



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Theses and Dissertations


Graduate School

2021

Beyond the Social: Artist Project Spaces, 2003 to 2016.

Clare L. van Loenen
Virginia Commonwealth University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [Contemporary Art Commons](#), [Museum Studies Commons](#), and the [Theory and Criticism Commons](#)

© The Author

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6654>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Beyond the Social: Artist Project Spaces, 2003 to 2016.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Clare van Loenen

Master of Arts, Museum Studies, University of Leicester, UK, 1997

Post Graduate Certificate of Education, University of Cambridge, UK, 1993

Bachelor of Arts (Honors), History of Art with History, University of Bristol, UK, 1992

Co-Directors:

Eric Garberson, Associate Professor, Department of Art History, School of the Arts, and
Hope Ginsburg, Associate Professor, Art Foundation Program, and Department of Painting and
Printmaking, School of the Arts.

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia

© Copyright Clare van Loenen 2021
All Rights Reserved

Acknowledgments

Right up to the last word, my cohort on the Media, Art, and Text program: Paula Talero Álvarez, Beth Collins, Allison Dyche, Justin Greene, Dawn Johnson, Alex Jones, Francis Longaker, Frankie Mastrangelo, Megan Ratliff, Andrew Spencer, and Tracy Stonestreet, who hit all those academic milestones with (or slightly ahead of) me. You are my American family.

My writing and accountability guides in coffee spots, back porches, and Zoom: Caroline Hoover, Christine Stanciu, Tracy Stonestreet, and Sharon Zumbrunn

My Media, Art, and Text Program Director, Eric Garberson, who guided me with patient pragmatism, sharp intelligence, and dry humor, towards academic rigor. Thank you.

My committee advisors, who proved both the prompt and the final word in this process. Your practice, focus and insight motivated and sustained me, Hope Ginsburg, Emma Mahony, Jenny Rhee, and Stephanie Smith.

The artist and academic reference points in my hometown (Richmond, VA): Celeste Fetta, John Freyer, Ashley Hawkins, Maurice Jackson, Massa Lemu, Giulia Pacini, and Emily Smith.

The dogged and demanding editorial support of Susan Barstow, Laura Holliday, Emma Mahony, Andrew Spencer, Sala Sihombing, and Tracy Stonestreet.

Around Machine Project, the extraordinary talents of Mark Allen, Asher Hartman, Lisa Anne Auerbach, Zut Lorz, Lucas Wrench, Ava Bromberg, and Joel Kyack.

At Elsewhere, my much-missed Southern Constellation cohort (RES101)—Kevin Brophy, Josh Franco, Diana Laurel Caramat, Alma Levia, Rosa Nussbaum, and Michelle Lisa Polissaint—plus the remarkable past and present Elsewhere team, including Jennie Carlisle, Emily Ensminger, Matthew Giddings, Jesse Hoyle, Travis Laughlin, Kerry Mubaarak, Amelia Nura, Gui Villalba Portel, Avery Rose, George Scheer, Stephanie Sherman, Zach Whitworth, and Sarah Witt.

From Mess Hall, all thanks to Salem Collo-Julin, Brett Bloom, Ava Bromberg, Marc Fischer, Bonnie Fortune, and Lora Lode for the generous conversations and archives shared in Chicago garages, Indiana farmers markets, and Hollywood studios.

The best family support team that began with Jasmine Calvert and continues with Mitch Crowder, James Davis, Tegan Flowers, Patrick Gegan, Ethan & Shannon Lindbloom, Heather Mullins Crislip, Hope Norman, Julietta Singh, Nathan Snaza, and Candace Stafford.

My home family, Marcie and Juno, who grew up through this process and whose mock boredom could win Oscars, plus Peter Taffs, of course.

From the very beginning, my parents, Daphne and Nico, who did not get to go to college, but took me to arboretums after school, far too many cathedrals, the gemstone scratch patch, and an open-air museum moved brick by brick. This is what you started.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	v
List of Illustrations.....	vii
Chapter One. <i>Beyond the Social</i>	1
1. Introduction	1
2. Core terms and research questions	2
3. Art historical and philosophical context.....	6
4. Organizational, museological, and archival context.....	16
5. Method and Overview	27
Chapter Two. <i>Machine Project</i>	33
Part 1.....	33
Part 2 – Organizational Turns.....	43
i. The turn towards the socially administrative in 2005.....	45
ii. The turn towards an organizational pedagogy in 2008	51
iii. The turn towards a participatory archive in 2012.....	59
iv. 2016	65
Part 3 – Principles of Practice	66
A. Humor	67
B. The Overheard	73
C. Empathy	81
Conclusion.....	88
Chapter Three. <i>Elsewhere</i>	89
Part 1.....	89
Part 2 – Organizational Turns.....	107
i. An archivally participative turn, 2003 to 2004.....	113
ii. A socially cooperative turn, 2007 to 2008.	119
iii. An administratively instituent turn, 2011 to 2012.....	121
iv. 2016	125
Part 3 – Principles of Practice	127
A. The Non-Object	128
B. Memory Liveness.....	134
C. The Hyper-local	138
Conclusion.....	142
Chapter Four. <i>Mess Hall</i>	144
Part 1.....	144
Part 2 – Organizational Turn	163
i. First keyholder wave, 2003 to 2007	166
ii. Second keyholder wave, 2008 to 2013.....	170
Part 3 – Principles of Practice	176

A. Free	178
B. The Unpredictable.....	183
C. Hardcore.....	186
Conclusion.....	190
Chapter Five. <i>Principles of Practice</i>	192
Summary.....	192
1. Platform affordances.....	196
2. Structuring behaviors.....	198
3. Participatory expansions.....	202
Towards structural change.....	205
Illustrations	208
Bibliography	227
Vita	235

Abstract

BEYOND THE SOCIAL: ARTIST PROJECT SPACES, 2003 TO 2016.

By Clare van Loenen Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University 2021

Co-Directors: Eric Garberson, Associate Professor, Department of Art History, School of the Arts, and Hope Ginsburg, Associate Professor, Art Foundation Program, and Department of Painting and Printmaking, School of the Arts.

This research examines storefront project spaces in the early 2000s that offered alternative approaches to the programming, organizing, and archiving found in conventional museums. I propose that such sites impacted participatory visual culture by offering a reformulatory role for arts' practices, one that organized itself across disciplinary boundaries, chose a collaborative rather than competitive approach, and processed the ideological implications of their group work. Focused on three specific sites—Machine Project in Los Angeles, Elsewhere in Greensboro, and Mess Hall in Chicago—this study details the museological, pedagogical, and archival challenges of these artist-convened organizations. My interdisciplinary investigation offers a reference point for museums and those seeking to work within them, as a way of rethinking organizational systems and their inherent structural exclusions in empathetically human and rigorously messy ways.

Detailing nine principles of practice, I trace the shared beginnings of these social sites in 2003, their shifting organizational forms across decade-long tenures, and their amassed archival remains. What Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall realized as arts organizations, or as artist organizers resistant to dominant cultural narratives, added necessary amendments,

additions, and accruals within participatory visual culture in the United States. In their producing of new organizational forms through their structural affordances, behavioral capacities, and participatory expansions, each revealed what may yet be lost when we translate artist and activist processes, non-dominant subjectivities, and neighborhood connections into more conventional display practices. In this way, the three sites moved beyond the social towards structural change, providing not a map, but a generative archival source.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1.1: Machine Project window with A-board signage (2014)	208
Figure 2.1: Machine Project <i>Closing Print Sale</i> (2018)	209
Figure 2.2: Machine Project floorboards (2018)	210
Figure 2.3: Machine Project performance on Echo Park Lake, Los Angeles—Carmina Escobar, <i>Fiesta Perpetua!</i> (2018).....	211
Figure 3.1: Elsewhere exterior with historic marker—Chloe Bass, <i>The Book of Everyday Instruction</i> (2015).....	212
Figure 3.2 Elsewhere frontage (2021)	213
Figure 3.3: Elsewhere first floor interior with swings and hand-plaited umbilical cord—Colin Bliss, <i>The Swings at Elsewhere</i> (2012) and Kevin Brophy and Rosa Nussbaum, <i>Keeping Young and Living Longer</i> (2019).....	214
Figure 3.4: Elsewhere staircase to second floor with hand-drawn Carolina Sales Company bookkeeping records—Meghan MacDonald and Laura MacAulay, <i>Selling Field or Similar Work</i> (2012)	215
Figure 3.5: Elsewhere ribbon room (2006–present).....	216
Figure 3.6: Elsewhere collection materials and suitcase archive (2004–2007).....	217
Figure 3.7: Elsewhere second floor with collection items on reused shelving—Queer Lab, <i>99 Books About Love</i> (2013)	218
Figure 4.1: Mess Hall former storefront exterior, 6932 Glenwood Avenue (2019).....	219
Figure 4.2: Mess Hall mail folder.....	220
Figure 4.3: Mess Hall project archive with free flour signage and associated pizza recipe—Sarah Kavage, <i>Industrial Harvest</i> (2010).....	221
Figure 4.4: Mess Hall project archive with detail of keyholder meeting note	222
Figure 4.5: Mess Hall document archive with event posters— <i>Hardcore Histories</i> (2005–2006)	223
Figure 5.1. Beyond the social: Principles of practice aligned by artist project space	224
Figure 5.2. Towards structural change: Principles of practice aligned by structural impacts.....	224
Figure 5.3. Museum organizational chart: Artist project spaces aligned by museum department	225

Chapter One.
Beyond the Social

1. Introduction

A number of North American artist project spaces established in the early 2000s activated alternatives to display and programming practices found in mainstream museums, giving voice to artists who did not fit existing durational, disciplinary, and single author parameters. Within this cultural landscape was a series of storefront sites that expanded the definition of participatory visual culture in ways that had structural implications for conventional museums.

In this study I focus on the organizational forms, phases of change, and principles of practice that guided three significant sites established in 2003: Machine Project in Los Angeles, Elsewhere in Greensboro, and Mess Hall in Chicago. Their programming offers resistances to the privatization of public space, the solidifying of disciplinary silos in museums and academia, and the emphasizing of competition over collaboration. Such project spaces centered on a mix of social, performative, and activist art practices in urban storefronts. They sustained and documented themselves for over a decade, producing distinctive archives.

Stepping up to each storefront, you might find an A-board outside Machine Project that suggested the fridge was defrosting (Figure 1.1), or a swing set in the window bay at Elsewhere that spun visitors out across the sidewalk, or plastic containers of free thrift items at Mess Hall to take away as needed. These disconcerting thresholds represent upsets to museological and social norms. Each social site took the ideological implications of lived, socially-engaged, and activist arts practices, within a spatially-accommodated social life, and activated them in relation to neighborhood sites and associated societal urgencies.

This research considers artists who have practiced and performed through these organizations. Each of the sites selected offers distinctive ways of forming an organization. The social, political, and environmental issues central to participating artists' practices shaped the way these organizations are structured and whom they serve. Through such organizations, artist conveners often offer resistances to conventional administrative processes and empower underrepresented voices. In revealing the impact of what doing the work of being an organization can look like as an arts practice, each artist project space offers a distinct variation on the artist-organizer role. Key to their cultural contributions are the guiding principles that shape such organizational art practices and how they navigate tensions with everyday North American life and move beyond the social towards structural change.

2. Core terms and research questions

Typically, writing in this area addresses organizational variance, activist redress, and specific publics; while integrated into this discussion, these topics are not the sole focus of the present study. In looking at the impact of artists' work beyond the social, my argument is that each artist project space realizes museum constructs in radically important ways that need considering as we go forward in a cultural landscape that has historically failed to represent its constituents, activate resources with equity, or show care to the more complex identities and stories of those with whom we share a contracting public sphere.

I have chosen the term *artist project spaces* to suggest certain basic site and programming specificities, rather than to reflect on their historical and political prehistories. Such a functional framing enables the three artist project spaces selected to assert their own connective origins, rather than be narratively reduced by comparison. This terminological choice also underlines my

specific focus on organizational practices, capacities, and impact. Each case study selected for this research was neither shared studio nor exhibition venue, but rather a site that hosted events and workshops, residencies and unpolished performances, radically shifting the participatory cultural dynamic between 2003 and 2016. While each case study has been identified as an artist project space for the purposes of this study, I have also used the interchangeable term *social site* to underline the site-specificity of such spaces, particularly as shaped by the participants' social life on site and the consistent occupation of their respective storefronts for ten years or more.

Working in from what could be a broad application of the term artist project space, or social site, these three case studies activate urban storefronts in cities in the United States of America (USA), leaving out those that are located in rural settings, such as High Desert Test Sites in California (launched in 2002), Mildred's Lane in Pennsylvania (launched in 1998), and Appalshop in Kentucky (launched in 1969). It is in finding new ways of practicing as artists, within an urban context that all three sites offer particularly institutionally-entangled distinctions as artist project spaces. In addition, I apply a timeframe that considers a very particular grouping of sites that appear to synchronously launch in 2003. Such date-range specificity limits a consideration of longer-term artist project spaces that exceed this timeframe or have emerged since the early 2000s. The emphasis on rigorously messy forms of participatory and event-based activity also implies a dissociation from those spaces that begin with a more specific focus, be it as a print workshop, youth project, or community farm, that deserve inclusion in a larger study.

There are two directions in which I would look to expand on this research grouping in the future. The first is the integration of other artist project spaces that have reformulated the museum complex by rethinking departmental functions, such as youth programming with Mario Ybarra and Karla Diaz' Slanguage Studio (launched in 2002) or food services with Fritz Heag's

Salmon Creek Farm (launched in 2014). The second research direction would be the integration of equivalent artist project spaces, specifically from the Global South, such as Ruangrupa in Indonesia (launched in 2000), Gugulective in South Africa (launched in 2006) and Beta-Local in Puerto Rico (launched in 2014).¹ However, addressing these social sites requires a comprehensive understanding of the political realities and locationally specific issues existing within complex political contexts, an understanding that depends on the capacity of local interlocutors and points of direct social contact.

In a disciplinary context, the three artist project spaces under consideration—Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall—are positioned for this study within *participatory visual culture*, rather than museum studies or art and design history. This interdisciplinary expansion accommodates the broader social context and the popular and subcultural forms promoted by each sites' programming. In conventional institutions such material is often categorically left out or sidelined, as the emphasis tends to be on a finished product or performance, rather than the social relationships critical to production or an accrual of material remains. Additionally, the perception of such visual cultural sources by participants introduces transdisciplinary interpretations, shaped by life experiences, that prove particularly significant for those whose subjectivity has been reduced or previously erased in the archive. The qualifying presence of the term *participatory* preceding *visual culture* emphasizes the subjectivity of those taking part and echoes the disciplinary analysis of art historian Michael Ann Holly.

¹ I am grateful for an interview with Farid Rakun of Ruangrupa, the Indonesian based artist collective founded in 2000. I interviewed him shortly after the group's curation of Sonsbeeek 2016 in Arnhem, The Netherlands, specifically about the challenges of their political context and the work of curating away from a home base. Ruangrupa will curate the 2022 edition of *Documenta* in Kassel, Germany. Additionally, Massa Lemu's writing and teaching on the artist group Gugulective, founded in Cape Town, South Africa in 2006 by Unathi Sigenu and Kemang Wa Lehulere, has synergies with the North American research grouping but from the specific context of post-Apartheid South Africa.

Participatory visual culture therefore functions within this study as a gathering of practices that emerge from visual (and literary) arts training, that acknowledge the social and administrative life of the group-work at each site. The programmatic and administrative integration of such everyday participatory processes, often in unexpected ways, draws on an array of visual cultural objects and behaviors.² Cultural theorist Nicholas Mirzeoff details the political and interdisciplinary implications of identifying practices and project forms within the expansive scope of visual culture. The act of opting to function as ambiguously-termed cultural centers or a living museum indicates a structural commitment to interdisciplinarity as a political and world-building gesture. Visual culture is both the naming of a discipline and a grouping of objects, as cultural theorist Mieke Bal details and this distinction has pertinence for the material culture amassed at Elsewhere since the 1930s, as well as an acceptance of the significant, often ephemeral, archival remains of all three social sites.

Participatory expansions within this visual cultural sphere are at the heart of the research findings, building on an evolving specificity of definitions for related social art practices since the late 1990s. Terms for the practices encountered throughout this study, and applied with theoretical, periodic, and contextual specificity, include *participatory practices*, *social practice*, *socially engaged art practices*, *lived practice*, *spatial practices*, *intermedial practices*, *performative practice*, *instituent practice*, and *activist practices*. Additionally, these terms fundamentally draw the earlier or concurrent terms *relational aesthetics*, *dialogical aesthetics*, and *institutional critique*, alongside debates on the role of *antagonism*, *collaboration*, and *cooperative structures*, as well as the philosophical concept of the *social form*.

² Joss Bailey, "How has Visual Culture been Defined," 2013.
<https://jossbailey.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/defining-visual-culture.pdf>

The overarching research question for this study addresses how artist project spaces such as Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall impact participatory visual culture between 2003 and 2016. Analyzing their distinctive contributions requires a focus on the organizational forms produced and activated, the sites and their contextual specificities, and the principles of practice adopted, with the key research questions being:

- How are new organizational forms produced?
- What does it mean for independent artist organizations to operate as a cultural center or living museum?
- How did the specificity of these three storefront sites and associated political urgencies alter the nature of the work shared, displayed, and archived?
- How might this analysis clarify the structural implications of the principles of practice identified, to achieve a more equitable reformulation of participatory visual culture?

Understanding the art historical and philosophical context from which these social sites emerged is critical, beyond the associated terminology, for identifying the case studies' organizational resistances, complexities, and abandonments of museological and archival conventions.

Additionally, the specificity of thinking as it relates directly to such artist project spaces in the United States inflects the organizational context from which each site emerges, clarifying the significance of even the smallest shift in values and associated behaviors, as well as the structural possibilities produced.

3. Art historical and philosophical context

Art historian Miwon Kwon emphasized the value of site-specificity and neighborhood relationships as she analyzed the role of Sculpture Chicago's *Culture in Action* in 1993, curated by Mary Jane Jacobs. Two projects within the *Invented Communities (Ongoing)* category of installations extended years beyond this event. The artist group Haha formed one, with a volunteer project called *Flood* that grew hydroponic crops for distribution to AIDS patients from

a Rogers Park storefront.³ Their early presence in this northside Chicago neighborhood and the research practices of founding member Laurie Palmer informed Mess Hall's emergence ten years later as well as future event program content.⁴ Kwon's book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, published in 2004, references many such formative projects from the 1990s, as well as clarifying the organizational impulses central to sustaining such sites. Kwon detailed the new verbs required to convey the reality of more socially engaged ways of working in relation to a specific site, using Richard Serra's controversial public art work *Tilted Arc*, that had cut a Manhattan Square in half in 1981, as a contrasting example of approach:

Thus, if Richard Serra could once distill the nature of artistic activities down to their elemental physical actions (to drop, to split, to roll, to fold, to cut, etc.) the situation now demands a different set of verbs: to negotiate, to coordinate, to compromise, to research, to promote, to organize, to interview.⁵

The sited-ness of the work still matters, but in detailing the administrative processes central to its successful integration, Kwon shifts the conception of public art from functioning as a monumental, abstract, and imposed presence, towards being a gathering of organizational practices that in some instances produced ongoing public sites.

Feminist performance artist Suzanne Lacy would begin to call such practices that functioned beyond the public square *new genre public art* in 1991, later publishing *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* in 1994. Her own participatory performance

³The second *Invented Community (Ongoing)* project that outlived Sculpture Chicago was Inigo Manglano-Ovalle's *Street-Level Video*, a youth technology project that became the nonprofit *Street-level Youth Media* in 1995. In 1993 as part of Sculpture Chicago they hosted a block party, *Tele-vecindario*, including some 75 television screens with content addressing issues of gentrification and community representation. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 2004), 130.

⁴ Laurie Palmer, Richard House, Wendy Jacob, and John Ploof were the members of Haha. Laurie Palmer presented her long-term research into resource extraction at a Mess Hall gathering of some 30 artists and activists in 2008, entitled "what we know of our past—what we demand of our future." The weekend used the Library of Radiant Optimism instructionals to shape workshops, and the participants formed the loosely-affiliated *Midwest Radical Culture Corridor* with many former Mess Hall participants. <https://www.joaap.org/6/lovetowe/fortunebloom.html>.

⁵ *Tilted Arc* was removed from public view in 1989, with accompanying legal reasoning that suggested the site was inconsequential to its form. Kwon, *One Place after another*, 51.

practices were positioned in resonant sites with specific community voices, from older women on the beach at La Jolla, California, in 1983, to young people reflecting on issues they faced and their futures on a rooftop parking deck in Oakland, California, in 1993.⁶ Concurrently, an emerging generation of artists offered an institutional critique of organization- and discipline-privileging norms that implicated assumed museum constructs.⁷ Artist Mark Dion produced durational projects that offered a performance of ecological and museum practices that proved fundamental to what became an expanded sphere of socially-sited practices. Dion and Daniel J. Martinez's *Urban Ecology Action Group* was an *Invented Communities (Temporary)* installation for *Culture in Action* that mapped knowledge gained of tropical rainforest systems onto the urban landscape of West Side Chicago, produced in collaboration with pupils from two local high schools.⁸ They laid bare the inadequacies of current representations and any sense of ideological separation between lived systems and cultural work.

Dion's practice can be placed within a second wave of institutional critique that drew on artists such as Michael Asher, who beginning in the 1960s focused on the structural and ideological misalignments represented within the museum, from curatorial approaches through to the spatial detailing.⁹ Dion in turn adopted distinct disciplinary modes of analysis, performing as archeologist, scientist, and archivist to deconstruct the systems of knowledge displayed in museums that failed to connect with their environmental and societal contexts. By the early 2000s and the opening of the three

⁶ Suzanne Lacy, *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*, 1983–94, and *The Roof is on Fire*, 1993–94.

⁷ The Whitney Study Program that began in 1968 hosted Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, and Rirkrit Tiravanija in the early 1990s, each key artists in the expanding concept of institutional critique and participatory practice.

⁸ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, 126.

⁹ Michael Asher taught at the California Institute of the Arts from 1973 to 2012, where his *Post-Studio Art* course would shape a future generation of artists, including Mark Allen, founder of Machine Project.

artist project spaces I focus on, a third wave of institutional critique was in progress, one with an expanded element of social critique that allowed for a flow of practices between art and activism that defined the founding organizational differences for these social sites. In the 2010s, what could be characterized as a fourth wave of associated practices emerged, offering scope for activist actions, from an interstitial distance, rather than a complete remove from the cultural institutions implicated in protests, which visual cultural theorist Emma Mahony terms interstitial critique.¹⁰

French curator Nicolas Bourriaud developed a set of philosophical terms in 1998 to address art production focused on human relations and their social context, grouping such practices under the title *relational aesthetics*.¹¹ This distinctly European variation of terminology around interactive tendencies in arts practice in the 1990s was also afforded a different type of museum space, epitomized by the refurbishment of the Palais de Tokyo, a non-collecting contemporary art institution in Paris, that came under the direction of Bourriaud from 1999 to 2006. The decoratively unfinished but structurally restored site retained its industrial detailing, releasing programmed artists from codified display conventions and allowing for the mess of process. The museum offered an alternative to the aesthetics of white cube gallery space and the constraining architectural weight of historic institutions. Such a shift in display capacities signaled a reorientation towards more social and relational aspects of arts practice, with artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija being a key example of this curatorial tendency. Tiravanija's *pad thai*

¹⁰ A fourth wave of institutional critique that draws on the work of philosopher Simon Critchley, contextualized by visual cultural theorist Emma Mahony, defines a practice of *interstitial critique* that seeks to wrest the museum and wider culture from corporate interests and activate the space created. Emma Mahony, "From Institutional to Interstitial Critique: The Resistant Force that is Liberating the Neoliberal Museum from Below," in *Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, eds. TJ Demos, Abhijit Banerjee, and Emily Eliza Scott (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

¹¹ Nicolas Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* was only translated into English in 2002 delaying responses to his philosophical framework, to which there was considerable resistance in the United States.

series of meal-based projects in gallery spaces with public participants began in New York in 1990. Generating a more social interaction between gallery visitors and the art on show, Tiravanija turned the gallery space into a makeshift kitchen distributing rice and Thai curry for free among gallery-goers, letting the pots and plates pile up afterwards. The curatorial framing of relational aesthetics meant it was primarily experienced by a self-selecting, participating art world, rather than the communities and contexts outside the museum that the work addressed. Bourriaud curatorially nurtured such a convivial and self-referencing sense of comradeship, offering up a new set of experiences and philosophical principles within the art museum with which to understand emerging social art practices.

British academic Claire Bishop responded to this social turn in art, speaking from the British context of a government-funded arts landscape in the early 2000s, with the associated baggage of instrumentalized community engagement. Bishop focused on the socially collaborative aspect of participatory practices but extricated them from any expectation of conviviality or cohering social life within such gallery sites. Bishop's perspective focused on the need for antagonistic practices that reasserted what the political Left had lost in Europe. Artists referenced in Bishop's writings include Jeremy Deller, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Santiago Sierra, who respectively courted controversy by degrees and overlaid strictures for participants activating their work, from the reenactment of the 1980s British miners' strike, to the ensnaring objectification of immigrant bodies, to the formation of public spaces for community activated re-education. Offering a resistance to Bishop's focus on the antagonistic qualities of the work was American art historian Grant Kester, based at University of California, San Diego. Bishop and Kester exchanged accusatory critiques in the back pages of *Art Forum* in 2004, about the

relative values of participatory and socially engaged practice that evidenced a growing and geographically divergent field of practice that was gaining broader academic attention.

Kester wrote of more community-responsive and internationally-sourced projects, that he termed *dialogical aesthetics*, citing practices that emerged in the US such as Lacy's *Oakland Projects* (1991–2001) and later those of Temporary Services (Mess Hall keyholders). The precarious communities addressed were integral voices within the construction of such work through the formation of discursive spaces in which responsive communication build consensus and solidarity over time. Kester draws on Jürgen Habermas' conception of the *public sphere* in which social differences are bracketed. When applied to an art context this thinking results in a space of dialogical exchange purportedly free from coercion and inequalities of race or class that typically manifest in the cultural hierarchies of the art world. Unlike the shock of antagonism and the oblique communication of practices Bishop profiled, Kester fore-fronted artists and collectives whose production of context rather than content nurtured community relationships.¹²

In Chicago, artist Dan Peterman, who co-founded the artist project space Experimental Station, hosted a reading group in the early 2000s to digest and recontextualize the content of European publications on this area of participatory art practices.¹³ Future Mess Hall participants attended these sessions, where antipathy towards Bishop's inflammatory approach, especially her

¹² Grant Kester launched the online journal, *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism* in 2015.

¹³ Those early and formative conversations Peterman convened on contemporary art developments in Europe and their respective valence in the United States, focused on texts such as Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*. Lora Lode, Mess Hall keyholder, conversation with author, May 29, 2019. Peterman and Connie Spreen co-founded Experimental Station in 2001 at 6100 S Blackstone, Hyde Park, Chicago, after a fire damaged the building that he had owned since the 1990s and from which he had done cultural, educational, and small business initiatives. Peterman nurtured connections across Chicago and internationally, modelling cultural activism and urban placemaking in his projects. Since 2001 Experimental Station has functioned as a non-profit venture that supports an array of organizations and programs, including Monk Parakeet (experimental art project and platform), Neighborhood Conservation Core, and Blackstone Bicycle Works (youth bike project and repair shop). The project building is located on the contested border between the University of Chicago and the African American neighborhoods of south Chicago. Dan Peterman, "About," *Dan Peterman*, <http://www.danpeterman.com/p/about.html>.

tone, was widespread. Nor was it reduced by her later publication of *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* in 2012 which argued that participatory art fails by placing ethics before aesthetics. Temporary Services (Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julien, and Marc Fischer) and founding Mess Hall members summarized their resistance to her perspective in an interview in 2013:

We don't accept this idea of "artificial hells." We think it is based on spurious and deceptive reasoning and is an ideological project of someone deeply threatened by shifting trends. We don't have the need to validate the already powerful, already entrenched artistic ideologies, the hegemony of the market that seems to be the unconscious of Bishop's efforts. We put our work into many different places and relationships and don't privilege the art world Bishop champions and tries so bitterly to defend. We want to see the boundaries she cares about dissolve on political, social, aesthetic, emotional and other levels. Bishop's accounts are always a caricature of the complexity of impulses in new ways of working. These new methodologies are at times clumsy, and other times elegant, but they are seeking ways out of the very landed power structures she celebrates and has entrenched herself in.¹⁴

Since Bishop's move to CUNY Center for Graduate Studies in 2009, she has advised on a number of more recent publications such as Yates McKee's *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition*, published in 2016, which details the aesthetic dimensions of protest art during Occupy Wall Street, conceptualizing this moment as an art project itself. A debate between Bishop and Chicago critic Brian Holmes is featured in the book. McKee chooses to align himself with Bishop's resistance to idealized consensus rather than valuing Holmes and Kester's preference for conviviality as critical to practicing within the context of the USA, in which systematic omissions place many in precarious positions without access to a productive social, cultural, and public sphere.¹⁵

¹⁴ Temporary Services (Brett Bloom, Marc Fischer, and Salem Collo-Julien) with Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander), *Free For All. Art As A Service To Others*, (Bielle, Italy: Visible Publishing, 2013), 11–12.

¹⁵ Paloma Checa-Gismero, "Book Review: Yates McKee, *Strike Art*, (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2016)," *Field Journal* 4 (Spring 2016). <https://field-journal.com/issue-4/review-yates-mckee-strike-art>.

Unlike Bishop's antagonistic critique, the Austrian philosopher Gerald Raunig created space for an analysis that accepted the complicity of art practices within governmental systems without losing all sense of exteriority, proposing the term *instituent practices* in 2006, that asserts the possibilities to organize differently. Raunig reduced the tension between the North American and European perspectives, with their contrasting degree of government involvement in the cultural landscape, by focusing instead on the instituent practices of actualizing new organizational forms that function differently within the public sphere. Raunig suggests that an organization can remain open to both self-critique and external criticism. The art practice of embodying institutional models in this way is key to my framing of each artist project space, though its conceptual application functions best where the social site is most clearly entangling within the cultural landscape, as with Machine Project and Elsewhere's nonprofit alignment. Neither delivers overt activism within the first decade of the century, but in working through the realities and absurdities of then-current museological and archival norms while forming as organizations, they activate platforms for social change. Rather than applying the term *instituent practices* when detailing Mess Hall, I focus instead on their intersection of art and activism. Gregory Sholette's writing details the hidden or, as he terms it, *dark matter* of the alternative art world's relationships to capital, and the relatively anarchic paths necessary through group work to free self-organized art practices from such vectors of controls. Sholette remains deeply shaped by his formative involvement in the cultural landscape of Chicago, including sites such as Experimental Station. His writing, activism through Gulf Labor and Occupy Museums, and teaching on radical administration within social practice, first at School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and then Queens College at the City University of New York, is critical to understanding the resistances and structural possibilities at Mess Hall and beyond.

Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe writes on the concept of *pluralistic agonisms* that accept the ineradicable presence of antagonism within social practices without nurturing them, countering the primacy Bishop gives to the activation of antagonisms. Mouffe's framing centers on the necessary formation of common symbolic spaces in which to continue collective struggles and collective administration through conflictual consensus.¹⁶ The term *agonisms*, as detailed in her 2013 book *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, can be applied by degrees to each artist project space within the precarious context of the United States, where a lack of state support and a conservative religious base create conditions in which deliberate antagonisms result in harm. My use of Mouffe's conception of agonisms is as a foundation from which to clarify the ways in which the three sites navigate tensions with institutional and specifically museological norms; the choice for each was never to be purely antagonist though not unconscious of the inherent antagonism of choosing to activate space and its material resources differently. I have adopted terminological variants to denote the degree of agonistic resistance.

For Machine Project I refer to the enacting of companionable antagonisms that accepted relationship failures and disconcerted participants, though critically always offering a way out of such experiences. Machine Project navigated collaborations as an oxymoronic force that accommodated absurd resistances to cultural, institutional, and social norms, counterbalanced with the provision of welcome, accessibility, and scope for failure. Machine Project's most generously explicated failure came from their Hammer Museum *Artist in Residence* commission between 2009 and 2010, which ended abruptly after just six of its twelve intended months. The resulting report provides a substantial documentation of artists' encounters with the institutional norms and the concomitant release offered within their home base of the Machine Project

¹⁶ Emma Mahony, "The Critical Art Institution and the Neoliberal State," PhD diss., (National College of Art and Design, Dublin, 2016).

storefront.¹⁷ The report offers rare and in-depth insight into the spatial and social reality of aligning two organizations with shared programmatic interests but far greater ideological and organizational differences than imagined. This text remains a critical source for why artist project spaces emerged as they did in the early 2000s and what they were still resisting in 2010, albeit companionably.

At Elsewhere, the shift in terminology is towards companionable tensions developed within a cooperative structure and a clear founding vision, responsive to the cumulative voices who reformulate the site and collection through the residency program. Internal tension also proved a means to identify gaps in provision and restricted vision where white-held privilege initially limited the redress of structural racism and race trauma of Greensboro. At Mess Hall I reference a more conflictual processing among a disparate keyholder group that binds to Mouffe's conception of pluralistic agonisms. However, nurturing inherent tensions rather than instigating deliberate antagonisms defines each site's variant of instituent practices and their activation of more overt activisms.

Performance artist and museum educator Pablo Helguera detailed the broader origins and pragmatics of working through socially engaged art practices, producing *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* in 2011. What is particularly useful about his approach is his integration of thinking about pedagogy and its distinction from education in schools, as well as his sensitive attention to the formation of equitable relationships within community settings. The roots of such an emphasis draws on the writings of Brazilian writer Paulo Freire, who conceptualized a critical pedagogy in which a co-educational approach was central and never divorced from the political circumstances that had placed many workers he

¹⁷ Hammer Museum, *Public Engagement Artist in Residence: Machine Project – Hammer Museum*, eds. Mark Allen and Allison Agsten (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2012).

taught through the 1960s in abject poverty. With many artist project spaces emerging in school formats—and indeed each of the case studies discussed here prioritize aspects of such activation through events and workshops across their tenures—it is useful to clarify what aspect of pedagogy is the focus of this research. Rather than an alternative-school framing, such as those that curator Sam Thorne details in *School: A Recent History of Self Organized Art Education* in 2017, each artist project space under consideration offers an *organizational pedagogy* that impacts how people experientially learn deeper ideological meanings and ways of occupying the world beyond the social site.

Critically, this study clarifies the museological and spatial implications of those socially engaged and instituent practices convened and hosted within an expanded public sphere. For such social sites, the urgency of offering alternative ways of organizing and facilitating structural change constituted a critical resistance to the production of culture that felt emotionally dry and disempowering by limiting who could perform. Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall also incorporated a dash of incongruous fun when the world felt prescriptively stalled, be it sitting on sidewalks suggesting that people pick apples (Elsewhere, 2003), sharing metal albums alongside meals organized by geographic association (Mess Hall, 2005–2006), or driving cars at speed around Los Angeles mimicking scaled-down planetary orbits (Machine Project, 2006). The ideological implications of such incongruent acts became more significant as each space gained visibility in an emerging field of independent organizations and related artist organizers from 2003.

4. Organizational, museological, and archival context

Writers and artists since the early 2000s have addressed tendencies in this participatory sphere of practice that clarified the principles of practice that proved critical for each site. Most directly, those who founded the artist project spaces, hosted residencies, or held the keys to the spaces have written or spoken in depth about their practices and the values that inform them. Mark Allen, artist founder of Machine Project, produced numerous essays on the specifics of his approach, alongside diagrams and animations of organizational positioning, that were collected with event details and project field guides into the monograph *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection (live by Special Request)*, published in 2017. Elsewhere activated their narrative through events and tours hosted in person across the living museum and gradually migrating online. Cofounders George Scheer and Stephanie Sherman have written and been featured in multiple journal articles, while the site itself is perennially rewritten by artist residents. Two of Mess Hall's founding members, Marc Fischer and Brett Bloom, formed *Half Letter Press*, an independent publishing house, in 2008, from which many lateral publications emerged that offer further ways to deepen or extend knowledge of topics raised here. They, along with other keyholding participants, have written essays, booklets, and transcribed interviews that speak to the organizational form of Mess Hall, its specific Chicago context, and the wider role of their approach and practices. As such, all three sites offer content for analysis in their own voices and in relation to specific aspects of their organizational concern between 2003 and 2016, alongside literary, performance, and museum theorists who expand on such content. The voices that speak to the specific principles that drive the three social sites selected for this study draw primarily from a North American context. Collating their theoretical and observational processing informed which principles of practice emerged through the research.

Each case study's review has resulted in the identification of three still-relevant principles of practice, ranging from the structural role of empathy, to programmatic unpredictability, to being free from existing systems. Informing the gathering of nine such principles are writers and theorists for whom these capacities had wider pedagogical and museological significances. This section is organized around three roles of the principles of practice, that address the research questions central to this project. First is the focus on how artist project spaces such as Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall built cultural platforms that offered structural possibilities and activated affordances not routinely adopted in conventional museums. Second are observations about what it has taken for their behavioral capacities such as empathy, humor, and activist concern to become structuring principles within their social sites, and potentially in museums. Third is the detailing of participatory principles that guide the pedagogical, museological, and archival significance of artist project spaces.

Former Director of the Queens Museum Tom Finkelppearl detailed the North American philosophical and historical sources for the practices convened in artist project spaces. Finkelppearl explains the critical roles of civil rights actions of community activists from the 1960s forwards and pedagogical change examined through experiential learning advocates, such as John Dewey (1859–1952) and later Richard Rorty (1931–2007), in his comprehensive book, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*. Finkelppearl also defines a structuring dynamic for artist project spaces, choosing the term *socially cooperative* to convey more equitable organizational constructions that acknowledge a degree of leadership among founders of a project grouping without asserting an overriding authorial dominance.¹⁸ This

¹⁸ Tom Finkelppearl was Director of the Queens Museum between 2002 and 2014, moving to become the cultural advisor in Mayor Bill de Blasio's office in 2014, just after this book was published.

formulation of participant relationships was most significant for Machine Project and Elsewhere, while Mess Hall opted for a more radical release from individuated artist control from the outset.

Finkelpearl also considers artist groups' structural capacities in relation to responses to major events, such as Superstorm Sandy in 2012. A network of artists and other volunteers achieved supportive and mitigating systems of supply distribution and other more social comforts. However, this hyper-local support was in no way a replacement for the government-scale structural services required in the aftermath, such as restoring water access and rebuilding dunes. I have chosen the concept of a *platform affordance* to acknowledge the likely scale of structural capacities secured by artist project spaces. These are the small-scale activations and occasional inversions of existing resources and architectural features to secure new functionalities and services. In play design, these would include the school steps that share the property of a skate rail, and for artist project spaces, the window bay that functions as a public plaza. By considering such human-scale impacts within a neighborhood social dynamic, each site is released from any expectation of governmental-scale impact and unbound from potential instrumentalization. However, on some occasions artists' collective responses to a societal issue have escalated beyond this level of platform affordance, such as Laurie Jo Reynolds' *Tamms Year Ten* project, which began at Mess Hall in 2008 and brought about the closure of Illinois' Tamms Correctional Facility in 2013.

To understand the organizational foundations and survival of each site, alongside the relative scale of their programs and more mundane realities, it is worth mentioning the economic context in which such sites functioned in the USA. Elsewhere's co-founder, Stephanie Sherman writing with James McAnally, details the circumstances from which independent artist

organizations emerged in the early 2000s in their article “Organization towards a Commons.”¹⁹ At the time there was little or inconsistent local government funds to draw on and few granting bodies that would cover operating costs. Most artist project spaces that emerged at this juncture activated a mix of donated participant labor, material surplus, white-owned property privileges, and individual donations, later securing earned income from programs and occasional grant funds. While Machine Project and Elsewhere secured non-profit status within the first year, Mess Hall would choose not to. The latter’s loaned site and commitment to liberatory practices meant a focus on nurturing an economy of surplus through a sharing of participant energies, skills, and resources, as well as small individual financial contributions to survive and with individual incomes sourced from outside the organization. Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall’s reliance on donated participant labor generated an expanded public realm in which those individuals could collectively practice, share and display work not accommodated in conventional museums.

The circumstances of each project’s storefront property occupation proved critical to their survival. Machine Project paid commercial rent, initially offsetting this obligation with monies raised by grass-roots consultancy work and basement rental. Elsewhere occupied an inherited site for which just property taxes were due, with initial labor drawn from friends and artist residents. The loan of Mess Hall’s space through an enlightened property developer released them from such financial concerns. For each artist project space their duration depended on the emergence of a wider field of practice and its support systems. While their organizational approach to finances and labor were ideologically driven, the benefit of consistent property

¹⁹ James McAnally and Stephanie Sherman, “Organization towards a Commons,” *Healers on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, Terremoto Magazine*, 11, April 2, 2018. <https://www.commonfield.org/projects/1852/organization-towards-a-commons-a-common-field-essay-published-by-terremoto>.

occupation and access to donated participant labor was indicative of the wider structural advantages of white-led and owned spaces.

In *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* the performance theorist Shannon Jackson details Paul Chan's *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, sited in the Lower Ninth Ward, two years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the neighborhood in August 2005. Her analysis of this specific project reveals a city still experiencing vastly different effects from both the disaster and structural racism. Jackson offers an interdisciplinary and historically-attuned perspective on the performative turn in art practice, one that builds on the limitations of the preceding social turn, whose tensions Bishop, Bourriaud, and Kester had detailed. What was fundamentally critical, as Chan's performance spilled out into the neighborhood and reactivated the traumatic reality of the site littered with remaining Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers, were the contextual layers of engagement that went beyond the Beckett production and into the layers of participant and administrative activities that supported and complicated the project's realization and resulting narrative. Jackson details the new range of skills and relationships required, as central practices for delivering work in such an activist-termed "theatre for social change."²⁰

Educator and artist Ted Purves led the first graduate program in social practice at California College of Art beginning in 2005.²¹ He wrote on the role of generosity within the dynamics of group and sited projects, as well as the value of sociologists such as Georg Simmel to the analysis and teaching of such social practices. Purves offered a way to deconstruct the

²⁰ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 220.

²¹ Social practice was an encompassing term referring to art works engaged with the social, delivered in formats that were not conventionally displayable, often with ephemeral remains having been service-led processes activated in museum contexts through meeting spaces, or participatory installations in the public realm. Socially engaged art and instituent practices form a specific subset of this practice grouping.

process of working out from the social life of a site, with the activation of a *social form*—a container or legible platform—in which to function. He would offer David Hammons peddler’s blanket, on which the artist sold snowballs in the unofficial marketplace of Coopers Square in New York in 1983, as an example of a legible but disconcertingly-activated social form.²² The familiar social form was in turn organized by the social dynamics of those participating in the practices proposed. In considering storefront sites that offered the accessibility of a main street shop, but for non-economic ends, Purves is foundational to understanding why such capacities mattered, through the generous surplus-redistribution activated at Mess Hall and the programmatic unpredictability at all three addresses. This research rethinks the concept of the social form as an occupied public site with socially cooperative dynamics.

Methodologically, the three organizations share an approach to acknowledging the layers of land histories and geographies critical to their processing of place. Mess Hall’s Brett Bloom, working with curator Nuno Sacramento, details the layers integral to the more complex conception of site in *Deep Mapping* in 2017. Such an approach to land research and its visualizations continues Bloom’s development of systems diagrams, from one that captures Mess Hall’s early social form, to another conveying the relationship between big oil and our sense of self which he terms petro-subjectivity. These historically hidden but geographically evident mapping methodologies find their thematic echo in events Machine Projects activated at the Los Angeles Contemporary Art Museum (LACMA) in 2008, where Pleistocene Epoch tours of the site took participants out to the asphalt seeps in the parking lot, LACMA excavation deposits,

²² David Hammons, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, Performance, 1983. Ted Purves, “Throwing Stones in the Sea: Georg Simmel, Social Practice, and the Imagined World,” in *The Everyday Practice of Public Art, Art, Space and Social Inclusion*, ed. Cameron Cartiere and Martin Zebracki (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016),106.

and the archeological dig at pit 91 that has been ongoing since 1969.²³ The Field Guides that Machine Project regularly produced to document such site-focused programs and Bloom's deep mapping methodology evidence the way artist project spaces reshaped the cultural landscape to include resonant geographies that straddled disciplinary boundaries and were out of everyday reach. The distinct environmental and sociopolitical urgencies conveyed in such deep mapping processes underlined how hyper-local activations of overlooked sites mattered around Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall, both in relationship to their neighborhood bases, interconnecting sites, and back in time.

Within each artist project spaces there are organizational behaviors that act as structuring capacities, that have also been the focus of attention in museum contexts. The art historian Elif M. Gokcigdem details the layered roles of empathy evoked in museums and historic houses in her book *Fostering Empathy in Museums* in 2016, while futurologist Elizabeth Merritt's 2017 *TrendsWatch* report for the American Association of Museums defines the power of museums to be "empathy-engines." Both publications focus on museums' capacities to engender empathy in visitors. This study emphasizes how alternative organizing and its resulting archiving practices can suggest how cultural organizations might fundamentally structure themselves towards empathy-production through practices such as integrating group humor and ethical commitments. By observing those approaches adopted within independent, artist project spaces—the experimental cultural centers, prolific event spaces, and living museums that emerged in the early 2000s—we can see the value of such behavioral capacities more clearly as

²³ The bulk of the early archaeological digs happened between 1905 and 1915. Once it became an established park in 1925 there were few excavations, until the building of LACMA and the Page Museum demanded them, except for the search for smaller fossils in pit 91. Sculptures placed around the Hancock Park grounds in the 1920s to distract passers-by from the archaeologists at work. <https://tarpits.org/la-brea-tar-pits-history>. Anne K. O'Malley, "LACMA during the Pleistocene Epoch," in *Machine Project: A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, ed. Mark Allen, Jason Brown and Liz Glynn (Los Angeles: Machine Project, 2009), 27.

the role of artist organizing beyond 2016 shifts to overtly address inequity, specifically as a product of systemic racism.

Philosopher Simon Critchley focused in on the incongruent particularities of humor in contemporary arts practices in 2002, later expanding his research into the interstitial distance opened within the state to accommodate the radical politics necessary for activists to address complicit, corporate actors. Mahony, applies Critchley's analysis to events in the cultural sphere, such as artist protests focused on British Petroleum (BP) and their sponsorship of collection displays at Tate Modern while the Deep Water Horizon disaster unfolded in 2010.²⁴ Artist activists were key voices in generating a critique that targeted oil corporations' sponsorship of museums in Britain and the United States, and rethought institutional relationships, from sponsors to board members. Each of the artist project spaces activates such a critique within the public sphere, often through acts of resistance performed with wry humor.

Key elements of Critchley's perspectives on humor, from the topsy-turvy upset of the world to the contingency of our day-to-day situation, inform my analysis of Machine Project, where humor was integral to its tone and programming approach. However, humor is also palpably relevant in Mess Hall's texts and Elsewhere's sidewalk encounters and material misuse. What escalates the value of humor as an accrued and socially-bonding feature of each site's social dynamic finds its dissonant value in writer Kiese Laymon's discussion of shared laughter as a familial-constructed survival tactic. As a Black child experiencing, alongside his mother, many micro-violences by ever-present authorities, Laymon begins to unpack the instituent value of humor for bonding those outside of the dominant order and in his case among his family. Each artist project space included in its community those from immigrant and queer backgrounds, for

²⁴ Mahony, "From Institutional to Interstitial Critique."

whom humor alleviates the tensions faced in practicing as artists within predominantly white, heteronormative cultural spaces, and for whom Laymon's perspective is sharply familiar.

Clarifying how artists can organize governance of themselves without being drawn back into museological and social conventions that limit artistic expression and self-actualization is key to this research. However, activating the behavioral capacities of empathy and humor as instituent practices surfaced as a critical dynamic by offering a way for participants at each site to alleviate the overwhelming pressure of social-political forces while enabling them to perform activist actions within an expanded public sphere.

Through an application of literary theorist Peter Schwenger's object studies and performance scholar Shannon Jackson's definition of performativity, I detail how participation is expanded spatially and archivally in artist project spaces. Schwenger's emphasis on the emotional and affective traces of object meaning is further deepened in significance when placed alongside art historian Tracy Stonestreet's analysis of liveness as indicated in performance remains. In this way each social site binds us, in person and in the archive, to subjectivities societally curtailed or hidden. Valuing the indexical qualities of ephemeral items connects into the broader material condition of mess and the need to accept all objects as non-object—a valuing of things normally thrown away that are instead valued and retained for reuse. As a collection site, Elsewhere faces the implication of non-object material status with the greatest museological significance, though the archives for Machine Project and Mess Hall accommodate material remains in a myriad of ways that level material hierarchies.

Shannon Jackson reframes the relationships and encountering dynamics of performative participations in museum settings, while anthropological theorist Martin F. Manalansan IV has explored this social dynamic within “seemingly hoarder-like household material” that

characterizes the material, symbolic, and emotional narratives of a queer immigrant archive and functions to assert rights of domestic representation, more usually denied.²⁵ Mess, as Manalansan describes it, retains the subjects, practices, and materials that did not fit established museum categories. To explain how each artist project space expands the scope of the participatory sphere, both spatially and temporally, depends on generative archive sources and online content, much of which could be superficially-categorized as mess.

Collating materials that build up a wider social imaginary for Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall is critical to understanding their contextual significances and, at the same time, to accepting the unknowableness of this condition. This expanding form of participatory association is introduced by curator Stephanie Smith in *Institutions and Imaginaries* in 2015, part of the Chicago Social Practice History Series. Methodologically, and on a smaller scale the archival approaches adopted by artists and curators provide critical content for further imaginary reformulations through projects such as Rebecca Zorach and Daniel Tucker's gathering of the *Never The Same* archive (2010–2015) of artist project space ephemera in Chicago, and Julie Ault's re-detailing of the work of *Group Material* (1979–1996), the artist group she was part of in New York. Creating and sustaining the archival capacity to allow for future participation, long after an event or space has shuttered, is challenging, and incremental losses impact the associated energies and relevancies of artist project spaces.

Mark Allen, in conversation with artist Anthony McCann in the *Public Engagement Artist in Residence* report of 2012, articulated the spatially expansive concept of the *aurally-overheard*. Adopting this as a principle of practice fundamental to Machine Project's activation of its off-site hosting at the Hammer Museum from 2009 to 2010 speaks to the wider

²⁵ Martin F. Manalansan, "The "Stuff" of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," *Radical History Review*, vol. 2014, no. 120 (Durham: Duke University Press Books: 2014): 94.

participatory significance of this term. The overheard has the capacity to broaden the spatial scope of events programming as well as informing Machine Project's archival form, wherein recorded sound still offers contingent, new ways to enter the space as a passer-by might have caught it. This inclusive capacity to function beyond the exact moment or site of performance encounter, alongside the switching of relational roles between performer and audience, has hierarchical and codification significance, particularly for museums. This research seeks out moments where participatory expansions reveal more informal and open activations of artist project spaces within participatory visual culture.

5. Method and Overview

The organizational, museological, and pedagogical foci of this research are shaped by my experiences as an educator and arts programmer in British art museums and cultural centers. The status as an outsider at the outset of the research lessened through a methodological approach that entailed periods of intense participation in each artist project space's archival remains, alongside the gathering of their anecdotally shared, but theoretically significant commentary. My overall goal was to understand why what happened at these three social sites in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Greensboro mattered and to identify what North American museums should cultivate—or resist losing—in the way they organize and program artists who practice beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries and draw from nondominant cultural contexts and experiences.

Mark Allen detailed how Machine Project emerged and shifted in focus over four key phases of organizational change. Taking his lead, I chose to cut into the substantial online archival sources by focusing in on details in their programming at points of significant project

transition. While Machine Project saw four phases of distinct organizational and programming focus, Elsewhere experienced two-year periods of intense reworking of capacities and direction, and Mess Hall had two clear groupings of keyholders that changed over in 2008. Beginning from these chronological organizational specifics, I contextualize each group's organizational decision-making and resulting micro-social forms.

Centering the artist voices and their archival presence required me to access the remains from all three sites, beyond their substantial online archives. I undertook a month-long research residency at Elsewhere in 2019 as part of the *Southern Constellations* cohort of seven artists, including many first-generation immigrants, drawn from across the southern states of the USA, from Miami to Kansas City (Residency 101). Additionally, I attended Machine Project's final weekend of performances and poster sale in February 2018. During this visit to both the storefront and off-site project sites I was able to spend time with Machine Project's associated theatrical director and intuitive Asher Hartman, who drove me through the city and back in time with recollections of how Machine Project had changed to accommodate participating artists and their emerging audiences. Finally, I accessed the archives across Chicago that related to Mess Hall, with the help of former keyholders for the site, as well as conducting phone and farmer's market interviews with other participants. Supporting these periods of in-person research contact was my access to the substantial paper and online event archives, as well as associated publications written by participants across and beyond the research period.

Detailing the administrative and organizational decisions integral to functioning and practicing at each site revealed radical inversions or reformulations of disciplinary norms as I understood them in relation to museums and cultural venue management. This research narrative aims to capture the energies behind such choices before they fade from view. The contextual

significance of what might now seem odd or diverting choices have behavioral, structural, and participatory significances within and beyond the social life of each site.

In the chapters that follow I look at three elements of each artist project space's organizational practice: how they functioned as social forms and their group dynamics, their phases of organizational change, and the principles of practice that remain applicable. The nine principles of practice identified are loose characterizations of aspects of organizational approach that all three sites have raised in their own vision and value statements, though each realized them in distinctive ways.

In chapter two the focus is on Machine Project, opened by artist Mark Allen in a storefront on North Alvarado Street, just off Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. Through many absurd and recombinatory events as well as technically disruptive workshops, this artist project space supported a troupe of dissonant performance artists, often accompanied in their event delivery by specialists from other disciplines, be they plant scientists or bomb experts. An atmosphere and approach emerged that nurtured others to establish new project forms, as well as being hosted in other locations, from public pools to historic houses. Travelling with its own distinct biome of aesthetics and recurring participants enabled companionable tensions (and failures) that they collectively experienced within more conventional museum settings to reveal the ideological core of Machine Project's approach as a wildly interdisciplinary cultural organization.

Allen chose never to restrict an artist's idea or the likely endpoint, which led to a mixed bag of experiences. Centering the principles of humor and empathy, Allen accepted failure, boredom, and his own subsuming within the business of organizing an art space. The interdisciplinary and often absurd programming acknowledged the transdisciplinary experiences

of the participants. Events overflowed the space, architecture was inverted, sound bled, and performances escalated their logic to extreme ends. In detailing and collating key aspects of its oscillating program, I establish how Machine Project made a museologically-entangled contribution to participatory visual culture between 2003 and 2018, when it closed its doors.

In chapter three, I detail the historical origins and phases of organizational change beginning in 2003 at the living museum and artist residency of Elsewhere in Greensboro, North Carolina. Elsewhere reimagined the Depression-era thrift store established by the cofounder's grandmother, Sylvia Gray, in 1937. Here, an archival approach emerged that considered what an artist project space could be if nothing was sold, altered beyond repair, or thrown away. Central to the artist organizing practices that emerged on site are archival principles that enable empathetic connections to form in relation to object meanings, lost subjectivities, and neighborhood relationships. Elsewhere, as a site, offered a means for hidden voices to be heard and alternative archiving practices to be tested as a form of community memory, with their museological presentation indebted to the implications of mess and its endless reordering.

The principles of practice that enabled Elsewhere to become a platform for imagining and securing hyper-local change are bound to successive reformulations of both the site and the resulting archive by artist residents. Elsewhere instigated organizational difference from the mess of thrift store Americana and the crumbling materiality it contained, and in the process learned ways of empathetically practicing as an organization, emotionally (and indexically) bound to past, present, and future participants. Specifically, I detail Elsewhere's site and the museologically significant principles that inform its construction from the non-object status of its contents, the project organization and its material memory, and the hyper-local neighborhood context.

In chapter four the focus is on Mess Hall, an experimental cultural center in Chicago that ran from 2003 until 2013 in the Rogers Park neighborhood, some twenty minutes north of the city center. The unusual organizational construction of multiple participants who worked together, though not always in agreement, to manage the loaned storefront space resulted in an unpredictable mix of projects and programs that addressed very different constituents and areas of cultural concern. As the most overtly activist of the three spaces and the one not aligned with nonprofit systems, Mess Hall was free to activate its resources in very different ways across two waves of building keyholders.

In the chapter, I detail the ideological and subcultural practices accommodated, which prefigured Occupy Wall Street and built on earlier Do-It-Yourself arts initiatives and the anti-globalization movement at the turn of the 21st century. Mess Hall retained its energies in the archive, remaining unconcerned with disciplinary or practice boundaries. The sharing of accessible key holder texts, the display of subcultural research, and the delivery of recurring or prolonged events acknowledged a deeper history of artist organizing in the city and a dispersal of ideas out into the Midwest. Mess Hall enabled those hosted on site to address issues of racial and environmental equity and deliver acts of societal care in ways not possible within cultural institutions more closely bound to the art market or nonprofit systems.

In the final chapter I group the nine principles of practice identified across the three sites into the three primary ways that they impacted participatory visual culture. First are the structural affordances that each site carved out in offering services for free, among a hyper-locally mapped neighborhood, and through unpredictable programming. Such affordances impacted the organizational platforms they provided. Second are the behavioral capacities that shaped the character and organizational structures of each site as an act of organizational care. The

importance of empathy and humor to bond participants and define organizational direction aligned with attitudinally hardcore approaches to ethical commitments. Third are the participatory expansions that offered a more inclusive and contingent conception of project access and archival content. Significant practices include the acceptance of the aurally overheard in broadening the participatory scope of events, the indications of memorial liveness to mark out past actions, and the conferring of non-object status for all material onsite.

The goal of this study is not to articulate evidence of impact for each artist project space but to understand the overlapping importance of capacities that are less often made clear or detailed when programming artist projects into the public sphere. The loss of indicators describing other ways of living and organizing such capacities reduces our grasp of their participatory visual cultural significances and the palpable everyday details that shaped our lives between 2003 and 2016. The resistances and denormalizations practiced within these social sites were critical to shaping the dynamic, equitable, and caring forms of sited participatory practices that became visible in the years that followed.²⁶

²⁶ Pablo Helguera commissioned *MoMA Studio: Common Senses* in 2012 with participatory installations by Fritz Haeg, Mildred's Lane, Reggio Emilia, and Karen Hewitt, with swarming events that hosted other artist groups and environmental activists, including Hope Ginsburg's *Sponge HQ*. At the Smart Museum in Chicago Stephanie Smith curated *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* in 2012 that included thirty artists who had activated the shared meal as an artistic medium, including inCUBATE, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Theaster Gates. In 2015, Simone Leigh installed the *Free People's Medical Clinic* with Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn and Creative Time, offering an historical and practical exploration of overlooked medical pioneers who supported Black women's health as well as programming workshops in which participants could access care and health services. The New Museum hosted *Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room* in 2016 that installed a care environment with remedies that drew on Black cultural traditions, including herbalists and apothecaries. Such programming in museum settings and historic sites placed care and equity as primary forces within the display and participatory activation of cultural space, accommodating ideological approaches that challenged institutional narratives, and disciplinary conventions.

Chapter Two. *Machine Project*

Part 1

At 10:10pm on November 15, 2003 Machine Project opened its doors, just briefly for the first time, closing them at 10:20pm after a performance of prog rock video with live bass shredding, then ushering everyone out by 10:30pm. In this first expression of itself as an organization, shared in a group email, it was noted that “You know all those times you went to see your friend’s band, and had to wait through 2 opening bands, and then even though your friend’s band was awesome, you kind of wished it was over after 20 minutes? This isn’t that.”²⁷

A few weeks later, in an invitation to the second opening, artist founder Mark Allen would expand on the intention of Machine Project:

We've been looking for a place to show sculpture, installation and technology that doesn't entail any of the following;
art on the wall
net art
white cube
black cube
cube
a subconscious desire to emulate the apple store.
We didn't find it, so we're opening a space called Machine.²⁸

With this announcement Machine Project was publicly launched and would continue over thousands of such events as a reformulator of participatory visual culture. The event programs’ content was as wildly variable as sonic massage, fungi mycology, and Arduino coding skills. Mark Allen, through Machine Project, surpassed all expectations of what an artist intrigued by engineering and botany might do.²⁹ The programming would expand outwards from its local

²⁷ Machine Project Emails, “Sexi Midi,” November 11, 2003.

²⁸ Machine Project Emails, “m4ch1n3,” December 4, 2003.

²⁹ Charlotte Cotton, “Field Guide for Machine Project,” in *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection (live by Special Request)*, eds. Mark Allen & Rachel Seligman (New York: Prestel, 2017), 151.

neighborhood of Echo Park in Los Angeles, with a glance at the wider legacy of the film industry, car culture, and mid-century happenings.³⁰ Charlotte Cotton, an early museum host for Machine Project summarizes:

Allen describes his approach as akin to a “genetic algorithm”—a process of seeding a lot of ideas, pruning and hybridizing them, observing and determining the important variables, and deliberately amplifying the accidental and unexpected. From the outset, Machine Project was not a philosophical but literal proposal of doing something to see what happens.³¹

That intention of performatively testing out ideas and their recombination in the company of others and from one site would provide the root ball of Machine Project’s generative and botanically analogous premise.

The application of Allen’s approach to site, from the shop unit at 1200-D North Alvarado Street, was visible from the outset. Fritz Haeg and Mark Allen conceived of a modular-designed space and that modularity ultimately extended beyond the furniture into the architectural structures, eventually resulting in complete alterations of the site. There would be a one-time inversion of the storefront windows to create a plaza and later the conversion of the basement into an opera house and sometimes poetry recording studio.³² Allen reconfigured what an artist project space might be, both physically and socially, in relation to both the local storefront strip and conventional museums. The site was a container for Machine Project with its many

³⁰ Brett Bloom, former Mess Hall keyholder defined the concept of petro-subjectivity in Brett Bloom, *Petro-subjectivity: De-industrializing Our Sense of Self* (Ft. Wayne, IN: Breakdown Break Down Press, 2015). It holds particular relevance to Machine Project’s car and oil industry-related programming and how such events acknowledge the implicit contradictions in the Los Angeles landscape, where oil extraction, car culture and pollution dictate how one moves through the city, no matter how sustainable or local one’s aspirations as an artist project space.

³¹ Cotton, “Field Guide for Machine Project,” 152.

³² See Machine Project’s architectural installations, including Josh Beckman, “Sea Nymph Ship Wreck,” 2010; Nate Page, “Storefront Plaza,” 2011–2012; Asher Hartman, “See What Love the Father Has Given Us,” 2012; Chris Weibard and Joe Seeley, “Victorian Opera House,” 2013; and Anthony McCann, “Mystery Theatre Poetry Archive,” 2015 & “Wave Books—Machine Project 5-day Poetry Marathon,” March 2016.

dissections and reconfigurations, some born of necessity and others of accidental discoveries, such as the removal of a first-floor wall after a flood.³³

Machine Project changed how artists could show their work, giving collaborators scope to be literal with the site beyond the conventions of the experimental space and towards a more social site specificity. Allen would refer to the accrued details, attitudes, and oddities as a *biome of aesthetics*, applying them when re-imagining Machine Project at other sites and in their archive.³⁴ In the very visible alterations of site made in each of these contexts, including re-directions of conventional presentation formats, Machine Project proved a distinctive force within participatory visual culture.

During its farewell party weekend in 2018, Machine Project would see many of its long-standing artist collaborators perform with wry lament, from folk song invocations, to poems, to amended song covers beside a funeral wreath. This wake was both simple in its structure and a synecdoche of Machine Project's social site specificity. Those in the room had been at the heart of peer organizations and participating artist communities that activated and expanded the social life of the Alvarado Street site. On the walls hung every event poster commissioned (Figure 2.1), though few had been delivered in time to serve a promotional function, and the floor evidenced every scratch, incision, and stain of those events. The sun-setting of the artist project space was performed as their culminating act, delivered using Machine Project's distinctive curatorial and participatory approach, with the doors closing for the last time on January 13, 2018.³⁵

³³ Mark Allen, "The Curiosity Effect," Essay posted Sept. 15, 2015. 1. <http://www.markallen.com/texts>.

³⁴ Mark Allen, "Hello, have you been here before?," in *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection (live by Special Request)*, eds. Mark Allen & Rachel Seligman (New York: Prestel, 2017), 47.

³⁵ Author present for *Machine Project Closing Weekend* events that included a poster sale and evening gathering at Alvarado Street with farewell performances, as well as a variation of Carmina Escobar's "Fiesta Perpetua!" on Echo Park Lake in which Mark Allen reclined on a floating platform beneath Butoh dancer, Oguri on Saturday January 13, 2018.

Machine Project retrospectively presents four key phases of organizational development, with turns in 2005, 2008, and 2012, that intersect with patterns in the wider museum and visual cultural landscape.³⁶ The changes evident at each turn demonstrate how Machine Project organizationally functioned as a reformulation of a museum education and public programs department, but without the paraphernalia of the museum. Machine Project was able to hold to a morphing identity in each organizational phase through Allen, who was energized by radical interdisciplinarity and willing partners. The artist “performing as an organization” would never simply fit in with external expectations and always provided an unexpected and kindly challenge in its collaborative ethos, as a companionably antagonistic partner, open to both contingent redirection and program failure.³⁷

Peer-scaled local partners initially drove what could be shown at Machine Project, many associated with neighboring sites, such as The Institute of Figuring, Public School, and the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest. A second group of partnerships inserted this emerging cohort into more conventional cultural institutions, such as a take-over of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 2008, a residency and ensuing interventions for the Hammer Museum in 2009, and a monographic exhibition at the Tang Teaching Museum in 2015.³⁸ A third group of partnerships enabled a more direct engagement with Machine Project’s neighboring Hispanic community. Despite the renowned status of some partners and increasingly well-attended events, Machine Project chose not to follow the logic of physical expansion of its

³⁶ Cotton, “Field Guide to Machine Project,” 149.

³⁷ Companionably antagonistic used here as a term to convey a lived complexity for artist project spaces, of what Chantal Mouffe’s proposed as agonisms. She offered a philosophical frame for the very human experience of navigating the structural tensions that emerge in partnership with cultural institutions and that reveal significant ideological differences, rather than one of antagonistic rupture. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics Thinking the World Politically* (London and Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2013).

³⁸ Museum exhibitions include: “The Artist Museum,” Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, 2011; “Summer Jubilee,” *Open Field*, The Walker Arts Center, 2011; “Wide Open School,” The Hayward, Southbank Center, London, 2012; and “The Field Guide to the Gamble House,” The Gamble House, Los Angeles, 2014.

site, providentially allowing it to survive the global financial crisis of 2008 and remain at one address.

Machine Project's curatorial identity emphasized as-yet-unfinished projects, whose meaning and value were likewise unresolved and whose prescience became more evident as the project continued. Michael Asher, who taught at the California Institute of Arts (Cal Arts), would ask Allen, then an MFA student, "If you figure out why you are making work about nothing, please let me know. I'm genuinely curious."³⁹ Allen would go on to perform many roles—college professor, graphic artist, computer programmer, event convener, curator, and mentor—though his most public and encompassing role between 2003 and 2018 was directing Machine Project. In this capacity, Allen's comedic twists, the kindness he fostered, and his accommodation of the unexpected, through misadventure and in the valuing of the overheard, shaped Machine Project. The loose collective Allen gathered around him, akin to a performance troupe, would become long-term collaborators in the programming of iterative events.⁴⁰ With them, Allen would test, challenge, and reshape in experimental arcs what an artist project space could be, in relation to a landscape of more conventional and larger cultural institutions.⁴¹

The affective experience of the Alvarado Street space was integral to how work was shown and framed at Machine Project, freeing participants from museum viewing expectations. Such a spatial and experiential undoing of gallery norms built on the institutional critique central to Michael Asher's installations in museums. Architectural historian Miwon Kwon would critique a fresh significance in the incidental and hallucinatory experience of bare exhibition

³⁹ Mark Allen, "Notes Toward Socratic Gardening," Essay posted Sept. 15, 2015. <http://www.markallen.com/s/Notes-Toward-Socratic-Gardening.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Jori Finkel, "Arty Subversives Storm the Museum," Nov. 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/arts/design/30fink.html>.

⁴¹ Cotton, "Field Guide to Machine Project," 3.

space while standing amid Michael Asher's final gallery installation in 2008 which had stripped down the Santa Monica Museum of Art venue to the stud walls.⁴² Her review values atmospheric details that echo those found in Machine Project's restroom with the chipped and chaotic infinity-mirrors similarly taking on basic architectural details and creating an incongruous and psychedelic experience. Allen includes such contextual irregularities in his definition of the *curiosity effect*, where attention is drawn to uncelebrated aspects of the site, enabling visitors to begin to shed expectations of both the space and the art practices within.⁴³ The foundational principles of Michael Asher's interventions within institutional space from the 1960s through to his 2008 retrospective, are echoed in Machine Project's approach to site and its performance as an organization.⁴⁴

Artists' increasing and deliberate misuse of the site also revealed what Machine Project was ideologically unlearning through its organizational pedagogy. For artist-educator Pablo Helguera, the misuse and misrepresentation of site that Machine Project demonstrates is key to the undoing of social roles and disciplinary conventions. He terms this a "transpedagogy" that can be extended to accommodate what artist organizations can teach.⁴⁵ Participants can both find motivation and be unsettled by absurd curatorial gestures that enable an accessing of complex ideas, made more visible in partnerships hosted in more formal, codified museum spaces.

Helguera frames this pedagogical approach:

⁴² Asher's installation reduced the gallery venue to its bare structural supports, where work might hang or spaces be defined he offered no release from an engagement with the physicality of the space, the loss of viewing and behavioral codifications, and the disconcerting attention to those also standing in the space, as a critique of the cultural sphere we move through and its expectations. Miwon Kwon, "Approaching Architecture: The Case of Michael Asher," in *Michael Asher*, ed. Jennifer King (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 171.

⁴³ Allen, "The Curiosity Effect," 1. An experiential site specificity, rather than being didactic or legible, was about accessing contextual information of a more affective and social character, to define the space.

⁴⁴ Kirsi Peltomäki, *Situation Aesthetics: The Work of Michael Asher* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ Pablo Helguera, "Notes Toward a Transpedagogy," in *Art, Architecture, Pedagogy: Experiments in Learning*, ed. Ken Ehrlich (Valencia, CA: Viralnet.com, Center for Integrated Media, California Institute of Arts, 2011), 107.

What art making has to offer today is not to represent accurately, but rather to misrepresent, so that we can discover new questions. It is when we position ourselves in those tentative locations, and persist in making them into concrete experiences, that interstices become locations of meaning.⁴⁶

The lack of codification at interstices, such as the storefront site, changed how work could be performed. It was Machine Project artist Emily Lacy, who clarified what misfitting could reveal about the restrictions for participatory visual culture performed in conventional cultural settings. During a residency that transferred the curatorial approach possible at Machine Project to the thickly codified environment of the Hammer Museum, Lacy performed Hammer Staff Birthday Personal Concerts, celebrating alongside employees at their office desks with her out-of-place guitar and performative focus, which required her to carry the emotional climate of her work with her as well, in order to be meaningfully contextualized.⁴⁷ Back at Machine Project her atmospheric folk and electronic song performances could exist unfettered by hierarchical, social, and spatial expectations. Additionally, the awkwardness of choosing to perform to just one person, be it in the Hammer Museum offices or the theatre, points to the leveling and mixing of public and administrative functions which is possible at Machine Project, with those present always already behind and part of the scene. Allen in conversation with Lacy observes:

... the performances that happen at Machine are much more fluid. They get their energy from the shift—the fact that, all of a sudden, the performative moment erupts out of this social space when the person starts singing.⁴⁸

Machine Project reformulated participatory performance conventions and their organizational significance as a transpedagogical art practice. The social life and those who activated the program turn the architectural misuse of site and lighter spatial codification into a capacity that

⁴⁶ Helguera, “Notes Toward a Transpedagogy,” 112.

⁴⁷ Mark Allen, “Interview: Emily Lacy, November 28, 2010,” in *Public Engagement Artist in Residence: Machine Project—Hammer Museum*, eds. Mark Allen and Allison Agsten (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2012), 68.

⁴⁸ Allen, “Interview: Emily Lacy,” 67.

accommodates, as Helguera suggests, new locations of meaning among disciplinary misrepresentations, reformulations and inversions.

The organizational forms that Machine Project adopted institutionally reflected both the shifting site and its social life.⁴⁹ Rather than the practice of critiquing the institution from within, the institution critiques itself as part of the world at large and in relation to other disciplinary approaches.⁵⁰ The inherent institution practices of Machine Project have been visualized by Mary Fagot, with Mark Allen, in a detail from a larger poster that diagrams organizational processes and echoes the animation that accompanies the following greeting to every new visitor to the website and Online archive:

What is Machine Project?

It's a question many ask, and keep asking, whether they've been here before or not. Machine Project is a place for artists to do fun experiments, together with the public, in ways that influence culture. We bring together artists of all different backgrounds from science, poetry, set design, performance, and technology and beyond, who have interesting ideas and provide them with resources to explore those ideas, together with the public (this means you!) and put those ideas into action.

These actions can take the form of talks, workshops, live performances, and group naps. Sometimes they happen in our storefront and sometimes out in the world through partnering with museums, parking lots, swimming pools, homes, and public spaces. Our experiments have unpredictable results. We like it that way and think you will too. We then share the results with the public in the form of videos, performances, publications, and tool kits.

If this sounds like your idea of a good time: learn more, join [the] mailing list, [and] attend an event. Thank you.⁵¹

The clarity given in this welcome is critical for navigating the more complex tensions demanded by Machine Project's pedagogical performance as an organization.

⁴⁹ Gerald Raunig, "Instituting and Distributing: On the Relationship Between Politics and Police Following Rancière as a Development of the Problem of Distribution with Deleuze," *Transversal*, Sept. 2007, <https://eipcp.net/transversal/1007/raunig/en.html>.

⁵⁰ Tal Beery, "Instituent Practices: Art after (Public) Institutions," *Temporary Art Review*, Jan. 2, 2018, <http://temporaryartreview.com/instituent-practices-art-after-public-institutions/>.

⁵¹ Machine Project website, "Welcome," 2015. <https://machineproject.com/>. Mary Fagot is a Creative Director and was Chairman of Machine Project Board of Directors to its closure in 2018.

The combination of structurally instituent practices and partnerships allows for the companionable antagonism found at the heart of Machine Project’s recurring and long-term external relationships. The capacity to companionably agree and reflect on failure—the Hammer Museum residency ended six months early, but resulted in a significant co-operatively compiled report—and other empathetic relationships formed with partners are characteristics of what Machine Project brings to those with distinctly different agendas and scales, from art museums to historic houses and planetariums. Each is an effective legitimizing force at a local public service level and within visual and political culture.

The organizational approaches that Machine Project adopts at each phase of its history are a distinctive variant within those focused on participatory practices, changing what was possible. Through partnerships, and the navigation of their companionable antagonisms, Machine Project set itself apart from other similarly scaled independent projects in Los Angeles, leading Ann Mayer to make the following comparative observation on its closure in 2018:

Los Angeles is home to several projects founded by artists desiring to produce extra-institutional spaces for criticality and innovation.... While Art + Practice, for example, works within an urban neighborhood as part of an expanded field of art, Machine often works within more conventional art world parameters. Its innovation is in the practice of inserting itself (back) into established institutions. The museum-based projects allow Machine to concoct scenarios on a scale not allowed by its modest space. They also function as a trickle-up experience for the hosting institution—a training, of sorts, in how to facilitate artworks that are participatory, ephemeral, and/or durational. Most importantly, that training often involves publicly processing the experience after the fact, an exercise museums don’t typically undertake.⁵²

Machine Project made visible ideological discontinuities within institutions by inserting or conflating their approach with those of partners.

⁵² Anna Mayer, “Artist-as-Consultant, Monograph-as-Transparency,” *X-Tra* 20, no. 2 (Winter 2018), <https://www.x-traonline.org/article/artist-as-consultant-monograph-as-transparency/>.

The accessible ways Machine Project shared its practices were significant to what it made visible and what it wittingly instigated within participatory visual culture. In partnering with established museums, the impact of Machine Project's reformulation of participatory art practice would shape visual culture beyond the Los Angeles arts community. Additionally, its wryly familiar toned communications shared through the use of emails, event listings, publications (essays, catalogues, monograph and toolkits), and audio and video documentation coalesced around the biome of aesthetics that so characterized Machine Project. The archive of these materials is realized as palpable, open, and accessible, from the meticulously documented floorboards that map the stains and cuts inflicted by past workshops to the slot machine entry device to thousands of online events.

The archive was comprehensively narrativized in 2016 with the publication of *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection* a monograph that tries to remember everything and sometimes can't, told through interlocutors such as Charlotte Cotton, who began as a once-refused curatorial partner, and Joshua Beckman, who had been there for almost every poetry event hosted, concluding with a speculative email generator that predicts future, nonsensical events, based on past emails, the latter so amusingly counter to the reality of the relationships Allen has nurtured with his long-term collaborators, peer partners, and institutional hosts. In the plethora of materials included in *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection* are Allen's own audio tour of Machine Project, with substantial footnotes, and Charlotte Cotton's "Field Guide to Machine Project" that identified the four organizational phases across its then 13-year history. Each turn towards a new phase in 2005, 2008 and 2012, revealed what Machine Project had been part of changing in participatory visual culture.

Part 2 – Organizational Turns

Machine Project’s launch in 2003 encompassed the formation of a voice and visual references that defined how the project’s identity sustained a flexible consistency over the intervening fifteen years. To relive the launch of Machine Project, albeit remotely and from the next generation, is to find oneself pulled down digital rabbit holes, echoes of those that Mark Allen dropped through, into the *Wonderland* of early 2003. The voice of Machine Project begins with email asides referencing soft, domesticated creatures and *lolcats*—an affable, kindly glance at internet culture. The mentions of kittens and fantastical pink poodles intermingle with discordant ultra-metal events, and mentions of specific dog breeds—a Xoloitzcuintli and a Peruvian Hairless. Later, memes and code references abound, such as ponies looking out to sea, and finally in the surprise closing announcement on January 4th, 2018, a small pair of terriers hurtled across a finish-line. It is in combining such personal and visual associations, obsessively sourced among pop cultural and technological references, that the voice that signs off emails, “Love, Machine” is sketched, reworked, and reiterated.⁵³ This tone is a co-construction, as Allen initially writes with performance lecturer Jason Brown, that expands to include other staff and interns’ predilections over the subsequent years.⁵⁴

Jason Brown brought his deeply poetic and layered reading of the world and its history into his experimental lectures at Machine, Brown helped craft a language that blended the descriptive and absurdist, without irony, for Machine to communicate to its audience.⁵⁵

⁵³ Cotton, “Field Guide to Machine Project,” 154.

⁵⁴ Jason Brown’s Machine Project events include “Symptomology and Mnemotechnics,” and “Tron and Gnosticism,” 2006; and “Paranoid Machines,” 2011. Brown also co-wrote the “Introduction” to Machine Project’s first exhibition, *Machine Project Guide to Cultural History and the Natural Sciences*, at Pomona College Museum of Art in 2006. Brown describes himself as the janitor at Beta Level, a neighboring Chinatown artist project space.

⁵⁵ Cotton, “Field Guide to Machine Project,” 154.

In sharing a sense of who you would meet if you walked through the door, the voice of Machine Project was a critical element to its accessibility and remote appeal.⁵⁶ Over the years, others added their voices to what was at the heart of the biome of aesthetics used to convey the social site of Machine Project—a tone held in place by Mark Allen’s identity and practice, complicated and entangled within Machine Project.

The sheer quantity and variety of events delivered are testament to Allen and his collaborators performing through the organization. Such a way of organizing as an arts practice did not negate Allen’s founder status and instead, as defined by Tom Finkelpearl, activated a more socially cooperative structure.

Works that examine or enact the social dimension of the cooperative venture, blurring issues of authorship, crossing social boundaries, and engaging participants for durations that stretch from days to months to years.⁵⁷

Allen spoke of collaborative working relationships as integral to his process of convening events at Machine Project, though the strict equality implied by the term was modulated with the organizational application of a socially cooperative framework, in which curatorial control was released. However, directed-participation, which drove many of Machine Project’s iterative and frequently scripted events, was an approach Finkelpearl distinguished from the socially cooperative, but which co-existed in this context. In its fifteen years and its literal living of the theoretical, Machine Project encompassed both, being organizationally socially cooperative and programmatically scripted. Mark Allen and, by extension, Machine Project edged away from the naming of social art practices, be they socially cooperative, dialogical, or socially engaged. His preference was instead to shuffle the certainties of definition to reveal gaps in our collective

⁵⁶ Allen, “Hello, have you been here before?” 45.

⁵⁷ Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 6.

social and cultural lives and highlight them among academic science and humanities disciplines. In the *Field Guide to Machine Project* Charlotte Cotton explained that “Allen geared himself toward the actual rather than the symbolic manifestations of social art practices,” at their most performative, participatory, and organizational end.⁵⁸ Such a granular approach presciently evidenced what was not yet possible elsewhere and suggested future potentialities, as well as necessary resistances.

i. The turn towards the socially administrative in 2005

In the *Field Guide to Machine Project*, Charlotte Cotton in collaboration with Allen, identifies a shift from the “interdisciplinary grassroots venue” of Machine Project’s opening phase to the “collective group of artists generating grassroots models of art and performance,” by 2005. Deep in its mailing list archive this shift is evident as Allen signed off on the last “pals” mailing at the close of 2005 with “Luv, Mark” and “Love, m.a.,” while in the public and continuing “friends” mailings he used the more organizationally encompassing “Love, Machine.” The email archive then expanded rapidly as the voice of Machine pulled in those pals, friends, and family to join a wider constituency of participants and followers. The organization functioned as a growing self-identifying collective but with Mark Allen still as its curatorial reference point, a convener and empathetic voice amid the uncertainties of a second, surprising, George W. Bush presidential term in 2004.

The turn towards being more socially administrative came with Machine Project’s application for non-profit status secured in May 2006 and the careful cementing of necessary institutional structures and processes. The term *socially administrative* acknowledges how the

⁵⁸ Cotton, “Field Guide to Machine Project,” 152.

social life of the site was bound to the administrative task of organizing the project at that juncture, with the artist organizer role emerging as central to these performance of such administrative practices integral to running a space, where tone, group relationships, and structural choices indicate an instituent difference. Charlotte Cotton observes a series of firsts that allowed for the more sure and steady evolution of Machine Project performing as “a research center and idea generator for the cultural sector.”⁵⁹ Allen secured the first grant for Machine Project from the Durfee Foundation; his first faculty position at Pomona College, Claremont; the first production partnership with Michelle Yu; and the first publication of an almanac of all the events to date, as well as a spot in the foundational Warhol Initiative Program.⁶⁰ Each was a timely addition given the precarity of the financial situation, which Allen acknowledged with humor in mid-summer 2005, requesting, “Please bring drinks because we’re out of money.”⁶¹

None of these firsts resulted in significant financial gains, though they did allow Machine Project enough resources to stabilize. However, Allen, like many artists remaining in Los Angeles after college, continued to live relatively simply in order to nurture Machine Project’s economic model. The Alvarado Street basement was rented out, and there were not-infrequent gifting calls for items such as a fish-eye camera, a deep fat fryer for the “first Machine Project Fry-b-que/Pneumatic Cash machine/holiday party,” and strobe lights to experiment with for a non-Halloween idea.⁶² Allen observed that “The semi-affordability of commercial real estate, the diverse communities of interest, and the excessive number of art schools makes LA a particularly

⁵⁹ Cotton, “Field Guide to Machine Project,” 158.

⁶⁰ Cotton, “Field Guide to Machine Project,” 158. The Warhol Initiative program ran from 1999 to 2012, with Elsewhere joining in 2011.

⁶¹ Machine Project Emails, “Wicked Frames videos and hang out at Machine Thursday,” April 7, 2005.

⁶² Machine Project Emails (Pals), “Gong Show and Studio for Rent,” March, 2005; and “strobe lights/black lights,” Oct, 2005.

fertile place for a project like Machine,” and where gifting networks are possible given their structural necessity and social significance to the artist project space’s administration and forms of participation.⁶³

Machine Project’s early social life grew outwards from families and friends in playful, experimental ways, and sought to be a new type of project from the outset. Allen’s father, a scientist, appears in 2006, presenting a lecture on polyester clothing, “the first in our Machine Project parent/scholar series.”⁶⁴ The establishing of familial relationships and a recurring group of artists gains strength at this turn as the social life of the site shifts to a socially administrative construction that enhanced its organizational capacity. Here the technical infrastructures and administrative systems began to form around the artist project space. The expanding frame included more women, deepening relationships with original artists, and new partners who all contributed to multi-event series and increasing numbers of programmatic experimentations.

The need to set up systems, or at least understand the systems, with which Machine Project and peer-projects would function resulted in an emphasis on foundational technologies. To this end, Machine Project delivered workshops on basic electronics, coding, and web hosting.⁶⁵ Allen also initially offered consulting and engineering services for a fee, from animatronics to database design, further supporting the organization.⁶⁶ Not only were they using and occasionally hacking the existing affordances of technology in the gentlest autodidactic fashion, but that DIY ethos was part of the larger concept and economic model. Few systems

⁶³ Laure Joliet, “7 Questions for Mark Allen of Machine Project,” *Dwell* (Feb. 10, 2009), <https://www.dwell.com/article/7-questions-for-mark-allen-of-machine-project-1a0c93f9>.

⁶⁴ Machine Project Emails, “Polyester at Machine Saturday, Robot Eggs at Pomona Museum Sunday,” Jan 1, 2006.

⁶⁵ Such technology workshops continued into 2007, after which the emphasis shifted away from core administrative systems to navigating and alternative uses of proprietary services and platforms.

⁶⁶ A Consultancy Services link can be found on the Machine Project’s website between Sept. 2004 and June 2005, according to Way Back Machine retrievals.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20040912173935/http://www.machineproject.com:80/consulting.php>.

existed for what Allen and Machine Project's growing retinue of artists were aspiring to achieve. The infrastructure being defined had to serve emergent organizations, which were interdisciplinary in their construction, unlike the more siloed structures in conventional museums.

While Machine Project remained bound to the size and parameters of its storefront site for fifteen years, it found ways to expand its frame by activating art world relationships and a hardwired sociality. Allen would note, "We are not trying to become any larger. A metastasizing logic of the art world, capitalism, and life seems relentlessly invested in making things bigger, larger, more expensive, and more ambitious."⁶⁷

An event that underlines the challenge of the Los Angeles context and that comedically alludes to the lived reality of scale was the *Illegal Space Race* delivered by Monochrome in Summer 2005. Participants raced in cars between planets, mapped onto the Los Angeles cityscape e.g., the sun, 4 meters in diameter; Pluto, one centimeter in diameter and about 20 miles away. Participants found themselves comfortable in their cars but as a mere dot in the solar system. Planetary scientists assessed their race speed and made navigation calculations.⁶⁸ In logging traffic conditions and vehicle breakdowns and their insertion into the car culture of Los Angeles, the event experientially embraced the concept of petro-subjectivity that Mess Hall artist Brett Bloom and curator Nuno Sacramento would address in their study of non-traditional mapping a decade later.⁶⁹

In Los Angeles, there is a tension between the potential reach of an artist project space that offers directed participation activities, such as Machine Project, and the acceptance of the

⁶⁷ Allen, "Hello, have you been here before?*" 43.

⁶⁸ Machine Project Emails, "Austrian space race Saturday 2pm (June 25th)," June 24, 2006.

⁶⁹ Brett Bloom and Nuno Sacramento, *Deep Mapping* (Auburn, IN: Breakdown Break Down Press, 2017).

futility of that ambition to draw people across town and through the door. To this end, Machine Project retained an emergent framework and storefront scale as a pragmatic response to such an urban challenge. They were also served as early adopters of website technologies and networked media to alleviate some of the tension around the privileging of being present. This was a physically intimate artist project space for which context was a dominant constructor of meaning, but not necessarily a mark of direct community relevance as European participatory practice might demand.⁷⁰

The Ten Beliefs of Machine Project stated, “Art is not defined by materials or means of production but the context in which it appears, is discussed, and analyzed.”⁷¹ The partnerships established in 2005 built on Machine Project’s approach for experiential and occasionally nihilistic ends, with programmatic series such as *Experience the Experience* with Monochrome; monthly Dorkbot gatherings for those intrigued by electricity; and events with The Institute of Figuring, which focused on the poetic and aesthetic dimensions of science, math and engineering.

A fundraiser for the newly-launched *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* in April 2005 positioned Machine Project in a wider conceptual frame beyond Echo Park and the expanded field of Los Angeles, intersecting in significance with other artist project spaces such as Elsewhere and Mess Hall. In the pages of the journal, there were influential voices that philosophically shaped socially engaged and participatory art practice in North America in the first decade of the century. Additionally, they raised the specific challenges and strengths of an activist approach, which had value for the futurescape of artist project spaces. What Machine

⁷⁰ Socially engaged art practices funded more routinely from government sources in Europe were charged with demonstrating a delivery of social service needs, often well beyond the capacity of the artistic program or indeed as a distraction from its core tenants. Such divergence reflects government divestment and demographic inequality.

⁷¹ Allen, “Hello, have you been here before?” 65.

Project tested, over fifteen years, expanded with a legacy of more demographically representative artist ventures that came next. Each speaks more directly from racially, socially, and gendered life exclusions, reframing what an artist project space could be from an experientially activist perspective.

Mess Hall's Marc Fischer and Brett Bloom of Half Letter Press also distributed the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* from their Midwest base. Where Gerald Raunig pushed against the neo-liberalism and an anaesthetized arts scene in Europe, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, under the editorship of Robby and Marc Herbst, looked to hack capitalism by insertion, such as the creation of dialogical spaces that would change the visual cultural landscape. In such dialogical spaces it was possible to activate Raunig's concept of instituent practices, building a third wave of institutional critique, wherein these new artist project spaces reformulated museum constructs as autonomous social sites.

Machine Project found its strongest administrative support at this foundational stage through the energy of others in academia, peer partners, and specialist granting bodies, rather than from conventional museum funding streams. It is easy at times to forget the organizations that now support independent artist projects and which emerged after 2005, with Open Engagement in 2007; then Common Field, formerly the Hand in Glove Conference, from 2011; and Blade of Grass, from 2014 to 2020. Key voices now associated with these organizations also appear in the early phases of Machine Project's development, as well as those of Elsewhere and Mess Hall. Courtney Fink was the Director of Southern Exposure in San Francisco and instigated a substantial partnership with Machine Project. She then moved to the Andy Warhol Initiative, and eventually took on a leadership role at Common Field. However, in 2005 all Machine Project had was an organizational form that could precariously sustain itself, though events were

often thinly attended and mainly by those within the arts community. Machine Project's distinction was in working with collaborators with non-arts specialist skills and amateur obsessions which successfully resulted in the expansion of those micro-communities.⁷²

A recurring core group of voices had gathered itself by 2005, with lateral voices and partners joining and redirecting events programs. However, underpinning this strong affiliation between other artists whose practice was temporally or disciplinarily challenging and hard to pin down, the Machine Project site became a locus of collective identity construction. All this was represented in their online presence, which conveyed the shifting emphasis and the scale of project delivery, as well as their use of new digital platforms, demanding such structural realities as a switch to professionally managed servers.⁷³

Navigating their online archive and its representation of the very human connections at the heart of Machine Project evidences its socially administrative principles. Characteristics emerge in the voice and program of Machine Project that, with Allen's humor, emerging collective, and organizational DNA, distinguishes Machine Project as a wider and more public social site by 2005. "Once I began using the storefront as a public space, I began to see that an organization could be a flexible container for all kinds of things. I saw that the event format can get people directly involved with new ideas and topics. Art is a great excuse for things you want to do."⁷⁴

ii. The turn towards an organizational pedagogy in 2008

⁷² Machine Project's support of collaborators and peer artist project spaces, to the point of its closure, can be mapped in a futurescape of projects that have foregrounded gender and racial representation since, including the Women's Center for Creative Work (WCCW), Los Angeles. A panel focusing on micro-communities for artist project spaces, was chaired by Natilee Harren at the College Art Association Conference in 2018, attracting many from this network, including Ken Allan.

⁷³ Machine Project Emails (Pals), "webhosting?", Aug. 25, 2004.

⁷⁴ Allen, "Hello, have you been here before?" 46.

Machine Project’s “collective group of artists generating grassroots models of art and performance” shifted focus to “collaborations with major cultural institutions across the country to reimagine forms of public engagement and accessibility” in 2008.⁷⁵ The culmination of this turn was the one-day takeover of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) on November 15, 2008, which significantly scaled up previous partnerships and public engagement. Machine Project’s curatorial approach would reimagine what the pedagogical turn in wider arts practice could look like in direct engagement with publics, both at Alvarado Street and off-site with cultural partners, such as the G.L.O.W. Festival in Santa Monica; LACMA in Los Angeles; and Southern Exposure in San Francisco. All these partnerships occurred at a time when the challenges of the economic model of academia, in the wake of Internet developments such as Web 2.0, became more neoliberal and restrictive. However, many of Machine Project’s associated artists, peer partners, and student interns would still earn their primary income within university departments, imbricating them in both landscapes and complicating oppositional positioning.

At the University of Southern California, a symposium entitled “On the Future of the Art School,” towards the end of George Bush’s presidency in 2006, was an aspirational moment before a collapsing of its potential, as adjunct rather than faculty status became a precarious norm, class syllabi were refocused on entrepreneurial ends, and students revolted at the ideological influences of the technological and business sector.⁷⁶ With pedagogical hopes contracted in one location, they were lived out in more nuanced ways on the edge of academia in artist project spaces and in the emergence of new social practice graduate programs. As

⁷⁵ Cotton, “Field Guide to Machine Project,” 149.

⁷⁶ Alex Klein, “Back to the Future (of Art School),” in *Public Servants*, ed. Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, and Dominic Willson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 300.

conventional academia positioned itself in relation to the wave of such pedagogical concerns and participatory practices, new alliances emerged. Fritz Haeg and Mark Allen were among the emerging artists who were creating discursive and social spaces, alongside more established figures such as J. Morgan Puett and Mark Dion. Each site offered students ways to reformulate their education toward the principles of theorists such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and, most relevant to Machine Project's organizational pedagogy, Paulo Freire.

Artist-educator Pablo Helguera observed that "artists and curators have become increasingly engaged in projects that appropriate the tropes of education as both a method and a form: lectures, seminars, libraries, reading-rooms, publications, workshops and even full-blown schools."⁷⁷ Helguera proposed the term "transpedagogy" to refer to projects by artists and collectives that blended educational processes and art-making to offer an experience that was clearly different from conventional art academies or formal education.⁷⁸ It is significant that Allen would later conceive of Machine Project's audiences as transdisciplinary while the program remained interdisciplinary, offering a distinction that lessens the authorial power of the artist and opens the program up to what participants bring to a situation.⁷⁹

Helguera makes clear that transpedagogical art practice is distinct from the conventional educational system, defining the term as those "projects by artists and collectives that blend educational processes and art-making in works that offer an experience that is clearly different from conventional art academies or formal art education."⁸⁰ Artists delivering symbolic educational ventures, mock and para-organizations are also not subject to the same evaluation

⁷⁷ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and The Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 241.

⁷⁸ Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorgo Pinto Books, 2011), 77.

⁷⁹ Allen, "The Curiosity Effect," 4.

⁸⁰ Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 77.

and interpretive criteria as those delivering education.⁸¹ Machine Project released itself from such value systems by situating itself within an adult educational model of autodidactic tendencies that was not just pedagogical, but more intrinsically about what events can reconstruct socially and then deconstruct about knowledge silos. Helguera observes that the pedagogical turn was a “powerful and positive re-envisioning of education that can only happen in art, as it depends on art’s unique patterns of performativity, experience, and exploration of ambiguity.”⁸² Many artist project spaces proceed from the 2003 launch of Machine Project or are ongoing, but the critical attention and initial wave of investment in radical models of pedagogy significantly emerged at this juncture in the USA. The combination of factors at play was evidenced in Machine Project’s visualization of itself as a separate form that radiated out to others, rather than looked inwards at its workings.

Machine Project’s adoption of an iterative event program was an instituent and distinctive response in the influx of discursive and pedagogical project spaces, many featured within museum exhibitions, such as “Engagement Party 2008–2012,” Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Santa Monica (2012); and “Walker Open Field” Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (2011 to 2014). Such discursive and participatory public spaces are now accepted as relatively conventional formats, though in wider museum adoption they are often frustratingly watered-down in intensity, with motivations of audience numbers and demographic diversity, rather than intimate engagement, shifting progress back towards the educationally spectacularized and marketized. The reach of Machine Project beyond its own location, as for peer artist project

⁸¹ Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter, Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 156.

⁸² Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 81.

spaces, was assisted by online platforms and, in some cases, the logic of such applications would define the process of public engagement.

Friends of Machine Project and former board members Sean Dockray and Fiona Whitten established Public School in 2007. They used an online proposal form, from which selected ideas would become performance lectures in just one week. Public School was located in Chinatown, close to both C-Level, Mark Allen's first Los Angeles arts base, and Mountain Bar, a relational art gathering space.⁸³ Dockray, in conversation with Museum Director Sam Thorne, would clarify the wider impact of artist project spaces that emerged as schools, noting, "I'm less interested in seeing these schools as different ways of doing the same thing than a different way of doing the thing [education]."⁸⁴

Pablo Helguera's focus on the stakes and challenges for art education from the early 2000s clarifies what such artist project schools and their pedagogical approaches bring to participatory arts practice:

Traditional pedagogy [art instruction, connoisseurship and interpretation] fails to recognize three things: first, the creative performativity of the act of education; second, the fact that the collective construction of an art milieu, with artworks and ideas, is a collective construction of knowledge; and third, the fact that knowledge of art does not end in knowing the artwork but is a tool for understanding the world.⁸⁵

Such pedagogical practices were often in tension with educational conventions of the day, which meant Machine Project was not necessarily an easy partner, despite being the self-identified "little gal" in the institutional relationships that emerged at this organizational turn.⁸⁶ However,

⁸³ Mountain Bar opened in 2003 as an installation by Jorge Pardo, shifting to being The Mountain School of Art on the second floor in 2009, with a ten-year trajectory that ended, prematurely, in 2012. Public School, founded in 2008, grew out of a new-media exhibiting venue, Telic Arts Exchange and ultimately had a peripatetic existence and other iterations internationally.

⁸⁴ Sam Thorne, *School: A Recent History of Self Organized Art Education* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 150.

⁸⁵ Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 80.

⁸⁶ The emerging organization for independent artist venues, Common Field would host Allen as part of its convening at the Japanese American Cultural Center in Los Angeles on Nov. 2–5, 2017, in a panel entitled,

Allen underlines that at LACMA, as elsewhere, “The whole show was really never about being antagonistic towards the museum” nor was its presence merely convivial and entertaining.⁸⁷ It is in this spirit that the term “companionable antagonism” allows for such responsive tensions and evidences a newfound willingness to test the parameters of participatory visual culture in conventional museum settings.

However, expanding the duration of their iterative event pedagogy to a year’s residency at the Hammer Museum, announced in 2008, resulted in a crisis of departmental tensions for the host institution and a curtailed run, discursively explored in the resulting report.⁸⁸ Maintaining professional museum standards, the segregation of duties by conventional job description, and event planning conventions were at the heart of the tensions for the Hammer Museum Artist-in-Residence failure, highlighting the necessary role of empathy for Machine Project, as a partner organization. Further off-site variations of their event pedagogy in museum and historic house contexts would hold to the programming concept of triaxial experimental arcs, beginning with an intuitive response, then a challenging of parameters, and finally the ease of having learned through the process. One such arc began with the LACMA takeover in 2008, was durationally tested through the Hammer Museum Artist-in Residence project in 2010, and resolved for the Walker Art Center’s *Open Field* in 2011.⁸⁹

“Institutional Partnerships: How To Be The Little Gal” organized by Sarah Williams—a wry look at the partnership relationships that many artist project spaces encounter with larger, conventionally curated organizations. <https://www.commonfield.org/convenings/254/program/1212/institutional-partnerships-how-to-be-the-little-gal>.

⁸⁷ Mark Allen, “A conversation between Mark Allen and Anthony McCann,” in *Machine Project: A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, ed. Mark Allen, Jason Brown and Liz Glynn (Los Angeles: Machine Project, 2009), 56.

⁸⁸ Hammer Museum, *Public Engagement Artist in Residence: Machine Project—Hammer Museum* (Los Angeles, CA: Hammer Museum, 2012). https://hammer.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/2020-06/Machine_Project_Public_Engagement_Artist_in_Residence_Report.pdf.

⁸⁹ Cotton, “Field Guide for Machine Project,” 151 .

In activating transitional spaces at LACMA, on a Saturday in November, 2008, among an encyclopedic collection from the elevators to the corridors, the collective planning and disparate events and locations “induced a giddy uncertainty of where the aesthetic experience is located.”⁹⁰ Many of the day’s artists were delayed by heavy traffic caused by wildfires, arriving off-schedule and deciding to start their performances on arrival. Normal rules were suspended, as museum guards let irregular behaviors pass, perhaps acclimatized by the dance flash mobs happening in other public settings. There were electric bass guitar fanfares from the rooftops, a brass band in the elevator, and floral murals in the modernist wing. In the preparation process some, though certainly not all, curators were accepting that Machine Project’s engagement was not necessarily with the given meaning of museum objects. Freed from the conventions of a museum education department, Machine Project was able to open up interpretative associations “Traditionally, museum education programming, however dialogic or critical, aims to invest the objects held by the museum with cultural value. Machine Project’s pedagogical offerings, by contrast, had no such investment.”⁹¹

Such an open and discursive attitude invited a wider constituency of perspectives, not least the transdisciplinary framing of the participant audience, for whom a social site was formed in the constellation of overheard and observed events within LACMA.⁹² The day also highlighted that there were people prepared to spend so much time just watching things unfold and that there was capacity for the overheard to become part of an event imaginary. Allen

⁹⁰ Allen, “A conversation between Mark Allen and Anthony McCann,” 55.

⁹¹ Ken Ehrlich, “Learning from Learning: Machine Project Workshops as a Laboratory in Context,” in *Machine Project: A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, ed. Mark Allen, Jason Brown and Liz Glynn (Los Angeles: Machine Project, 2009), 93.

⁹² Allen, “The Curiosity Effect,” 4.

characterized what Machine Project had revealed in the process of its lateral, interpretative address at LACMA by voicing the following analogy:

there being the museum which you go to and then there's the hidden museum, and that our show in a way mapped that. It's like the museum is this invisible man that we slowly throw darts at. As the dots of blood appear he takes form, and doing our show revealed the contours of the museum for us in a way that we couldn't see before.⁹³

Such alternative perspectives let the museum abandon its business-as-usual approach, opting, for a day, to be participant-led in its meaning-making and instituent in its curatorial practice.

Machine Project's relationship with larger-scale museum partners such as LACMA and associated publications increased their visibility, yet their retention of a storefront site underpinned their sustainability as the global financial crisis unfolded by the close of 2008. Ultimately, Machine Project contributed to a shift within wider visual culture around the value of cognitive dissonance in interdisciplinary programming and the multiplicity of voices that can speak to new meanings in cultural venues and historic sites critical to genuine inclusion of the dissonant artist. There were opportunities to collaborate where there had not been scope to do so before, particularly for those under-represented in conventional programming. The principles central to Allen's organizational approach ultimately nurtured new artist project spaces, such as the Woman's Center for Creative Work and Human Resources. These, and other spaces, have since been host to numerous Machine Project artists, including Carmina Escobar, Corey Fogel, and Emily Joyce, who is also Allen's wife.⁹⁴

The global financial crisis that escalated in 2008 had significant consequences for funders' investments and proved a turning point for most independent art organizations, ultimately resulting in closure for some and peripatetic solutions for others. The structural

⁹³ Allen, "A conversation between Mark Allen and Anthony McCann," 60.

⁹⁴ Human Services was founded in 2010 in Chinatown, Los Angeles.

stability that conventionally arises after five years of functioning as a small organization within a non-profit environment was subjected to significant external economic pressures. Any presumption of viability for those artist project spaces emerging at this time was misguided and many seemingly sustainable models collapsed quietly. Machine Project's usually lighthearted tone in its weekly email turned serious at the close of the year, and in the process revealed the financial stakes of this seemingly carefree venture. At the end of this particular mailing Allen chose to shift its tone by offering a free poem, in a moral character of the reader's choosing. Such examples of combined instituent and kindly practices offer a mitigating gesture to offset the financial challenge of the times and the circumstances that threatened many art institutions. The free poem was a much-needed symbol of generosity that, while not enough to pay the rent or the sole staff member's salary, was enough to suggest the organization's long-term goals. In being responsive to life, Machine Project helped rework the systems designed to serve, more empathetically, those who would step into the frame next.

iii. The turn towards a participatory archive in 2012.

By 2012 the organizational form of Machine Project turned towards "new approaches to expanding public art, engagement, and performance documentation."⁹⁵ In this commitment to engage beyond the museum, by moving out into public space and conversely back into the archive, a distinct aspect of Machine Project's legacy was established in a participatory form.

Machine Project's partnership with Southern Exposure, a long-running artist-centered organization in San Francisco, produced a high level of confidence with off-site iterations of its curatorial approach. Private, domestic space was activated as public and the local, social

⁹⁵ Cotton, "Field Guide to Machine Project," 149.

specificities of the Alvarado Street site were shared. There were aural tours in apartments and performances in back yards, as local and visiting artists were paired. The reciprocal exchange deepened as Southern Exposure artists were then brought back to Echo Park. Machine Project's biome of aesthetics further expanded in such projects. The companionable antagonism of the Hammer Residency lessened, as new partners picked up the evolution of partnerships and the associated possibilities, though none was ever as temporally ambitious as the Hammer's original year-long commitment to hosting Machine Project.⁹⁶ In creating an "autonomous supplement" to the museum landscape, Machine Project had institutionalized a set of behavioral norms that gained traction in the wider sphere of its work.⁹⁷

Mark Allen convened Machine Project as an organization open to the directions others might take it. The valuing of the socially cooperative over any directorial sense of artist-led is further captured in the description for *Mark and Charlotte's 90-day Curatorial Academy* in the summer of 2012. Allen clarified why they were instigating this program and its transdisciplinary conception: "We like going to interesting events. We think what happens at Machine is a good example of how to organize and curate events but believe that you will come up with better/different ideas than we can imagine."⁹⁸ The Curatorial Academy was followed by spring workshops on starting your own DIY art space that began in 2011, expanded in 2012, and then recurred annually until 2016, when Tehran artist project space Sazmanab, delivered their variation. The workshops became a living instructional on how to run an artist space. They finally took the form of three toolkits published by Common Field in 2018. The increasing

⁹⁶ Common Field Convening Panel, "Institutional Partnerships: How to be the little gal," Nov. 3, 2017.

⁹⁷ Ken Ehrlich, "Introduction," in *Art, Architecture, Pedagogy: Experiments in Learning*, ed. Ken Ehrlich (Valencia, CA: Viralnet.com, Center for Integrated Media, California Institute of Arts, 2011) 6.

⁹⁸ *Mark and Charlotte's 90 day Curatorial Academy*, Summer 2012.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120508133940/https://machineproject.com/classes/mark-and-charlottes-90-day-curatorial-academy/>

visibility and popularity of Machine Project, as well as the capacity to employ staff, specifically Elizabeth Cline, formerly Assistant Director of the Hammer Museum, allowed Machine Project to review its practices and, significantly, its performance documentation and archive.

After a hundred fixed-camera event films that dryly documented events, the need for a more poetic approach to video documentation became clear. Artist Emily Lacy and Machine Project intern Ian Byers-Gamber began a process of recording content that conveyed the mood, pedagogical narrative, and less tangible ideas of events, as well as allowing for a visualization of the participants through their filmed footage. Machine Project gathered eighteen terabytes of content—significantly more than what was available on the organization’s website—and made some of this material accessible through a Vimeo stream.⁹⁹ The affective detail captured in that footage is central to the participatory qualities of the archive that allows passers-by to listen in beyond their closure.

The role of the non-material and social life of the site is an aspect of its organizational form that gains visibility and clarity through both the affective documentation and transcribed post-project conversations. Artist Nate Page and Allen demonstrated the value of such reflections in relation to the project description for Page’s *Subject/Object/Project* in 2010, a precursor to his *Storefront Plaza* of 2012. In the process they clarified both the activated ecosystem of transformative installation projects and the metaphoric value of what they reveal about the social dynamics of the space:

Nate: There’s that issue between responding to a site because of its basic site characteristics, versus responding to a site because of its social and cultural context, and the specifics of how it operates.

Mark: Like the architectural site versus the dynamics of the people at that site?

Nate: Yeah. I’d say the first piece that I did at Machine [*The Machine Subject Object Project*] was responding to how Machine operates socially. That response became a

⁹⁹ Machine Project on Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/machineproject>.

physical transformation that sort of represented or became a metaphor for the social dynamics. [...]

Mark: A concert hall is the machine for focusing your attention on performance. Your piece was like a machine for focusing your attention on everything happening around the performance.¹⁰⁰

The importance of such exchanges centers on what they reveals about the delivery of practice within artist project spaces such as Machine Project, valuing the foundational social life of artist sites but also the contextual and contingent details that establish an expanded and open organizational frame. Machine Project made public private spaces that had the capacity to overflow in meaning beyond the programmed event or installation.

The focus on the storefront as a space for events, performances, and workshops offered an experientially site-specific frame.¹⁰¹ The inversion of the window bay, as a *Storefront Plaza* in 2012, provided the stage for the performance of the artist/s as an organizational form, starting with its architectural reformulation to accommodate them. This was followed by programming that mixed up the iterative event pedagogy and the forms of power familiar in the incrementally stepped ladder of citizen participation.¹⁰² In this combination Machine Project freshly defined who could take part, freed from the demographic separation so carefully catered to in conventional museum and educational settings. At its most absurd, babies in specific-toned outfits were recruited as color and movement activators of a sound output received next door for an erratic, electronic jam dance session, called *Infantcore*, in which, it was noted, there was a waning of participants around nap time.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Mark Allen, "Interview with Nate Page," Posted June 8, 2012. <https://machineproject.com/archival/projects/interviews/interview-with-nate-page/>.

¹⁰¹ Miwon Kwon had expanded on the signification of such a frame in relation to Michael Asher's retrospective, which finds its organizational equivalent in Allen's convening at the Alvarado Street site.

¹⁰² Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 280.

¹⁰³ Machine Project and Scott Cazan, *Infantcore*, 2010. <https://machineproject.com/2012/events/infantcore/>.

An additional layer of communicating such difference is found in the routine use of disclaimers that amusingly released Machine Project from conventional visitor expectations and set the tone for events whose outcome were unpredictable and potentially dissatisfying to attend. Participants were warned that babies might need to wear unflattering colors to activate the motion sensors, but that none would be harmed or expected to work the full five-hour performance. This curatorial approach was humorously encapsulated as part of a larger organizational pedagogy, within which the contingent and accidental could still redirect focus and emotional tone on a whim or invoke intimate rather than high-profile risk.

What appeared to be an oscillating curatorial energy during and between events or projects was reconceptualized as Machine Project escalated its now popular programs. There was a job advertisement for a staff member with the ability to “synthesize verbal and ambient information into coherent, detailed plans,” conveying the dynamic and contextually-valued social life from which Allen needed to not be distracted, and within which that ambient sociality functioned as a fundamental aspect of the organizational practice.¹⁰⁴ Machine Project accrued a social dynamic that moved beyond itself as organizational visualizations show, but not so outwardly that it lost its capacity to be what it needed to be if one walked in off the street when nothing was happening.¹⁰⁵

During a discussion with Nate Page as he completed the *Storefront Plaza* installation in the window bay, Allen clarified the significance of Machine Project’s turn towards new approaches to public art, engagement, and documentation in 2012:

For a long time, Machine’s model has been a square wave: something intense is happening, then nothing is happening. The sine wave model is more like having things always going on, with various peaks in intensity.
And if you think about overlaying different waveforms, you get a more complex

¹⁰⁴ Machine Project Emails, “Real money job! Now hiring Assistant Director,” July 20, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Fagot and Mark Allen, *Machine Project Organizational Diagram*, color poster, 2015.

sound. It's like the pieces you're doing and I'm doing and somebody else is doing start to overlap in the space. So, there's a continuous energy coming out of Machine.¹⁰⁶

Such waves of activity led to the production of a storefront audio tour that was transcribed as extended footnotes in the writing of its history for the monograph *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection*. Handling the emptiness of the site between events as an archival state from which the resonance of all that had happened could actively speak is a significant insertion into an expanded concept of the archive. Concurrently the meticulous documentation of the incisions and stains on the floorboards was completed, with later removal and storage in the J. Paul Getty Museum (Figure 2.2).

Intimate outdoor engagements also led to an additional sense of site specificity that overlapped with the possibilities of the overheard to function as a collectivizing force in public spaces. In a reformulating of event focus at this turn, there were mappings of the psychic geography of the neighborhood, with poetry hikes above Los Angeles, while at the Korean Friendship Bell overlook, Carmina Escobar delivered her sonorous opera, *Massagem Sonora*, on participant bodies. In the storefront, Asher Hartman constructed corridors with trapdoors to confine similar intimacies and rituals for a number of immersive and participatory theatre performances fueled by anarchic narratives.¹⁰⁷ Each artist was drawing on unschooled community practices deeply embedded in their own cultural identities, as feminist, Mexican, or queer artists and their relationship with site and its expanded sense of the participatory.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Allen, "Interview with Nate Page."

¹⁰⁷ Asher Hartman, "See What Love the Father has Given Us," Monday, March 19, 2012, <https://machineproject.com/archival/projects/see-what-love-the-father-has-given-us/>; Carmina Escobar, *Machine Project Workshop Archive*, January 24, 2013. <http://machineproject.com/archival/artist-biographies/carmina-escobar/>; Asher Hartman, *Purple Electric Player (PEP!)*, October 2, 2014. <http://machineproject.com/archival/projects/pep/>.

Such participatory and performance work resonated in informal community settings where Machine Project's iterative approach, willingness to embrace architectural misuse, and substantiated social relationships pointed to an organizational pedagogy that continued to capture remote attention beyond the moment of event delivery. There was a growing number of speaker and mentor requests for Mark Allen as the convener of it all, as well as locally-attuned installations where Machine Project's approach was made manifest, beyond Alvarado Street.

iv. 2016

In Machine Project's archive, the valuing of such a social life and theatrically embodied ritual of the site is achieved by both the generically accessible formats of online chronological and searchable event listings, alongside the capacity for more random and contingent recombination. Allen was sympathetic to those who would come next and the need to consistently present all aspects of the program along the way, without exception. This archival approach found its resolution in a living and hyper-engaged form of artist survey show at Skidmore College's Tang Teaching Museum in the exhibition *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection* that also resulted in a monograph and concurrent website redesign in 2015–16. In addition to offering chronological access to documentary source materials, from recorded poetry to scanned posters, the site includes a slot machine that sends website visitors to random entry points in the archive.

Mark Allen had spoken in 2011 at Skidmore, his undergraduate alma mater, and sown the seed of an idea that curator Rachel Seligman would finally propose in 2013, after Seligman had a dream in which he refused to collaborate. What emerged was a multi-site installation that brought staff, students, and local community groups together in an active social space that held

furniture from the Mystery Theater in Machine Project's basement had events happening on the rooftop and across town, placed the show's administrative office in a visible storefront location, and hosted a multi-day dance party performance, the involved a substantial amount of glitter.¹⁰⁸ A tiny Tang Museum remote-controlled structure roved the campus, too.

The voice of Machine Project circled back to small mammal memes in 2016, alongside the specificity of domestic and local context. However, inserted into this seemingly nostalgic use of references was a futurescape of names linked to new artist performances and project spaces, indicating what would come next. These social sites referenced Machine Project as their guide and in some cases set-up advisor, with Allen's "compulsive collaborator" role and approach to convening programs handed on.¹⁰⁹ The principles of practice most striking at the closure of the research period, as peers processed the unexpected Presidential election result, were Machine Project's ongoing wry humor, the participatory-expanding value of the overheard, and the parting gift of structural and resilient organizational empathy.

Part 3 – Principles of Practice

With each organizational turn, the principles underlying sustained artist project spaces, such as those for Machine Project, became more overtly apparent and generated group behaviors. Initially embodied and unremarked upon, such tacit principles became more explicit in partner relationships with conventional museums and with the application of political hindsight that came with longevity. Additionally, the commitment to transparency in administrative and curatorial process shifted the dynamic of institutionalization towards a not-being-governed-like-

¹⁰⁸ Hana van der Kolk, "deepdeepbodygl!tter" November 15, 2013. <https://tang.skidmore.edu/calendar/22-deepdeepbodygl-tter>.

¹⁰⁹ Allen, "Hello, have you been here before?" 45.

that assortment of instituent practices.¹¹⁰ In humor and empathy, as well as the capacity to value the overheard, Machine Project ostensibly shared such principles with peer sites, such as Elsewhere and Mess Hall, albeit in ways not necessarily as organizationally formative or personally significant for each of them. An appreciation of three such principles can be evidenced across Machine Project's fifteen-year program as thematic groupings that could each be easily expanded, reshuffled, and intersected. This proves a significant means to parse out the value of Machine Project within the wider cultural landscape.

These three principles enabled Mark Allen to activate forms of participatory art practice in more neutral, expansive, and mundane ways, liberating Machine Project's curatorial impulses from governmental instrumentalization and discipline-specificity. Looking back, such principles of practice become more outwardly telling and characteristically distinctive at each organizational turn, and as those principles emerge in other fields and echo across the 2003 to 2016 timeframe. Mark Allen's fifth injunction for forming one's own artist project space suggests an openness to future reformulations, beyond the immediate social and familial context: "Trust your audience to get it (even if you don't always get it yourself)."¹¹¹ In enabling others, while performing as the organization, Allen remained committed to principles that are both liberating and generous.

A. Humor

¹¹⁰ The lecture, "Qu'est-ce que la critique?" given in 1978 by Michel Foucault, provides a significant caveat in considering over-reaching governmentality (in this instance in 16th century Western Europe) and its possibilities for other ways to occupy such locations. Foucault significantly suggests the role of critique, as the art how not to be governed *like that*. Gerald Raunig, "Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming," in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFly Books, 2008), 4.

¹¹¹ Catherine Wagley, "8 All-Important Things to Know If You're Crazy Enough to Start an Alternative Art Space," *Artnet News, Art World*, January 17, 2018. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/eight-lessons-for-running-an-independent-art-space-1200137>.

Humor proved a definer of organizational form at Machine Project. Philosopher, Simon Critchley—whose 2002 *On Humor* guides the reader through the historical origins of humor, its forms, their complications, and wider world expansions—provides a framework for a deconstruction of the visual and cultural contexts of Machine Project’s foundational phase. His central thesis rests on the roles played by the incongruent in humor, which can be aligned with the absurd curatorial prompts at Machine Project.

The comic world is not simply ‘Die Verkehrte Welt’ [The Topsy-Turvy World], the inverted or upside-down world of philosophy, but rather the world with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, the common sense rationality left in tatters.¹¹²

The incongruent found its equivalent in the absurd curatorial injunctions framed by Allen in his role of convener, which were the starting points for many Machine Project events. The literal restrictions and odd combinatory factors also implicitly value the interdisciplinary, the everyday, and those social bonds central to their organizational form.

There was daft fun amid the deeply serious focus on the unfettered knowledge of Machine Project’s amateur enthusiasts, trained specialists, and artists, all shared with participants. Allen notes how variations arise in *Machine Project Guide to Curating and Planning Events* where his chosen curatorial emphasis is on experts in any field who fascinate him, but who may not prove to be the best public speakers. In the process of pairing them with someone who is a confident communicator in the given topic area, Allen makes incongruent leaps of association that still honor the core subject but could combine a pneumatic burrito cannon engineer with an outspoken bombardier, enhancing audience engagement and in this instance providing hospitable sustenance. Critchley would reiterate what such programming can reveal.

¹¹² Simon Critchley, *On Humor (Thinking in Action)*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

That is to say, through the endless displacement of seeing the world through another's hobby horse, through the eyes of a Walter or Toby Shandy, one is brought closer to the things themselves, to the finally laughable enigma of ordinary life.¹¹³

Doing the conceptual in person, on the ground and in company, and on the edge of the conventional institutional map, does over time weave an amusing path that ultimately changes wider culture and organizational rituals. Ken Ehrlich notes that the artist project spaces of Los Angeles such as Machine Project critically functioned as “autonomous supplements” to the visual culture landscape, reformulating ideas more than they assimilated museum practices.¹¹⁴ It is in this relationship with conventional institutions that an oxymoronic companionable antagonism is invoked. Machine Project performed as neither a mere convivial convener (though refreshments were brewed and shared) nor or a mere subversive counter institution (though resistances were embodied and hosted). Each event or workshop was delivered as if it were an ideological necessity, no matter how absurd or pragmatic, while mimicking the production cycles of education—the workshop, the field trip, the lecture—and the production of a social life, be it the beach picnic, the urban stroll, or the pool party. None in and of themselves were harbingers of future organizational forms, but they were iteratively valuable to systemic change in artist representation.

Managing expectations and risk in some of these intriguing but incongruent event forms was handled with the use of tongue-in-cheek disclaimers that were “simultaneously a form of promotion.”¹¹⁵ The voice of Machine Project would supply details that both clarified the scope of the event and established the pragmatic essentials one might need to address. Participants were

¹¹³ Critchley, *On Humor*, 22.

¹¹⁴ Ehrlich, “Introduction,” 7.

¹¹⁵ Mark Allen, *Machine Project Guide to Curating and Planning Events* (Los Angeles: Common Field, 2018), 29. http://www.headlands.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/allen_m_curating_2018.pdf.

warned that radio signals would not reach as far as the Tacos Arizas truck, or that activities were to be held outdoors in autumnal temperatures, or that restroom access was limited. The physical and psychological expectations set prior to participation seldom required costly preparation and would prove only mildly inconvenient, physically uncomfortable, or potentially disappointing. However, reading such humorous disclaimers after the Ghost Ship fire in Oakland, California in 2016, and alongside anecdotal tales of events in artists' yards that end in litigation, it is clear that there is now an expectation of more thorough and overt risk assessment and behind-the-scenes mitigation plans.¹¹⁶ To this end, Machine Project's board would include those with professional skills in areas of city code and public space management, and while recommendations were sought, Allen took them under advisement rather than as direct instruction.

Allen seldom said no to an artist's development of an idea, in a manner that recalls Michael Asher's resistance to curatorial direction, making visible those parts of the process that were lost along the way, including lists of unfeasible projects that appear on the opening pages of *A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*.¹¹⁷ Additionally, in the humorous complications of risk explanations and apologies for event failures, often accompanied by cute visual and technological references, Machine Project's program accentuates how iterative events never bring us back to the same place in life. The context changes, and what was current is now wistfully retrograde, and as Critchley attests, "By producing a consciousness of contingency, humor can change the situation in which we find ourselves and can even have a critical function with respect to society."¹¹⁸ Humor acted in part as a definer of social site, a placeholder,

¹¹⁶ Ava Bromberg (Machine Project Board Member), interview with Clare van Loenen. Feb. 23, 2018.; Joel Kyack (Co-operator of The Meow with Lisa Anne Auerbach, Mount Washington) interview with Clare van Loenen. Feb. 18, 2018. Ghost Ship Warehouse Fire, Oakland, CA, Dec. 2, 2016.

¹¹⁷ Jason Brown, "The Ones That Got Away," in *Machine Project: A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, ed. Mark Allen, Jason Brown and Liz Glynn (Los Angeles: Machine Project, 2009), 5.

¹¹⁸ Critchley, *On Humor*, 10.

analogous to the caravan Michael Asher parked and photographed at the same spot every ten years during the Sculpture Project Münster, while the world changed around it. Machine Project's humorous approach to participatory practices underlined, as the caravan did about urban change, what shifted in relationships between disciplines and institutions across 15 years.

Machine Project's insistent response to the world at large was informed by collectively constructed humor, and here Kiese Laymon's thoughts on the role of humor in negotiating political and embodied tensions are useful. Laymon's early racialized and traumatic life experiences led him to consider how familial humor, the collectively-lived laughter of those in long-term, recurring relations, is both a way to point outwards to the wider world but also a means to see things differently. I would not want to suggest an exact congruence between the tensions experienced in Machine Project and those experienced in African American family life. However, Laymon's formulation offers a useful way of conceptualizing the role of humor in negotiating the tension in Machine Project between the recurring group of artists (and their own dissonant life experiences) and their relationship with the world at large. Many of those artists held identities that meant they were subject to societal exclusions, such as Hispanic immigrants and queer performers, who each introduced social and culturally informed arts practice at Machine Project that crossed conventional museum boundaries. Laymon captures how familial humor allows for such intersections as a form of companionable tension, among the inequities of everyday life and cultural representation:

I don't just want them to clash, I want to try to find the shards of humor particularly in the familial, even if we can't find shards of humor in the national because I don't think the familial exists without the national but the humor is sort of what gives it any kind of integrity and the humor is not used to laugh it off, but if anything it's a lubricant to get us in there and to do things more profoundly.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Laymon, interview.

Humor, as a principle of practice, functions as a “lubricant” for the resistances and energies required by the group as they demonstrate and insist on a culturally inclusive shift in museum presentation.

Forms that events took were additionally superficially humorous, and the resulting consensual bonds created within the site became central to a social imaginary that was enhanced by a proximity to the popular and visual cultural references of Los Angeles, which also tie us all altogether on a national level. The social life of the site offered participants and observers a means to work outwards towards the formation of their own spaces, their own experiments, their own collectives, as a futurescape of more demographically representative and disciplinarily freed artists. The weak signs of the everyday and socially driven, as theorist Boris Groys might term them, are also ones that can traverse boundaries and make strong, sharable experiential practices and associations.

For those siloed out of conventional organizations in 2003, such weak signs were critical; as Boris Groys concludes, “[a]rt still has something to say about the modern world: it can demonstrate its transitory character, its lack of time; and to transcend this lack of time through a weak, minimal gesture requires very little time—or even no time at all.”¹²⁰ The familial constituency of humor alleviates what Allen himself observed about delivering events at Machine Project:

Art and Culture can cause anxiety for people who aren’t in the field—even for many who are. Humor is a great way to ease this anxiety and make people feel welcome. Shared laughter lets people know they are invited inside of something.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Asher Hartman, Machine Project collaborator and Director of Gawdawful National Theatre), Interview with Clare van Loenen. Feb. 23, 2018.; Boris Groys, “The Weak Universalism,” *E-flux Journal*, no. 15 (April, 2010). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61294/the-weak-universalism/>.

¹²¹ Allen, *Machine Project Guide to Curating and Planning Events*, 23.

The incongruent details of principles, such as humor functioned as organization-forming acts that underlined the capacities of the artist project space and upended conventional social, museological and archival practices.

B. The Overheard

The overheard became an expanding principle of practice for Machine Project, with its ability to accommodate different subjectivities, rather than merely as an act of passing by and hearing things not specifically intended for sharing. At the Hammer Museum, during the *Artist In Residence* project, the dreams of museum campers were re-enacted for daytime visitors and on another occasion vacationing plants, on a month-long retreat, could have their homesickness alleviated by broadcast phone-ins from their propagators.¹²² There was a default inclusivity in what could be overheard, which expanded the social imaginary beyond the micro community of those directly participating in each event, out to those hearing of things secondhand and remotely. This inclusivity continues retrospectively in the online archive with the presence of ambient documentation. Being present was no longer the sole imperative, as networked and social media platforms connected participants and followers together.¹²³ What Machine Project was and could be going forward was captured in the concept of the overheard.¹²⁴

The overheard accommodates the participant-spectator as a more blended being, one also capable of carrying the story of the work into other contextual frames. The accommodation of such transdisciplinarity was encapsulated in the audience feedback from such events, in which scheduled poets called in and read to vacationing plants at night and held private screenings of

¹²² Machine Project, *Houseplant Vacation and Hammer Dream In*, Hammer Museum, 2010.

¹²³ Facebook was publicly available in 2006, though launched in 2004 as The Facebook. Google Docs became available in 2005.

¹²⁴ Allen, "A conversation between Mark Allen and Anthony McCann," 74.

plant pornography.¹²⁵ It is in this botanical, poetic dreamscape that Allen most clearly defines how the overheard functions dynamically to reformulate both participant and subject, and the wider social imaginary emerging from this mix. Allen would write in an essay focused on the role of curiosity in public engagement that:

The work [*Houseplant Vacation*] prompts thinking about alien or unknowable subjectivities, asking if and how an audience can identify with those subjectivities. It enacts the poetics of the overheard utterance, in this case, what people could overhear being read or sung to the plants. In doing this, it considered the dynamics between the primary audience (the people performing to the plants and the secondary audience (the people watching the people performing to the plants).¹²⁶

Allen's expansion of the overheard as a contextual realm embraces oscillating layers of participation, without giving primacy to any one form of engagement.

A significant subset of Machine Project followers was never at the site. However, through the tales of those who were, the emails that spoke as if we might walk in the door, and the increasingly ambient video documentation, the need to be physically present so central to socially engaged art gained a participatory foothold in the long-term and slow formation of a social imaginary. If a vacationing plant's homesickness can be accommodated, so can the absent, almost-there community for whom the archive becomes a point of access, an invitation to perform as Machine Project might—be it hammering the slot machine or taking literally Allen's directive that everyone should start an artist project space.¹²⁷

Wave Books were perennial partners who set up an online erasure poetry generator, and in this device captured a textual sense of the overheard with all its partial and interlocking visual associations, much as contingent sounds convey a site's activation.¹²⁸ An erasure poem written

¹²⁵ *Cinema Botanica*, is a six-minute film of plants being pollinated, directed by Jonathan Keats, 2006.

¹²⁶ Allen, "The Curiosity Effect," 3.

¹²⁷ Allen, "Hello, have you been here before?" 46.

¹²⁸ Erasure poem application designed by Joshua Beckman and David Hirmes, Wave Books, 2004.

by Anthony McCann in May 2007 records the following words from an *LA Weekly* article about Machine Project. It encapsulates the curatorial absurdity of Machine Project while it applies an algorithmic logic, gathering word selections that are partial, yet surprisingly indicative of this organizational period.

Medieval enthusiasts
modeled in
hyperbolic crochet
invite me to attend
an evening of
experimental heat

Tubes connect a
giant hamster
to a lawn chair
up in space

A bunch of dads
have this
fantasy
somewhere in my box

And it either
heals or
casts you
from the room¹²⁹

The logic of the poem's construction shifts the character of participation to a spectacularized imaginary plane full of disconcerting oddity.

The sounds of the remembered and overheard reverberate in the archive, almost as they did across LACMA's site in 2008 during the Machine Project takeover, to form a constellation of intersecting subjectivities. At any given moment during that daylong event, the overheard would experientially define the site, most cacophonously when speed metal was played from a rooftop

¹²⁹ Anthony McCann, "Machine Project Erasure" in *Machine Beginnings Blog*, ed. Mark Allen, May 2, 2007. <http://www.markallen.com/machine-beginnings-blog>.

arch on the hour or when sharing an elevator with a performing brass band.¹³⁰ The relentless run of such iterative events, some delivered concurrently as they were at LACMA, continued to cumulatively define Machine Project throughout its tenure, “project after project, after project, after project,” as an artist at its closing party exhaustedly intoned.¹³¹

The overheard realized most directly in poetry events but also as the theatrical expanded the scope in Machine Project’s program. The relative frequency of the term *theatre* shows a sharp increase in a word usage chart incrementally peaking in 2010, 2013, and 2016, as opposed to the word *electronics*, which drops in frequency from 2007, with a temporary recovery in 2014.¹³² Performance and theatre reasserted their focus in Machine Project’s program, be it through Asher Hartman’s theatrical reconfigurations of the Alvarado Street space that particularly tested its architectural specificities and codifications to their extremes, or Carmina Escobar’s vocal experimentations on participant bodies that led Machine Project off-site and into physically intimate contact with the local community beneath the Korean Bell of Friendship in San Pedro. Theatre and poetry events recurringly opted for such challenging set-ups and content, but in the process alleviated their interpretative weight on participants, often with a dash of humor. Machine Project’s proximity to Hollywood and the usage of the site as an actual film location by Daniel Baumbach suggests an analogy voiced by Critchley, which identifies the experiential pull of easily overheard participatory art practices and their unconventional settings:

Cinema was obliged to encounter humor almost straight away because film not only—like poetry—represents the successive situation of life, but also claims to take account of their interconnection and enchainment and in order to affect the emotions of the spectator it is obliged to employ extreme solutions.¹³³

¹³⁰ Cotton, “Field Guide to Machine Project,” 165.

¹³¹ Houghnowla, “Project after Project.” Instagram, Jan. 15, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bd-0PoAFRdm/>.

¹³² Allen, “Hello, have you been here before?” 67.

¹³³ Critchley, *On Humor*, 57.

Allen chose to convene poets in humorously extreme settings in order to make visible interconnections and possibilities that we drop with everyday routine. Poetry was read by request in a boat off shore, or delivered to your door in person, or potentially found at a grid reference out in the desert. The manner of their convening held to an intense sense of locality, with the absurdity and leisure-time ambience of each situation enabling a quotidian form of accessibility that deviated from the conventions of museum public programs.

Anthony McCann, Machine Project's wryly titled Poet Laureate, talks of two aspects of poetry—its form and conception—that capture ideas in the broader Machine Project lexicon. Taking the simple visual of a triangle, McCann characterizes what poetry can mean for participation. In the lyric poem form, the “overheard utterance” is a fundamental element in the three-part structure: “The lyric poem is spoken to a ‘you,’ but there’s a triangle in which the reader is listening in, so the poem is a performance for the ‘you’ with the knowledge that it’s being overheard.”¹³⁴ Here Allen identifies how multiple audiences can be integral to participatory art practice and in that mix of primary and remote presence there is also an acceptance of “the unknowability of somebody else’s experience [and subjectivity].”¹³⁵ The impact of such a conceptualization is not only transdisciplinary in bringing in their contextually-specific life experience, but also aware of a continuous ontological existence of a thing, such as listening plants left among a museum collection at night.¹³⁶ The ultimate leveling of social hierarchy in an arts institution resonates with the thrift collection and free stores at Elsewhere and Mess Hall, respectively.

¹³⁴ Allen, “A conversation between Mark Allen and Anthony McCann,” 74.

¹³⁵ Allen, “A conversation between Mark Allen and Anthony McCann,” 75.

¹³⁶ *Houseplant Vacation* at the Hammer Museum in 2010 posed a lived expansion of the subjectivity given to plants in the documentary, *Secret Life of Plants*, screened in 2007.

The overheard was encapsulated as a form of participation that might not be easily conveyed or demand active participation, but would ideally result in ongoing curiosity as an outcome. Participants would not need the validation of formal engagement, and any social discomfort was mitigated through the development of a shared language that established boundaries and escape routes: headsets could be removed and elevators exited. John Searle would later note in his description of institutional status functions that details such as these allow for greater freedom for the performer or artist as convening organizer, an etude or improvisation rather than a policed, expectation-laden performance.¹³⁷

Eric Klerks and Chris Kallmyer said of their musical improvisations for *Live Personal Soundtrack at the Hammer Museum* that they demanded responsiveness to both participants and to the collection, but were never a jukebox-like selection or called for reciprocal dependency. In order to achieve this balance, Klerks and Kallmyer used the distance of professionalism in performing, fed on participant feedback, and allowed the piece to emerge in and of itself, observing that “you have to be a performer in the sense that the quality of your performance can’t be entirely dependent on the audience.”¹³⁸ Mark Allen observes that “We’re always instrumentalizing each other in different ways, but it is more of an open exchange, than a straight forward transaction.”¹³⁹ The overheard is a reflexive principle in which not being directly or actively participating does not limit one’s own transdisciplinary points of reference, resulting in the capacity to instigate connections with an interpretative openness well beyond those imagined

¹³⁷ John Searle, “What is an Institution?” in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. J. C. Welchman (Zurich: Ringier, 2006), 31.

¹³⁸ Mark Allen, “Interview with Eric Klerks and Chris Kallmyer,” in Hammer Museum, *Public Engagement Artist in Residence: Machine Project—Hammer Museum* (Los Angeles, CA: Hammer Museum, 2012), 80. https://hammer.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/2020-06/Machine_Project_Public_Engagement_Artist_in_Residence_Report.pdf.

¹³⁹ Allen, “Interview with Anthony McCann,” 75.

by the project. The overheard denotes the experiential conception of how one might re-learn across knowledge silos.

Machine Project's early group of performers were excluded from museum programs for not fitting, motivating Allen to create this artist project space. In time, they modeled and trained conventional spaces to find ways of crossing those boundaries and to test their capacity for the experimental. For Machine Project, the acceptance of the dissonant and the overheard into every aspect of its organization was its ultimate cultural production. In Elizabeth Merritt's keynote at the American Associations of Museums conference in 2015, she highlighted Machine Project's Hammer Residency project to exemplify the possibility of the disconnected museum, a resistance to overwhelming social networking, and a counterpoint to the quantified-self movement where participation is outsourced to media applications.¹⁴⁰ Machine Project artists chose to be disconnected on occasion in order to become more attuned to the onsite rituals that still can bind participants regardless of medium.

For Machine Project, making visible those who did not fit conventional museum display and performance formats was central to serving the dissonant artists fundamental to its formation, collaborative relationships, and sustained energy. Allen has summarized this central tenet of his approach to curating: "What has remained consistent, though, is a gleeful enthusiasm for supporting all kinds of people in their various weird and sometimes esoteric interests."¹⁴¹ The dissident in this context defined as one "positioned without the institutional matrix of power of his native land."¹⁴² The disconnect from the conventional ideology of arts institutions is not an

¹⁴⁰ Elizabeth Merritt, "Keynote," recorded July 24, 2014 at *The Future of Museums Conference*, Atlanta, GA, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2vKb0x5C1c>.

¹⁴¹ Allen, *Machine Project Guide to Curating and Planning Events*, 5.

¹⁴² Sofija Grandakovska, "Lightness of the Dissident, Brightness of the Critical Mind," in *Playing by Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternate Spaces*, ed. Steve Rand and Heather Kouris (New York: Apexart, 2010), 154.

antagonism but rather a drive to be a supplement or act as a companionable partner, one who both serves the dissident and reframes what room there is for the unseen and unheard.

Allen and McCann provide ways for the archive to be narrativized beyond standard historical frames, through the concept of the overheard, allaying what Ault feared, when “the micro history gets thematized and rendered an illustration of a larger phenomenon.”¹⁴³ Within Machine Project’s archive there are amassed details with access devices that can both randomize points of entry or chronologically present them, that combined with the attention of disciplinary diverse participants furthers a resistance to thematicization or any sense of a singular defining of values within the ecosystem of independent arts organizations.

The implications of the overheard for archived performances take on a particular quality in Machine Project’s role as a reading venue. Poems were delivered in ways that reflected what was implicit in the work, there were often refreshments, and there were also inherent self-defeating flaws in the exchange, such as not knowing what kind of poems people wanted and poems being read when no one was present. It is in these descriptions of poetry events that the concept of the overheard emerges in its most compelling form, an attitude to participatory process that levels the participant and the performers, but also allows the site to exist beyond its social life, shape-shifting as each incongruous curatorial form of poetry event is tried, tested and occasionally repeated. The resulting programs were driven by the obsessions and works of the recurring group of artists, from the negating act of erasure poetry through to the work of the Romantics, to the oral site specificity of archived recordings from the *5-Day Poetry Marathon* in 2016, read inside a head box in the basement theater. Even now it is possible to step into the archive and catch a contingent moment from an event that is not necessarily an intentional

¹⁴³ Julie Ault, “Active Recollection: Archiving ‘Group Material’,” in *Self-Organized*, ed. Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen (London: Open Editions, 2013), 111.

takeaway but as overheard translates and reformulates Machine Project within current participatory visual culture. Ken Ehrlich would connect the significance of such a reflexivity back to pedagogical and philosophical roots through the work of Paulo Freire.

To reimagine the student [listener] as an active agent rather than a passive recipient in the formation of new structures of knowledge was, for Freire, the first step towards a total transformation of the social order.¹⁴⁴

Ehrlich identifies here a theoretical elision of participation and interdisciplinarity that is foundational for Machine Project.

For the specifics of participatory art practice, the overheard was not just lip service to Machine Project's commitment to a wide conception of participants, but rather a participatory form that allowed for the overheard, with all its contingent dynamics and enabling of less visibly active modes of being present, to shape a social imaginary, remote and otherwise. The acceptance of the symbolism of that imaginary from the outset was central to Machine Project's contribution to fresh forms of participation now possible in museums and other cultural sites.

C. Empathy

Organizational change at Machine Project emerges with the rethinking of its structural forms through the interdisciplinary arts practices and empathetic accommodations of its founder, performers, and museum partners. Empathy as an organizing principle for cultural institutions did not receive much attention in the early 2000s. However, the role of empathy as a capacity to be engendered in museum audiences and valued in interpreting historic house museums such as the Tenement Museum in New York has gained prominence since then, particularly with the publication of Elif M. Gokcigdem's *Fostering Empathy in Museums* in 2016. The immersive and

¹⁴⁴ Ken Ehrlich, "Learning from Learning," 95.

story-based experiences of such historically redolent sites intersects with the experiential learning that Machine Project integrated from the start. However, seeing empathy as a structuring principle to invoke organizational difference at every turn was a distinct expansion of this capacity, tested within each artist project space. Hierarchies, be they disciplinary or of art world status, were muddled and minimized, long-term relationships were given primacy, and support for dissonant practitioners proved a fundamental stake.

Mark Allen's biography begins with a dire medical diagnosis on the day of September 11, 2001, and his experience of recovery and dependency on friendships are lived out in the structurally empathetic organization for which he then set the tone.¹⁴⁵ Scanning back and forth through emails and toolkits, there are event moments that define an attitude or arc of behaviors that speak to the valuing of empathy, be it through inclusion, accessibility, or failure. A script for a *Butter-Making Aerobics Class* was used to establish how participants are both welcome and, once aware of the basic structure of the event, they are left to their own devices with space to decide how to proceed and engage. Leaving space for participant contemplation is, as Elif Gokcigdem observes, central to fostering empathy as an inclusive and structuring principle for the organization.¹⁴⁶ Machine Project's activation of the Alvarado Street shop front as a socially site-specific space enables the more personal business of being welcoming. Allen observes, "making your audience feel bad is exclusionary and poor manners"; however, at Machine Project unsettling visitors or encouraging them to look askance at a topic previously not considered, was curatorially intrinsic.¹⁴⁷ Dissonant practitioners were able to assert alternative perspectives

¹⁴⁵ Emlyn Koster, "Foreword," in *Fostering Empathy in Museums*, ed. Elif Gokcigdem (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), vii.

¹⁴⁶ Elif Gokcigdem, "Introduction," in *Fostering Empathy in Museums*, ed. Elif Gokcigdem (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xix.

¹⁴⁷ Allen, *Machine Project Curating and Planning Events*, 9.

without being spotlighted for doing so. Empathy emerges as a responsive rather than neutral principle in mixing the participant and the artist together as co-constructors of meaning, where such combined memories and past presences become the stories associated with a specific address.

In the final phase of Machine Project, there was a groundswell in curating that laterally addressed mental health and self-care, be it those thinking on an astral plane or from a place of recovery. *The Sober and Lonely Synchronized Running Club Run Club* promoted its meets through Machine Project's email list with calls for orange juice servers at dawn, while Allen programmed communal poetry hikes and free body opera for passersby.¹⁴⁸ Machine Project's enlarged scale through off-site projects was grounded in nurturing those artists with whom they were in long-term association. Recruitment proved a key feature at this juncture, and descriptions of competencies of the incoming team provide further insight into an organization that was constantly being reformulated as well as acknowledging the emotional labor of working within the non-profit landscape as an experimental space. Being transparent about such challenges in emails and job advertisements serves to further underline the organization's structural empathy, enabling peer projects and funder expectations to similarly accommodate artist project space needs and emotional variance. The job description for an Assistant Director in 2012 clarifies how Machine sustained itself while empathetically embracing failure:

We specialize in long term collaborative relationships with artists, the research and development of new models of cultural engagement, and sustaining a high comfort level with the inevitable embarrassment, awkward mistakes, and wrong turns connected to running a genuinely experimental program. We have accomplished this through a combination of intuition, bursts of manic energy, wily cunning, and the effort and advice of friends and supporters.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Machine Project Emails, "Machine This Week: August 9th-12th," Aug. 8, 2012.

¹⁴⁹ Machine Project Emails, "Real money job! Now hiring Assistant Director" July 20, 2012.

The advertisement defines the socially cooperative ways in which staff roles function and shape what could be achieved through such an organizational form.

Elif Gokcigdem points to the deeper significance of such public acknowledgments by Machine Project within participatory visual culture observing that “being transparent with visitors [participants] about how we know what we know fosters a nuanced understanding of the history.”¹⁵⁰ In forms that included professional skill trainings, footnoted audio tours, and interviews offering lengthy and generous critique, Allen offered clear insights into the successes, failures and redirections across Machine Project history. Such insights continued beyond closure in the summative toolkits and occasional performance lectures, while the humorous, archived event disclaimers offer an alternative narration of possibilities and realities.

Repetition, like humor, has a critical value for empathetic leadership by enabling some form of expectation-setting while still delivering an incongruent, changeable, and experimental program. Machine Project let its iterative event structure and the carrying of a *biome of aesthetics* establish a consistent framework beyond its site, one that allowed for its performance as an organization. As an artist project space hosted in multiple other locations such as local historic houses, overlooks with planetariums, or public parks, Machine Project revealed their own values in companionable tension with those of other sites. The primacy of empathy in negotiating these sites, from dreaming up events with others to balancing usage tensions, functions across layers of behavior that Elif Gokcigdem charts:

- Emotional connections with another’s feelings;
- The cognitive effort to engage with another’s reality and social context;
- A compassionate and pragmatic realization of interconnectedness.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Adam P. Nilsen and Miriam Bader, “The Psychology of Empathy,” in *Fostering Empathy in Museums*, ed. Elif Gokcigdem (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 119.

¹⁵¹ Gokcigdem, “Introduction,” xxi.

In such layers of respective intensity, it is possible to see the nuanced and complex way that Machine Project enacted empathetic approaches ahead of a centering on self-care in more overtly political activism. However, fundamental to the openness of these sites and their dynamic activation is the structural role empathy has within the practice of organizing.

Handling failure within a close-knit arts community that included funders and high-profile partners required embracing potential conflict, contingent outcomes, and ideological incompatibilities. There was always scope for things to go wrong, such as keen participants overwhelming the feedback format for a Video Gong event and the need for a re-run: “Cue your tape. Some tapes got gonged before they started because we were looking at color bars. This made the artists mad. We’re very sorry.”¹⁵² A granting agency would deem a project proposal “too innovative to scale,” and the ambitious year-long Hammer Museum Residency left staff overburdened, with the final word being that the institution had had enough.¹⁵³ How far the Hammer Museum could host and bring about their own transformation was constrained by their visitor service expectations, staff roles and professional training, and underlying ideological structures. Each constraint proved an unbalancing factor in the companionably antagonistic approach usually adopted by Machine Project, and ultimately Allen, together with collaborating artists and Hammer staff, would transparently and empathetically co-critique the curtailed residency.

Retaining the reports of such failures and details that allow users to make interconnections among the 1500 events listed means participation in the archive continues beyond Machine Project’s closure date. It was during the off-site iteration of Machine Project at

¹⁵² Mark Allen, “Video Gong Show notes,” in *Machine Beginnings Blog*, April 6, 2005. <http://www.markallen.com/machine-beginnings-blog>.

¹⁵³ Allen, *Machine Project Guide to Curating and Planning Events*, 10.

the Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College that the characteristic cross-disciplinary and multidimensional thinking found its stakes in the processes of gathering and shaping how Machine will be perceived in the future, as structured in the archive. Order and chronology were prioritized for access, but with scope for the random and the contingent in affordances, such as an online slot machine search engine. For as Allen notes, “The better and more accessible you make you container, the more experimental and challenging the content inside can be,” and at every level of organizational performance.¹⁵⁴

In the annual *TrendsWatch 2017* Report, written for the American Alliance of Museums by Elizabeth Merritt, she writes: “Museums’ inherent strengths position them to be effective ‘empathy engines’ helping people to understand the ‘other’ and reinforcing social bonds.”¹⁵⁵ Not only are museums—and, by extension, artist project spaces—“empathy engines,” but the creation of contemplative space can circumvent differences in behavioral norms and social expectations. Each site thereby has the potential to overcome bureaucratic and service function demands. At the Walker Art Center’s *Open Field* in 2011, Allen talked of the types of social site that can embrace such companionable antagonisms while not being held back by an institutional fear of failure. What the Walker Art Centre could allow to happen out on their lawn during the Summer Jubilee that Machine Project convened was free from expectations that other cultural institutions had found hard to navigate, particularly the meaning of failure. Allen shared why this situation allowed for failure in a way that other museum partnerships had not.

Often when I’ve worked in museums, I’ve found that you can have a theoretical conversation about the value of experimentation, but you can still feel the

¹⁵⁴ Allen, “The Curiosity Effect,” 1.

¹⁵⁵ Elizabeth Merritt, *TrendsWatch 2017* (Washington, DC: American Alliance of Museums, 2017), 8. The report details examples of creating environments that foster conversations between strangers and meaningful encounters between people of different backgrounds. Empathy Museum founder, Roman Krznaric is quoted as saying, “Conversations with strangers are one of the best ways to overcome our prejudices and assumptions about others.”¹⁵⁵

institution's almost psychic pain when projects go embarrassingly wrong, which itself is one of the most fruitful and exciting parts of an experimental practice. The Open Field is a complex enough public container that it allows for things to fizzle without people feeling necessarily embarrassed.¹⁵⁶

In being an empathy engine, Machine Project could celebrate when its capacity for experimentation and failure were best accommodated. The value of Machine Project's performance as an organization lies in how it partnered with institutional others and found productive ways to characterize ideological differences that such an approach made visible.

While from the outset Allen was openly grateful for support, it is the additional layers of integrating conscious and empathetic thinking that Machine Project structurally defines the organization at each turn, be it by enabling a contemplative space, ensuring accessibility in the archive, or overtly embracing an act of God failure. The latter is evident in a group email that was thankful for the donations that allowed for the recovery from a flood and for the scope such generosity had given to expand the space: "We feel really lucky and warm and snugly to have received so much support from you."¹⁵⁷ Machine Project would continue to turn disaster into further possibilities with the discovery of an insurance clause that accommodated watercraft. The project went on to leverage this clause throughout its tenure. They sent poets offshore in Santa Monica to read audience requests and installed a floating platform on Echo Park Lake that hosted a Library, as well as Carmina Escobar's *Fiesta Perpetua!* one of Machine Project's closing day performances, with a shoreline Oaxacan marching band, in January 2018 (Figure 2.3).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Sarah Schultz, "Summer Jubilee: An Interview with Mark Allen of Machine Project," *Walker Art Centre Magazine*, Sep. 17, 2012. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/summer-jubilee-an-interview-with-mark-allen-of-machine-project>

¹⁵⁷ Machine Project Emails, "Hekla talk and good news about bad news," March 2, 2007.

¹⁵⁸ Events using watercraft include: 'Poetry Boat', Glow Festival, 2008; Sarah Peter, 'Floating Library', LA Book Fair, Feb, 2016; Carmina Escobar's 'Fiesta Perpetua!', commissioned by Machine Project for Fiesta Perpetua!, May 2017 and re-performed as part of Pacific Standard Time LA/LA, Jan, 2018.

Conclusion

Machine Project, in becoming a sustained artist project space, shifted expectations of what an artist performing through an organization might be. The nature of Allen's artistic leadership was complicated by his compulsive collaborator tendencies, cooperative working relationships, and a transdisciplinary perspective of the participant-audience. All were realized in a plethora of events and workshops that spun out from the visual cultural references of Los Angeles into disciplinary-spanning arcs and which gained focus at moments of organizational turn in 2005, 2008 and 2012, and in the activation of humor, the overheard and the empathetic.

Machine Project functioned as a museum education and public programs department, where participants and staff, public and private, amateur and professional, administrative and curatorial, discipline-siloed and interdisciplinary, finished and emergent, were re-shuffled. In convening events that mixed up all of these categories with host artists who did not fall neatly into any single category, Machine Project was able to build relationships around the specifics of site and its momentary situation, with an ever-instituent gaze beyond the social to the world at large.

What Machine Project did was to reformulate the artist project space as a social site that had deep and interwoven synergies with conventional museums, while leaving behind an archive that may yet bring new iterations to life long after the site is gone. Machine Project made visible what was not yet possible and what might yet be different, if cultural norms were routinely made explicit and the topsy-turvy world was left as an open and absurdist curatorial challenge.

Chapter Three. *Elsewhere*

Part 1

Resident artist Chloe Bass' historic plaque on the exterior of 608 South Elm Street in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina, announces the founding intentions of Elsewhere beside its storefront window bays (Figure 3.1):

Since 2003, George Scheer and Stephanie Sherman have been using this building, and the objects within, to create collaborative systems through (in)visible work and play. They have always pieced the world together in different ways. This building remembers everything: Stories, reasons, and yesterday's weather.¹⁵⁹

The built-in memory of this three-story warehouse site expands with each year (Figure 3.2). Through its windows is visible a material cultural cache amassed since the 1930s and reworked as an international artist residency and living museum since 2003. At the conjoined 606 S. Elm Street, on the days when the former thrift store is open, a swing set allows visitors to fly out above the sidewalk, with each person swaying between public and private space, and between play and museum functions (Figure 3.3).¹⁶⁰

The Depression-era store's reformulation as an artist project space has occurred alongside the gradual revival of its immediate neighborhood. Residents' lives and art practices have coalesced as a living museum among the gathered thrift, necessitating ongoing care while accommodating non-normative identities and ephemeral processes materially and categorically invisible in conventional museums. The rituals of care for those things gathered on site re-assert

¹⁵⁹ Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Three: We walk the world two by two*, 2015, cast aluminum plaques with bronze finish, and audio, 12" X 15". Elsewhere, Greensboro (commissioned as part of Elsewhere's South Elm Projects, funded in part by ArtPlace America).

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200809015424/https://www.goelsewhere.org/book-of-everyday-instruction/>.

¹⁶⁰ Colin Bliss, *The Swings at Elsewhere*, 2012, reclaimed collection wood. Elsewhere, Greensboro.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200809180919/http://www.goelsewhere.org/the-swings-at-elsewhere/>

lost subjectivities and build towards more equitable community relationships. The centering of an encompassing principle of care, as a museological approach, empathetically vindicates mess, accrues non-dominant meanings, and retains liveness in all that remains.

How the resulting archive drawn from historically white-centered social practice formations of the early 2000s emerges as a resonant platform for uncelebrated voices has been presciently telling during times of racial and social justice reckoning. Returning to Elsewhere's origin story and founding stakes is critical to imagining its futures, while acknowledging its flaws. Elsewhere emerges as an organization vested in unconventional principles of care for an ad hoc collection amassed since the 1930s, a repository of alternative forms of organizing since 2003, and an accrual of resident artists' installations through to today.

Origins

Elsewhere's consistency as a site of social and cultural production, south of the railroad tracks in Greensboro, finds its roots in family history. The business that George Scheer's grandmother, Sylvia Gray, opened with her husband, Joe, in 1937 began across the street at 607 South Elm Street, where they sold Depression-era furniture that shipped twice daily on the neighboring railroad up to New York State. Their trading provided affordable home essentials at a time of national recovery. As a young Jewish American couple living in Greensboro, they were part of a strong but not welcome religious community, many of whom had invested in the fabric mills of the area, such as Wrangler Denim and Cone Mills, that neighbor the downtown area.¹⁶¹ The echoes of other dissonant community migrations across the United States weave into their

¹⁶¹ Tellingly the Grays changed their name from Grabowski in 1947, while Cone Mills was established by the more recognizably Jewish-named Cohen family. Zach Whitworth, Elsewhere Resident, Email message to author, May 18, 2020.

story of seeking opportunity in new territories.¹⁶² In 1939, the Grays moved across the street to the store that has become Elsewhere, at 606 South Elm Street, and began the Carolina Furniture Company, whose hand-copied receipts and records Meghan MacDonald and Laura MacAulay used in 2012 to plaster the stairs leading to the second level (Figure 3.4).¹⁶³ By 1945, the Grays had expanded the business to include Army surplus that they repaired and resold to local scouting groups and hospitals.¹⁶⁴

The second floor had by then become a boarding house; today the space is used for staff offices and resident artists' sleeping quarters. On the third floor was the workshop and shipping area for the flourishing mail-order business in the 1950s, as well as the one-time family living quarters for Sylvia's three children.¹⁶⁵ The basic division of functions for the three levels of Elsewhere are not dissimilar today, with the public storefront functioning as a living museum for the collection of remaining thrift and surplus stock on the first level. The artist residency accommodation and administrative offices are on the second level, and finally the active

¹⁶² *Radical Seders* hosted at Elsewhere map the tales of migration and suffering as told through resident artists installations, such as Ecuadorian Edison Peñafiel's "Ni Aquí, Ni Allá" (Neither Here, Nor There), 2018, alongside the biography of the Gray family within the history of the Jewish community in North Carolina. In the early 1900s, Jewish migrants, such as the Grays traveled from New York and Baltimore into the South. 'They set up dry good stores, scrap yards, and groceries in small towns. They built communities and synagogues. Theirs was a struggle in a strange land. To an extent, many passed and assimilated, but each year they retold a story that reminded them of a struggle to maintain their religion and their difference in an unfamiliar and sometimes inhospitable place.' Zach Whitworth, *A Haggadah for Passover—Pesach for a Digital Diaspora* (Greensboro: Elsewhere, 2020), 17.

¹⁶³ Meghan MacDonald and Laura MacAulay, *Selling Field or Similar Work*, 2012, pencil tracings on stairwell. Elsewhere, North Carolina. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201030231934/http://www.goelsewhere.org/selling-field-or-similar-work-megan-and-laura/>. An account of how the couple ran their business in these early years appears in the Haggadah, 'Joe and Sylvia worked as a team. He played the front man, corresponding with customers, merchants, wholesalers, and dealers. She kept to the margins—managing the books, inventories, and accounts of shipping costs, CODs, lot payments, and sales contracts. His name was signed to every invoice; her chicken-scratch math covered the surfaces.' Whitworth, *A Haggadah for Passover—Pesach for a Digital Diaspora*, 12.

¹⁶⁴ The post-World War II inventory included pup tents, outfits, mess kits, canteens, wool mummy sleeping bags with poplin covers, jungle hammocks, rucksacks with metal frames, entrenching shovels, boots, pistol belts, and musette bags.

¹⁶⁵ Joe and Sylvia Gray cut-and-pasted product illustrations to make catalogues for distribution to scoutmasters, hospitals, and hotels throughout the nation. Scheer and Whitworth, *A Haggadah for Passover—Pesach for a Digital Diaspora*, 12. The three siblings were George Scheer's mother, uncle and aunt respectively, with the warehouse provided, but not gifted, to George by his Uncle, David Gray on the founding of Elsewhere. In 2014 this situation was formally resolved with a 40 year lease.

maintenance and studio workshop, with its warren of small rooms, is on the third. Many whole-room artist installations are in these upper level, domestic-scale spaces.

The amassed collections of thrift and surplus materials at Elsewhere have gradually found resting places that echo the original store layout. Additionally, within these zones and on a micro-level, there was a replicating of some of the ordering principles Sylvia Gray applied to items gathered after her husband had died unexpectedly in 1955. Sylvia's idiosyncratic approach to ordering included placing small things of like-color together in clear bags, as well as rewinding spools of ribbons by hand. George Scheer, among others, re-performed these orderings according to memories of his grandmother working in the store and the evidence of her systems, as revealed in the way things had been found when they opened the space for the residency.¹⁶⁶ The role of women was intrinsically centered originally through Sylvia and echoed in Elsewhere's collection-ordering rituals since.

Elsewhere's contextual frame and focus on empathetic neighborhood bonds is rooted in Greensboro's troubling history. The first sit-in of the Civil Rights Movement, led by four students from the town's A & T University, happened at the Woolworths store further up South Elm Street in the summer of 1960. Race relations in the town continued to be tense and, nearly two decades later, the Greensboro Massacre saw five community leaders killed when a textile workers' march was subject to a counter Ku Klux Klan-affiliated demonstration. Activists from the nearby Beloved Community Center continue to attempt to secure justice for those killed in incidents of local police brutality, while also fighting to mitigate voter suppression. Such historical scars are ones that Elsewhere marks with such neighborhood partners through

¹⁶⁶ The bags are tied with ribbon, wire bread ties, and paper-based tapes, with a few in snap lidded plastic containers. Gray's inventory also expanded by the mid 1960s to include end-of-line fabric bolts from local mills.

memorial-activisms, event programs, and resident artist research.¹⁶⁷ Sylvia Gray's collection and artist resident reformulations provide a palpable narrative of cultural change and historical omission.

Collection

Even in her lifetime, Sylvia Gray was an object of myth-making and storytelling. Anecdotes from the 1970s onwards tell of other shoppers following her through neighborhood thrift stores and picking up her rejected selections, be they toys, storybooks, or clothing. Legend has it that she also had a tendency to restrict to whom she sold an item if their intent was not its functional use, once deliberately defacing a rare Beatles *White Album* sought repeatedly by a collector.¹⁶⁸ Sylvia was also known to have locked in shoppers whom she thought were stealing.

Sylvia Gray worked in the store right up until the end of her life in 1997, leaving the ordering of its final contents to whomever came next, though some things were sold off in the years before the formation of Elsewhere on the site in 2003. The Program Department *Tour Guide* for Elsewhere, given to interns and staff, characterizes Sylvia Gray's evolving approach to collecting as follows:

Over time her inventory became more or less a collection, more or less a hoard, more or less an archive that detailed her tastes, interests, and perception of value.¹⁶⁹

Hoarding is de-emphasized given its negative psychological associations, often highlighted in popular culture through decluttering-themed reality TV shows. Instead, Elsewhere frames the tendency to collect, hoard, and gather surplus as an empowering source of Sylvia's feminist

¹⁶⁷ Two ongoing partner relationships include the Beloved Community Center and the International Civil Rights Center.

¹⁶⁸ Anecdote recounted in George Scheer Interview with author, Nov. 28, 2016.

¹⁶⁹ Elsewhere, *Hoardiculture*, in Story. <https://www.goelsewhere.org/story/>

narrative as a single, Jewish woman navigating business, community, and family roles. One with synergies for artists such as Lonnie Holley who likened Sylvia's approach to that of his grandmamma collecting and sorting food as a means of supporting her family and the community.¹⁷⁰

Artists have responded to the contents of Elsewhere through acts of further ordering on micro- and macro-level scales. There are sets of like things as seen in wearable, vintage clothing hung in the Transformatorium dressing rooms; glass vitrines and mirrors gathered next door in *The Glass Forest* installation; and, evocatively in terms of Sylvia's own curatorial ordering, there is The Ribbon Room (Figure 3.5).¹⁷¹ Here, ribbons from the collection come together, first gathered by Angela Zammarelli in 2006, which has proven a particularly active site of resident artist interventions over the years.¹⁷² Ribbons were ironed and piled in a central heap or carefully rewound using a pencil as Sylvia herself had done, with some circular bindings hung on the walls. Such participatory re-performing of Gray's ordering has resulted in further reorderings and reformulations, as well as ghostly tendrils of cream ribbons hung above the final flight of stairs, brushing residents' heads as they pass. Performances happen amid this material subset, often with an endurance quality to them. The Ribbon Room's ongoing physical form as a mound of soft materials also encourages less formal participatory play for passing tour visitors and residents, be it rolling, meditative sitting, or just fiddling.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Recollection shared during a recorded Zoom call for Elsewhere's 24-hour extravaganza, *Fort Night*, Dec. 18, 2020. Lonnie Holley speaks with Josh Franco, April Parker, Antoine Williams, Thea Cohen, and Matthew Giddings.

¹⁷¹ Agustina Woodgate and Ian Montgomery, "The Glass Forest," 2009. Elsewhere, Greensboro, NC. 2015.. <https://vimeo.com/11920673>.

¹⁷² Angela Zammarelli, *Ribbon Room*, 2006, ribbons from the collection. Elsewhere, Greensboro, NC. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201028105921/http://www.goelsewhere.org/ribbon-room-2/>.

¹⁷³ The Ribbon Room is a long-standing installation, 2006-present, that is aging and environmentally challenging, not least the business of keeping it clean, as well as mitigating wear and tear from active use.

Many sets of childhood things were collected thematically from the 1970s, when Gray's grandchildren expressed an interest in a toy character or game activity, and these collectibles are often the first items to capture the attention of groups of young people who wander into Elsewhere or the couples passing by on First Fridays. Projects developed by resident artists with these sets are both a playable archive of Americana and, through their mass production and corporate-gifting origins, part of a global imaginary. These objects offer traces of mislaid childhood treasures and incongruous, vintage brand messaging.¹⁷⁴

On shelving that accommodates collection handling and that almost runs the length of the first floor are unnamed toy characters who lie among branded items; gender-conforming cowboys who combine with strong men enacting camp masculinity, and pods of plastic fish who mix freely with trinkets that came with McDonald's Happy Meals. Visually things group by form—toys, games, fabric bolts, etc.—and color, but also in storefront display modes such as the items gathered beneath glass counter tops at the entrance. Where things converge in more mixed combinations is often where artists have gathered, oftentimes inverted or adding to Gray's original gestures.

Within Elsewhere's material genealogy, the area of least apparent order and simultaneously most distinct from Sylvia Gray's collection and business remains are the filing cabinets in various corners of the living museum that reveal an amassing of administrative documents lacking any narrative or chronological structure. Each pile holds a tentative connection to earlier thinking around the formation of the organization. Some artist residents have tried to order such project information, such as a tome of stitched documents amassed

¹⁷⁴ Stephanie Sherman Interview with author, April 20, 2020.

between 2008–2009 that resulted in a giant book that rests in the Library.¹⁷⁵ Other residents have attempted to visualize the entire organization as a tapestry or produced an intense diagram of Elsewhere on a chalkboard wall that connects the artist project space into the wider field of residency spaces in North America.¹⁷⁶ Each of these administrative visualizations evidenced the spheres of organizational activities and priorities prevalent at specific moments in time, expanding on the paper archive with its weakened relationship to past chronology.

In these disconnected piles of administrative remains lie printouts from past projects, proposal sketches, and shopping lists; and communications ephemera such as publicity postcards and fundraising pamphlets. There are also magazines saved for collage workshops that offer pop cultural aesthetics from 2003 onwards. Stored more carefully are newspaper clippings specific to Elsewhere, held in the administrative area that adjoins the welcome counter for the museum. In searching through such an amorphous administrative trove, one stumbles upon papers that help tell the history and explain the founding ideas of Elsewhere.

Organizational anecdotes help navigate such assorted paper remains and identify specific details or narrative threads within the interpretative possibilities. The choosing of Elsewhere's name happened when the word appeared in a passing remark made by Matt Merfert as founding participants sat talking on the entrance stoop in the first month of the organization. The name has proven since to have philosophical synergies within the writings of both Jean-Paul Sartre, who used "elsewhere" as a conceptual hinge in *Being and Nothingness: Essay on Phenomenological*

¹⁷⁵ Artist/Group unknown, *Unabridged Elsewhere, A Document of Circumstance, Account, Actions and Affairs*, July 19, 2009. Its inscription states that it has gathered fragments in the service of making, a copy of anything made by Elsewhere for Elsewhere, and that it is not our blog, rather a catalogue of perishing chronologies for when all internets will have died.

¹⁷⁶ April Bartlett, *The Urban Explorers Guide to the Elsewhere Commonwealth*, 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20210109031717/https://www.goelsewhere.org/the-urban-explorers-guide-to-the-elsewhere-commonwealth/>; Mike Nourse, *Untitled (Chalk Mind Map)*, March 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201023113439/https://www.goelsewhere.org/chalk-map/>.

Ontology (1943) and Lucy Lippard, who defined the humanizing-value of place rather than space in *The Lure of the Local* (2006).¹⁷⁷ Critically, the latter's book is listed on a bibliography for an educational class run at Elsewhere found in an abandoned cabinet, which introduced points of reference for concepts of site specificity enacted at Elsewhere and its naming:

But place is where we stand to look around at landscape or look out to the (less familiar) "view." The word *place* has psychological echoes as well as social ramifications. "Someplace" is what we are looking for. "No place" is where these elements are unknown or invisible, but in fact every place has them, although some are being buried beneath the asphalt of the monocultural, the "geography of nowhere." "Placelessness," [sic.] then, may simply be place ignored, unseen, or unknown.¹⁷⁸

Lippard's investigation of the distinctiveness of place indicates how the word—elsewhere—can allude to a dreamed of or different place, a definite location, just not where people have found themselves, yet. The circular citation of the site, contents and anecdotal history reaffirming an attitudinal relationship to mess, meanings, and everyday moments.

At such a place, the resurfacing of memories, the collaborative embedding of new site specificities, and the reformulation of the collection allowed the artist founders to expand their organizational arts practice, in all its social, administrative, and participatory manifestations. Such organizing was done in the human equivalent of a nature preserve—the living museum. Those who stepped inside were the secondary audience for whom the archive was reformulated, with each subsequent residency serving as an experiential system of cultural production not centered on consumerism. Stephanie Sherman's memories of visits to sites such as The Museum of Jurassic Technology in California, Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, and Disney World in

¹⁷⁷ Scheer's family referred to the warehouse as The Store and in later research he would discover a Sartre reference to Elsewhereness that seemed to fit the project in a phenomenological sense. Email conversation Scheer and Sherman, October 13, 2020.

¹⁷⁸ Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 9.

Florida informed Elsewhere's museological non-alignments and its capacity for the acting-out childhood dreams.¹⁷⁹ At Elsewhere, resident artists conceptually worked through ways to collaboratively tell stories amid a warehouse of forgotten things, while remaining open to possibilities of as-yet uncelebrated stories and world-building dreams.

One of the artist-founders' first intentions for Elsewhere as an organization was that nothing was for sale, despite the storefront setting that might suggest otherwise. While this shop-function choice continues to prove disconcerting for visitors, the options to handle, contribute, and play with collection items within an assigned museum setting unsettles visitors further. Additionally, the valuing of things normally thrown away had overwhelming implications in terms of managing things in the collection and their sheer quantity, reuse potential, and eventual decay. Elsewhere changed how artists' work could be shown by making visible the associated layers of curatorial and archival practices. They foregrounded process and participatory constructions, but always within a set of founding and distinctive collection parameters: Nothing can be damaged beyond repair, nor leave the building, and if accidentally broken, must be reused or saved.

The scale of such material retention and all-encompassing care proved a motivation for ordering beyond those acts of sorting performed by Sylvia Gray, so that over the years each floor at Elsewhere has been cleared into more manageable zones by function and likeness of things. The physical ordering made (or rendered) the collection more immediately comprehensible and accessible to visitors and resident artists alike. No longer was there just a narrow path through

¹⁷⁹ The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City, Los Angeles, established by David and Diana Wilson in 1988, remains open to visitors and filled with relics of human endeavor, from cats' cradle knot displays, to miniature scenes of caravans above oil wells. As a precursor to interdisciplinary artist project spaces, such as Elsewhere and Machine Project in Los Angeles, the site's displays and odd categorizations of content suggest alternative museological values and interpretation.

piles of carefully amassed thrift, as was the case when the family boarded up the building after Sylvia Gray's death, instead communal spaces emerged as the materials were ordered and gathered in specific zones.

The disordered intensity of this interior landscape during Elsewhere's earliest years is seen in footage of *City*—a participatory game that reimagined relations within a “city” that was in fact populated by resident artists and shop-like set-ups of collection items.¹⁸⁰ *City* appears a confrontational and chaotic game, practiced with seeming abandon that at first glance functions in the closed realm of participant artists and those adept at performing political theory.¹⁸¹ However, in reviewing the footage, the actual attempt to live in the city appears most telling in the narrative nature of the game: the twists and turns of negotiations to create something that does not conform to conventional service functions, but instead is committed to the co-construction of an urban life.¹⁸² *City* is fairly out of reach to those who were not there for the extended performances that began at Winter break in 2003. The exchanges and fantastically reworked installations lost to those moments of co-performance as dwellers of a more dynamic and messy creative city.¹⁸³ It was a significant participatory experiment that ideologically

¹⁸⁰ *City* was first played over the winter holidays in 2003/4 and was an iterative performance game that continued over many years. Its forms include a play staged in the front window about a family living in a shack, with taxidermy stuffed animals for props (“Gun Family Christa”); a Copernican Revolution themed performance, and a Halloween party that filled the museum with hay and built bird nests (“MadNest”). Stephanie Sherman and George Scheer facilitated these versions of *City*, with the High School intern team, Bryan, Chelsea, Chris, and Mike.

¹⁸¹ A formative course at University of Pennsylvania, for both Sherman and Scheer, was Will Harris’ “Political Theory of the Bible”. In July 2019, Harris would host an event at Greensboro Civil Rights Museum on South Elm Street, <https://www.rhinotimes.com/news/civil-rights-museum-turns-focus-to-constitution/>

¹⁸² *City: In the Shadow of the Skyscraper* was a docudrama performed in 2007, with an extensive cast of residents, including Sarah Witt, George Scheer, Stephanie Sherman, and *Skyscraper* artist, Ian Gamble. <https://vimeo.com/57163445>. Sherman recalls the chaos of *City* events that on one occasion integrated an actual tree into the kitchen (Jay Gamble), without clearing tea cups off the shelf in preparation, such feckless, funny and fearless acts of reformulation had an energy still in the site's form today, though now taken with more measured risks. Internally connecting the downstairs to the second floor was, likewise, achieved when Jay Gamble cut through and spent hours shaving down boards to frame the new internal doorway that was both an absurd gesture and a practical act (New Year 2009).

¹⁸³ Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 2002, spoke to the Greensboro Downtown business community in 2004 and advocated for the role of attracting the *creative class*. Political analyst and editor of *The Baffler*, Thomas Frank is critical of Florida's emphasis on a new professional creative class rather than the issues

revealed Elsewhere as an organization practicing at living as a microcosm of the city, as well as playfully capturing the social life of the site. The recurring *City* game also alluded to problems in the world at large, such as the intense privatization of public space and reductive neighborhood regeneration conventions. The performed and internalized solutions within the residency space offered an instituent, practice-led and counter-critical response to the burgeoning *Creative Cities'* national, place-making agenda.

Within the *City* footage there emerges another organizing principle that speaks to Scheer's curatorial approach, that of stacking. The piling and stacking of things so that none asserts dominance in the wider schematic of Elsewhere's organizing is then reiterated by major installations such as glass cabinetry recombined to become a *Skyscraper* by Ian Gamble during a *City* performance in 2007 or piles of tonally similar plates and other crockery amassed and stacked to surround what became the Kitchen Commons in 2011.¹⁸⁴

The ultimate stack, one that shares in Machine Project's mildly destructive approach to architectural features, can be seen in *Core Sample*, in which Jason Ferguson bored through every layer of the buildings and the things stacked in its path out to the sky in 2007.¹⁸⁵ On one occasion during a *City* performance, ribbons were strewn down the center of the building through this circular chute, falling out onto the first floor. Within this tubular form, the levelling of object hierarchy held ideological implications for the project, as did the disruption of the museological conventions around maintaining object integrity. The intersecting histories within the building

faced by working class people, many of whom were of color. <https://thebaffler.com/odds-and-ends/the-flight-of-the-creative-class>.

¹⁸⁴ Part of Ian Gamble's *Skyscraper*, 2007 has since housed a lone reading table and chair on its top deck with multiple display levels below, positioned on the edge of J. Morgan Puett's *Kitchen Commons*, 2011. <https://vimeo.com/10290946>.

¹⁸⁵ Jason Ferguson, *Core Sample*, 2007.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201021160038/http://www.goelsewhere.org/core-sample/>. This work has similarities with Machine Project's documentation of its floor boards that contained holes drilled to basement theatre, stains from workshop disasters, and floor board incisions from a performance set at 45 degrees in the space.

are also alluded to in such a substrate sample from the evidence of domestic life in the building, the remains of a family business run on surplus, and the artist project space that chose to dissect and resect it all. The layered remains of the core sample sit in stacks in a glass cabinet on the top floor beside the hole—a fragile archaeological pile that would topple back into the clutter of the collection if not for the display case.

In pointing to both the actual and metaphorical layers of the organization, the *Core Sample* echoed Scheer's later characterization of Elsewhere:

The arrangement and rearrangement of these materials and the totality of this space and all the symbolic relationships that existed within these things and the way they are articulated and shaped and the way that shape produces a narrative and that narrative is in fact the different communities that live within and the way that those communities have agency over this thing. To the sort of second layer, which is a layer of organization and that leading to a layer of institutional organization.¹⁸⁶

Within these layers of organization were intersections with under-represented artists and identities, forgotten things and re-usable treasures, and administrative tendencies and political acts, each an indication as to how Elsewhere would build a sustainable organization vested in empathetic bonds.

Core Sample echoed one of the opening acts of Elsewhere, as Scheer and Sherman packed a suitcase filled with assorted objects that they took with them to show to potential supporters, including the literary theorist Bill Brown. In such gestures, Elsewhere acknowledged how the substance of the collection and its reformulations are also always analogous with Brown's characterization of the contrary bind of the thing which:

... the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names something else. [...] Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibitions, outside the order of objects.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Scheer, George. Interview with author, Elsewhere, November, 28, 2016. Jason Ferguson, *Core Sample*, 2007.

¹⁸⁷ Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 5.

The material of Elsewhere accrues its own narratives yet can potentially be experienced outside of this trajectory, depending on the point of entry and the transdisciplinary knowledge brought to the encounter by secondary audiences.¹⁸⁸ The elusive ontological force of the material culture that such a living museum contained would become variously intelligible through the work of a shifting micro-community of participants. Elsewhere would not conform to museological values, art-object conventions, or societal meanings, instead existing in companionable tension with such expectations of its collection of things.¹⁸⁹ In its refusal to prioritize one meaning over another, such polyvalence proved a structural means for the collection to hold onto the memory of its acts without stalling them in time or ascribing them to a specific value set. Elsewhere thereby changed the presenting apparatus for artists' work, be it as integrated into a site, archived and/or reworked, or performed as an alternate way of living more sustainably with things.

Organization

The domestic entanglement of living together as an artist community within an initially chaotic site meant the inextricable practice of everyday cultural work and domestic ordering became the organizational process. Within this context, what art making and the value of memory could be became a resonant framework that shaped the organization and its participants, a whole cosmology of social forms, programs, and systems.¹⁹⁰ Co-founders George Scheer and Stephanie Sherman, along with artist residents since, hold to an arts practice of organizing,

¹⁸⁸ See distinction on perspectives of artists, as interdisciplinary and audience/participants as transdisciplinary in Chapter 2 Machine Project, 23.

¹⁸⁹ Companionable tensions might include more antagonistic gestures within the archive but were not solely driven by the desire to upset boundaries, however Elsewhere inherently places such material culture in tension with privileging museological norms.

¹⁹⁰ Stephanie Sherman Interview with author, April 20, 2020.

performing, and playing with the business of being Elsewhere that has shifted the dynamic and expectations of artist-instigated projects, particularly for those who remain at one address.

There are also foundational principles around the roles and behaviors of artist project space founders that emerge, that are mappable across concurrent projects. At Mildred's Lane, a rural artist residency site just outside Narrowsburg, New York, J. Morgan Puett characterized her embracing of creativity as a lived practice.¹⁹¹ She sets the premise of art as a conscious performance of feminist domesticity, stating that “being is my practice.”¹⁹² Elsewhere, like Mildred's Lane, conceived of lived practices—albeit more immersive—as central, as well as being focused on honoring the women who shaped the organization, domestically and otherwise.¹⁹³ Artist project spaces have the potential to reveal the impact of what doing the work of being an organization can look like as an arts practice and as an example of how they navigate the resulting tensions with everyday life and societal conventions.

However, arts management advisor Susan Kenny Stevens describes the dichotomy of the artist-founder, which would seem to contradict the characterization of founding artists more holistically practicing as the organization:

Like other entrepreneurs, founders generally find management tasks boring and only tolerable as a way to get things organized around them. In fact, founders, at least at the outset, may disdain management. Their energies are absorbed elsewhere. They are driven by the higher goals of mission and purpose. Their job is to create. The task of management is quite different. It is to organize, systematize, and develop a stable framework for getting the work done and sustaining the organization over time.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Mildred's Lane was established informally in 1998, and more formally from 2008 as they opened up the site as an interdisciplinary art complex. In 2011 J. Morgan Puett with Ian Montgomery, installed the *Kitchen Commons* at Elsewhere. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201028074224/http://www.goelsewhere.org/kitchen/>.

¹⁹² J. Morgan Puett, “Being as Practice,” in *I'm going to live the life I sing about in my song, How Artists Make and Live Lives of Meaning*, ed. Jen Delos Reyes (Chicago: Open Engagement, 2016), 33.

¹⁹³ During the Radical Seders, Elsewhere toasts key women to the formation of the site, Silvia Gray, Stephanie Elyse Sherman, and Emily Ensminger.

¹⁹⁴ Susan Kenny Stevens facilitated Elsewhere's *Self Assessment of Organizational Capacity* in 2011 that would lead to the refurbishment of the site in 2016. Susan Kenny Stevens, *Nonprofit Lifecycles: Stage-based Wisdom for Nonprofit Capacity, Second Edition* (Scottsdale, AZ: Stagewise Enterprises, Inc., 2008), 80–81.

Accepting that these two tasks of creation and management are distinctive and evolving in non-parallel ways does not, however, preclude the entanglement of such roles within the lived complexity of artists durationally practicing as the organization.¹⁹⁵ The inseparable realities of organizing and creativity as an arts practice can, from a managerial perspective, predominate in different lifecycle stages. However, for artist project spaces such as Elsewhere, Machine Project, and Mess Hall, the performance and practice of everyday creativity and/or organizing is part of an embodied and inextricable organizational process.

At Elsewhere there was a necessary structural shift around the creative and management practices at the end of the co-founder's tenure in 2016.¹⁹⁶ At that time, the nature of the artist practicing as an organization shifted in its primacy, as some of the idiosyncrasies of the site were ironed out and dissonant voices were given more structural weight. While the co-founders disentangled their own practice from that of the organization, they remained forever bound to it, no longer as a form of job description but as originators—succession as imagined within a socially cooperative organizational form.¹⁹⁷ The project of Elsewhere moved beyond the co-founders' own arts practice while still being shaped by the foundational and archivally-open principles they established.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ *Entanglement* is a term used to define the complexities of art/life practices and their interdisciplinary navigation from the site of *Mildred's Lane*, J. Morgan Puett's rural artist project space in New York State.

¹⁹⁶ The end of the founder-tenure was 2016, at the point of refurbishment and the start of succession planning. George Scheer, the co-founding Director, would leave the organization officially in 2019, though both founders remain on Elsewhere's Board, Sherman joining in 2011.

¹⁹⁷ Tom Finkelpearl's terminology around *socially cooperative* organizational forms, rather than the purely collaborative ones, remains helpful to understand the planned founder succession at Elsewhere. Kenny Stevens would use the term *originators* in her earlier management study of nonprofits.

¹⁹⁸ Stevens, *Nonprofit Lifecycles*, 83.

George Scheer has spoken of how “diversifying agency and responsibility to a community and away from a founder-leader is, for me, an ‘instituent practice.’”¹⁹⁹ Elsewhere lived a museological and artistic narrative that crossed conventional disciplinary, collection, and organizational boundaries. Scheer has continued to process how a more instituent approach can shape new organizational forms:

Instituent practices are those organizational structures, processes, policies, tools, even beliefs that allow an organization to formalize, sustain, and transition leadership. In our field [independent artist organizations], I’m curious how they resist rigidity, institutionalization, and maintain space for an unfolding “institutional imagination” meaning, a creative mindset that invites a different kind of organizational reality out into world.²⁰⁰

The consuming business of the artist practicing as an organization ultimately de-centered the project narrative in significant ways, with Elsewhere’s organizing practices increasingly shaped by factors beyond the immersive social life of their origination.

Elsewhere opened its doors as an advocate for past and future histories of this site and neighborhood, but it has taken time for that imperative to become visible in the immediate vicinity. Scheer reflects on the disconnect between the co-founders’ vision and the reality of working within this context:

People want to imagine that we just stumbled into this but we had a really clear vision of what we were trying to do. It just took years for the space to match where we were. Our language was ahead of what the physical environment was, itself. What it was capable of and its capacity to support.²⁰¹

Funding was not the sole factor in this slow formation of hyper-local relations and site improvements. An art world needed to coalesce around the organization and an invisible local

¹⁹⁹ George Scheer, “Session Notes,” in *Instituent Practices: On Founding and Succeeding an Arts Organization*, Common Field Convening, Philadelphia, April 27, 2019.

²⁰⁰ Scheer, “Session Notes.” Discussed with author and referencing Beery, “Instituent Practices: Art After (Public) Institutions.”

²⁰¹ Scheer, George. Interview with author, Elsewhere, November 28, 2016. (00.17:05).

community emerged as a more equitable dynamic became possible. Language, consciousness around privilege, and partnership formations proved necessary and gradual tools for sharing administrative principles and resulting forms—the organizational pedagogy—amid a social life that sought to celebrate counter-publics. Those communities—people of color in the South, the LGBTQ+ community, and beleaguered small business owners—were elusive at first along that South Elm Street corridor, a business zone depleted by forty years of misguided, predatory urban renewal efforts, particularly those of the late 1960s that offered no public investment and displaced the freed-slave community of Warnersville. The rekindled small, hidden networks of past communities, almost lost, drove the reestablishing of more public sites for social connection realized most significantly in Elsewhere’s later phase of neighborhood public art interventions that escalated in 2015 with funding, community partnerships, and secondary audiences as integral.

Elsewhere’s deep mapping of place means it does not function merely as a DIY regenerator, but also as a way of being experientially site-specific with relational bonds to its past, bonds that continued through neighborhood change and business additions and losses.²⁰² The curatorial approach at Elsewhere built on the collaborative othering of a collection within a former thrift store and the messy realities of this process. Mess is an actual and overwhelming material presence at Elsewhere, while additionally retaining the subjects, practices, and materials that did not fit established museum categories, as anthropological theorist Martin F. Manalansan IV has explored in the domestic context of queer immigrant households where the performance of identity has been released.²⁰³ He established how accrued domestic materials act as a symbolic

²⁰² Bloom and Sacramento, *Deep Mapping*, 7. Elsewhere is responsive to long-term regeneration projects, such as *The Greenway* that circles Downtown Greensboro and follows the line of Scheer family land ownership in its southernmost section.

²⁰³ Manalansan, “The “Stuff” of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives.”

connection to the past, hold functional value, while also being open to inevitable loss through relocation, as often experienced by undocumented immigrants and those living a necessarily itinerant life. Mess proves integral to Elsewhere's process of organizing itself into a living museum and artist residency.

It is from these sidewalk-fronted, family-legacy warehouses that hold furniture, Army surplus, and material ephemera of past popular and mass-produced culture that Elsewhere defined its relationship with audiences and the wider field of independent artist organizations—a sector that acknowledged and networked artists practicing and performing as organizations, many of whom emerged in the early 2000s in similar urban locations.²⁰⁴ In this utterly unassuming, walkable, and historically redolent end of the South Elm strip, Elsewhere would build outwards from the Depression era into a space that accommodated collaborative and future fictions.²⁰⁵

Part 2 – Organizational Turns

Organizational change at Elsewhere emerged with the rethinking of its structural forms through the art practices of co-founders, residents, and advocates. Those artists hosted by the residency program proved critical instigators of how the organizational form would change over time and introduced distinct secondary audiences. This section explores how Elsewhere's position as a repository of alternative forms of organizing reveals structurally significant differences and decisions that sometimes fell short.

²⁰⁴ The *Hand in Glove* conference in 2011 initiated a retreat at Ox Bow, Michigan, in 2013, that would lead to the formation of *Common Field*, the organization for artist organizers. The six founders included Elsewhere's Stephanie Sherman. <https://www.commonfield.org/about/89/history>.

²⁰⁵ Sherman Interview 2020. The term *collaborative fiction* was a foundational phrase to characterize the approach the founders took, that allowed for the polyvalent and generative activation of the collection in the company of others. *Collaborative futures* was adopted after refurbishment in 2016 and alludes to shifts in thinking around agency and equity.

New organizational forms at Elsewhere emerged in phased turns. The impetus for each typically took two years to coalesce, triggered by resident artworks, the funding support that defined new stabilities, and the input from an emergent field of organizing practice. Elsewhere's organizational approach between 2003 and 2016 focused on three elongated turns that align with the first few stages of non-profit development: idea, start-up, and growth.²⁰⁶ Within the organizational framework itself, the residency program moved towards the growth stage, while the public and education program retained the energy of a start-up due to its responsive planning and less consistent funding.²⁰⁷

The combination of immersive living practices and the substantial material archive gave Elsewhere a complicated role to play as an organizational form, as well as the capacity for self-regeneration at each of the turns, such as the securing of funding relationships between 2003 and 2004, the staffing structure changes between 2007 and 2008, and the demands of refurbishment goals between 2011 and 2012.²⁰⁸ The learnings from each turn also underpinned the approach taken later with the building refurbishment, year-round program offer, and succession planning.²⁰⁹ The co-founders' announcement of "nothing for sale" on launching and the resulting organizational turn as the first local funding relationship was secured in 2004 became a significant phase in their non-profit narrative, with its unusual participatory and archival twist.

From launching in 2003 to refurbishment in 2016, there are domestic details that give a sense of the daily challenges faced and the many ways the organization sustained itself without infrastructural necessities, not the least of which included the hosting of an artist residency that,

²⁰⁶ The remaining stages are maturity, decline, turn around, and terminal with an option to regroup after maturity to ensure dynamic self-preservation. Stevens, *Nonprofit Lifecycles*, 6.

²⁰⁷ Stevens, *Nonprofit Lifecycles*, 9. Administrative and technology system were likewise lacking in investment and institutionally evolved procedures.

²⁰⁸ Nancy J. Lee, *Elsewhere: Self-Assessment of Organizational Capacity* (Minneapolis: Larson Allen Nonprofit and Government Group on behalf of Warhol Initiative, June 9, 2011), 9.

²⁰⁹ George Scheer, Co-founder, Elsewhere, Conversation with author, Feb. 19, 2019.

in order to circumnavigate residential building code requirements, had to be locally profiled as a 24-hour open studio.²¹⁰ The reality was that initially shower access required a walk to the local YMCA, sweltering summers passed without air conditioning, and harsh winters led to building closure.²¹¹ The resulting survivalist on-site social life fueled many subsequent artist installations and communal DIY comforts that sought to address these omissions and remain in situ today.

The domestic entanglement of the artist-founders amid such realities defined how they became artists in this context. Co-founder Stephanie Sherman describes this pedagogical process:

I learnt how to practice as an artist at Elsewhere, which meant at every step along the process it was very important to be approaching the environment and space around me as its own installation, as its own sculptural process. I think when I first arrived at Elsewhere, I really didn't have the sense of how to think with my hands.²¹²

Sherman's processing of the sheer physical reality of Elsewhere's material challenge is reiterated by Scheer, who identifies the stakes within their emerging practice: "Putting everything in order was both the Art and the only way we'd survive."²¹³ Additionally, both would bring literary insight where visual arts conventions might emerge, though the structures of visual arts organizations fell in place around them as funding and participant expectations accrued.²¹⁴ Their literary training also meant distinctive and non-trapping activations of the collection that flipped what was available in creative ways from the wearable and self-styling wardrobe, intimate but

²¹⁰ *The Ghost Ship Fire* in Oakland, CA. in December, 2016 underlined how risky but necessary such an approach was, given that funding bodies prior to this point in time focused on programs rather than building improvements or regular maintenance.

²¹¹ Elsewhere was able to conform to building code after the refurbishment in 2017 and has been profiled as an artist residency inside a former thrift store since then. The building's residency and open season ran from March to November.

²¹² Anthony Spinello, "Dirty Girl—Stephanie Sherman," *Dirty Magazine*, Aug 23, 2011.

²¹³ George Scheer, "Up to code but caught on the fringe: holding alternative space in emerging cultural economies," *Temporary Art Review*, Jan. 13, 2017. <http://temporaryartreview.com/up-to-code-but-caught-on-the-fringe-holding-alternative-space-in-emerging-cultural-economies/>.

²¹⁴ Literary reference points include Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and George Perec. The latter appears in bibliography lists found in filing cabinets. Sherman observes that no puppeteers or film makers came as residents but instead visual artists dominated.

chaotically-ordered library, and well-sifted toy bin among other things, each the source for absurd or daring play, as well as wild and beautiful stories.²¹⁵ Scheer characterizes his practice as an experiment within Elsewhere, one synergistic with the collaborative fiction workshops he and Sherman conducted while at college:

We started as writers years ago and our question was if we were to treat objects like words and arrange them and rearrange them infinitely over time, what kind of narratives or rather communities would take shape. So that has been the experiment for many, many years.²¹⁶

In such recursive, socially-driven, and non-linear storytelling practices, Elsewhere was in tune with independent film makers of the time, such as Wes Anderson.

The Royal Tenenbaums (2001), released in cinemas a month before the Twin Towers fell, focused on an entwined family narrative set in a New York brownstone and without any of its iconic buildings as backdrop, giving the film a soothing resonance and visual importance well beyond its release date. The film makes a parallel visual and narrative intersection with the ordering of vintage thrift inside Elsewhere, as well as Scheer and Sherman's journey to uncover it.²¹⁷ Elsewhere offers a cinematic equivalency of landscape with conventional cultural icons and implied values removed. Wes Anderson's world-in-microcosm associatively established a way of navigating a collection and building as a social site, at odds with contemporary museological conventions. Anderson's film values the role of whimsical narrative and the empathetic accommodation of human failings in the nurturing of social bonds, within a home-base filled with redolent things.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Sherman Interview, April 2020.

²¹⁶ George Scheer, *Thing Tank, Elsewhere—Where Else*, Event hosted by Elsewhere and Cabinet Magazine, May 13, 2017. Unpublished audio, 00:02:40.

²¹⁷ It would be the events of September 11th, 2001 [9/11] that instigated Scheer and Sherman's move away from metropolitan East Coast and down to Greensboro, as they graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 2003. Scheer Interview, 2016.

²¹⁸ Headbands that visually alluded to those worn by family members in *Royal Tenenbaums* whose youngest son Richie, was a rising tennis star, were made a 5K neighborhood run. Each gathered sweat as participants ran past sites

At Elsewhere, such immersive ways in which the artist-founders existed took on a very specific variant of an arts organizer role, one that Stephanie Sherman and James McAnally later defined on behalf of advocacy group, *Common Field*:

Rather than the more common stand-ins of the arts worker, cultural producer, or arts administrator, positions which have become central to questions of the artist-as-laborer, the artist-as-free-agent, and the artist-as-bureaucrat, respectively, an arts organizer contains and exceeds these dynamics. One administers the present but organizes towards the future.²¹⁹

Being at Elsewhere places Scheer and Sherman in this set of arts organizers that, like Machine Project and Mess Hall, were notable for their sited and long-term project spaces that balanced living systems, curatorial parameters, and socially-charged artistic expression. They shared in the goals of artist organizers for whom “the curatorial tends towards questions of process, access, and the generation of knowledge as well, as community building or directly connecting towards cultural and structural change.”²²⁰ Elsewhere’s specificity, however, rests in its strong guidelines for ways of working with the collection, which can appear constraining on initial encounter and at times culpable for racial exclusions. The negative effects of such specificity are usually alleviated as the history of the site and its empathetic stakes are revealed, critiqued, and performed through the residency structure. Additionally, the immersive and collaborative residency framework is often divergent from conventional artists’ training and disconcerting for those with more contained and individuated practices.

The networked technology platforms that supported emerging artist project spaces found stability and new capacities in the early 2000s. These platforms enabled the building of sustainable spaces and programs independent of existing museums. Specifically, they enlarged

of administrative significance and transformation within Elsewhere’s history and ongoing presence on South Elm Street. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201025051018/https://www.goelsewhere.org/atlas-of-administration/>.

²¹⁹ James McAnally and Stephanie Sherman, “Organization towards a Commons.”

²²⁰ McAnally and Sherman, “Organization towards a Commons.”

the scope of artist recruitment, fund-raising, and organizational visibility and by 2003 those capacities, along with the political and cultural landscape in North America, enabled alternative sites such as Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall to emerge.

It's unclear why this particular year [2003] marks a surge in the founding of these spaces—a new generation of creative people disillusioned by art in the wake of the insanity of 9/11 and the unfolding Iraq War, the ubiquity of mobile technologies that precipitated fluid working in start-up, DIY, or DIT [Do-It-Together] modes, or simply, as times deliver, a confluence of energies around the idea of operating art spaces or institutions differently than what visible arts or culture institutions had to date.²²¹

The first artist resident came from Vancouver, lured by an internet message board announcement, and this meant that Elsewhere could frame itself as an international artist residency from the outset.²²² Scheer would later reflect that ‘the internet made it [Elsewhere] happen.’²²³

However, the location of Elsewhere, as with other artist project spaces founded at this time, holds other clues as to their sustainability and distinctive creative freedoms that the internet amplified and made shareable. Sarah Witt, a former artist resident, speaks to the affinity grouping of sites that emerged, offering a perspective on why her home town of St Louis and the similarly-scaled and regionally-positioned Greensboro were particularly effective creative bases in the early 2000s.²²⁴ Both cities offered a relief from the competitive ecosystem associated with the art market of New York or the academic programs that might drive the employment of those traversing the line between emergent arts practice and established status. Additionally, North

²²¹ McAnally and Sherman, “Organization towards a Commons.”

²²² Message Boards used at this time were *ResArtis*, *Alliance for Artist Community*, and *transartists*. George Scheer, Email to author, Feb. 25, 2020.

²²³ Scheer Interview 2016.

²²⁴ Sarah Witt was an early member of a community that would emerge of former resident artists, *Elsewherians*, alumni who appear across the arts landscape and often in locations where the rethinking of arts organizing was occurring, be it a *Revolutionary Reading Group* in the Woman’s Center for Creative Work in Los Angeles, or out in Joshua Tree with *High Desert Test Kitchen*.

Carolina attracts tourists to its shoreline, while Greensboro is set back in the western part of the state and outside of the so-called Research Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill).

Free of the demands and constraints that attention and connectivity bring, Witt sees value in locations that in 2003 were similarly “off the radar, no art authorities hovering around, no scenes to take part in; this freedom paired with astonishingly cheap rents and uncensored space makes it [St. Louis] a friendly location for young artists to take risks in their work.”²²⁵ Elsewhere was on a site in Greensboro that was barely visible and in an overlooked downtown location, granting it scope to be rewritten by artists and a freedom from cultural expectations, though the need to build a supportive community around them would be critical to their long-term sustainability. However, South Elm was a time capsule tied to histories of segregation in its location as well as in its proximity to the lost African-American community of Warnersville, so that sense of freedom and affordability was ultimately rooted in a past communities’ removal.

i. An archivally participative turn, 2003 to 2004

Elsewhere proved archivally participative from the ideas phase by expanding who could show work and how incorporation of such contributions functioned within a site and collection bursting with the remains of 20th century material culture. Each installation that grew from this early phase of organizational imagining was open to reworking by those who came next or performed as an alternate way of being in the world. Elsewhere’s presentation of art work made from and within a collection also encapsulated a form of museological non-competition. Meanings accrued rather than depleted, resisting hierarchical valuing as each new narrative accepted its own sublimation within future constructions.

²²⁵ Jodie Cavalier, “An Interview with Sarah Witt,” *Drain* 14, no. 1, 2016. <http://drainmag.com/an-interview-with-sarah-witt/>.

Such a foundational turn toward archivally participatory practices relied on Elsewhere's swift securing of non-profit status and initial funding.²²⁶ Downtown Greensboro's ambition to be a creative city proved timely and ensured base structural supports and local networks were there, though in reality it would take time to build impetus for Elsewhere in relation to its immediate neighbors.²²⁷ The city paid \$10,000 to bring urban planner Richard Florida to town in 2004 to propose how downtown Greensboro could bring about creatively-driven urban change. Scheer knew of and attended such events, and it is a critical detail that the town, alongside Elsewhere, was imagining a new future, though from very different regenerative perspectives. Scheer would write about the sustainable role of creative placemaking through both artists and a retained businesses community, rather than that of neoliberal gentrification more usually espoused by Richard Florida.²²⁸ As such, the reimagining of the city's forgotten corners gained a broader case for the local investment of public funds.

Removing storefront window coverings at Elsewhere made the process of ordering the interior collection visible to those in the neighborhood and those planners, funders, and political leaders newly alerted to the cultural potential of the South Elm strip. Things were brought out onto the sidewalk to share in conversation with those passing by.²²⁹ A newspaper photograph in the *Greensboro News and Record* on June 17th 2003 showed Scheer seated in a deckchair outside Elsewhere in the full heat of summer with assorted items from the collection by his side.²³⁰ Behind him hung an abstruse seasonal forecast written on a chalkboard that suggested people

²²⁶ Scheer, George. Interview with author, Elsewhere, November, 28, 2016.

²²⁷ Urban theorist, Richard Florida spoke of urban revival through the clustering of creatives and technology workers as key to economic prosperity in downtown areas, terming such places, creative cities.

²²⁸ George Scheer, "Deploying Place: A Cultural Economy of Art and Urbanism in the Great Recession" (PhD Diss.), University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2019.

²²⁹ There is a visual synergy in this moment with the sidewalk *Free Store* ventures at Mess Hall, though the thrift at Elsewhere available as social prompts, rather than for their use-function and gifting.

²³⁰ "Elsewhere, Not a Drop in Sight," *Greensboro News and Record*, June 17, 2003.

pick apples, stroll at night, and explore rabbit holes. Not unlike Machine Project's recurring sandwich board sidewalk signage, such public text assertions associatively bound humor and the seemingly absurd with the site. For Elsewhere, such spatial prompts began to frame how artists would intersect and form social bonds differently and specifically with those around them. Inside Elsewhere, objects found order in displays of abundant like-things. The window bay housed containers overflowing with strewn dolls or a screen built of boxed games with a rectangular opening for viewers to peer through. Inside, sofas likewise grouped together, enabled public events and communal-living gatherings within the larger cavernous space. Local press coverage aided public awareness of what behaviors and forms Elsewhere was testing out.

Such visible distinctions function in a cultural landscape where archives conventionally privilege white, heteronormative voices. However, out of the archival mess of Elsewhere's early years, production processes gave space to artists having to archive otherwise—for those who do not fit as subjects of history, such as queer communities, immigrant communities, and people of color in the American South, specifically in this context. Such archivally inclusive practices, amid the reckoning with Sylvia Gray's hoarder-like household material, revealed the significance of those things unconventionally valued in the development of the collection, including the symbolic and emotional conditions of objects. Central to such valuing is the treasuring of memory without a slippage into stalling nostalgia and the capturing of participatory liveness in the scars and remains. Such departures from the conventions of museum collection departments alongside the living museum and residency construction would shape Elsewhere's organizational form at every stage.

The commitment to both the debris left behind from mass-produced culture and those items more conventionally valued for reuse also disrupts the expected order of things enshrined

in museums. One substantial example of their emerging archival process is a row of suitcases filled with ephemera from each artist's residency up to 2007 that sit on a high shelf, inaccessible but for a tall ladder and the permission to climb it (Figure 3.6).²³¹ The assortment of materials in each suitcase tells of an organization that archives differently, holding space for dissonant and ephemeral artistic practices.²³²

Martin Manalansan would advocate for the more nuanced and inclusive potential of archival approaches beyond mere ordering and categorizing. Elsewhere achieved this by releasing artists from disciplinary, material, and functional separations, and letting the mess of the site facilitate the building of empathetic connections with those who did not societally fit, were denied cultural space, and whose maximalist practices had been constrained. The accommodation of non-normative identities enabled by such a release from expected material and practice distinctions, echoed the archival capacities Manalansan observed: "Archives, therefore, are constituted by these atmospheric states of material and affective disarray and the narratives spun from them."²³³ Each resident embodied the archival approach by occupying and maintaining the thrift store site as one driven by the co-construction of expansive meanings and the formation of a residential social life among the collection, building, and surroundings.

Those artists hosted by the residency program proved critical forecasters of how the organizational form would change over time. Over the seventeen years since its founding, Elsewhere's form has shifted significantly, with the voices behind substantial organizational changes radiating outwards from the co-founders to the artist residents and organizers. In this

²³¹ The resident suitcase archive ran out of space in 2007, followed by the rethinking of the residency structure and public/private space demarcation in 2008. In them one might find installation remains, broken coffee mugs, photos, glitter, and an abundance of doll body parts, glitter, and buttons.

²³² Resident artist portraits with selected collection items as well as photo documentation of their research practices offer a less cumbersome gathering of visual ephemera relating to artistic process and the culturally-expansive meanings of things.

²³³ Manalansan, "The "Stuff" of Archives, Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," 94.

first organizational turn between 2003 and 2004, the focus was on the pressing urgency to establish an external funding source with a self-sufficiency deadline of 2005. Sherman and McAnally detailed the specific challenges of the funding landscape in the early 2000s as they reviewed the formation of the field of independent artist organizations:

Aside from the Warhol Foundation, there are no private foundations focused on supporting the work of this field on a national scale, and public funds, such as The National Endowment of the Arts or state arts councils, are not only in very short supply, but are also highly variable in terms of their annual project commitments. Very few grants cover operating funds, so organizations often survive by inventing some hybrid mix of rampant volunteerism, earned income from programs or sales, grant funds, and private donations—from big to crowd-funded.²³⁴

Elsewhere's capacity to move beyond being a thinking playground for those intimately involved to a place of serious structural and wider participative play depended on pursuing a local financial commitment first.

Elsewhere secured its first formal and public funding relationship from United Arts Council Greensboro, with their income drawn from local tax funds provided by optional public contributions. The \$2,000 commitment in 2004 forged this critical organizational turn, as such local support and confidence begat wider financial support and followers. The United Arts Council proved to be an inconsistent but recurring public funder. Their decisions were not closely tied to local or national economic realities, with Elsewhere securing their biggest local grant immediately after the global financial crisis of 2008, but by 2016, receiving almost the same amount they received some 12 years previously in 2004.²³⁵ Changing staff in such agencies and those in local political office made Greensboro, like similarly scaled and managed places

²³⁴ McAnally and Sherman, "Organization towards a Commons."

²³⁵ Scheer anecdotally recalls around \$2,000 was received in 2004 and 2016, during refurbishment, while 2009 saw a contribution of around \$25,000.

with sparse cultural landscapes, a hard space in which to educate local leaders about the long-term benefit and the ongoing precarities of artist project spaces such as Elsewhere.

Scheer and Sherman's first artist followers were friends, though the sweat equity of those early contributions were short lived as tensions of parity arose, despite existing social bonds. However, the energies of those early participants were foundational to the project's ideas stage and are now openly acknowledged.²³⁶ Management consultant, Kenny Stevens references the unpaid creative labor that was an expected norm for start-up projects, terming it *sweat equity*. Over time the privileging of white-owned ventures to expect and benefit from such surplus time and donated participant labor has reinforced structural racial inequities. The implications of such exclusions for the internship and residency construction at Elsewhere, led in 2016 to a thorough rethinking of who could afford to be present on site and who needed additional support to be there. With the vision for the site emerging fairly fast from the initial orderings in 2003, those friends made way for artist residents and itinerant advocates out in the wider arts landscape who brought in other hybrid financial resources to support the establishment of the organization, with its unusual participatory and archival twist.²³⁷

This "fledgling business", as the *Greensboro News and Record* would term it, organizationally turned towards local support networks in tandem with securing national recognition for its approach through the residency program.²³⁸ As such, Elsewhere was in tune with local ambitions with varying capacities to work through different types of solutions to cultural invisibility and economic challenge, particularly as a participatory archive. With the

²³⁶ The Spring Break road trip in 2003, that stopped in Greensboro, included Josh Boyette, as well as Scheer and Sherman. Other ideas' phase friends include Josh Fox and Matt Merfet from Michigan, and in October of 2003, Allen Davis joined them. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201028051930/https://www.goelsewhere.org/story/>.

²³⁷ Stevens, *Nonprofit Lifecycles*, 61.

²³⁸ The full excerpt reads: "Fledgling business as a collaborative where artists leave a mark on the space and the space leaves a mark on the artist," in *Elsewhere, Not a Drop in Sight*, *Greensboro News and Record*, June 17, 2003.

securing of funds and the reorderings of the storefront to embody Sylvia Gray's practices in place, a grand re-opening would launch regular visitor hours in 2005 with increasing scope for public interaction and participation within the vast material cultural archive that was Elsewhere.²³⁹

ii. A socially cooperative turn, 2007 to 2008.

The integral valuing of swirling relations with those who have stayed and worked at Elsewhere, contributed to its expansion as a living museum, and identified those whose guidance sustained it. During this start-up turn, the establishment of more a socially cooperative form that accommodated such voices would begin to re-shape Elsewhere as a "functional organization," drawing specifically from resident artist Carol Porter's act of institutional critique and her restructuring of the internship framework.²⁴⁰ This artist installation embedded a way of working in which resident artists could both symbolically and structurally bring about a reformulation of the organization. A socially-collaborative dynamic that allowed for staff leadership among a constellation of artist-resident collaborators and in this instance, a resolution to the tensions of Elsewhere's foundational volunteer- and internship-fueled phase. It was an organizational turn in which staff (and electrical systems) would settle into more conventional non-profit configurations.

Press coverage often expanded local awareness of Elsewhere, and Porter began with an act of fake news by sharing a fictional letter between Scheer's grandmother and Peggy Guggenheim (founder of the Guggenheim museum in Venice) that told of a Guggenheim takeover of Elsewhere. The resulting press release was picked up by *North Carolina Signature*

²³⁹ Stevens, *Self-Assessment of Organizational Capacity*, 4.

²⁴⁰ Scheer, George. Interview with author, Elsewhere, November, 28, 2016.

Magazine with co-director Sherman quoted as saying: “This is a major step forward in our plans for Greensboro and its cultural district, which will become an international cultural hub for the Southeast, on par with the best in the world”²⁴¹ The accompanying window display then asserted a startling aesthetic shift towards a Modernist and spare institution, though one filled with the gleaming excess of Gray’s collection. Porter’s intervention underlined the ways in which Elsewhere’s organizational approach differed from that of the Modernist museum.

Additionally, Porter met with Sherman and Scheer to share her non-profit expertise over breakfasts at Tex and Shirley’s, a famed local diner in the Starmount neighborhood near Gray’s family home. Here they discussed a paid staffing structure, moving away from the intern-based operation on which the organization previously relied. Scheer observes that this shift was challenging and took Elsewhere from being a “big adventure inside this giant thrift store to saying now we’re running an institution” though critically, such change “always started with the artists.”²⁴²

The organizational shifts in Elsewhere’s professional and public capacities continued to find their prototypes and provocations in resident artists’ projects. Variations on Gray’s ordering principles and acts of institutional critique became more than symbolic acts within the archive. They matured into active forces that shaped Elsewhere. At this second turn between 2007 and 2008, resident artists’ works of institutional critique and architectural re-presentation resulted in museological subversions and visualizations of organizational difference, traces of new norms amid the piles of thrift store detritus.

The often-absurd reformulations of space at Elsewhere found significant installation and architectural manifestations in 2007 that still resonate today. A *Toynado*, of surplus dolls

²⁴¹ “Gateway to the Guggenheim,” *North Carolina Signature*, Nov/Dec 07, 47.

²⁴² George Scheer, Interview with author, Elsewhere, November, 28, 2016, audio, 00:20:09.

gathered in dense swirls to the ceiling alluded to power of natural forces beyond human control, while three swings installed in the front window bay arced out playfully over the sidewalk and the *Core Sample* offered its act of institutionally analogous, structural incision.²⁴³ The progress through non-profit organizational stages now appears smoothly staged, however, between 2007 and 2008 staff structure and site re-presentations became key. Additionally, in continuing to face occasionally absurd and often challenging institutional critiques within a socially cooperative form, Elsewhere's impact on visual culture drew critically on the ability to be generatively reformulated by others.

iii. An administratively instituent turn, 2011 to 2012

Elsewhere's turn towards administratively instituent practices depended on integrating significant community partner relationships from 2011 and processes that would underpin the growth stage of its organizational development. The key to such an instituent approach was the commitment to honoring alternative forms of organizing that might accommodate those artists and practices not conventionally shown in museums at the time. Administratively, Elsewhere needed to meet expectations of the site which had necessarily escalated in terms of health and safety, comfort, and public welcome, while still accommodating the mess, openness, and accepted-risk critical to its stakes. To this end, the organization gained managerial insight as part of the self-assessment process for the *Andy Warhol Initiative*, a North American program that

²⁴³ Two tornadoes touched down in Greensboro on the opening night for this installation. The Haggadah contextualizes the *Toynado* more broadly: "History repeats itself, as do its disasters. us the power of natural forces beyond our control. Through the reciting of plagues, we remember what the Egyptian people endured and the catastrophic events that have afflicted many other generations of people around the world since. It is the stubbornness in relinquishing their power with which the upper-class abandons the working people and impoverished population to the mercy of economic and ecological catastrophe." Whitworth, *A Haggadah for Passover—Pesach for a Digital Diaspora*, 27. Kim Holleman, Toynado, 2007. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200930214828/http://www.goelsewhere.org/toynado/>.

supported independent arts organizations from 1999 to 2012, including Machine Project and Elsewhere.

During this phase, the amplification of key working processes led to significant structural changes in the longer term. The *Andy Warhol Initiative* focused on feasibility studies and organizational capacity enhancement, as well as providing an influential support network through its recipient meetings. This program's attention ultimately enabled Elsewhere's refurbishment project that culminated in 2016 with the building's temporary closure. When the site re-opened it could offer year-round occupation and met building code standards. However, in 2011 that reality was still just a long-term goal, and instead the emphasis was on hosting an international succession of artists, making living quarter improvements, and establishing local relationships that would drive the organization's more administratively instituent practices and social justice endeavors. This turn would be the start of processes that would hone the organization and the dynamic of its community relationships.

In 2012 more private *Creature Comforts* sleeping areas were added to the shared dormitories on the second floor, which was the former boarding house that Sylvia and Joe Gray ran through the 1950s. Here previous artist residents Jay Gamble, Mary Rothlisberger, and Angela Zammarelli reworked collection materials with an aesthetic that is Elsewhere's distinctive style of vernacular reuse and hacktivist practice.²⁴⁴ This style is also evident on the ground floor in the public-facing Kitchen Commons installed by J. Morgan Puett and Ian Montgomery in 2011. The re-thinking of this area for food preparation efficiencies that enhanced socializing included stacked vintage crockery and equipment, while at ground-level a functional and responsive communal kitchen emerged.

²⁴⁴ Jay Gamble, Mary Rothlisberger, and Angela Zammarelli, *Creature Comforts*, 2012. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201021184350/https://www.goelsewhere.org/creature-comforts/>.

Emily Ensminger arrived as a resident artist at this juncture and built long-term relational bonds through the program that led to her role as Creative Director (2016–2020), continuing the role of women’s voices in shaping the organization alongside those of Sylvia Gray and Stephanie Sherman. Ensminger’s practice focused on domestic systems manifesting initially in an edible yard installation and then the House(pitality) Department that expanded outwards from the Kitchen Commons.²⁴⁵ In keeping with the organizational practice of Elsewhere, the scope of such domestic activities was integral to its construction: “Art in Everything: from cleaning and maintenance activity, to administrative tasks that keep the museum running, to daily rituals of food preparation, to creating visual, conceptual and performance-based artist residency projects—we see all these things as art practice.”²⁴⁶ The range of activities encompassed within this definition of an arts organizing practice at Elsewhere integrates empathetic acts of collective and accrued care for material, social, and performative aspects of the site.

There were tiny systemic details that built up over the years alongside the adoption of behaviors practiced in equivalent settings, culminating in the Power Hour:

POWER HOUR (n.)

: *A spiritual ritual, a cultural exchange, & a gathering to prepare for the subsequent week.*

: *Focused & energized communal Sprucing, Hooshing & Knolling that returns the space to intention. Uses concepts of Do Easy, Carpooling, Everclean, Autopoiesis, Improvisation & Performing to complete tasks in the most efficient fun methods possible!*²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Emily Ensminger was an artist resident in 2012, developed the House Department until 2015, managed the Programs Department until 2017, and became Elsewhere’s Creative Director in 2018.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20201021110622/https://www.goelsewhere.org/the-ground-up-emily-wynn-ensminger/>;
<https://web.archive.org/web/20201028075402/http://www.goelsewhere.org/emily-ensminger-2/>;
<https://web.archive.org/web/20201022030147/https://www.goelsewhere.org/emily-ensminger/>.

²⁴⁶ Elsewhere Program Department, *Elsewhere Tour Guide*, 2020.

²⁴⁷ Emily Ensminger, *Elsewhere Parks and (Re)creation Services, Power Hour (n.)*, 2015. Power Hour was a practice designed to inspire everyone to take care of the site together, as an integral part of micro-community formation within each residency’s social life, since 2015. Ensminger conducted a self-funded research trip in 2014, that included Appalshop, Kentucky and High Desert Test Sites, Joshua Tree, CA. High Desert Test Sites, like Elsewhere, also began in the early 2000s and is an artist residency site, as well as being the ongoing home of sculptor and educator, Andrea Zittel. Installations extend beyond the residency property, appearing across parcels of artist-owned land with forms responsive to the hyper-local context and environmental urgencies.

Resident artists introduced domestic tools and processes drawn from their own homes. For instance, there grew a slowly evolving set of lived practices in the form of cut-off sponge corners to denote floor-cleaning use, chainmail for cast iron pot cleaning, and SCOBY-maintenance systems that allow for fermented beverage preparation. Many of these integrated housekeeping solutions offered more sustainable ways to reuse, clean, and extend the life of resources.

Organizational visualizations produced just beyond the culmination of this turn capture behaviors and rituals, as well as their association with specific areas of the site. Such diagrams allude to museum systems that have been undone by the immersive-studio imperative of the residency and the curatorial approaches that upset conventional display modes.²⁴⁸ *The Urban Explorers Guide to Navigating Elsewhere's Commonwealth* is a tapestry that suggests the critical constitution of a visitor, offering behavioral direction and permissions, all clarified in hand-stitched signs and symbols on a schematic map that lays out the features of the first floor of Elsewhere. Prompts on the piece suggest visitors “Sit and stay a while,” “Mend and make do,” “Look with your hands,” or “Play.”²⁴⁹ The tapestry also features the long-form participatory project *Storybank*, now found in the Library, that gathered audio recordings of local lore.²⁵⁰ Both of these projects represent how Elsewhere was engaging passing visitors through acts of wayfinding or listening, as well as giving permission for new and distinct ways of being amongst a collection. Each activity gave an insight into the idiosyncratic lived practices enabled on the

²⁴⁸ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995).

²⁴⁹ April Bartlett, *The Urban Explorers Guide to Elsewhere's Commonwealth*, hand-stitched tapestry map, 2013. <https://web.archive.org/web/20210109031717/https://www.goelsewhere.org/the-urban-explorers-guide-to-the-elsewhere-commonwealth/>. Mark Allen uses the idea of *The Curiosity Effect* to structure an essay on the role of transdisciplinary publics as opposed to interdisciplinary artists, the balance and consciousness of which has a role to play in equitable participation, published in 2015.

²⁵⁰ Elsewhere, *StoryBank*, 2013.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201028081436/http://www.goelsewhere.org/appalshop-goes-elsewhere/>; <https://web.archive.org/web/20201021192029/http://www.goelsewhere.org/storybanking/>.

site, as Wes Anderson's portrayal of family life amid their things had demonstrated earlier in *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

In this phase of the organizational turn, peer relationships and a consciousness of other histories defined how Elsewhere would reformulate. A testing of forms for conducting community engagement and an establishment of a local reputation for living out a political ethic led to events such as *Radical Seders* being hosted at Elsewhere, *Get Out the Vote* initiatives with the Beloved Community Center, and a *Read-In* of burnt books at the International Civil Rights Center in conjunction with an exhibition that addressed the Holocaust.²⁵¹ Elsewhere's proximity to historically resonant sites set the tone and stakes for its community engagement and resulting administratively instituent practices. However, such a reframing and investment in staff roles, onsite behaviors and systems, and community relationships took time to emerge in structurally empathetic systems resulting from this significant organizational review.

iv. 2016

Elsewhere marked the presidential election of 2016 as it had done three times before: by hosting *Political Party*, an event with state senators and community interviews—some conducted inside an empty television set—with candidate masks available for wear, while baked fruit pies represented every state in the Union.²⁵² Without being directly political, the event focused on the stakes and perspectives of community members. It also directed attention to the growing activist possibilities of Elsewhere, more overtly realized at this stage. This drew on Scheer's training in

²⁵¹ Elsewhere with the International Civil Rights Museum, *Read-In, Fighting the Fires of Hate: America and the Nazi Book Burnings*, 2012. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201030230936/https://www.goelsewhere.org/readins/>. Elsewhere, *Radical Seders*, 2014–2018.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201022131005/https://www.goelsewhere.org/seder/>.

²⁵² George Scheer, *Political Party*, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201025052511/https://www.goelsewhere.org/political-party/>.

political science and his writings on topics such as the issues raised by the Ghost Ship fire in Oakland and the brewing controversy over the removal of the Confederate monument known as Silent Sam at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.²⁵³

Following the police shooting of Keith Lamont Scott in 2016, an excessively-policed *Read-In* of revolutionary writers of color occurred in a Greensboro park with the Queer People of Color Collective just prior to Elsewhere's closing for refurbishment.²⁵⁴ The tension of that event shaped how Elsewhere chose to emerge and transition leadership. The warehouse now met building code requirements and such improvements made it more domestically comfortable. Structurally the residency began to align more clearly with applicants from diverse backgrounds, particularly those of color and with queer identities. The new application process was free and compiled in a dyslexia-legible font, allowed submission of personal websites rather than demanding a fresh portfolio, and offered individual guidance on request. The application's style of open-ended questioning was also more inclusive to experiences beyond conventional academia.²⁵⁵ The tone of Elsewhere's online presence also expanded to address more diverse constituents, reflected in staff identity demographics and a strengthening of the organization's LGBTQ+ youth program.²⁵⁶ Each gesture built restorative connections with secondary audiences

²⁵³ Scheer, *Up to code but caught on the fringe*, Jan. 13, 2017. <http://temporaryartreview.com/author/george-scheer/>; George Scheer, *University of North Carolina Students Accuse Administration of Artwashing*, June 12, 2018. <https://hyperallergic.com/446551/university-of-north-carolina-art-students-artwashing-accusations/>.

²⁵⁴ Funders raised questions about the direction of programming during this activist event that shaped what Elsewhere would become on reopening in 2017, however no one mentioned if funding was revoked or refused in following years.

²⁵⁵ Emily Ensminger, Conversation with author, February 20, 2020. Inclusive application changes were consciously initiated from 2016, with external reviewers and selection panels formulated at this juncture too.

²⁵⁶ Queer Lab was a varying youth editorial team gathered at Elsewhere from 2013 to 2017, who published five issues of the independent magazine, *I Don't Do Boxes*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201128005349/http://www.goelsewhere.org/queerlab/>. Gui Villalba Portel, Program Manager, Conversation with author, February, 2019.

whose vulnerability was illustrated by the *Read-In*'s public reality. The conscious undertaking of succession planning beyond the founding artists also began in 2016.

Elsewhere took time to form itself through artists practicing as the organization amid a legacy collection and building that was overwhelming in its scale and embedded narratives. Historical and political absences progressively gained visual and social acknowledgment along South Elm Street, founders and staff shared their approaches through emerging networks, and an expanding retinue of some 500 resident artists took their learning beyond the site. With each turn, Elsewhere expanded its socially cooperative structures, archivally participative processes, and administratively instituent practices that have helped shape the organization from its launch and through subsequent phases of change.²⁵⁷ Such practices in turn generate a sustainable framework for the ongoing construction of Elsewhere and its practice of archival care.

Part 3 – Principles of Practice

In the years since 2003, many resident artists and their lived practices have become more familiar, particularly through commissions in conventional museums and creative centers as well as other project sites that have absorbed those once hosted and tested at Elsewhere.²⁵⁸ Restating the principles of practice that enabled such work to be produced at Elsewhere helps explain the organizational commitment to a curatorial approach that can initially feel materially constrained and conceptually determining. Additionally, such principles of practice attest to how organizations can hold space for a diversity of artists as yet unknown.

²⁵⁷ A neighborhood partnership with Beloved Community Center has included a Get Out the Vote initiative in 2012 and the presence of Pastor Wesley Morris on Elsewhere's Board, alongside advocacy and commemoration projects. <https://belovedcommunitycenter.org/>.

²⁵⁸ In 2015 the School of the Art Institute of Chicago published *A Lived Practice*, part of the Chicago Social Practice History Series. Given the immersive domestic nature of Elsewhere, lived practices is the collective term used in this context.

Humor and affection for the legendary Sylvia Gray means that many artists perform their interventions with a wry acknowledgment of her place among past projects and future reformulations, while negotiating their co-existence with such a finite resource of aging things. The collection increasingly reveals its gaps and inadequacies, be it the retention of racist and patriarchal ideologies in the thrift library, toxicity of building materials, or crumbling architectural features. Memory of the stakes that motivated each installation remains important to the narrative of what an artist project space can be in relation to the world at large. Each contribution is also evidence of how the presentation and sharing of participatory visual culture has shifted in terms of museological expectations and organizational norms. How Elsewhere changed what an artist project space might be rests on both the originating stakes and the principles that inform its existence.

While the issues for those who intervene in the collection today are evident in the reframing of past family, material, and art histories, it is the principles of practice that prove to be the companionably antagonistic balance between the realities of Elsewhere's contents and the othering of its meanings, important for those just stepping into that framework. Elsewhere's commitment continues to be to the use of the finite collection as a source, which at every stage of decay celebrated the non-abjection of all things, while those memories captured on site combine with hyper-local relationships to underpin its ongoing social and organizational life. Elsewhere offers a platform, an iteratively tested occupation of a resonant site, that enables alternative ways of being an organization emotionally (and indexically) bound to past, present, and future participants.

A. The Non-Object

For Elsewhere, to reclaim materials traditionally categorized as abject—ostensibly waste—is an archival gesture towards erasing material hierarchies. A levelling of object values is bound, more than symbolically, with the removal of barriers across race and class in North America. With the expanded logic of the non-abjection of all things comes a layer of ignored practices and processes integrated into the collection that can be structurally accepted at a disciplinary level, and then a layer of voices and stories that can be more freely told and celebrated going forward.²⁵⁹ The removal of such hierarchical distinctions produces an open archive in which participation can begin to address lives across race and class. This section explores how the principle of the “non-abject” can begin to address issues of exclusion through rescued material culture in the archive, breathing symbolic and narrative life back into them, particularly for and with those whose stories were absent. The definition of the non-abject encompassing those items saved, despite societally being considered as waste, their subjectivity lost, and their cultural-value demeaned, be they broken, surplus, or mass-produced.

Elsewhere’s refusal to prioritize one meaning over another holds to a polyvalence that has proven a structural means for the collection to hold onto the memory of its acts without stalling them in time or according to ideologically-toxic values, such as self-help texts from the 1970s found the library. The artist residency program engages with the things at Elsewhere as both fictional subjects and functional objects. The associations and values from within the collection expand as residents dress up in thrift clothes, repair or misuse items, and re-arrange things, including the space. Additionally, each resident’s experientially absorbed understanding and reformulation of the collection happens within the context of the social life of the site. Such

²⁵⁹ Scheer speaks about the layers of organization that emerged over time that align with the practices being described here as the expanded logic of non-abjection. George Scheer, Interview with author, “An Oral History of Elsewhere,” Elsewhere, November, 28, 2016.

artist interventions reference both past and concurrent constructions, as well as the framework of Sylvia Gray's ordering.

The meaning of the contents of Elsewhere are subject to intense consideration, while oxymoronicly failing to reveal their full stories with any consistency. Peter Schwenger has written of the loss inherent in not fully comprehending the meaning of objects, underlining the recurring challenge of Elsewhere to make ongoing collaborative constructions despite the unknowableness of its foundational collection and accumulated art works: "For the objects of the world, no matter how physically present they may be, are always implicated with a metaphysical nonexistence, an unknowableness that is—at least for the perceiving eye—a kind of death."²⁶⁰ That unknowableness at Elsewhere encompasses the many lives of those who have shaped the collection and shifted its meanings that are potentially lost from view over time. The contrary bind of loss and memory at the heart of the collection is therefore one in which the object's full significance is never fully realized by just one person, nor is its value ever fully resolved within the process of organizing, reformulation, and sharing with a secondary audience.

Central to the founding premise of Elsewhere is that nothing can ever leave the store, and nothing is dead-enough to be discarded.²⁶¹ Furthermore, if everything retains value, even if its conventionally agreed upon use is lost, the substance of all things becomes non-object, wherein nothing is swept or piled up as waste.²⁶² The reality of such accrued waste being saved is visually evident in several storage locations from the resident suitcases to jars filled with crumbled

²⁶⁰ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things, Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 174.

²⁶¹ The focus here is on the material content and substance of the building. It does not include the food preparation processes, though those aim for sustainable balance.

²⁶² Schwenger, *The Tears of Things, Melancholy and Physical Objects*, 157. More recently a ten-minute hourglass used during talks given by resident artists, contains broken glass from the collection, ground-up to become the grains that sift through a re-blown device. Will Owen, *Ten Minutes*, Feb. 2017. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201025081251/https://www.goelsewhere.org/10-minutes/>.

plaster, wallpapers, and cracked book bindings, as well as snipped-up doll body parts. If one accepts the things stashed, ordered, and remaining inside Elsewhere as non-object and their recurring citation as the collection, then the project of archival care can theoretically and museologically never end.

Resolving to manage the collection as a living museum in which the encompassing nature of the non-object is inherent means that Elsewhere as an organization has to consider how to age well.²⁶³ Elsewhere's form, through the artist residency, acts as a reformulating structure to renew, redress, and critique its own meaning over and over again. However, the desirability of such a reality places a burden on the social life of the site, as nothing here—processes of care and use functions—aligns with conventional museum conservation practices. The living museum will age despite the best efforts of domestic care, with final decay and irrelevance always just around the corner.²⁶⁴

Through Elsewhere, Scheer and Sherman created a space for insertion and hierarchical upset unlike anything in established museums, placing the accretions of incoming spatial practices as part of its non-object material existence. In integrating and identifying art among the thrift and the collection of thrift as art, the organizational motivation to indefinitely maintain and honor the site is high, but to alleviate material decay through preventative conservation is not the

²⁶³ Kevin Brophy and Rosa Nussbaum's critique of the site in 2019, emerged in a surreal performance and film Their absurd and irreverent efforts to embody the life of the collection moved from birth, while tied by an umbilical cord to the site, through footage of instructional fitness and beauty regimes, to engagement vows laden with conceptual art principles sealed by the exchange of a giant inflatable ring. A remaining hefty and collapsing patchwork placenta wryly alludes to one possible organizational end. involving the exit and return of an oversized placenta and umbilical drawn made from collection textiles, was titled *Keeping Young and Living Longer* based on a book found in Elsewhere's Library. Joseph P. Hrachovec, *Keeping Young and Living Longer: How to stay Active and Healthy past 100, with a special appendix: How to survive a Heart Attack* (1973).
<https://web.archive.org/web/20201021191011/http://www.goelsewhere.org/keeping-young/>.

²⁶⁴ Jennie Carlisle (Elsewhere's Production Curator, 2012–2015), Conversation with author, during *Emergent Futures: State of the Field*, Oct. 27, 2019.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20201027005918/https://www.goelsewhere.org/jennie-carlisle/>.

primary goal. That is not to say that destruction was encouraged, but rather that behaviors discouraged in established museums are paramount to the artistic practice of Elsewhere, be it collection handling, transformative reworking, or even structural dissection by boring through every layer of the building and the things stacked in its path out to the sky.²⁶⁵

Elsewhere reverses the professional promise of a museum collection department by preferring ongoing participation or re-performance over preservation. In writing on performativity and its addressee, Shannon Jackson captures the significance of Elsewhere's role as an oxymoronic museum actor:

A museum context does something to these intermedial works, but these works also do something back to the museum. They require new presenting apparatuses; they ask the institution to make new kinds of promises. It will be exciting and intriguing to see whether and how intermedial panic can be turned into intermedial transformation. The performativity of art will, in the end, perpetually transform the institution that houses it.²⁶⁶

The socially engaged, lived, spatial, and participatory practices enabled at Elsewhere are synonymous with Jackson's intermedial genre. Intermedial practices are those that fall between traditional media forms, such as sculpture and architecture, but sit within the arts as a discipline, encompassing performative, spatial, and activist practices etc. Enabling new presenting and archiving apparatus for such art practices has established a rolling transformation of Elsewhere as a living museum.

The knowability of performance objects and past participatory constructions is made visible with some museum-like solutions that include parcel tags on objects that can direct

²⁶⁵ Reversibility is the ideal and some have left the residency having not been able to grasp the balance between object transformation and damage. Some deaccessioning does occur, as seen after the refurbishment but is documented and with a parallel rationale to that of a Museum Collection Department, albeit subject to a different set of principles rooted in the practice of being Elsewhere, rather than a duty to remain the same. Scheer, George. Interview with author, Elsewhere, November, 28, 2016.

²⁶⁶ Shannon Jackson, "Performativity and Its Addressee," on *On Performativity*, edited by Elizabeth Carpenter. Vol. 1 of *Living Collections Catalogue*. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014). <http://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/performativity-and-its-addressee>.

researchers to the project name or artist, the establishment of a tour narrative that weaves a fairly linear story through artist interventions on the site, and the use of label displays during residency presentations that then become part of the online record. However, none of these is evident to those passing by or visiting for the first time. As they turn things over, accept prompts to engage in activities, and gaze around, they begin a very personal intersection with the collection that is legibly open in its welcome but ambiguous in the wider meaning.²⁶⁷ Most start from a perspective in which the non-abjection of all the things gathered is overwhelming to comprehend, and gradually unfurl an understanding from the context that artists and audiences bring to the thrift store remains. Such associations accrue alongside the testing of new apparatus for presenting the collection, both on-site and in the online archive.

Reformulation and the ongoing survival of the site depends on how artists use the material things without depleting them to nothing, while also co-constructing the ongoing life of the thing. Some spaces have been given collection boundaries—few ribbons leave the amassed pile in the Ribbon Room for instance—yet new accretions and windings are present, as are performances. With each intervention, Elsewhere accepts and mitigates the visceral demands of everyday objects conventionally considered ephemeral and thereby abject, the quotidian remains of an era, rather than vintage-design signification (Figure 3.7).²⁶⁸ The non-abject, then, is a critical principle of practice for ensuring the openness of this archive and its empathetic capacity for those who come next.

²⁶⁷ Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power*, (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), 29.

²⁶⁸ Shannon Jackson refers to the challenge of this material reality given that only certain things can hold to their production function and many items used in social and performative works are integrally ephemeral or mass produced. Over time remnants and offcuts have been repurposed. Shelving from a *QueerLab* fundraising project installation, *99 Books About Love*, in 2013 now hangs on the second-floor landing.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201023104018/http://www.goelsewhere.org/99books/>. Collection material quilts made by a volunteer are still in use, and a patchwork, denim shower curtain by resident artist, Michèle Fandel Bonner, hangs in the second-floor bathroom.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201031171025/http://www.goelsewhere.org/make-do-mend/>.

B. Memory Liveness

At the core of Elsewhere's appeal are the memories that broken and decaying material things hold. As Peter Schwenger writes, "Their long association with us seems to make them custodians of our memories; so that sometimes [...] things reveal us to ourselves in profound and unexpected ways."²⁶⁹ Those who have been present at Elsewhere are indexically captured in the remains that abound on-site. The presentation of such remains and associated anecdotes form a palpable archival source. The accrual of resident artists' installations within and beyond the site and their recurring citation enables public participation in the archive. Additionally, the inbuilt archival memory of the site as indicated on the exterior historic plaque declaring that "This building remembers everything: Stories, reasons, and yesterday's weather."²⁷⁰ How secondary audiences absorb such memories rests on the voices that shape the remains, both the material culture cache and the repository of arts practices.

Things saved, regrouped, and imprinted become the archive, such as Ayo Jackson's invisible impressions (unless under UV light) of a female Black body left on chairs and the kitchen table top (*Black Light Matters*, 2016). Sylvia's approach to order, its rudimentary re-performing by her grandson and friends, and interventions since made by successive artists produce a complex and fragile territory in which to intervene. However, what remains central throughout is the once-physical presence of the maker—the nails in the floor marking the spot where a queer artist Pioneer Winter bore the weight of precarious leaning glass cabinets for 13

²⁶⁹ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things, Melancholy and Physical Objects*, 3.

²⁷⁰ Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Three: We walk the world two by two*, 2015, cast aluminum plaques with bronze finish, and audio, 12" X 15". Elsewhere, Greensboro (commissioned as part of Elsewhere's South Elm Projects, funded in part by ArtPlace America).
<https://web.archive.org/web/20201028113043/http://www.goelsewhere.org/book-of-everyday-instruction/>.

hours while tales of local LGBTQ+ breakups played; or April Camlin's solo attempt to rewind all the ribbons that barely diminished their source pile despite every intention to do so.²⁷¹ The combinatory force of artistic energy and material memory leaves a palpable connection to the originating act, an indexical marker of past action.²⁷²

Machine Project's valuing of the overheard as an expanded form of participation found its embodiment in objects at Elsewhere through the archival liveness indicated in scarred or reformulated objects. Such liveness through performance objects, as detailed in research by art historian Tracy Stonestreet, retains the resonance of each work, connecting the observer to the subjectivity of the maker, an empathetic form of museological retention and a means to build connections to uncelebrated identities through chosen objects and process by-products.²⁷³

The archival concept of liveness is held within the presenting apparatus of the living museum, elucidated through non-object remains, be they visceral or decaying, and the social relationships that sustain this space. Such liveness builds associations within the site's social imaginary, a collaborative fiction within the broader resonance of dissonant artists and their communities who find safe harbor here.²⁷⁴ Some projects do lose clear connections to the collection's perambulating narrative, as installations become obsolete or require deconstruction. Easing such potential illegibility comes with Elsewhere's integral valuing of memories as a community encapsulated in the anecdotes shared within the ongoing social site, an artist project

²⁷¹ Pioneer Winter, *A love to last 13 hours*, June 2016.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201024152312/http://www.goelsewhere.org/13-hours/>.

²⁷² Tracy Stonestreet, "Breaching the Document/Artwork Divide: Performance, Hybrid Artworks, and the Lingering Problem of Categorization," *Art Documentation* 39, no. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020) 141.

²⁷³ Stonestreet, "Breaching the Document/Artwork Divide," 141.

²⁷⁴ Emily Ensminger, Creative Director, Elsewhere, Conversation with author, February 16, 2020. *Collaborative futures* being the evolution of Elsewhere's terminology to capture this broadened scope of practice.

space that ontologically cares for its collection as a living entity. Memory, as Elsewhere embodies it, is both knowingly legible and ambiguously addressed.²⁷⁵

Evidence of the organization's administrative workings and its critical liveness within the history of artist project spaces is synecdochally represented in interventions that visualize behavioral norms that emerged at the site, be it alternatively archived administrative paperwork or stitched tapestry maps of Elsewhere. The organizing that happens at sites such as Elsewhere act as reformulators of cultural production and the archive.²⁷⁶ Their resulting and morphing organizational pedagogy is testament to new ways of thinking and living as a social and cultural site.

Elsewhere's participatory archiving remains in companionably antagonistic tension with museological conventions, holding to a necessary complexity. This approach becomes particularly pertinent when read alongside identity restrictions in North Carolina, such as House Bill 2 (HB2), the so-called Bathroom Bill that, in 2016, prohibited transgender people from using the public bathroom with which they identified.²⁷⁷ Elsewhere provided a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community with identity-positive social media content, youth programs, and respective staff demographics, through whom personal stories were honored. Additionally, in the American South, immigrant family histories often went publicly uncelebrated, as did childhoods shaped by those from other cultures. Resident artist Antoine Williams placed an animalistic form hung from the ceiling made of bound Army surplus, surrounded by Haint blue walls scratched

²⁷⁵ Digital documentation is a critical source of institutional memory as the organization moves well beyond its originators.

²⁷⁶ Unknown Artists, *Unabridged Elsewhere, A Document of Circumstance, Account, Actions and Affairs*, July 19, 2009.

²⁷⁷ North Carolina voted into law, House Bill 2 (HB2), *The Bathroom Bill*, on March 23, 2016 that restricted bathroom use for transgender people to their assigned at birth gender people. The stakes for providing a safe space for the LGBTQ community at Elsewhere became visibly critical at this juncture and their social media content reflected this position and offer.

through to reveal images of white suburban life and romanticized war.²⁷⁸ His work calls attention to the color blindness rife in privileged communities in the American South. Shannon Jackson notes how contextual perception can shift the stakes of the work, as visitors encounter performers or remains: “As we have also seen thus far, the relational exchange among participants will certainly have different stakes depending upon how receivers understand the regional politics and perceptual parameters of the situation in which an encounter occurs.”²⁷⁹ Greensboro’s immigrant and Civil Rights histories, within the broader context of North Carolina’s divisive identity politics, poignantly heightens the meaning of works such as Williams’.

Elsewhere is a living embodiment of that which was hidden, an *in memoriam*, with actions synonymous with the loss and tears that literary theorist Schwenger addresses.²⁸⁰ Among interventions made since 2016, the memory of Sylvia dwells, used as a curatorial approach that does not idolize her role within the ongoing social life of the artist project space, but instead allows her to be a touchstone for the many lives that intersect at Elsewhere. Certain projects shift the functioning of the site and embrace newer participants or ways of forming different relationships with visitors, generating an institutional memory that is not just held in place by its staff or committed supporters, but encapsulated in the way each resident’s work shapes the

²⁷⁸ Haint blue is the color of porch rooves, particularly in the southern states, and functions as means to ward off haunting spirits who cannot cross the water, hence the color blue. Antoine Williams, *Am I being elevated out of darkness of hung from the ceiling?* July 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200809025435/https://www.goelsewhere.org/believe-in-unicorns/>. In 2019 artist resident Michelle Lisa Polissaint introduced her Haitian immigrant parents to the table at Elsewhere with the stacking of sprayed-black toys atop of two kitchen chairs that were then *love* chained together in *Dine nan Nwa (Dinner in Black)*, among a selection of other chairs painted traditional Haitian house colors. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201022035126/https://www.goelsewhere.org/dine-nan-nwa/>.

²⁷⁹ Shannon Jackson. “Performativity and Its Addressee,” 2014. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201031052304/http://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/performativity-and-its-addressee/>.

²⁸⁰ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 2.

collection and becomes part of the living museum going forward. Elsewhere, as such, works towards offering a safe space for embattled bodies, forgotten things, and community memories.

C. The Hyper-local

The expansion of Elsewhere's site out into the neighborhood evidences hyper-local relationships that have informed organizational transformations, asserted cultural difference, and encouraged informal participation. Elsewhere made ignored spaces newly public and generated a playable, occupiable, and mappable archive of arts practices. The works that spread out across the neighborhood offer both physical and imaginary spaces for community gathering, identity-formation, and itinerant performance. Some installations remain as active archival references to hyper-local relationships that artists and long-term fellows have built beyond the walls of Elsewhere, such as the historic plaques and *The Porch Project: Black Lunch Tables* picnic area.

Such an expanded and responsive notion of site specificity was particularly visible in the distinctive and slow pattern of surrounding neighborhood change, driven by the energies and visions inserted and overlaid by resident artists. Each intervention becomes part of the local expectation of what South Elm Street offers as an expanded social site. However, the hyper-local proves to be both the neighborhood partner sites that connect Elsewhere as part of the community and the relationships that underpin the visible manifestations of these connections.

Producing a mappable atlas of local administrative sites significant to Elsewhere is possible through Downtown Greensboro, where those partners include the United Arts Council of Greater Greensboro's offices (ArtsGreensboro) in the Cultural Center, the *Greensboro News and Record* building, and the Beloved Community Center, which is a block away.²⁸¹ However,

²⁸¹ Author, *An Atlas of Administration*, Feb. 2019.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20201025051018/http://www.goelsewhere.org/atlas-of-administration/>.

more visible hyper-local relationships are realized in neighborhood public art projects that come to fruition and attest to the supporting framework of such a local atlas. An *Art Place America* award in 2015 enabled an escalation of ambitions for the creation of community spaces along the South Elm strip, with each new public installation representing intersecting relationships in the neighborhood and the outcomes of racial segregation.²⁸²

Behind Elsewhere, the repurposing of the backyard as a public park twists shared-private ownership towards the shared-communal. The bio-landscaping of the sloping space between buildings is a social focus for those living on site and for neighboring businesses, as well as being whimsically vernacular in its detailing. People gather at a large communal table shaded by a fig tree, while the tiered beds enable the growing of vegetables for the Kitchen Commons, and guttering is repurposed as wall-mounted planters. These new additions contrast greatly with older photographs that reveal a grass wasteland in which the odd paddling pool appears to serve over-heated residents. The conversion of this site into a connecting public space is critical to those working in the neighborhood, but is also a hidden detail that remains relatively private as a space of hyper-local community care rather than one of popular public usage.

The Milagros Collective joined Elsewhere in 2015 as part of the South Elm Projects. Their resulting murals offer a unifying visual language for the neighborhood that extends from the backyard of the site onto a warehouse building at a key road junction, along a disheveled alley with small businesses, and across an existing sculptural feature.²⁸³ The intention of their

²⁸² \$200,000 awarded by *Art Place America* in 2014 for South Elm Projects, delivered in 2015.

²⁸³ Murals prove a critical force in asserting neighborhood identity and collective during the Pandemic to come in Spring 2020, with the window bays of Elsewhere shuttered behind plywood boards as the building emptied of its artist resident community. On the streets outside, staff joined those marching for Black lives lost to systemic racism across the United States and, more specifically, for lives shattered locally. The boards became a site for expansive murals that ran across building frontages in the neighborhood, where imagery of Black joy and implicit trauma would begin a new chapter in the stories of this downtown strip. Xavier Carrington, Karena “Kidd” Graves, Jamin “Jay Squid” Guinyard, Phillip Marsh, Tambra Parsons, Neidy Perdomo, Quadasia “Lady Q” Prescod, and three

subtle camouflage markings is to unify shared communal spaces. The patterning highlights wastelands, private pass-throughs, and tired public sculptures. The colors chosen by the Milagros Collective reflect the palette of the neighborhood, from cement whites to floral pastels, thus connecting sites but consciously not asserting a dominant visual aesthetic.²⁸⁴

An earlier mural commission marked an access-point to the Downtown Greenway, a long-term city project to provide vehicle-free pathways, which winds back along the edge of town crossing South Elm and passing the *Porch Project*. Painted on the concrete underpass of a multi-grade intersection for the city's railroads and highways are murals by Miami collective Primary Flight, who took up an Elsewhere residency in 2011.²⁸⁵ The abstracted shapes featured are a strikingly colorful counter-balance to the industrial landscape setting.

The Porch Project: Black Lunch Tables, constructed by Heather Hart, sits a few blocks away from Elsewhere but still on Scheer family land, alongside the city's downtown greenway and on the edge of the former Warnersville neighborhood, established by formerly enslaved people.²⁸⁶ The wooden structure offers picnic tables on three platforms, each with five sides for seating. Those places commemorate the five local textile workers and advocates shot by Klansmen in 1979, as well as being mathematically associated with the numerical threshold for a functional conversation. This site is used most routinely by unhoused people. The challenge of hosting a community events program rests on the time taken to plan, and its dependence on established local relationships that are not possible to nurture within the month-long duration of

volunteers joined muralist, Darlene McClinton, founder of Greensboro *The Artist Bloc* to complete *Inspire Change for a Collaborative Future* in June, 2020.

²⁸⁴ The neighborhood color referenced: 'brick, rust, cement whites, sky blues, and floral pastels.' Milagros Collective (Felici Asteinza, Joey Fillastre, and others), *Neighborhood Murals*, 2015. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201028103807/http://www.goelsewhere.org/neighborhood-murals/>.

²⁸⁵ Primary Flight, *Greenway Mural*, 2012. <https://web.archive.org/web/20201030071240/https://www.goelsewhere.org/primary-flight/>.

²⁸⁶ A small entry lane on the block is named after George Scheer's uncle, David Gray.

residencies.²⁸⁷ The stated intentions for this structure were that: “This *Porch Project* reserves a place for conversation among neighbors, and a space to consider and challenge the evolving socio-political landscape at this intersection of Greensboro’s community.”²⁸⁸

In asserting and realizing ambitions for spatial art practices in this way and on white-owned land, there is also the paradoxical reality of this being a private resource. Elsewhere’s ways of working as a re-definer of public/private space navigated such tension between privilege and citizen control in order to open up abandoned lots, alleyways, and underpasses—a significant expansion of its social and administrative life. Despite the compromises and resource limitations of managing such public spaces, each still holds scope for reclaimed joy through community convenings and as the backdrop to daily routines.

As Elsewhere closed for refurbishment in 2016, these activations of newly-claimed public space created outdoor social sites open to participatory events, occasional music video shoots, and those newly strolling the neighborhood. There is even an extensive hopscotch trail along the sidewalk installed by Augustina Woodgate.²⁸⁹ These public interventions became formative of the life Elsewhere chose to invoke on re-opening as a conscious reformulator of participatory practices within a neighborhood of now more open storefronts, restored public walkways, street crossings, and expanded sidewalks. Local breweries, The Forge maker-space, and a café whose mission is supporting the working life of those on the autism spectrum, now

²⁸⁷ Heather Hart, *Porch Project, Black Lunch Tables*, 2015.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20201030230323/https://www.goelsewhere.org/black-lunch-tables/>. In 2020, arts activist April Parker would hold a year-long *Creative Catalyst Fellowship* grounded in the concepts of site and shaped in turn by necessary Pandemic programming restrictions. They focused on Greensboro’s Black community by supporting citizen engagement, communication, and organizing during racial justice protests and the Covid-19 pandemic. Parker’s project embodies the intentions of *The Porch Project* and was titled *Unveiling Monuments*.

²⁸⁸ Heather Hart, *Porch Project, Black Lunch Tables*, 2015.

²⁸⁹ Agustina Woodgate, *Hopscotch*, 2015.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20190412010725/http://www.goelsewhere.org/hopscotch/>.

mix with vintage and designer stores, with some original business owners of color still in place and one former artist resident.²⁹⁰

Elsewhere has had a very particular ambition from the outset as an advocate and anchor for the neighborhood sites that eventually connect through and around them. It has functioned as a social driver that was never about rapid gentrification, instead valuing pass-through places, honoring under-represented narratives and memories, and actuating hyper-local resources. The plaque that identifies Elsewhere at 608 South Elm Street is part of a set that highlights the lives of neighbors along the South Elm Street strip: Jerry Leimstoll, who walked his dog four-times a day; Mary Wells, who anthropomorphically viewed her pieces of antique store furniture as people; and Walter Jamison, who, in the 1960s, would go no further than no. 358, given the unwritten rules of being a young Black boy in downtown Greensboro.²⁹¹ Each historic marker functions as a recognition of those with whom, and among whom, Elsewhere's founders, resident artists, and organizers would work as they redirected what a downtown public space might be, an overflowing archive of spatial practices that still connect people.²⁹²

Conclusion

At every organizational turn, Elsewhere reframed its value within the cultural landscape through its ways of responsively working among forgotten things and beyond its social life—as an ongoing act of care. Elsewhere offered a way to empathetically occupy the past while generating new platforms and relationships—in all their messy complexity—that were open forms, even when those inside were not fully aware of the possibilities and exclusions.

²⁹⁰ Vintage store *Aeronauts* is run by a former Elsewhere resident.

²⁹¹ Chloë Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction, Chapter Three: We walk the world two by two*, 2015.

²⁹² The South Elm Projects in 2015 were managed by Jennie Carlisle. <http://jenniecarlisle.com/south-elm-projects>.

Elsewhere is both an intensely complicated site and yet one where its management very simply embodies a focus on order, reuse, and retention. There are boundaries to contravene in its proximity to conventional institutional forms, such as the museum collection department or the family store, alongside the scope to be administered as an arts' practice itself. The invoked principles of practice, such as the non-object status of all content, the memory indicated in the liveness of remains, and the hyper-local neighborhood context enable continuing acts of organizing in categorically non-reductive and societally restorative ways. Elsewhere's commitment to be ongoing impacts participatory visual culture most directly by modeling what adopting some precepts and letting go of others can shift about the stories we are told and the organizations we need.

Chapter Four.
Mess Hall

Part 1

Mess Hall enabled people to do projects in the cultural sphere that were not possible elsewhere. Aided in their more radical practices by an intersection of visual arts and activist energies, Mess Hall exerted a conscious freedom from art world conventions and an ethical commitment to structural difference at an organizational level. The loaned storefront became a site of unpredictable cultural experimentation vested at its heart in shared public life, through events offered, social connections formed, and spaces occupied. The project's beginnings, as a group endeavor, defined how it functioned as a storefront social form and as an archive.

The two waves of keyholders, who were the artists and activists invited to hold the keys and program on site, critically documented Mess Hall's emerging thinking and realized distinctive organizing directions. The trajectories of the two phases—2003 to 2007, then 2008 to 2013—echo the shift in energies and emphasis felt in other artist project spaces, such as Machine Project and Elsewhere. However, at Mess Hall the two keyholder waves would function free from nonprofit organizational systems and instead activate an economy of surplus.²⁹³ The principles of practice associated with Mess Hall reflect their capacity to be a platform for experimental cultural and activist work that prefigured the Occupy movement and ensuing social justice reckoning in the cultural sphere, as well as continuing the work of the anti-globalization movement.²⁹⁴ Critically mapping such processing of still-relevant concerns through two distinct waves of keyholders reveals three core principles of practice that structurally shaped Mess Hall:

²⁹³ An economy of surplus evokes banking and financial surplus, alongside the spirit of giving stuff away from free, and critically at Mess Hall the intention to create surplus out of any situation or opportunity they were given.

²⁹⁴ Mess Hall keyholders were shaped by the anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) protests of 1999, also known as, *The Battle of Seattle*.

being free from existing systems; programmatically unpredictable; and committed to the ethics of hardcore—the attitudinal quality of seriousness and rebellion that developed within the heavy metal music community in the late 1980s.²⁹⁵ Mess Hall’s impact escalated beyond its intimate scale and social form, by hosting projects that shut a Super Max prison, turned wheat *futures* into distributable food, and reworked thrift clothing for wear.

Beginnings

Not to be scanted is the poignant collaboration between Temporary Services, a socially aware artists’ collective based in Chicago, with Angelo, a long-term inmate of a California prison. For the show, Temporary Services has replicated Angelo’s grim cell, from exact measurements he provided. And the artists have made models of some of his fellow prisoners’ inventions for making prison life more comfortable. Not least among them is a toilet paper “cooking bomb” to produce melted cheese sandwiches.²⁹⁶

Although brief, Grace Gluek’s inclusions of artist group Temporary Services’ work in her *New York Times* review of the exhibition *Fantastic*, on show at MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art) in 2003, proved significant. This brief entry caught the attention of Rogers Park property developer Al Goldberg.²⁹⁷ Impressed by the collaboration, Goldberg contacted Temporary Services, which at the time consisted of Marc Fischer, Brett Fischer, and

²⁹⁵ Being free of existing systems speaks to Raunig’s interest in the strategy of exodus—formations existing beyond the state institutional landscape—and draws on the writings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Paulo Virno, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guatarri. However, in the United States such an organizational exodus is critically tied to the locating of a public sphere resistant to privatization, rather than beleaguered and indifferent state control found Europe, be that the governments’ subcontracting of prison management or the vagaries of the agricultural futures market.

²⁹⁶ Grace Gluek, “Art Review; Making History a Part of Today With Some Artifacts and Whimsy,” *New York Times*, Section E. Aug. 15, 2003, 31. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/15/arts/art-review-making-history-a-part-of-today-with-some-artifacts-and-whimsy.html>.

²⁹⁷ This excerpt from an article in the *New York Times* recounts the contents of an exhibition entitled *Fantastic* on show at Mass MOCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art), focused on the Prisoner Inventions project gathered by artist group, *Temporary Services* with Angelo who is incarcerated in California. Landlord Al Goldberg profile can be found in Roger’s Park news coverage. Rogers Park Builders Group, “Sun-Times Editorial Features our own Al Goldberg,” *Rogers Park Builders Group Newsletter*, May 2018. <https://rpbg.org/index.php/latest/news/218-sun-times-editorial-features-our-own-al-goldberg>.

Salem Collo-Julin, to offer up a storefront space at 6932 North Glenwood Avenue, in Rogers Park, Chicago, for a nominal rent (Figure 4.1).²⁹⁸ The site, which became Mess Hall, was a 700-square-foot room, with a black-framed sidewalk window, flush with other storefronts along the block. Narrow and tree-lined, North Glenwood Avenue here is overshadowed by the elevated tracks of the rapid transit Red Line into Chicago.²⁹⁹ It is from this address that Mess Hall instigated events, talks, meetings, actions, and exhibitions from 2003 until 2013, many spilling out onto the sidewalk or reaching beyond the address into niche, invisible, and underserved circles of community.

Mess Hall's organizing principles began to form as Temporary Services reached out to others in their artistic circle and with Ava Bromberg, Marianne Fairbanks, Jane Palmer, Sam Gould, and Dan S. Wang established the space. A shifting group of some eight to fourteen artists would function as actual keyholders for the site across its ten years.³⁰⁰ Each held roles and commitments beyond Mess Hall, as well as having affiliations with other groupings and socially engaged activist practices; none depended on the project as an income source. Instead, the keyholders collectively gained expanded peer support networks, recurring access to Mess Hall as a public venue, and reputation by association that aided the sharing, rather than marketing of their work.

Temporary Services, through their previous work as a group at other project sites, set the tone and aesthetic of Mess Hall without dictating its future variations. As a group, their

²⁹⁸ Past keyholders cannot recall if Al Goldberg ever actually collected rent payments. <https://temporarieservices.org/served/mess-hall/>.

²⁹⁹ Above the store were live-work artist studios whose residents had previously programmed the space below. <https://www.timeout.com/chicago/art/mess-hall-closes-in-rogers-park>.

³⁰⁰ Dan Wang names many of those who were involved with Mess Hall: "Over the decade of its activity, the 'keyholders' included Marc Fischer, Marianne Fairbanks, Sam Gould, Ava Bromberg, Jane Palmer, Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julin, Mike Wolf, Erik Newman, Claire Pentecost, Justin Goh, Diana Berek, Amy Partridge, Rozalinda Borcila, Aay Preston-Myint, Matthias Regan, and more." Dan S. Wang, personal website, <https://danswang.xyz/mess-hall>.

publications and archival approach disseminated Mess Hall's events and actions into the world long after they occurred. Missing the moment or not making the 10-mile trek up to Mess Hall from central Chicago did not exclude anyone from the ongoing conversation.³⁰¹

Mess Hall acted as a storefront that offered things for free, with the keyholders embodying an organization that sought to diffuse the organization beyond its specific location, even as it was forming.³⁰² With every project and event, keyholders advanced livable and workable ways to bring about focused societal changes and an expansion of the public sphere.³⁰³ Dan S. Wang published a booklet after the first year of Mess Hall's existence that defined the keyholder role, which he, too, had held, as "collaborative, ongoing, cumulative, open-ended, regularly and sometimes intensely conflictual, profoundly social, simultaneously theoretical or even dreamy, while also concrete in the least glamorous ways imaginable."³⁰⁴ Each keyholder would also share the capacities and ethic of the organization beyond the storefront, inviting others in and producing events and projects that built on their own focused concerns and activist preoccupations.³⁰⁵ Keyholders would gather each month to work through the needs and issues of the project site, be they cleaning the bathroom, paying bills, or debating the conceptual challenge of being noncommercial.³⁰⁶ Through continuous rethinking of everyday practices and their

³⁰¹ In an interview in 2013, Temporary Services would talk about how publications were the "alternative" they were seeking all along in the project spaces they formed in Chicago; it just took them awhile to realize it. Such a paper trail functions as an autonomous thing distinct from the actual event. Temporary Services, "Free For All," 9.

³⁰² While the spreading out of its people and ideas could be seen as a generative act of regifting, it is the additional layer of surplus redistribution that takes Mess Hall's practices beyond the notion of generosity as a practice and into a recalibration of societal norms, usually defined by material capitalism.

³⁰³ Throughout its existence, Mess Hall retained thematic concerns with incarceration, food insecurity, and public space, as these issues were shaped by macro-economic systems, such as the Chicago-based Futures market, big oil, and aggressive policing.

³⁰⁴ Dan S. Wang, *Mess Hall: What It Is (After the First Year)*, (Chicago: Mess Hall, 2004), <https://web.archive.org/web/20041204070748/http://www.messhall.org/wimh.html>.

³⁰⁵ Bonnie Fortune, Mess Hall keyholder, conversation with author, June 1, 2019.

³⁰⁶ Monies and utilities were perhaps not always managed efficiently, as illustrated by a stray \$50 bill and an invoice in the archived mail folder gathered up and stored on closure. On the rare occasions when a specific event necessitated an exchange of monies, the sidewalk provided a compromise location. Inside the storefront things were always free and the costs of running the site were shared between key holders.

ideological implications, the keyholder project kept the values of Mess Hall alive and in tension with societally-assumed norms.³⁰⁷ From such beginnings this chapter next details the storefront as a social form, before considering the archival paper trail of Mess Hall’s organizational approach.

Storefront

Mess Hall’s organizational form expanded on Chicago’s history of do-it-yourself (DIY) culture, at a point in time when social critique and resulting activism became freshly significant as arts practice. The convergence of these two histories—that of alternative spaces and socially-engaged art practices—alongside an act of generosity by the property owner, enabled the radical testing of Mess Hall’s capacities beyond the frame of many artist project spaces. Public interactions would combine with tactical activisms to form an experimental cultural center that brought about small and significant changes beyond its doors. The storefront itself was rarely recognized as an art space. Rather, Mess Hall chose to present a more ambiguous form that shifted depending on the current use of the space and who stepped in to talk—a choice that attempted to minimize associations with gentrification.³⁰⁸

However, the storefront held a more legible role that sociologist Georg Simmel would define as a *social form* from which participants could deduce how the shop functioned as an art work, as well being “a way to understand more fully the tension between the two different worlds that it exerts its effects upon.”³⁰⁹ Entering a space that had associations with storefront functions, structured an understanding of the form that generosity, as surplus redistribution,

³⁰⁷ Lora Lode, Mess Hall keyholder, conversation with author, May 29, 2019. Lora detailed the necessary tensions and time taken to settle down into a new social dynamic during the second keyholders phase from 2008.

³⁰⁸ Temporary Services “Free for all,” 13.

³⁰⁹ Purves, “Throwing Stones in the Sea” 108.

might take. Expanding on the value of social forms for understanding socially-engaged and generosity-driven practices, Ted Purves details the way that David Hammons' *Bliz-aard Ball Sale* on a peddler's blanket functioned. While the meaning of the work speaks specifically to the African-American experience and identity of the artist, the blanket itself proves the legible platform from which Hammons performs the obligatory work of a salesman.³¹⁰ Similarly, Mess Hall's storefront offered a spatially and functionally familiar context from which the practices hosted in the space could divert from the storefront's expected use function without being rendered incomprehensible.

Inside the storefront, the organizing aesthetic and spatial detailing were the physical markers of programmatic difference at Mess Hall. A striking orange wall ran down the length of the space, functioning as a deliberate contrast to the white-walled spaces of commercial galleries.³¹¹ A build-up of event posters on the restroom wall mirrored those posted in punk venues that several keyholders frequented and others played at. Additionally, recycled-plastic vertical storage bins formed a display area, produced by Dan Peterman at Experimental Station.³¹² The combination of all these elements generated a site specificity of accumulated physical details and social association. Wang reflected that "Any event that gathers people in a place necessarily articulates an aesthetics of the social." For Mess Hall, such detailing had an overt ideological resonance.³¹³

Attitudinally, relationships to local policing, regeneration, and community were evident in smaller gestures and routines, centered on the capacity of Mess Hall as an open host with clear

³¹⁰ Ted Purves, "Throwing Stones in the Sea," 107.

³¹¹ The orange also appears on Mess Hall printed materials, such as letterhead and fliers, and on its website.

³¹² Lara Lode, Keyholder, Mess Hall, conversation with the author, May 2019.

³¹³ Wang, *Mess Hall: What It Is (After the First Year)*. In terms of visual and display aesthetics, other keyholders did add to or ignore such details in their activation of the site, and the vagaries of this commitment is part of the social aesthetic. After ten years this site-shaped dynamic necessitated closure, rather than the relocation of the keyholder group, when the tenancy of the site ended.

ethical values. On occasions keyholders gave safe harbor to local drug dealers by inviting them into the space, rather than letting them be targeted by Chicago's brutal policing on the nearby street corner. A surveillance camera later positioned by the Chicago Police Department in the neighborhood resulted in an intense public consultation facilitated by Mess Hall.³¹⁴ Members of the public were invited to comment on postcards, which were posted back through the letterbox in the door or handed in and then later displayed across the storefront windows for public viewing.³¹⁵ In giving voice to those who felt the creep of insidious and blunt governmental controls, Mess Hall provided space to those not welcome on the street, as well as offering connection between those artists gathering locally. From the outset, Mess Hall held to principles of practice that socially, organizationally, and spatially manifested their ethic.³¹⁶

The site's distance from downtown, some 40 minutes north on the Red "L" train line with few cross-town public transit routes, acted as a filter, which intensified when programmed presentations stretched well into the night, often with input from participants beyond Chicago. Those who made it up to Rogers Park, particularly speakers commissioned by other cultural and academic institutions, did not expect payment and had cleared their schedules to be at Mess Hall.³¹⁷ Brett Bloom recalls that the commitment required to attend diminished more sycophantic art-world attention.³¹⁸ The forms of display, discussion, and engagement generated by Mess Hall

³¹⁴ An earlier work by Temporary Services initiated community consultation on an imposed piece public art that appeared in the Western and Grand Avenue median in Northwest Chicago in 1996, and was a set of interlocking steel pipes entitled *Episodic*, by Josh Garber.

³¹⁵ Temporary Services have done several *ad hoc* consultations about public art that had been installed without a prior democratic assessment of public opinion, starting with Josh Garber's *Episodic*, 1996, in Chicago and Susan Milne and Greg Stonehouse's *Bower*, 2007–2008 in Redfern, Sydney.

³¹⁶ Keyholders, guests, and event attendees would gather long into the night at Mess Hall, or in the Noon Hour Grill diner next door or at the Heartland Café (which was demolished in 2019). <https://chicago.eater.com/2019/5/1/18525325/heartland-cafe-demolition-rogers-park-neighborhood-opportunity-fund-2019-intel>.

³¹⁷ Wang notes that friendly relations with those in more formal cultural settings meant that Mess Hall often hosted off-site extensions of those programs with visiting artists and lecturers, such as Paul Chan (University of Chicago, 2009) and Amos Paul Kennedy Jr (Hyde Park Arts Center, 2004).

³¹⁸ Brett Bloom, Keyholder, Mess Hall and Member, Temporary Services, conversation with author, May 2019.

were distinct from other public programs available and informed what the keyholders chose to reshape in the cultural life of the city and beyond.

The social life activated on site generated possibilities by setting aside time to process, act, and connect—through letters written, food shared, journeys mapped, heavy metal albums played—that generated tactics and networks for bringing about activism and representation that led to structural change. Additionally, perceptions of community issues and fresh advocacy channels emerged from these storefront gatherings of disciplinarily-disparate and issue-affiliated participants. Mess Hall’s activism was born of its social life but grew to become something more culturally revealing and politically prescient within its own ten-year run from 2003 to 2013.

Mess Hall’s line of programmatic thinking was vested in an approach that looked at sustainability at every level of its actions, be it recycled plastic storage bins, redistributed food, or art rooted in social rather than material process. The reasons to practice within the sphere of the social were rooted, for keyholders, in both the need to rethink the potential of everyday practices and material culture activations (hobbies, collections, and thrift), alongside the environmental cost of material production. Keyholder Brett Bloom talks of how “Peak oil has something to do with your art practice. Consuming, in order to make more objects for more people to consume, is a destructive dead-end cycle.”³¹⁹ Chicago-based cultural critic Brian Holmes characterized the challenge of such an approach and its external reception, saying:

The energies devoted to the creation of a privileged object could be better spent on reshaping the everyday environment. Abandonment of authorial form and exodus from the museum are some consequences of these vanguard insights. A protean world of exploration and intervention opens up for practitioners of art into life. If you take this path you will often hear the complaint that artists these days just can’t “handle the brush” as their predecessors did. Yet it’s up to us to demonstrate that there are other ways of unfolding formal complexity into lived

³¹⁹ Bloom, conversation.

experience.³²⁰

Mess Hall generated an experimental form of DIY cultural production that joined the dots between wider socioeconomic issues and the day-to-day possibilities of a more socially-engaged, activist arts practice to reshape the everyday environments that Holmes identifies as a critical stake.

A recurring focus for Temporary Services and others who convened events at Mess Hall was the everyday experiences of those incarcerated.³²¹ While Angelo's inventions played an important role in the invitation that generated the artist project space in 2003, it is *Tamms Year Ten* (TY10) that proved synecdochic of how project forms could emerge through Mess Hall. Conceived by Laurie Jo Reynolds in 2008, TY10 made contact with and advocated for those interned at Illinois' Tamms Correctional Facility, a supermax prison that placed people in solitary confinement well beyond recommended limits and for some, a full ten years. The project ultimately resulted in securing the prison's closure in 2013.³²² However, its beginnings at Mess Hall were unassuming:

It was a lock down and a potluck where you had to finish writing all the letters but you could be in a room with food. [...] These things fulfilled social needs for us; they were social events. They were also the way to connect socially with prisoners who had no social contact and were in total isolation.³²³

In gathering to perform the small services of sharing a poem or observation of the world from

³²⁰ Brian Holmes, "Art After Capitalism," in *It's the Political Economy, Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory*, ed. Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 166.

³²¹ Marc Fischer has had an extensive letter writing relationship with Angelo, who remains incarcerated in the California prison system, as well as hosting his art archive. More recently Fischer has developed *The Courtroom Artist Residency* (2018-current) that builds on the Public Collectors' *Joong Boo Residency Program* (2016-18) hosted in the Joong Boo Market, Avondale. <https://halfletterpress.com/the-courtroom-artist-residency-report-residencies-1-4/>.

³²² Tamms Correctional Facility closed in 2013; the TY10 project ran from 2008 to 2013. "Stateville Speaks—Special Tamms Issue," *Stateville Speaks Quarterly Newsletter*, April 2008. https://www.neiu.edu/sites/neiu.edu/files/migrated-arts-body/documents/rjohn14/SS_2008_April.pdf.

³²³ Laurie Jo Reynolds, "Interview: One Question About Critical Art in Chicago," interview by Tom Hall, *Proximity* 003 (Winter 2009): 74.

outside the prison, participants in initial discussions gave relatively passive attention to the more activist possibilities. A shift would come within the social gathering as replies came in from those in solitary confinement making feasible and considered requests that were basic assertions of their human rights. The principle of the non-bject, realized here in a project recognizing the lives of those forgotten by the state and reaffirming their subjectivity through a small-scale intervention, prompted a tenacious movement to close the prison and assert prisoner rights.

Laurie Jo Reynolds details how those gathered around the table for project potlucks established an informal social situation that challenged the “preconception in all of our minds that obviously that’s not all you can do for someone [in prison].”³²⁴ Shared concerns and relationships began to coalesce around activities hosted at Mess Hall, from the communal meals that became a lobbying body launch (TY10), to other programs such as *Supermax Subscriptions* with artist Sarah Ross. In the latter, donors used extra frequent flyer miles to subscribe to magazines that people incarcerated had requested. Another project, the *Art Work* newspaper, was an exhibition prompt with instructions for display options printed inside as well as a political text about the work of projects such as Mess Hall and Elsewhere.³²⁵ Such microsocial forms, tested within the storefront, built on distinctive identities and contextual socialities that curator and educator Ted Purves proposes in his writing on generosity: “Rather than illustrating ideas of gifts and charities, these works actually intended to embody them, to locate ‘the work’ of the artwork in the literal transfer of goods and services from the artist to the audience.”³²⁶ In the case of

³²⁴ Reynolds, “Interview,” 74.

³²⁵ *Art Work—A National Conversation About Art, Labor, and Economics*, was a newspaper conceived as a potential display starting point for an exhibition. Compiled and distributed in 2009, *Art Work* can be found in the archives at Elsewhere as well as in the *Never the Same* archive at the Newberry, as well as in documentation of shows that it informed, such as *Just Cause: Bad Faith—Art Workers Activism and Organization in New York City and Beyond*, 2015. <https://temporarieservices.org/served/past-services/2015-2/>.

³²⁶ Ted Purves, “Introduction,” in *What we want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*, ed. Ted Purves (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), x.

Tamms Year Ten, that service was agitating on behalf of a silenced and societally forgotten group. Through George Simmel's writing, Purves sees the participants' social dynamics as critical to the practice that emerges and asserts itself in the world-at-large.³²⁷ At Mess Hall, the social form of the storefront, or a micro-variant such as a potluck or a newspaper distribution, enabled a social dynamic that offered a reworking of museum and academic programming—or rather their potential services—and a resulting network of speakers and participants.

The social dynamic at Mess Hall included quieter times of apparent inaction. Keyholder Salem Collo-Julin describes how typically she spent hours in the Mess Hall space with nothing much going on, a calm that occasionally intersected with moments of intense energy around events or exhibition projects. Alongside Dan Wang, as the two keyholders of color with immigrant histories, their Sundays activating the empty storefront enabled lengthy conversation that worked through their relationship to the project site and its positioning in the wider field of organizing practices, historically divided by race and class. Such friendships and ways of processing ideas in company were foundational to the social dynamic of the storefront site. That unusual capacity to be doing nothing was part of a de-scheduled approach to the support services offered at Mess Hall, that ran counter to most concurrent cultural venue programming. As Wang writes:

Mess Hall always was a kind of resistance against the mandatory scheduling of professionalized art activity. Over any given stretch of months, the calendar would be overlaid with serial meetings, day or weekend-long projects, semi-permanent experiments, and a sprinkling of one-off events, and all without much discernable regularity, plus the constant exercise of the most basic of freedoms, the freedom to do nothing.³²⁸

³²⁷ Ted Purves, "Throwing Stones in the Sea," 105.

³²⁸ Dan S. Wang. "Mess Hall Ends its Haul," *Propositions Press 2.0* (blog), March 1, 2013. <https://prop-press.typepad.com/blog/2013/02/mess-hall-is-ending.html>.

To hold space for nothing to be happening meant that a passer-by or unplanned caller's perception of the site could remain blank, unless they were aware of Mess Hall's reputation for engagement with life across the city. Often all that was visible were ad hoc displays seen through the storefront windows, and the occasional free thrift bins on the sidewalk. All these recurring features helped suggest to secondary audiences what the work of Mess Hall was. Curator Nato Thompson recalls that "Going to Mess Hall blindly was nearly a guarantee that one would find a locked door and darkened space, but wandering in while an event was going on without pre-knowledge was just as certain to produce wonder, delight, lasting memories, and more than a few collaborations."³²⁹ That lack of consistency acted both as an additional filter for accessing the site and an assertion of the right to function without the expectational norms of institutionally-imblicated social practice, which tended to offer more clearly scheduled and public-facing programming. In being freed from such service-level demands, Mess Hall found its deeper engagements and consistency of services in longer-form relationships.

The programming that emerged on site, as Collo-Julien recalls, more typically provided an opportunity to become immersed in a topic and *nerd out* as a core ritual of the space.³³⁰ There was scope to absorb new ideas and concerns expressed from the perspective of amateur or nonacademic specialists or hobbyists. Those who spoke were often from subcultural fields and drew on a diverse mix of visual culture sources. The acknowledgment of these micro communities of collectors and observers reshaped social connections within and beyond the group, and often drew people from across the city dedicated to a topic. Mess Hall's website stated "It is important to us to share knowledge and build up a culture of participation, access, and empowerment rather than of competition, intellectual property, and proprietary

³²⁹ Wang. "mess hall ends its haul," 2013.

³³⁰ Salem Collo-Julien, Mess Hall keyholder, conversation with author, July 24, 2019.

information.”³³¹ The events, programs, and project hostings at Mess Hall often included those who might usually be required to compete for resources in the nonprofit sector, those who hold knowledge incubated in a university, and those who seek to collate alternatives to materials hidden or lost as proprietary content or to reveal a system designed to obfuscate a process.

Such an approach realized the larger ideological resistance that characterized the site and its social dynamic. Those opportunities to nerd out onsite were not subject to institutional permissions or deferential acknowledgement of expertise, but rather a way for Mess Hall to be an open and activating resource space, one that might generate further (and divergent) research, event, and public services. It is from this public programming aspect of service that keyholders began to think about the pedagogical implications of Mess Hall in relation to academia.

Keyholder Mike Wolfe considered the pedagogical implications for all involved in the organization, critically detailing how Mess Hall offered an experience that went beyond the academic programs from which many participants emerged or in which they taught, and which some were unable to complete.³³² Mess Hall’s programmatic approach was broader than a breakdown in disciplinary boundaries or departmental conditions, providing instead a form of experiential and organizational pedagogy. A pedagogy that Wolfe would describe as a combination of collaborative-education, overt formal lessons and spontaneous moments, with a chance to test out ideas within a recurring site.

The geographic diffusion of such practices over time, as keyholders secured commissions and roles elsewhere, was an oxymoronic outcome of a stable core site that organizationally held no-one in place. The training ground that Mess Hall offered, which Wolfe characterized as the

³³¹ Mess Hall Homepage. <https://web.archive.org/web/20061201001650/http://www.messhall.org/>

³³² Mike Wolf, “Can Experimental Cultural Centers Replace MFA programs?” in *Support Networks*, ed. Abigail Satinsky (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2015), 190. Originally published in *AREA Chicago*, 5 in October 2007.

new MFA, went on to establish linkages across the Midwest through a retinue of keyholders and participants who continued the work they tested or realized through Mess Hall.

Among a mix of project spaces, radio shows, group exhibitions, and reader publications, Mess Hall emerged as distinct in its expansive provision of socio-politically engaged and activist practices as well as services. In offering a broad constellation of event-based services, conducted through both keyholders and affiliated voices, its social form and dynamic were both hard to convey as a whole and resistant to efforts to do so. *Artist Run Chicago* at Hyde Park Arts Center in 2009 would not include Mess Hall, an omission that *Bad at Sports*, the Chicago-based podcast, felt worth redressing in an interview with keyholders, as the exhibition's goal was to capture the independent arts scene as it collapsed and shifted after the global financial crisis of 2008.³³³ While more mainstream cultural institutions accommodated participatory programmatic shifts in the early 2000s, Mess Hall held an expansive capacity for responsive reorientation and a depth of processing that was hard to achieve elsewhere. There were also possibilities at Mess Hall that under the calming force of conventional bureaucracy might vanish or be smoothed over.³³⁴ At these more formal kinds of sites, as Marc Fisher observed in 2008, personal anecdote and in-the-moment opinion are lost to the archive. Those details and their "precious moments" of encounter that might hold appeal to a single inquirer, slip from view as a wider audience is served.³³⁵ Mess Hall, and projects such as Fischer's Public Collectors archive and related Tumblr site, re-insert idiosyncratic and specific sources to repopulate imaginations with more

³³³ Temporary Services, "Episode 218: Temporary Services." Podcast recording by *Bad at Sports* (podcast), Nov. 1, 2009. <http://badatsports.com/2009/episode-218-temporary-services/>.

³³⁴ Ava Bromberg, "Creativity Unbound: Cultivating the Generative Power of Non-economic Neighborhood Spaces," in *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity*, ed. Tim Edensor, Deborah Leslie, Steve Millington, and Norma Rantisi (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010), 218.

³³⁵ Fischer's focus on digitally documenting the personal collections of others and connected single, focused enquirers with respective collectors in their area, sharing stories that evidenced the practices and interests of under-represented and sub-cultural communities. Public Collectors, <https://publiccollectors.tumblr.com/>.

contextualized, everyday passions and details considered messy to some, and forms of liveness to others.

Analogies for Mess Hall’s organizational form populate articles written during its run with its organizational difference being at the heart of its service to its audience. Arts organizer and curator Abigail Satinsky would summarize Mess Hall’s character by noting that “It was a welcoming-and-kooky-and-homey-and-sometimes-dogmatic-but-mostly-not-and really-just-all-over-the-place space.”³³⁶ The keyholders did not perform as the organization but rather lived out the principles of the organization through an embodied critique of societal realities, which Satinsky describes as functioning as a cultural compass for the city of Chicago and wider participatory culture, with each participant embodying the organizing principles while counterintuitively also diffusing Mess Hall’s power, in many cases geographically beyond the storefront site and Chicago.³³⁷

The storefront proved a legible social form and logistical gathering space for doing the work of an experimental cultural center. In offering what was not happening in museums and universities, yet intrinsically linked to those institutions, and in upending values central to commercial representation of artists, Mess Hall shifted the definitions and boundaries of alternative space practices, as well as changing how work could be shown or activated in smaller moments of shared energies and passions. Keyholders, Temporary Services acknowledged that some museological conventions still served a purpose despite their gaps: “Work like this [TY10]

³³⁶ Abigail Satinsky, “Mess Hall is a Compass (2003–2013),” *Bad at Sports* (blog), March 12, 2013. <http://badatsports.com/2013/mess-hall-is-a-compass-2003-2013/>. Additionally, the Compass Group, formed of Mess Hall keyholders and assorted advisors, grew out of a 2008 multi-day mapping event, *Continental Drift Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor*, hosted by Brain Holmes and Claire Pentecost. Group collaborators included Mess Hall keyholders Rosalinda Borcil, Bonnie Fortune, Matthias Regan, Sarah Ross, Dan S. Wang, and Mike Wolf. For a chronicle of these explorations, see Dylan A. T. Miner, Compass Collaborators, and Nicolas Lampert, *Deep Routes: The Midwest in All Directions* (Chicago: Just Seeds, 2014).

³³⁷ Dan Wang was part of the Compass Group from 2013 that contained Mess Hall-affiliated participant Abigail Satinsky.

can benefit from being included in exhibitions but those shows aren't really where most of the work happens and finds its audience."³³⁸ While Mess Hall maintained synergies with existing museum and academic structures, it was able to realize generative projects as a rogue outreach department might, one with somewhat out-of-hand and community-focused cultural production that could lead to occasional DIY exhibitions, as well as the release to do service work not subject to bureaucratic systems, funder justifications, or dominant programmatic traditions.

Archive

Mess Hall documented many of its activities with printed materials as well as by collating project ephemera. These remains form the archival paper trail that extends from the organizational beginnings and storefront activations into libraries, basements, and garages across the city. Mess Hall's archival materials comprise informally gathered remnants alongside more formally categorized ephemera housed in existing institutions such as the Newberry Library and Flaxman Library, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Within this eclectic mix of archival sources, a more informal archive exists in which the organizing principles of Mess Hall are traceable in the texts found on rolled-out large sheets of paper, self-adhesive sheets, and brown parcel paper, as well as mail still in the post folder (Figure 4.2). Scrawled across them are meeting notes, crossed-through agenda items, and project planning exercises. Each sheet reveals the urgencies of the day and the consistent principles that define how Mess Hall shaped itself and its program as well as its popular cultural reference points, including books and movies recently watched by keyholders.³³⁹ Access to this material requires contacting its various holders,

³³⁸ Temporary Services, "Free For All," 14.

³³⁹ Keyholder book and TV preferences listed on one rolled out sheet include *The Trenches*, TV series, 2010; *30 Rock*, TV series, 2009–2013; and *Enter the Ninja*, film, 1981. Reading materials included J.M. Coetzee's *Life of Micheal K*, 1983, and Colin Atrophy Hagendorf's blog started in 2009, *Slice Harvester*, followed by zines and a

working out logistics, and going to their houses. The human encounters needed for archive access are part of the ongoing work of embodying principles explicitly valued at Mess Hall, such as being free, programmatically unpredictable, and attitudinally hardcore. Among the atmospheric ephemera and relationally-secured access to them, the process of archiving echoes attitudinally how the keyholders dispensed with existing artist project conventions. The only formality was in choosing to gather the remnants, leaving their interpretative substance to the voices of the individuals and institutions who participated or who hold the archives.³⁴⁰

Some items display dates without the year, which generally suggests a lack of concern with the project's ongoing existence or archival end; instead the focus is on capturing the conversational directions and connections between the everyday, pop cultural, and sociopolitical.³⁴¹ Palpable details that emerge in the annotations and marginalia for project documents convey a liveness of ideas and energies, readily expanded on in conversation with former keyholders and archive hosts. The vagaries of memory and precise dating also releases Mess Hall from any expectation of formal historicization or stalling singular narrative after its closure.

To tie materials more formally to chronological events for research purposed there are details in officially housed and ordered materials in libraries, alongside the digital content found on the Internet Archive's capture of www.messhall.org, to which keyholder essays and articles are attached. Keyholder critique and explanations conveyed in essays and letters are particularly central to understanding the expectations that accrued around the site and still speak to the work

book that was published in 2015, *Slice Harvester: A Memoir in Pizza*. This sheet is likely to come from a keyholder meeting in 2010, as streaming *The Trenches* would not have been a norm.

³⁴⁰ Mess Hall's website hosted online discussion boards, with lecture slideshows and interview transcripts available too, placing spoken voices and visual documentation ahead of carefully categorized remains.

³⁴¹ Former keyholders host archive materials: Lora Lode's garage boxes, Marc Fischer's basement office and Half Letter Press distribution space, and possibly Claire Pentecost's files (not located).

of a field of independent organizers and artist project spaces. Art historian and archivist Rebecca Zorach explains the challenge of generativity faced by such project archives:

The community, independent, grassroots archive we admire most are living archives with an expansive sense of the ongoing usability of their materials—their artistic and political generativity. But how do you keep that generativity going?³⁴²

With artist organizer Daniel Tucker, Zorach would form the *Never-the-Same* archive, housed at the Newberry Library in Chicago, which includes substantial printed material from Mess Hall, while Doro Boehme would gather publications from Temporary Services and others at the Flaxman Library at the School of the Art of Chicago.³⁴³ Additionally, external narratives critiquing the philosophical implications of Mess Hall appear in numerous publications addressing concurrent, socially engaged art practices, group work, and activism, not least in the *Social Practice History* series, distributed by School of the Art Institute of Chicago between 2014 and 2017.³⁴⁴ Archival substance rests in a nuanced paper trail that accepts printed materials more often seen as ephemeral, as in-the-moment tools rather than documents for revealing the past with any form of consistency—a material culture approach to valuing text as found object that may yet hold fresh contextual relevancies or reformulatory powers that maintains a quality of liveness and future-facing openness.

The site at 6932 N Glenwood Avenue is a resonant point on the Chicago map, and one which has lost many of the energies of its earlier activation as Mess Hall, yet remains a

³⁴² Rebecca Zorach, “Making Usable Archives,” in *Unfurlings: Explorations in Art, Activism, and Archiving*, ed. Daniel Tucker and Rebecca Zorach (Chicago: Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry at University of Chicago, 2014), 12.

³⁴³ The earliest Mess Hall events between 2003 and 2006 are absent online but available through fliers and magazines gathered in the Never-the-Same-Archive at the Newberry Library, Chicago. SAIC Librarian, Doro Boehme curated, *Pass It On: Connecting Contemporary DIY Culture*, for A + D Gallery, Columbia College, Chicago in 2005 that also featured Temporary Services publications that were retained for their college library.

³⁴⁴ Keyholder and associated voices’ texts in the series, include those by Rozalinda Borcilă, Brian Holmes, Claire Pentecost, Dan Peterman, Laurie Jo Reynolds, Temporary Services, Daniel Tucker, and Mike Wolf,

placeholder in a neighborhood—an indicator of Mess Hall’s original context.³⁴⁵ Al Goldberg’s decision to reassert property ownership after ten years, as he envisioned a new role for the storefront would disperse the organization. Upon closure Mess Hall keyholders lost the site specificity and the neighborhood relationships that sustained them. In Mess Hall’s closing performance on March 29, 2013 a script, printed on two sides of paper, addressed the site: “We will miss seeing you in this space, and hope to rediscover each other in the context of new experiments with generosity-driven culture.”³⁴⁶

The impact of Mess Hall can be seen in current neighboring sites that share its activist concerns and keyholder projects, such as Lora Lode’s Project Yellow. The storefront is also now neighbor to a series of high-end delis and bars, the Glenwood Arts Festival murals have faded, and a bike path runs seamlessly past the door, connecting leafy, suburban streets. Al Goldberg remains the property owner and the planned Jewish Community Center he envisioned is still there; further down the strip, an activist space fills the window with hand-daubed signs resisting patriarchy and calling for woman’s health, specifically abortion access. Mess Hall’s former storefront space sits among more gentrified stores, with an architectural form that has enough early twentieth century historical character not to be overwritten by development and without refurbishment allows for imaginings of life on site.

To encounter Mess Hall’s archive is a participatory process rooted in the dispersed keyholders and those they advise, as well as their provision of access to physical remains. The things learned through Mess Hall’s experiential organizing shaped and trained those who took

³⁴⁵ Rogers Park in the early 2000s was an immigrant-dense community amid longer demographic histories of other projects, such as Sculpture Chicago *Culture in Action*’s Flood: A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare (1992–1995). An urban farming project that grew organic produce hydroponically, serving their nutritious produce to those suffering during the AIDS crisis, was located in Rogers Park at 1769 Greenleaf Street).

³⁴⁶ “Mess Hall is Closing: Final Months,” Mess Hall website.
https://web.archive.org/web/20130812035658/http://messhall.org/?page_id=1362.

part, underpinning the archival character of Mess Hall after closure. However, this diffusion of principles is not the same as being there, acknowledged in the humorously ironic and laconic script from the closure ceremony, in which Mess Hall participants are asked, “Exactly how did you prepare yourself to become an archive?” and additionally affirms that “Your status as an archive means you will no longer be updated.”³⁴⁷ Such allusions to the archive’s lacks and its ongoing role within the history of the site, held a tongue-in-cheek acceptance of loss. While the paper trail expands engagement with the issues and approaches lived out at Mess Hall beyond their actual dates of happening, it cannot replace the social life experienced on site. Sustaining the participatory and generative character of the project relies on retained indicators of liveness and the sociality of archive access.

Part 2 – Organizational Turn

Mess Hall falls organizationally into two waves of keyholders: those who came through Temporary Services in 2003 and expanded as the project site established its premise, and those who came in 2008, predominantly from the neighborhood, and activated an assortment of activisms and events. A few keyholders recur across both phases, notably Salem Collo-Julien and Lora Lode; others, such as Marc Fischer and Brett Bloom, remained invested in its program but not directly involved in its day-to-day keyholder construction.³⁴⁸ Mess Hall’s beginnings, storefront activations, and archive reveal how structurally the concerns of the two keyholder groups informed the functioning and specificity of the site as it emerged as an expansive public venue run on surplus energies and attention. The two waves of keyholders secured Mess Hall’s

³⁴⁷ “Farewell to Mess Hall #6,” printed script for final event in space on March 29, 2013. Stored in Marc Fischer’s archive.

³⁴⁸ Their publishing house, Half Letter Press, launched in 2008, continues a broader paper trail through the research projects and radical philosophical insertions into visual cultural life that surround and intersect with Mess Hall.

distinctive reputation as a convenor of events and activism that spoke across conventional cultural boundaries and beyond its social life. This section details the character and impact of both keyholder waves, between 2003 and 2007, then 2008 to closure in 2013.

Mess Hall's ideological positioning in relation to capital and its resulting emphasis on a surplus economy correlates with the economic challenges of the first decade of the 21st century—which, as philosopher Slavoj Žižek observes, was bookended by “the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the financial meltdown in 2008.”³⁴⁹ However, there is a longer-form imperative identified by Brett Bloom that flows beyond these two moments wherein, as he notes, “We need to bail ourselves out of much more than an economic crisis.”³⁵⁰ An ongoing consciousness around capital-driven depletion and its societal and environmental impacts remained at Mess Hall's core for the duration of the project. How the organization chose to address the implications of late capitalism on communities and make visible other possibilities rested in a program of events and exchanges that trouble artist organizing norms as well as those of museum outreach departments.³⁵¹

The everyday business of valuing and distributing domestic and labor surplus speaks to more than just pragmatic economics, which enables the project's survival beyond a market collapse. Such an emphasis articulates ways to resist the contracting public and social spheres and to be environmentally and empathetically conscious of others in a system set up to reduce meaningful encounters and the resulting possibilities for change and redress. Each of the events

³⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “It's the Political Economy, Stupid!,” in *It's the Political Economy, Stupid!*, ed. Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler (London: Pluto Press: 2013), 15.

³⁵⁰ Brett Bloom and Salem Collo-Julin. “Together: Resilience,” *The Remedies Issue, Proximity Magazine 004*, eds. Rachel and Ed Marzewski, and Mairead Case, (Spring 2009): 24.

³⁵¹ Annie Lowery, writing in the Atlantic in 2017, describes recent use of the term *late capitalism* as “a catch-all phrase for incidents that capture the tragicomic inanity and inequity of contemporary capitalism” that came into popular usage during Occupy Wall Street in 2011. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/late-capitalism/524943/>

at Mess Hall, drawn from the vagaries of keyholders' memories, online echoes, and various archives, helps identify the urgencies and ongoing lines of thinking for the two organizational turns, from 2003 to 2007 and again in 2008 through closure in 2013.

Crystalizing social concerns and actions between such economically historic moments and in the context of Chicago became necessarily bound to wider political urgencies. Mess Hall keyholders would embody and diffuse what a generosity-driven and socially engaged activist arts practice could be in the first decade of the 21st century. By the global financial crisis of 2008, they were also pointing to deeper possibilities of their recurring gatherings at this site to embed unheard voices and redress inequitable realities in the wider community, be it in prisons or the redistribution of thrift.

It is also poignantly telling—as I write this in 2021, from the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic—that in 2003 public space became a site of vacancy as SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) spread across the globe, notably experienced across the border in Toronto.³⁵² The perception of biological threat seeped into the public realm as infection-reduction strategies cleared the foyers of travel nodes and other gathering spaces. This growing sense of fear was quickly countered by corporations keen to market the end of the biological threat and reactivate their businesses. Such efforts also coincided with a political system committed to heightened security and surveillance following 9/11. The notion of what constituted public sites was bound by the business of protecting the interests of private and predominantly white land ownership, as well as fresh anxieties around security and health within such spaces. In this way there was a further obscuring what an open social sphere might be, or

³⁵² The privatization of public space and the management of health risks within such zones became freshly significant during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 and the concurrent reckoning with racial justice following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. There were few places to gather to protest or just meet.

had been. To gather, to acquire community knowledge, and to resist dominant power became a pressing urgency that by 2011 had escalated on a nationally visible scale with the Occupy Wall Street protests in Zuccotti Park, Manhattan, that would expand to other locations, including Rogers Park. Those keyholders from activist communities overtly connected the program at Mess Hall with such wider public protest and anti-conflict movements.

Early links on Mess Hall's website identify the war in Iraq that began in March 2003 and the resulting anti-war movement as a concern for many in the group, and some keyholders and Mess Hall participants met through the Hyde Park Committee Against War and Racism, such as Dan Wang, Rebecca Zorach, Matthias Regan, and Amy Partridge.³⁵³ Mess Hall therefore emerged in 2003 as an experimental cultural center invested in tactics and structures born out of activist as well as art trainings.³⁵⁴ Their approach produced responsive cultural event and project programming, as well as identifying and occasionally securing structural change in the face of growing hegemony, isolationism and anxiety. In expanding public space, making visible those societally cast out, and centering meaningful social services, Mess Hall's projects revealed the stark reality of governmental controls and corporate limits, echoing resistances at the heart of the anti-globalization movement and realized in the anti-WTO protests in 1999. The activities Mess Hall offered had capacities that exceeded the scope of participatory projects increasingly programmed in art museum contexts and alternative exhibition venues.

i. First keyholder wave, 2003 to 2007

What Mess Hall organized on site held to a radical freedom from existing cultural expectations and systems that fed its sustainability, even beyond this first wave of keyholders

³⁵³ <https://undercommoning.org/against-the-colonization-of-time/>

³⁵⁴ Wang, "Mess Hall: What is after the first year."

from 2003 until 2007. Salem Collo-Julin observed that a lack of certain structures let Mess Hall be what it needed to be—combined with it being a lucky time to participate in the Chicago arts landscape, with those people emerging from academic programs and those already in the city sharing ideas and more socially-attuned modes of practice. Brett Bloom identified further structural gaps that left them free to experiment within the cultural landscape and remain reputationally visible, despite their events being barely attended on many occasions, given that “We [Mess Hall] really benefited from both the collapse of the infrastructure for alternative spaces—actually, I should say, the right wing dismantling of the infrastructure for alternative spaces—and critical practice. I do think we benefited from that and also an incredibly weak commercial art market [in Chicago].”³⁵⁵ As time went on, the space expanded its activities, and occasionally a huge crowd would push the limits of Mess Hall’s capacity as a venue, but never at the expense of the programming visions of the keyholder group.³⁵⁶

The aesthetic details and material objects that accumulated over ten years at the storefront site testify to the cycling through of ideas among the keyholders. The keyholders’ organizing of themselves, their loaned space, and accoutrements pointed to world-at-large possibilities, from the repurposed vertical storage unit, to the mobile graywater kitchen, and Ydre Nørrebro Kultur Bureau (YNKB) light fittings. An early residency with Kevin Kaempf centered on a bench holding used paint as part of a recycling system that reconstituted donations into fresh cans for redistribution. Later, that bench became storage for the *Free Store*, which distributed thrift items for free, while a vertical-storage system made of reclaimed plastics from Experimental Station held a variety of things. In another material-morphing action during this early phase, another artist melted down vinyl into jars. Each initiative both took up the functional service of such re-

³⁵⁵ Temporary Services, *Do-it-yourself Interview*, 3.

³⁵⁶ Salem Collo-Julin, conversation with author, July 24, 2019.

processing and raised bigger ideological issues, from the environmental to the governmental. Collo-Julin recalls Mess Hall's initial focus as being "An open space yearning in first year to be relevant to people living around the space, not just for creative people to use in a certain way—connected to wider issues."³⁵⁷ In opening and establishing the aesthetics of its social form through those it hosted and knew, Mess Hall remained centered on the implications of life beyond its doors while turning waste back into non-bject and useful material.

In the first wave of Mess Hall keyholders, the time spent together produced organizational practices and a pedagogical impact, as keyholders Wolfe, Wang, and Collo-Julin have detailed in relation to the time taken, topics discussed, and an alternative MFA format. Brian Holmes expands on the significance of such beginnings in his reading of the use-value of multilayered works such as Mess Hall.

The first stage of this process involves direct response and sustained dialogue in informal settings, unencumbered by time constraints or conventional protocols that limit the circulation of speech. Usually the work itself can be shared, through copies, recordings, archives, or long-term presentations in everyday spaces, without the mediation of money and the obstacles it brings.³⁵⁸

Holmes underlines the value of the initial processes of constructing a social life, often without external participants. Wang evokes such value, writing specifically: "The first Mess Hall project was and is the most basic: for individuals to come together and establish a working group that would coordinate the use of the space."³⁵⁹ The guests that follow began to shape the critical qualities of the events program. Bloom's connection with the SARAI publishing network and new media initiative in Delhi, brought other technology-focused artists from India to Mess Hall, and while no audience showed up, the keyholders were present and later referenced this moment

³⁵⁷ Collo-Julin, conversation.

³⁵⁸ Holmes, "Art After Capitalism" 167.

³⁵⁹ Wang, *Mess Hall: What It Is (After the First Year)*.

as significant to the project because of the learning and support offered through their shared concerns, as well as modelling how events with those from outside Chicago, and in this instance the USA, might be realized in the future.³⁶⁰ Likewise, Holmes considers the dynamics and value of such moments, observing that “the point of the post-capitalist process is to develop new means of production, where subjectivity—the group itself in its affective and collaborative pulse—is the primary thing we produce together.”³⁶¹

While hosted at Hyde Park Arts Center in 2004, Amos Paul Kennedy, a friend of Wang’s, spoke at Mess Hall about his printmaking projects. He proved a significant artistic figure, both as an African-American with a professional background in computing and in the directness of his political views. Kennedy’s distinctive print aesthetic, bold political statements, and focus on the stories of people in his hometown of Lafayette, Louisiana resonated with the attending group.³⁶² Shared issues such as gun violence in their respective locations, yet interspersed with the celebration of someone’s mom’s birthday, were all navigated in his poster series. This combination of world-at-large and individual events echoed the mix of the personal and the political realized in the programming at Mess Hall.

In the printed cards, leaflets, and posters produced throughout Mess Hall’s first wave, plain language, anecdotal narratives, and diagrammatic or mapped content were key, offering distinctive and shareable documentation of social and event-based processes. Recurring events particularly feature in these remains and became key features of the program, from Fischer’s essay-poster series from the *Hardcore Histories* metal listening parties (2005–2006), to Collo-Julín’s *Free Store* fliers (2006–2013), to Frau Fiber’s Sewing Rebellion workshops (2006–

³⁶⁰ Lode, conversation.

³⁶¹ Holmes, “Art After Capitalism,” 166.

³⁶² Collo-Julín, conversation.

2007).³⁶³ Each event or event series hosted at Mess Hall, and their iterations elsewhere, brought attention to the human and social connections intrinsic to an art practice or an activist action, be it punk music, letterpress printing, or clothing repair and reuse.

The handover to a second wave of keyholders was not a neat moment of change; instead, over a year, what Mess Hall was and how it might engage more deeply with local issues became intensely negotiated territory. The new keyholders took time to settle into fresh formulations and argued through the parameters of the space in terms of program energy, values, and intensely activist foci. Existing texts and the project's existing reputation proved a structuring frame for what would come next.

ii. Second keyholder wave, 2008 to 2013

Through the transition phase, Mess Hall keyholders from the first wave, as well as a couple from the second, would contribute to a core document that coalesced the project's values and acted as a cornerstone for an exhibition residency at Wysing Arts in the United Kingdom in 2008.³⁶⁴ The compilation of a *Ten Points* list of values, as a form of group manifesto, would prove to be a critical touchstone for both the exhibition and the concurrent organizational turn that brought a new wave of keyholders into the project, many locally based in the Rogers Park neighborhood.

Lora Lode recalls excruciatingly debated processing of the site's functioning among new

³⁶³ The archived Mess Hall website does not contain a calendar of events prior to 2010, though this may be available offline through former keyholder Lora Lode. Attempts to share this content online are seen from 2008 with a link to "Our Messy Archives" on the front page and additional links to "2003 (in progress)" through 2008.

³⁶⁴ Mess Hall delivered 12 workshops during this residency, including functional and performative sewing events and furniture-upcycling workshops, as well as a print fair, "Publish and Be Damned." Mess Hall was one of five international artist residencies hosted at Wysing Arts during 2007. A comparable and archivally significant exhibition for Machine Project would be the 2015 show at Skidmore College in New York State and resulting Monograph.

keyholders, while for the *Ten Points* document a chain of comments on a printed-off email shows the gradual accumulation and editing down of ideas into the clear list that emerges from various lines of thinking.³⁶⁵ The debated organizing of the space and cumulative editing of the document convey the energy of this transition period between keyholder groupings, though it is Fischer's handwritten, precise editing notes in the margins that offer a haptic sense of liveness among the spoken recollections. The *Ten Points* summarized, in poster form, the project's commitment and values for those just passing by Mess Hall (and Wysing Arts) or passing through Chicago, as well as for those who would remain in the city. The list played a role for those on site and in the social imaginary built around Mess Hall, binding participants in significant arts and activist networks and narratives beyond themselves:

1. We demand cultural spaces run by the people who use them.
2. We create the space to remix categories, experiment, and learn what we do not already know.
3. Mess Hall explodes the myth of scarcity. Everyone is capable of sharing something.
4. The surplus of our societies should be creatively redistributed at every level of production and consumption.
5. Social interaction generates culture!
6. We embrace creativity as an action without thought of profit.
7. We demand spaces that promote generosity.
8. Mess Hall insists on a climate of mutual trust and respect—for ourselves and those who enter our space.
9. No money is exchanged inside Mess Hall. Surfing on surplus, we do not charge admission or ask for donations.
10. Mess Hall functions without hierarchy or forced unity.³⁶⁶

Summative processing gestures such as the list of points, earlier diagrams of the organizing structure, and keyholders who bridged the gap between the waves of programming brought a

³⁶⁵ Lora Lode shared the details of the 2007 to 2008 handover between keyholders, while Marc Fischer showed me the printed off emails, he holds in his Mess Hall archive. Lora Lode, *Conversation with author*, May 27, 2019 and Marc Fischer, *Conversation with author*, May 2019.

³⁶⁶ "Ten Points," on Mess Hall website, https://web.archive.org/web/20080516224547/http://www.messhall.org/ten_points.html.

sense of consistency in social, ethical, and ideological values to Mess Hall: the *Ten Points* structurally playing out in organizational terms across the ten years. However, the character of Mess Hall did shift with the second wave of keyholders, who were predominantly younger, local programmers, with overtly activist agendas.

Two significant projects that emerged through Mess Hall during this second phase encompass many of the characteristics of the site's cultural production. Both also drew on the growing acceptance of the role of artists to engage with structures and systems of everyday life, often overlooked in media narratives on incarcerated people and the realities of affordable food access. The first was Laurie Jo Reynolds' convening of the *Tamms Year Ten* letter-writing project (discussed earlier in this chapter), which would remain active for the five years from 2008 until the closure of Illinois' supermax prison in 2013—the same year Mess Hall closed its doors. The second project was Sarah Kavage's *Industrial Harvest*, which addressed the divergence between the agricultural futures market in Chicago and local issues of food scarcity (Figure 4.3).³⁶⁷ Although neither were Mess Hall projects, their discursive events were hosted in the storefront or on the sidewalk outside, and the artists' affinities with the keyholders enabled deeper project linkages and associated critiques to happen on the site. Each project proved synecdochic in its deep mapping of local infrastructures and its engagement with the far-reaching consequences of the obfuscated corporatized practices of the institutions they criticized, be they prisons or agricultural trading floors.

Industrial Harvest emerged during a residency at InCUBATE, Chicago in 2009 and involved hedging the value of 1000 bushels of wheat on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange floor

³⁶⁷ Kavage's project began at InCUBATE, Chicago in November 2009 and was hosted at Mess Hall in the summer of 2010, archiving its blog in February 2011.

(CME).³⁶⁸ *Industrial Harvest* made visible food scarcity and related conflict, as the financial markets compressed after the 2008 global financial crisis. The planned buying and redistribution of Midwest flour spoke to destabilized and sensitive wheat markets and their relationship to unrest in Egypt and Tunisia. Kavage's gesture to disrupt and make visible this production system is what Gregory Sholette termed "dark matter": the practices and people through whom instituent or activist art practices appear on the margins or in opposition to mainstream museum programming, often finding their place in micro- or quasi-institutions such as Mess Hall.³⁶⁹ Such projects also affirm the importance of long-form development timelines and test ways of sharing artistic processes, both in person and through online platforms. Mess Hall's ability to accommodate *Industrial Harvest* and its return a year later points to what is often not possible to program in conventional museum settings.

In a reflective blog post some three years later, Kavage sums up the wider connections that the project of mass-wheat redistribution made palpably real for participants, wherein wheat access and consumption directly connected to issues of unrest at the point of cultivation:

But, if someone asked me, I would sum up my view of the situation as increased demand and a host of other factors (climate events, biofuels, monetary policy, etc.) magnified by a pretty large and unstable speculative system, which is in turn driven by a few huge, powerful, vertically integrated corporations. This is *all* exacerbated by the fact that with markets it doesn't matter what's actually happening—it just matters what people think is happening—and what people think people think is happening (and so on). The fact that this house of cards could be brought down by any of, oh, 5 or 10 or 100 different and / or random events (or all of them, or some of them) is not only discomfiting. It also makes it

³⁶⁸ The CME was a nonprofit set up in 1898, which went public in 2002. There was a minimum quantity for investment of 5 micro-minis—a cost effective way to gain exposure to the markets. Kavage's uncle guided her understanding of the economic principles behind the exchange, as he had been a young runner for the exchange in the 1960s. Price fluctuations, such as those after the assassination of Kennedy, would lower the value of the investment and impact the grower.

³⁶⁹ Gregory Sholette, recruited Fischer and Bloom as adjuncts at School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and his writing covers topics such as collective work, Occupy and the dark matter of institutional structures that artists work within and at times resist or as Kavage does, make visible. The Smart Museum, Chicago would curate the exhibition *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* in 2012 that integrated associated art practices driven by a generosity ethic and the role of the shared meal in cultural life. Sholette, *Dark Matter*, 4.

easy for any single party to point the finger at the others, effectively diffusing responsibility, perpetuating ignorance and causing those who should care to throw up their hands in inaction and confusion.³⁷⁰

This project was both hyper-local in its distribution of Midwest flour and also an instituent practice that offered a commentary on Chicago's role in the agricultural trading market, in which the vagaries of economic practices in the United States negatively impact neighbors and those well beyond its borders.

Mess Hall's role within Kavage's project and Reynolds' *Tams Year Ten* was in part to provide an activating-community of keyholders and other participants, but also as an ethically aligned venue in which to host project gatherings. Kavage notes that she was able to interact with those who took her 5-pound bags of white wheat flour, often for projects such as Food Not Bombs. Mess Hall's emphasis on nonmonetary exchange also made it an ideal philosophical base. What remains is a pizza recipe printed out in the pile of papers in one of Mess Hall's garage archive boxes and other items that record the labor of loading a truck with 1000 bushels of wheat in Indiana and redistributing it over two years to communities in Chicago, alongside a concurrent blog that details meals made by others. Mess Hall's *Ten Points* offered a principled point of reference for which projects might recur on site, from *Industrial Harvest* to *Tamms Year Ten*. The points were a form of promise to uphold certain principles of practice that were—and remain—in tension with art world structures, perpetuating acts of generosity, redistribution, and social interaction.

The value of unfettered critique of such practices, outside of academia, referenced in Mike Wolfe's detailing of the experiential MFA equivalency of Mess Hall, found an expanded contextual frame in events and exhibitions that served families of incarcerated people. The *Just*

³⁷⁰ Sarah Kavage, "And Back to our Regularly Scheduled Program," February 8, 2011, <https://industrialharvest.wordpress.com/2011/02/08/and-back-to-our-regularly-scheduled-program/>.

Seeds Prison Portfolio event, hosted at Mess Hall in 2009, showed a display of posters drawn up by inmates, making visible their stories and realities, while critic Lori Waxman offered 20-minute reviews to artists of any background with no guarantee of positive response, which was part of her ongoing *60WRD/MIN Art Critic* project. This was not cheerleading or networking to help secure shows elsewhere, but a service that gave frank feedback and bore witness to those within and outside the art school as a unified body of creative producers.³⁷¹ In collapsing such training boundaries, Mess Hall sought to assert the freshly relevant role of creativity in everyday life, particularly for those whose voices had been absent from conventional museums. In this way, public critique at Mess Hall was a reiteration of its core activist concerns, amplifying and empowering the participative potential of all those who convened at its address.

At the time of its closure on March 29, 2013, the keyholders announced an event in which “We will mix practicality with dreams, fantasies and hallucinations in order to brainstorm about future shapes the spirit of Mess Hall might assume.”³⁷² Their dispersal from the site was an event that keyholders conceived of together, with a performance script that echoed the *Ten Point* document by asking questions of those involved about how they had prepared for such an end and the implied archival aspirations of it all. Much had been considered and secured for the archive, but nothing would prove as finalizing as turning the lights off and stepping beyond the site. The final event announcement on Mess Hall’s website read:

Friday, 29 March, 7:00 pm – Midnight
Farewell to Mess Hall: Closing Ceremonies and Celebration
Join us for our final gathering in the space. We will say our farewells with a parade, a key-tossing ceremony and a night-long party. The current key-holders

³⁷¹ Just Seeds, *Prison Portfolio Critique*, February 1, 2009.

³⁷² Mess Hall, final email and website announcement, March 2013.

https://web.archive.org/web/20130812035658/http://messhall.org/?page_id=1362.

do not wish to leave the space alone. We will leave it as we found it: together.³⁷³

The principles that are legible in the archive long after closure draw on events right up to March 23, 2013, and a group of keyholders who activated their own practices within the open structures of Mess Hall. The external forces of political change that came with the second term of President Barack Obama in 2012, alongside the reassertion of Al Goldberg’s property ownership in 2013, suggest both possibilities beyond the site but also the reality about what the loss of space means in a heavily privatized North American context. The wrapping-up of Mess Hall did not shy away from the impact of reclaimed private property, a factor ever resonant among communities of color more usually excluded from the domain of property control.³⁷⁴ Wang observes, “The creative administration of space—i.e. territory and architecture—is of particular significance given the process of world-systemic bifurcation, and the fact that space is the sphere in which property rights are most concretely manifested.”³⁷⁵ For Mess Hall, the storefront was a critical resource that enabled a distinct form of organizing practice over two waves of keyholders, liberated in so many ways from alternative arts practice in nonprofit settings, giving them a head start on structural equity work in the cultural landscape beyond their September 2003 to March 2013 tenure.

Part 3 – Principles of Practice

The loosely banded and overarching principles of practice attributed here to Mess Hall

³⁷³ “Mess Hall is Closing: Final Months,” website announcement, March 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20130812035658/http://messhall.org/?page_id=1362. The final keyholders were Diana Berek, Lora Lode, Lara, Justin Goh, Rozalinda Borcila, Amy Partridge, and Matthias Regan.

³⁷⁴ In reviewing this detail of Mess Hall’s history in relation to reclaimed private property that the broader issue of land ownership comes into play, particularly in light of commentary such as that of food justice activist, Duron Chavis who writes on the role of land trusts in rectifying the disproportionate control of land by white investors, urging black communities to wrest and cultivate communal spaces to grow and share food. Duron Chavis, “Why a Community Land Trust?” blog post, Nov. 1, 2020, <https://duronchavis.com/why-a-community-land-trust/>.

³⁷⁵ Wang, *Mess Hall: What It Is (After the First Year)*.

are ones that inform the project's structuring as a nonhierarchical gathering of artistic and activist forces. Their implicit valuing of being free of existing systems, programmatically unpredictable, and attitudinally hardcore are clear structuring injunctions. These principles tell of what was incalculably critical in their group's work and not necessarily possible in peer projects and the museums that hosted them. Mess Hall was a precursor within the political imaginary, both in its experimental cultural center form and in its ways of practicing as an organization, to what the Occupy movement asserted in the public realm in 2011. To perpetuate certain freedoms, retain an unpredictability of methodology, and be consistent about ethical challenges within the art world system and beyond, Mess Hall needed to process what that might mean for them as a sited organization and platform. These three principles of practice suggest shared capacities and behaviors that in different ways unlock cultural privilege through surplus labor, social bonds, critical attention, and material redistribution. Such principles of practice therefore register in distinct and idiosyncratic ways within the various programmatic elements that feature across the ten years of Mess Hall.

Acting as an experimental cultural center demanded a consciousness of the constraints found in more conventional museological contexts and an organizational pedagogy that reoriented conventions, with rituals and social norms that ran counter to public expectation. Disciplinary boundaries and art-form distinctions were never the focus of the group work undertaken at Mess Hall, nor was there any clarification of what work constituted art. Instead, keyholders gathered others with shared concerns and through committed practices unlocked a vast field of ethical address and an expansive social imaginary. The assortment of perspectives, surplus time, and niche passions allowed Mess Hall to make visible deep-rooted societal issues within the city of Chicago, tied to labor, debt, and climate realities. The activation of such

principles of practice as being free of existing systems, programmatically unpredictable, and attitudinally hardcore reveal core tenets of Mess Hall’s decade-long tenure, hyper-local histories, and scalable possibilities.

A. Free

It was in the reassertion of capital as the property owner reclaimed the storefront site, instigating Mess Hall’s closure in 2013, that the principle of being free showed up in particularly sharp contrast to the overriding seepage of accessible public space and conversational places for critique. Each keyholder had felt the contraction of such social sites from the outset of their engagement with Mess Hall. However, in realizing ways to secure the opposite trajectory and open up possibilities for public space, the loaned storefront on Glenwood Avenue offered a rare opportunity to imagine and impact the social realm more broadly, yet from a place of locational site-specificity. This was an unusual combination of factors in which, as Bromberg notes, everyday decommodification became the goal:

... MH functions as a non-economic space for exchanging ideas and skills, eating with others, developing projects, and celebrating interests with strangers. [...] It suggests a role for non-economic neighborhood spaces—somewhere between work, home, and commercial life—wherein new social bonds, forms of politics, and ventures of all sorts can be cultivated.³⁷⁶

While Mess Hall was decommodified at its core, there was also a resistance among keyholders to the notion of the loaned site being a gift, or the only factor that supported such an economic principle. One participant scrawled on an agenda sheet, “mess hall is not: – a gift (Figure 4.4).”³⁷⁷ This is likely an acknowledgment of the accrued labor and costs associated with keeping the power on and events resourced, alongside the prospect of eventual property return. The

³⁷⁶ Bromberg, “Creativity Unbound,” 214.

³⁷⁷ Sheets stored in Lora Lode’s garage, Chicago.

loaned space did, however, enable a significantly sustained exploration of what being free might mean for a social site invested in embodying generosity in socially broad and intersecting ways.

Mess Hall was able to function more freely than non-profit and commercial peers, asserting a resistance to what art historian and activist Yates McKee would term the three contradictions of left-wing cultural work in the first decade of the 2000s: “the proximity of left-aspiring art to the actual forces of capital; the constriction of those aspirations to the norms and protocols of arts institutions; and, [...] the economic inequalities traversing the art system itself.”³⁷⁸ However, Mess Hall’s closure reflected the organizational reality of private land ownership—a force of capital—rather than that of the sustainable gift, which might have found a better equivalence in a community land trust.³⁷⁹ A storefront to be returned was not a gift, though as a loaned space it engendered a mindset freed for a decade’s tenure from conventional demarcations of cultural centers’ work.

Being free was also an attitude to and a capacity for redistributing resources in which keyholders structurally understood their own position and power to reformulate invisible and mundane systems. What seem almost superficial, convivial gestures by conventional European and standard charity assessments of social impact, such as the potlucks shared and public comments stuck in the window, ultimately proved to be moments for making visible far more structurally significant public issues and service gaps.³⁸⁰ Being free of nonprofit assessment

³⁷⁸ Yates McKee, *Strike Art*, (Brooklyn: Verso Books: 2016) 17.

³⁷⁹ Food justice activist Duron Chavis has written on significance of community land trusts to secure space for African-American communities, where public and private endeavors have failed them and where they have been structurally discouraged or prevented from owning land. Land trusts offer a means to gain control in a land ownership system rigged against people of color and gained particular significance during the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020, some 7 years after Mess Hall’s closure, when community movement became restricted and food distribution systems failed or became too costly to access, due to job losses. <https://duronchavis.com/why-a-community-land-trust/>.

³⁸⁰ Bishop’s writing suggests that conviviality is a distracting expectation within politically-oriented practices, without comprehending the importance and loss of social gathering freedoms within United States public space.

conventions and mission justifications meant there was little to confine keyholders' ways of realizing social and activist practices.

Wang wrote after the first year of Mess Hall's existence about the importance of being free at a horizontal service-level that corresponds with the principal of the hyper-local. Horizontal actions by keyholders and collaborators were distinct from the more vertical redistribution of wealth that their nonmonetary tenancy enabled. These dual forces hinged on different capacities of being free as Wang notes, "Horizontal recirculation is a service of Mess Hall; vertical redistribution is the goal."³⁸¹ Reuse and scavenging continues as a hyper-local service for others beyond Mess Hall and functions to share resources for micro-environmental and individual equity gains. However, Mess Hall chose to offer such horizontal services with distinctive aesthetics by profiling artist-conceived apparatus at their storefront to achieve such goals and in responsive events that involved sharing things directly with those who needed them or were passing by.³⁸²

At Mess Hall the vertical return of resources from the property-owner to the tenant opened a space in which to freely realize and test what a social site might look like within the world-at-large. This act of redistribution highlights the curtailed possibilities for communities set historically, racially, and economically outside of land ownership options. Mess Hall also spoke across its tenure to what Occupy Wall Street (OWS) realized in Zuccotti Park in 2011, with both the right to gather in public and protest, as well as calling attention to the need for and absence of vertical economic redistribution. Mess Hall's goal to activate such a vertical, or rather structural, redistribution of spatial and public wealth beyond their immediate participants shows how the

³⁸¹ Dan S. Wang, *Mess Hall: What It Is (After the First Year)*, 2004.

³⁸² Mess Hall's storage bins were gifted by Dan Peterman, who has continued to produce reuse functional objects, such as *Ground Cover*, a 5000-square-foot dance floor made from recycled plastics that went into Summer Festival circulation in 2010. The light fittings at Mess Hall were also environmentally experimental.

principle of being free was a critical tool for modelling equity beyond the giveaway and the space to gather (more horizontal, hyper-local services). What OWS would make popularly visible as strike art had an equivalency with the outcomes at Mess Hall. Through long-term, event-based, group work in a loaned space, they produced an organizational pedagogy of rare and viable freedoms.³⁸³

McKee's analysis of Occupy Wall Street's pre-history speaks in specific ways to the second wave of Mess Hall's keyholders and their growing activist focus. Chicago itself appears as he details the Chicago Teachers Union strike in 2012 that spread across the United States and that drew on the labor movement of the city. Mess Hall, however, proves organizationally and site specifically more than the pre-history of the Occupy movement, in its spatial embodiment of what rethinking being free means culturally, societally, and as Chicagoans. Collo-Julien would address the stakes for the city in a letter penned in 2005 on behalf of Mess Hall.

Dear Chicago,
... The things you've given away for free: your public spaces, your generous moments, your research labs and archives, your libraries and moments of rest – are all fading, few and far between. Chicago, I love these gifts, and I want to see more of you through them!³⁸⁴

Her positioning of a denuded Chicago in the process of losing its social and cultural sites, proposes Mess Hall as a hopeful endeavor to rethink power, cultural services, and the business of being free to share skills and resources.

Mess Hall chose to circumnavigate genre and disciplinary boundaries, expanding on Chicago's artist-run project history with its own form of direct action, in order "to make the

³⁸³ Strike art sets itself apart from what McKee calls nominal public participation and civic dialogue, instead reinventing art as, "direct action, collective affect, and political subjectivization embedded in radical movements working to construct the commons in the face of both localized injustices and systemic crises that characterize the contemporary capitalistic order." McKee, *Strike Art*, 6.

³⁸⁴ Salem Collo-Julien, "Dear Chicago, from Mess Hall," August 2005. First published in AREA Chicago 1. <https://areachicagoarchive.wordpress.com/2018/03/10/dear-chicago-from-mess-hall/>

redistribution of resources profoundly felt by all who come through the door.”³⁸⁵ The valuing of the free takeaway—the poster essay, the contents of thrift bins, and the time to write a letter—are still redolent forms that linger with liveness in the archive. The significance of being free as a structuring principle is hard to evidence conclusively without a vertically scalable outcome, such as the closure of a supermax prison through the *Tamms Year Ten* project.

The *Free Store* that Mess Hall offered as a recurring social form realized horizontal services as a sustained initiative with multiple partners and in response to multiple hyper-local needs. Arguably, the *Free Store* met more vertical goals by being delivered consistently and in building an expectation of service, as well as offering associated skills that empowered reuse and redistribution beyond the site. Such happenings and their open, responsive style of delivery expanded on a history of store-based arts practices that include The Diggers in San Francisco in the late 1960s and Superflex in Denmark in the 1990s.³⁸⁶ Collo-Julín, as part of Chicago’s *The Free Store* project, would host numerous free stores, the first at Mess Hall scheduled for Black Friday 2006 and the final one on the project’s closure in 2013.³⁸⁷ She would also distribute her grandmother’s things after caring for her until her death, through an estate sale that was both free and a rethinking of the social form of the wake, located at Mess Hall’s storefront. The closing event *Free Sale* text in 2013 humorously highlighted the principle of being free: “It was free to begin with, so just imagine the discounts you’ll find at our going-out-of-business anti-sale!”³⁸⁸ The absurdity of this final offer points to the very liberatory force of Mess Hall as an

³⁸⁵ Wang, *Mess Hall: What It Is (After the First Year)*, 2004. The projects Collo-Julín cites in the *Dear Chicago* letter are Culture-in-Action, HahHa’s Flood, Axe Street Arena, Randolph Street Gallery, Experimental Station and The Resource Center.

³⁸⁶ Joseph del Pesco, “Trip Without A Ticket: Free Store Variations,” in *Open Space*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art online platform, Dec. 15, 2009, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2009/12/trip-without-a-ticket/>.

³⁸⁷ *Free Store Chicago* was a group that included keyholder Collo-Julín, Zena Sakowski, Rob Kelly, and Melinda Fries.

³⁸⁸ Text from Mess Hall’s final announcements featured on their website profiled a Final Free Sale on Saturday, March 24, 2013.

organizational form. The project space undercut capitalism, even while implicated within its systems, and used its loaned storefront site to amplify the role of group work as a force to reimagine a city space not solely invested in individualism, financial exchange, and societal control.

B. The Unpredictable

There is both something deeply predictable about the storefront as a venue as well as a readable tension when it is unpredictably misused or activated by artists. The street-facing and designed-to-serve parameters as well as a specific spatial scale, does result in physical limitations to the potential uses of the space. Marc Fischer pointed to such spatial and locational predictability as the reason for withdrawing from Mess Hall as a programming keyholder in 2007.³⁸⁹ The ability of 6932 Glenwood Avenue to be both a predictable container and producer of accessibly unpredictable culture find clarification in Ted Purves' analysis of social philosopher Georg Simmel's texts on social form and his citing of Hammons's *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*:

A social form such as a shop, whether it be a peddler's blanket, a table at a farmers' market, or a large drugstore, will be recognizable to us in terms of its form, and through it, we will anticipate, somewhat, the range of encounters that might occur within, the ways that we are "with and for" the proprietor, or the person at the cashier's desk. Social forms, then, help us manage our interactions with others, and organize the immensity of the social.³⁹⁰

The legibility of the site as a storefront managed the ways in which participants and passers-by might encounter Mess Hall's programs, particularly those events that were more ambiguous or open in their meaning or potential application. The interdisciplinary mix of keyholders, through

³⁸⁹ Conversation with Marc Fischer.

³⁹⁰ Purves, "Throwing stones in the sea," 108.

the social life supported on site, offered the capacities, skills and dynamics to unleash a program freed from the expectations of a store, as well as being culturally distinct from museums in avoiding categorizations, durational limits, and material consumption. Mess Hall therefore established a social reality where the social form was a point of gathering and discussion, with its events functioning as activations of an open platform rather than as a thematic line of cultural programming.

An early but short-term Mess Hall keyholder, Sam Gould, examined how the clear frame of the storefront was an enabling factor in the types of programming that became possible. Not unlike Simmel's social form, the clear frame meant that Mess Hall could provide both expected shop services, such as offering things to browse and take away, while also being non-functioning in any commercial sense. Programming beyond expected storefront economics and museological conventions was a shared premise of all three artist project spaces, but at Mess Hall this capacity was activated with greatest force in that everything was offered for free.³⁹¹ The clear frame of the storefront was, as Gould suggests, a predictable and empathetic point of entry to the Mess Hall's program. Conversely, the store proved an ongoing referent and clear marker of cultural difference when it failed to conform to its use-function.

When asking strangers to enter into a situation that might be unwieldy and fragmented, masking your activity in a wrapper that is, if not appealing, at least known to them is helpful and pragmatic. We need to be eased into things we are not looking for.³⁹²

The microsocial forms taken at Mess Hall were similarly hospitable and recognizable from pot-and-brunch-lucks to extendable nighttime talks. These familiar moments of social comfort functioned as a safe space in which to raise and process urgencies together. As Gould and

³⁹¹ At Elsewhere nothing was offered for sale that was drawn from its thrift store collection, making a closed system for goods originally gathered for a retail function.

³⁹² Sam Gould, "Flatlands: Non-Hierarchical Space and its Uses," *Journal of Radical Shimming* 9 (2010): 66.

Simmel suggest, clearly framed and routinely social entry points open space for more ambiguous outcomes.³⁹³ The mix of possibilities for practices hosted at Mess Hall could therefore shift unpredictably between didactic and ambiguous content, unsettling what it meant to participate and opening other avenues for connection.

The social life of the site also proved a means to unlock political potentialities unimagined individually, but that through group work would sharpen the focus of activist address and resulting actions. Gould suggests a further construction, of the flat site which anchors programs through predictable factors:

... platforms that operate within these strategies [Tactical Ice Cream Truck], while continuously facilitated by certain core individuals, are constantly in flux, the recurring individuals acting mainly as ballasts, a central role to balance activities which take place over time, space and quotidian narrative.³⁹⁴

The flat site was less about the familiar social form and more about the dynamic and capacities of the participants who activated it. As such, the flat site aligns with what Tom Finkelpearl would term a socially cooperative structure, though at Mess Hall the flattened keyholder hierarchy seems more suited to the equilibrium-finding ballast analogy. The clear frame and flat site clarify ways in which Mess Hall's distinctive embodiment and diffusion of cultural organizing were able to channel more unpredictable and activist forces.

Collo-Julin captured Mess Hall's offer as a mitigator within a field of cultural sites that were disappearing across Chicago, but also as an activator of unpredictably mixed programming:

I know there's no way I can give you everything you want every moment of the day. But please: hang out with me every once in a while. Check out my date book. It's full of events that have nothing to do with each other and have everything in

³⁹³ Mark Allen suggests that greeting visitors on entry to the space, explaining the steps of an activity, and then leaving them free to roam and make sense of the experience, was good manners. He extended this notion of welcome to the archive, in which a degree of order was a way to be accessible to those less familiar with the project.
³⁹⁴ Gould, "Flatlands," 69. *Tactical Ice Cream Truck* is a peer project, offered through the Center for Tactical Magic, that served ice cream, distributed radical organizing texts, and offered DIY surveillance technologies for local activist research use.

common all at once. It's full of moments that mean something to me and my keyholders—moments that I hope are meaningful and wonderful for you, too.³⁹⁵

The varying offer of Mess Hall would begin to map its position in relation to other spaces in the city, the history of labor protest, and hyper-local needs as captured in this open letter written in 2005. This re-estimation of geography through convened moments on site and impacts beyond the site repurposed the social form of the store for more unpredictable ends.³⁹⁶

Mess Hall never settled on a specific programming manifestation, as its characterization as an experimental cultural center might suggest, though there were recurring events that worked around a particular set of variables. Instead, its keyholder-based structure, consensus-building governance, and guests from elsewhere render Mess Hall an unpredictable but telling forecaster of participatory visual culture—an artist project space that chose to disband rather than relocate due to the loss of what the predictable storefront frame enabled. Bromberg would capture Mess Hall's offer as one of "*possibility spaces* for deep, unexpected, or provisional encounters in the city."³⁹⁷ Programmatic unpredictability functioned as a principle of organizational practice secured through the opposing predictability of a storefront site and existing nonprofit gallery conventions.

C. Hardcore

A commitment to ethical values at Mess Hall was both an attitudinal form and a structural approach. Given the interests of first-wave keyholders, such a commitment to being attitudinally hardcore was also synonymous with Punk culture in terms of conflictual processing,

³⁹⁵ Collo-Julien, "Dear Chicago," 2005.

³⁹⁶ Acknowledging the work of a number of social theorists, such as Elisabeth Smolarz, Arjun Appadurai, and Georg Simmel, Purves characterizes how contemporary social-artists' projects bring new horizons into view within a cultural world and its social imaginary. Purves, "Throwing Stones in the Sea," 115.

³⁹⁷ Ava Bromberg, *Creativity Unbound*, 214.

subcultural event foci, aesthetic detailing, and DIY print materials. Each keyholders' existing practice as an artist and/or activist also informed the way they chose to activate societal concerns through the storefront and those in the wider group. Significantly, the loaned storefront site released Mess Hall from the need to seek instrumentalized funding that might have distracted them from the intense addressing of issues that was integral to the group work they chose to do. In discussing the motivating forces of Do-It-Yourself culture, curator Kevin Henry observes that "It is a punk attitude, that "No, we're going to do it ourselves because if we don't do it ourselves we'll be co-opted."³⁹⁸ To negate any individual opinion within such a nonhierarchical approach was not an option, and relational processing had to be worked into the organizational structure. Mess Hall's unusual keyholder formation instigated such behavioral variance, but critically also remained open to secondary audiences through an archival paper trail that traced the impact of such attitudinal forms.

In being attitudinally hardcore about shared societal concerns, Mess Hall tested the curatorial possibilities of an openly conflictual, oddly generous approach. At Mess Hall the intimacy of organizing the space and the long-term duration of keyholder relationships meant that tensions were part of the process alongside a grounded sensitivity, but without expectation of conviviality. Fischer would capture the potential of such an attitude in his writing on unnecessary competition in the arts: "Arguing against competition is not necessarily a vote in favor of an idealized world of shiny happy people holding hands—some of the most productive collaborations can have a lot of tension and disagreement."³⁹⁹ Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonisms acknowledges the tense reality of organizational relationships, that can be extended to

³⁹⁸ Kevin Henry, in conversation with Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julien, Marc Fischer, Anne Dorothee Boehme, Kevin Henry, and Lindsay Bosch. *Temporary Services, Do-it-yourself Interview*, 4.

³⁹⁹ Marc Fischer, *Against Competition* (Chicago: Half Letter Press, 2014), 7.

accommodate the conflictual consensus approach adopted at Mess Hall (and within Metallica) without demanding overt acts of antagonism. Continuing in this line of thinking Fisher cites a relationship key to the heavy metal band Metallica, whose co-founders, James Hetfield and Lars Ulrich, routinely screamed at each other in disagreement. Ulrich admitting in a band documentary, “I’m afraid of changing what has worked. Twenty years of hatred sold one hundred million records.”⁴⁰⁰ Mess Hall was unfazed by disagreement and chose an approach to programming that allowed time to accommodate keyholder perspectives, with only one keyholder choosing to step away.⁴⁰¹ Arduous and long conversations were integral to Mess Hall’s organizing which, in the second wave of keyholders in 2007, took time to settle into a productive dynamic.⁴⁰²

Such an attitudinal quality to the organizing of Mess Hall finds its atmospheric source in the recurring *Hardcore Histories* series convened on site by Marc Fischer, Terence Hannum, and Paul Sargent between 2005 and 2006. Each of these events centered on the subcultural genre of heavy metal music from a specific geographical context or identity grouping, combined with the sharing of an associated themed meal, from an *Italian Hardcore Pasta Dinner* to a night of vegan Swedish meatballs, or a *Canadian Hardcore Pancake Breakfast* with Labatt beer and maple syrup. These events took an immersive approach to their themes as well as the niche knowledge of participants.⁴⁰³ Attendees and the conveners brought their own heavy metal record

⁴⁰⁰ Marc Fischer, *Against Competition*, 7.

⁴⁰¹ Gould reflects on the grouping of projects such as his Red76, Temporary Services, Center for Tactical Magic, and Just Seeds. He notes that while they may share political and philosophical goals, their methodologies and practices are different. He goes on to problematize the term social practice which amasses all such groups together by assuming a shared methodology, deflating prospects of more dynamic conversation around hardcore goals. Sam Gould with Daniel Fuller, *The Pop-Up Book Academy*, Aug. 17, 2009. <https://magazine.art21.org/2009/08/17/sam-gould-red76/>.

⁴⁰² Lora Lode, *conversation*, 2019.

⁴⁰³ *Hardcore History* events have focused on 7" records, brevity in music, Queercore, Straight Edge, a candlelight dinner with the band *He Who Corrupts*, presentations on *Les Thugs* and *The Crucifucks*, and a series of Italian, Swedish and Finnish *Hardcore Dinners* with regional music and cuisine.

collections, took turns playing tracks, and shared anecdotes about original performances. Accompanying photocopyable posters contained essays prepared alongside informal lectures given on the night, as well as collaged imagery from the original shows (Figure 4.5). Such a print aesthetic extended to the band and event posters pasted on the Mess Hall's bathroom wall, which likewise encapsulate the DIY and subcultural context of Chicago and a programming approach that drew heavily on the metal and punk music scenes.⁴⁰⁴

The amassed event and project offerings at Mess Hall shifted definitions of creativity through the mix of backgrounds and practices represented, including metal enthusiasts, introduced through keyholders. Salem Collo-Julin reflected on such a value during an interview as part of *Temporary Services*: “Another of our hardcore values is the notion that we don’t see any distinction between things that are—creativity that comes out of the art world and creativity that comes out of the rest of the world as though those might be two separate places.”⁴⁰⁵ This attitude expanded at Mess Hall with the attention given to subcultural content and specific issues within the public realm as a means of locating and supporting micro-community identities within the city and sustaining them long-term beyond the site, be they punk Queercore or animal rights activists. Some keyholders and affiliates conducted direct activisms and others gathered research and observations, as an experimental cultural center might, about systemic gaps, surveillances, and inequities in the system of public space and resource distribution.

Across its ten years, Mess Hall let necessary hardcore behaviors and attentions become structuring devices within its steady spatial form.⁴⁰⁶ Those project significances and the

⁴⁰⁴ These *Hardcore Histories* posters echo Machine Project's day-of or after, bespoke posters that likewise did not serve a promotional purpose but instead offer an archival paper trail from the actual event.

⁴⁰⁵ Salem Collo-Julin, “Episode 218: Temporary Services” interview with Shannon Stratton and Duncan MacKenzie, *Bad at Sports* podcast, Nov 1, 2009, <http://badatsports.com/2009/episode-218-temporary-services/>.

⁴⁰⁶ Natilee Harren, panel host, “Sites of Micro-Community,” College Art Association Conference, Los Angeles, 2018.

communities they advocated for grew increasingly relevant as local issues of police overreach, unnecessary drug enforcement, and food scarcity escalated. Mess Hall used a neighborhood storefront to live out the social potential of the space, in ways distinctive from those of commercial galleries and corporate coffee shop culture, by understanding the reduction dominant culture brings and the exclusionary social form of such sites. Mess Hall's archive is a means to re-access their materials, thinking, and challenges between 2003 and 2013, but also offers a critical perspective on activism as an artistic strategy.⁴⁰⁷ These principles of practice are one way to envision how Mess Hall asserted organizationally embodied difference in the cultural sphere.

Conclusion

Committed to excluding no one from the programmatic lines of thinking that emerged on site, Mess Hall archived itself in ways that produced a paper trail that captured the attitude of critique central to its keyholders, friends, and those with shared activist concerns. The focus, energies, and thrift that Mess Hall offered for free created space to rethink art and museological practices in more humanely-connected and structural ways. The familiarity of the loaned storefront freed participants from art-world expectations, enabling unpredictable ends without predetermining goals. In being attitudinally hardcore about ethical and social concerns, through the idiosyncratic passions of collectors, hobbyists, and rogue museum speakers, Mess Hall created a generative set of organizational practices from its social site on Glenwood Avenue.

There is an overt ideological revelation in everything Mess Hall did and in its remains. The resistances embodied on site through the various events and projects remain relevant within

⁴⁰⁷ The Newberry Library in Chicago received the *Never-the-Same* archive in 2015, though it had been in development from 2010 through Daniel Tucker and Rebecca Zorach, with a focus on collecting counter-cultural art projects from the 1960s forwards from Chicago.

a cultural landscape that still systemically fails to protect public space, food security, and nondominant cultural practices. Angelo's grilled cheese sandwich prisoner-invention set in motion an artist project space that went beyond its storefront and into the public sphere of what was societally-presumed, ignored, or forgotten. Mess Hall held disparate social lives together, as a pedagogical and activist force, and in turn those lives shaped a social imaginary and archive whose participants embraced Scandinavian hardcore and closed a supermax prison.

Chapter Five. *Principles of Practice*

Summary

In the preceding chapters' focus on three artist project sites—Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall—I have detailed how artists who organize spaces offer a particular insight on existing cultural institutions and participatory visual culture. Their storefront social forms, phases of organizational change, and significant principles of practice identify a constellation of factors that informed their processes as social sites. Through archival research and conversations with those who were there, I have suggested that each project held to an organizational pedagogy that instigated museological variance and changed how people could experience artwork. Central to this administrative history are the principles of practice that emerged through each site (Figure 5.1); these continue to be particularly relevant as the cultural sphere structurally reckons with racial representation, inclusion, and equity.

In this concluding chapter, I will summarize how the participatory expansions, structural behaviors, and platform affordances realized through the nine principles of practice shifted the possibilities for “artists who help artists” by convening organizations resistant to dominant culture.⁴⁰⁸ The focus remains on Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall, but is written with an awareness of the many more artist project spaces that emerged during this timeframe, and which hold to different organizational categorizations and associations within the field of independent arts organizations.⁴⁰⁹ Through socially informed investigations of artist project

⁴⁰⁸ Asher Hartman (@chickentasteslikewood) credited Mark Allen at Machine Project, among others, for their hosting of and advocacy for Godawful Theatre Company, characterizing it as being “supported by artists who help artists.” <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLVPmKaF2ak/>.

⁴⁰⁹ Ashley Hawkins and Kate Fowler’s as yet unpublished work on Community Centers of Power raises a politically contextualized (2020-21) variation on the artist project space, informed by their work at Studio Two Three in Richmond, Virginia, since 2009.

spaces, I extend the interdisciplinary approach of this study to museums and those seeking to work in them, as ways to rethink organizational systems and their inherent structural exclusions in more empathetically human and potentially messy ways.

Independent arts organizations can be difficult to write about because they, and the art they create, are not always easily categorized. While the three sites are collectively identified as artist project spaces within this research, other descriptive namings could be applied to them. In terms of function, Mess Hall and Machine Project routinely referred to themselves as experimental cultural centers, while Elsewhere adopted a living museum and residency classification. Grouping all three together as artist project spaces makes visible the patterns and chronologies they organizationally share and the ways in which they are culturally significant beyond their storefronts. However, the distinct characteristics of each project also suggest that there is value in considering them individually. For the purposes of offering an arts administrative history of the practices that emerged at Mess Hall, Machine Project, and Elsewhere across their shared timelines beginning in 2003, I want to focus on the principles that inform their work. The shared possibilities that emerge from the participatory expansions, structural behaviors, and platform affordances of these nine principles of practice, indicate each artist project space's activating role within wider participatory visual culture in North America and its relationship to mainstream museum culture.

While the nonprofit trajectory of organizing brings Machine Project and Elsewhere into closest alignment, with their similarly stepped timelines for organizational change, it is in 2008 that all three sites coalesce in a period of structural shift. Mess Hall welcomed a new wave of keyholders, based predominantly in the neighborhood; offsite hosting and future residency prospects energized Machine Project's conception of site, and Elsewhere moved beyond its

founding campout survival by reformulating staffing structures and organizational vision. Outwardly, this shared organizational turn aligns with both the optimism of an Obama presidency and the contraction of the field of independent artist organizations caused by the global financial crisis. In 2008, each of these artist project spaces had also reached a point where their approach had gained a generative core of participants and a reputation that enabled them to shift their organizational practices, requiring fresh energies and programming emphasis.

The activation of systemic freedoms, by degrees, at each social site and the variations in managing their resources in relation to hyper-local needs, aligns with what Nati Linares and Caroline Woolard term a solidarity economy, where cultural programs contain “systems-change work that addresses root causes rather than symptoms of cultural inequity.”⁴¹⁰ What their report identified in terms of philanthropic possibilities for change in 2021, echoes the reformulatory potential and actions of Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall within participatory visual culture and beyond.

A precarious, hybrid mix of group labor and surplus resources alongside secured tenancies was critical to each of these three artist project sites. Additionally, there were participants who had secured stabilizing employment, many in academia, by 2008, leading to a dispersal of keyholders and performers. This diffusion fueled a field of practice and bolstered the focus for emerging grant funding and networking bodies. However, individual financial contributions remained motivationally significant with sites offering humorous membership statuses and absurd naming-right inversions that countered conventional museum sponsor demands. Such an assortment of small financial contributions alongside donated participant labor, offered social rather than material benefits valued by those who shared concerns of a

⁴¹⁰ Nati Linares and Caroline Woolard. “Solidarity Not Charity: A Rapid Report,” (Bronx: Grantmakers in the Arts, March 2021) 6.

contracting public sphere and saw the expansive potential of Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall.

However, having access to a storefront space despite an economic downturn appears a significant factor for the duration of their tenures, from a property owner who could carry the financial impact, to a family who continued to share an inherited site, and an artist who could accept the obligation of commercial rent. Redirecting these white-held affordances for structural gains took time and a commitment to long term relationships and a radical organizational responsiveness. There was donated participant labor from artists and activists of color that significantly benefitted organizational consciousness at each site. Those voices were critical and indicative of a change in historically and predominantly white-led social sites as they structurally learnt to distribute their advantage by seeding Black, LGBTQ+, and gender-affinity projects (Machine Project), focusing on support systems for under-represented artists (Elsewhere), and continuing their practices long after closure in court rooms, thrift distribution, and community gardens (Mess Hall).

What each site changed within visual culture in North America between 2003 and 2016 connects them to the artist organizers who came next, as they reckoned more directly with social justice and racial equity. The sited practices at Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall separated them from conventional value systems employed in museums and public spaces and allowed them space and time to reimagine cultural institutions in more socially attuned ways. Critical affinities and presentational differences may yet be lost in the rush to program artists beyond their social sites and into mainstream settings, if their principles of practices are not integral to planning processes or are ignored in terms of structural implications.

Gathering the principles of practice within three kinds of organizational impact clearly asserts their role in shaping the cultural sphere (Figure 5.2). The first is the platform affordances that Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall offered, by reimagining more systematically equitable distribution of resources, services, and advocacy by valuing hyper-local neighborhood contexts, being free, and being programmatically unpredictable. The second is the structural impact of behaviors more usually regarded as personality and relational traits such as empathy, humor, and being attitudinally hardcore, that are critical to shifting organizational norms. The third is the radically inclusive expansion of participatory practice through the valuing of the overheard as a sonic and imagined force, the indication of memory in the liveness of remains, and the non-object status of all content. The emergence of these principles of practice across such idiosyncratic sites serves to connect them fluidly to those before and after them, as well as open them to future reformulations and underline their impact beyond their sited, social life.

1. Platform affordances

Each artist project space activated features that invited certain behavioral pathways and proved to be structurally defining affordances. These affordances characterize the instituent differences of Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall as cultural platforms. Acting as structural principles, the specific affordances are the hyper-local connections with neighborhood sites, offering services and resources for free, and accepting unpredictable outcomes within their programs. In upsetting related organizational conventions, these platform affordances allowed each social site to realize more structurally equitable goals.

The legible platform, or rather social form, of the storefront, and the many micro-communal acts hosted there, de-normalized the siloed, yet homogenized tendencies of

conventional cultural institutions in the early 2000s. Adopting the affordance of programmatic unpredictability in this context made room for disciplinarily and culturally non-dominant voices of artists and activists. Performances, installations, and service gestures evolved over the duration of each social site and became a more visible and comprehensible field of practice.

The sites that surrounded Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall held deep histories and acted as dynamic forces in a cultural landscape of omissions and forgetfulness. Connections with and among these neighborhood sites directed organizational processes towards the stories and needs of those with dissonant identities, from the Echo Park queer film festivals beside Machine Project, to the Beloved Community Center's activism around police accountability a block from Elsewhere, to Flood, an earlier AIDS hydroponic vegetable cultivation project near Mess Hall. Each artist project space gradually realized the associated historical resonances of these connections and built intimate and everyday community relationships within their hyper-local neighborhood contexts which became a directional platform affordance.

Mess Hall stands outside of nonprofit constructions, activating the platform affordance of being free in the most impactful way. In redistributing surplus resources and energies towards more equitable ends, Mess Hall redirected the vertical release from rental costs towards shared, communal service. However, across the three sites through artists practicing organizationally in very different contexts, there are revealing differences in the ability to deliver on the platform affordance of being free. For Machine Project, specialist workshops and an early consultation service required a charge, while at Elsewhere, the residencies and museum entrance charges covered the bare minimum of costs. The archive offered one way to participate, without the cost or logistics required to attend in person, particularly at Machine Project and Elsewhere. Longer-term funding initiatives to reduce barriers to residency participation at Elsewhere, particularly

among BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and caregiver artists, has also become an increasingly pressing goal. The everyday social life on each site had political implications that remain urgent in an art-world system committed to capital rather than generosity and surplus.

Each platform affordance perpetuates further freedoms that become proportionally larger forces in shaping each artist project space, because of the duration of their tenure and their intimate organizational scale. How closely each social site feels and represents the challenges of lived experiences beyond their door clarifies their role as an instituent force, albeit with distinct foci. There is a responsiveness built into the framework of each artist project space that allows them to activate certain affordances, not usually the preserve of conventional museological practices, and test their effectiveness as sources of productive exchange, energy, and representation.

These activations of platform affordances, including being free, programmatically unpredictable, and hyper-locally connected, were dynamic principles of practice that attempted to re-formulate participatory visual culture more equitably.

2. Structuring behaviors

The organizationally defining impact of behaviors, such as practicing and embracing empathy and humor, and being attitudinally hardcore, emerge in layers of structural significance at Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall. There are the relationships between material and social things, the understandings or acknowledged unknowablenesses of another's experience, and the interconnections between them all.⁴¹¹ Significantly, in the context of this research there is also an expanded spatial and organizational layer in which these behaviors play an important

⁴¹¹ Gokcigdem, "Introduction," xxi.

role. At the three sites, empathy and humor were bound in a familial dynamic that sustained participants as they resisted or found the energies to perform differently as organizational bodies. At the same time, their ethically hardcore commitments extended empathetic behaviors into the detail of organizational practices, uncovering ways to enact care at a structural level. Humor helped alleviate tension when incongruent programming, disciplinary disregard, and participatory prompts went too far, requiring an acceptance of failure as a critical aspect of organizing each artist project space.

The founding conveners, hosts, and keyholders embodied these behavioral capacities from the outset, while embarking on the business of running a space as an art practice itself. Their approaches and backgrounds shaped the tone and focus of the social life and relational dynamics that emerged on each site. Allen knew standup comedy and had delivered unlikely events, before Machine Project, that were innately interdisciplinary as they activated everyday rituals, or failed to do so. Scheer and Sherman saw fictional narratives in everything and wrote collaboratively with others whom they met in street workshops in Philadelphia. Temporary Services felt urgencies in simple pleasures shared and the value of more radically administered surplus, testing out project forms in an office suite before Mess Hall.⁴¹² These early energies and background experiences, alongside personal health challenges, are critical forecasters of the role behaviors such as empathy, humor and hardcore ethics held on site. In varying degrees such care, laughter, and instituent practices shaped each social site across their tenures.

Forging relationships among performers, participants, and passersby, alongside those societally hidden, held particular significance where nondominant cultural practices and non-normative identities were at play. Behaviors evident in event and project programs delivered by

⁴¹² Turning Temporary Services' office in Suite 1124, 202 South State Street into a Warming Center during the winter of 2001. <https://temporarieservices.org/served/past-services/2001-2/>.

culturally uncelebrated artists aided the release of disciplinary, medium, and subject boundaries. By reformulating or combining programming in fresh ways, they repositioned non-normative practices in new and unguarded contexts. Shaking off expectations of presentational forms and art content meant work emerged that acknowledged more complex and quotidian details of life, critically revealing artistic process and an openness to participation. Such deeply mapped care rethought organizational impulses, reorienting what sited, instituent, and social practices of art could be, and how they differed from conventional museological capacities, with resulting implications for generative archives committed to a non-reductive record.

In structurally rethinking what an empathetic organization might be, new conventions and systems surfaced at Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall that resisted and challenged some of the unconscious and exclusionary presumptions of more established cultural institutions. The ability to reconfigure each storefront and its associated sites via group processes and work, rather than as governmentally or culturally prescribed, proved critical to how each site extended attention into neighborhoods and specific community partnerships. As a result, each artist project space emerged with participants whose arts practices and ideologies were at odds with the prevailing culture. Their solutions to performing in this landscape did not seek to be radically utopian, instead offering pragmatic services and occasionally absurd performances of structural goals. Such empathic behaviors accrued, exposing tensions, offering variants, and bringing about changes that celebrated those denied subjectivity. In reconnecting people, as well as building and sharing the social life of each site, Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall facilitated the propagation of a field of artist organizers.

The topsy-turvy release of participants from expectations about how to practice within the public sphere bonded them as loosely associated groups resisting cultural norms and

identities that, much like incongruent humor, reasserted their subjectivity as fittingly-other. Humor proved to be a generative lubricant for realizing the intimate world of an artist project space in relation to the potentially overwhelming reality of the sociopolitical sphere.⁴¹³ And as a behavior, humor functioned outside of established support systems to enact accessible care.

An open acknowledgment of the human capacity for difference and the provision of alternatives to assumed systems redefines conviviality as a more realistic offer of collective generosity that can accommodate conflict. Antagonism itself is not an appropriate focus for organizational practices in such systematically fragile North American terrain; instead, the right to disagree proves paramount. Ethical commitments to structural equity goals and hyper-local services took time to accrue substance and meaning within a shifting contemporary cultural landscape. What Mess Hall more fully realized, in choosing an overtly political and ideologically revealing approach to programming, emerged in slightly less legible and more instituent ways in the absurd reformulations at Elsewhere and Machine Project. In maintaining an unresolved openness through the experiential upset of spatial, behavioral, and material norms, participants remained connected to the issues impacting people as they lived out their daily lives in a public sphere that increasingly denied behavioral difference. The hurtling force of capitalism, that controls and attempts to define social lives, curtails the right of protest, imposes forms of creativity, and disallows simple pleasures.

Humor, empathy, and hardcore ethics fluctuated as behavioral forces depending on the personalities, backgrounds, and focus of each keyholder, resident, or performer, but ultimately formed an associative core of attitudes that are structurally significant. Such principles of practice proved responsive to wider urgencies, and structurally ingrained processes of organizing

⁴¹³ Laymon, “Keise Laymon’s American Memoir “Heavy””

that escalated the scope and impact of programming at each social site. The structuring behaviors that enable platform affordances and museological variance also underpin the capacity of artist project spaces to expand the participatory realm with care.

3. Participatory expansions

Within each site an expansion of participatory practices found their most inclusive capacities through an activation of the overheard and the memorial liveness indicated within the non-object remains. Such an understanding of participation, beyond the social life of the site, negates any authorial or location bias, committing to unforeseen entry points, access through sounds overheard in passing-by, or in the archive where aural and indexical details offer generative scope to build on the social imaginaries. Critically, this approach enabled each artist project space to construct a noncompetitive present, as well as afterlife, by opening themselves to nonhierarchical modes of participation. Stepping into the social imaginary of a former artist project space through its archive—or its reformulating as an ongoing site, as is the case at Elsewhere—one finds what was once intermedial, unfinished, or dissonant, all over again. Each person's point of entry brings a transdisciplinary realignment that takes their knowledge and experience across disciplinary silos and beyond dominant narratives. The expansion of the participatory into oscillating layers of engagement reveals new histories and fresh resistances.

The overheard remains an auditory possibility for Machine Project as ping pong balls bounce across the mezzanine of the Hammer Museum which houses a playable installation from their residency in 2010. The participatory qualities that the sonically overheard imply in how we gather information, engage with performances, or take action have the potential to decenter singular narratives of an event experience and its retrieval in the archive. A concurrent emphasis

on casually garnered language, in anecdotal transcripts of poetry recordings with extraneous sound, furthers the scope of what was overheard. Mix into this aural landscape the social contact encouraged by keyholders and residents, through the self-managed archives stashed across Chicago for Mess Hall or lost in warehouse corners for Elsewhere, or beneath a humorously machinic animation at Machine Project's web site, and then the overheard gains spatial specificity and relational immediacy.

The overheard acts as a marker of more quotidian and relatable project details, experienced directly, indirectly, or accidentally as projects unfolded: the social life of the meals shared and records played at Mess Hall or the window-bay performances and anecdotally fueled tours at Elsewhere, led by those who were there, those who overheard them, and those who heard of them. These auditory and affective details conveyed the specifics of events and the spatial qualities of the sites. The escalated role of the overheard as a participatory expansion is in part a product of the informal storefront setting where sound bleeds out, rather than contained by built-for-purpose and behaviorally codified theatres or concert halls where listening is directed and focused.

The liveness of memory, as indicated in the physical archival remains of each artist project space, functions as the ontologically activating variation of the overheard. The energies and identities that shaped past gestures, performances, and activisms become palpably real through scarred, reformulated, and annotated objects. The indexical capturing of liveness in such things prompts further participation in the archive as an expansion of past actions, as well as an acceptance of object-genealogies that can assert, in turn, academically agreed-upon, collaboratively fictional, or hidden narratives. In each site's acceptance of such side-by-side and

countering meanings, there is also an inherent openness to stories and identities previously hidden or under-represented.

The subjectivities made visually and haptically evident through the marks of the liveness produced through these social sites are often of those whose practices do not categorically or societally fit the conventional, known-name artist archive. The handling of memory in this way is a form of museological care that looks past presentational norms and organizational order towards a more complex understanding of who is present in these things, from the scratched-up floorboards at Machine Project, to the sweated condensation on glass cabinets at Elsewhere, to the accrued marginalia on the project manifesto at Mess Hall. Liveness has the capacity to honor process and associated subjectivities in a way that challenges museological display and archive conventions. Preventing the loss from view of such domestic rituals, dissonant bodies, and activist agendas by retaining indexical cues becomes freshly relevant as new political urgencies arise and past exclusions become strikingly clear.

In hosting those artists, performers, and activists who did not fit within the disciplinary silos of cultural institutions in the early 2000s, these artist project spaces proved a platform for performative and spatial practices rather than finished productions, more likely experienced in-process. To capture such shifting experiential qualities onsite and in the archive meant retaining the liveness of details. Such participatory evidence demanded an overarching attitude of material care in which all performative remains were saved as non-*abject*. A chipped but favored coffee mug among project ephemera in a residency suitcase, a leftover \$50 bill for future utilities, or a list of projects deemed unfeasible—all detail the processing and social life critical to the artist project space.

For participatory expansions to function beyond the social life of each site the resulting mess of things left over matters. The non-object logic of the materials that remain are the markers of the aesthetics of the social, as well as being more particular material culture reminders of functioning between 2003 and 2016. Additionally, the symbolic values associated with some objects bind them emotionally to the performers, resident artists, or keyholders who chose to set them apart. Instead of the stalling nostalgia of the untouched historic house or the encapsulating museum display, the orderings, gatherings, and reformulations possible at each social site reveal processes and identities within the unsettled bind of loss and memory, revived by further artist citations and concomitant mess. Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall all adopted an approach characterized by an inclusive material care for things more usually considered waste, which also reflected their larger ethics of accepting things more usually categorically and societally excluded, at a basic level.

The significance of expanding the conception of the participatory sphere through the overheard, memorial liveness, and the non-abjection of the resulting material remains, including the auditory and textual substrate, allowed each artist project space to be an intrinsically open form. In enabling a movement beyond their own frames, Machine Project, Elsewhere, and Mess Hall rewrote concepts of organizational inclusivity through the depth of their ideologically impacted social forms and their presentational approaches to in-process realities. Artist project spaces reoriented participatory visual culture from the odd combinatory specifics of event programs, to the projects as publicly overheard, to the mess (and order) of the archival remains.

Towards structural change

The principles of practice that artist project spaces emotionally, behaviorally, and institutionally adopted produced new forms of presentation and inclusive care for non-dominant subjectivities. In doing so, they were able to move beyond what museums could offer, constrained within existing standards of categorization, disciplinary groupings, and accepted-narrative norms. Machine Project performed as a parallel museum Education Department that pushed absurdly at disciplinary conventions and their implications for participatory visual culture. Elsewhere practiced as the divergent Collections Department that accommodated structurally significant behaviors in its material cultural archive. Mess Hall embodied the rogue museum Community Outreach Department that built a platform of affordances that challenged who culture was for (Figure 5.3). Each realized capacities within their storefront sites that shared their organizational variation beyond their doors and challenged prevailing concepts within the public sphere through the practices they convened, hosted, and activated. The social sites' roles in generating dynamic social imaginaries proved critical to their organizational pedagogy and instigation of structural shifts. What they realized as arts organizations or as artist organizers, resistant to dominant cultural narratives, added necessary amendments, additions, and accruals to participatory visual culture. The expanded reach of the participatory, the acceptance of empathetic behaviors as structurally significant, and the activation of more equitable platform affordances took the organizing impact of each artist project space beyond the social.

* * *

In the process of focusing on three artist project spaces which offered very different variations on both museums as participatory sites and socially-engaged practices as sited forms, I have offered a perspective that is rooted in my museum training, pedagogical thinking, and art

historical reading. I wish for the energy and directness of those who wrote about their involvement in these projects as they were unfurling, and of those who with hindsight wrote amusing and politically bold guidance on how to manifest ideas in the world as artists committed to people, rather than to the art market. In collating pieces of archival and spoken content that reflected shifting cultural norms, my intention is to act as a collated resource for further reframings of the work of these projects in a broader and more demographically representative context. Something remarkable happened in these artist project spaces in North America between 2003 and 2016. The most compelling thing about rethinking that contribution is an expanded conversation about its relevancies and the associated organizational forms that have emerged since, particularly for those who think critically about arts practice as a force within our everyday social lives.

Illustrations



Figure 1.1: Machine Project window with A-board signage (2014)
Photo: Author, 2014.



Figure 2.1: Machine Project *Closing Print Sale* (2018)
Photo: Author, 2018.



Figure 2.2: Machine Project floorboards (2018)

Photo: Author, 2018.



Figure 2.3: Machine Project performance on Echo Park Lake, Los Angeles—Carmina Escobar, *Fiesta Perpetua!* (2018)
Photo: Author, 2018.

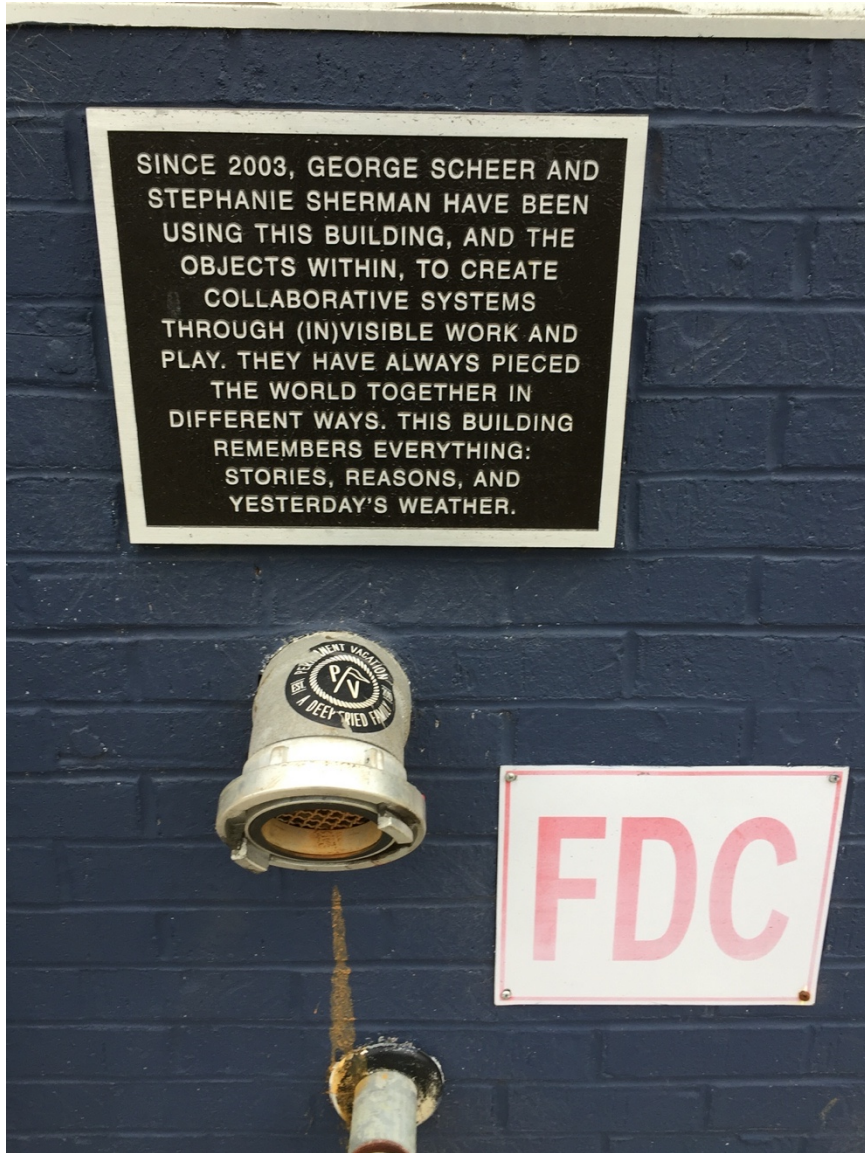


Figure 3.1: Elsewhere exterior with historic marker—Chloe Bass, *The Book of Everyday Instruction* (2015)
Photo: Author, 2019.



Figure 3.2 Elsewhere frontage (2021)
Photo: Jesse Hoyle, Elsewhere, 2021.



Figure 3.3: Elsewhere first floor interior with swings and hand-plaited umbilical cord—Colin Bliss, *The Swings at Elsewhere* (2012) and Kevin Brophy and Rosa Nussbaum, *Keeping Young and Living Longer* (2019)
Photo: Author, 2019.



Figure 3.4: Elsewhere staircase to second floor with hand-drawn Carolina Sales Company bookkeeping records—Meghan MacDonald and Laura MacAulay, *Selling Field or Similar Work* (2012)
 Photo: Author, 2019.



Figure 3.5: Elsewhere ribbon room (2006–present)
Photo: Jesse Hoyle, Elsewhere, 2021.



Figure 3.6: Elsewhere collection materials and suitcase archive (2004–2007)
Photo: Author, 2017.



Figure 3.7: Elsewhere second floor with collection items on reused shelving—Queer Lab, 99
Books About Love (2013)
Photo: Author, 2019.



Figure 4.1: Mess Hall former storefront exterior, 6932 Glenwood Avenue (2019)
Photo: Author, 2019.

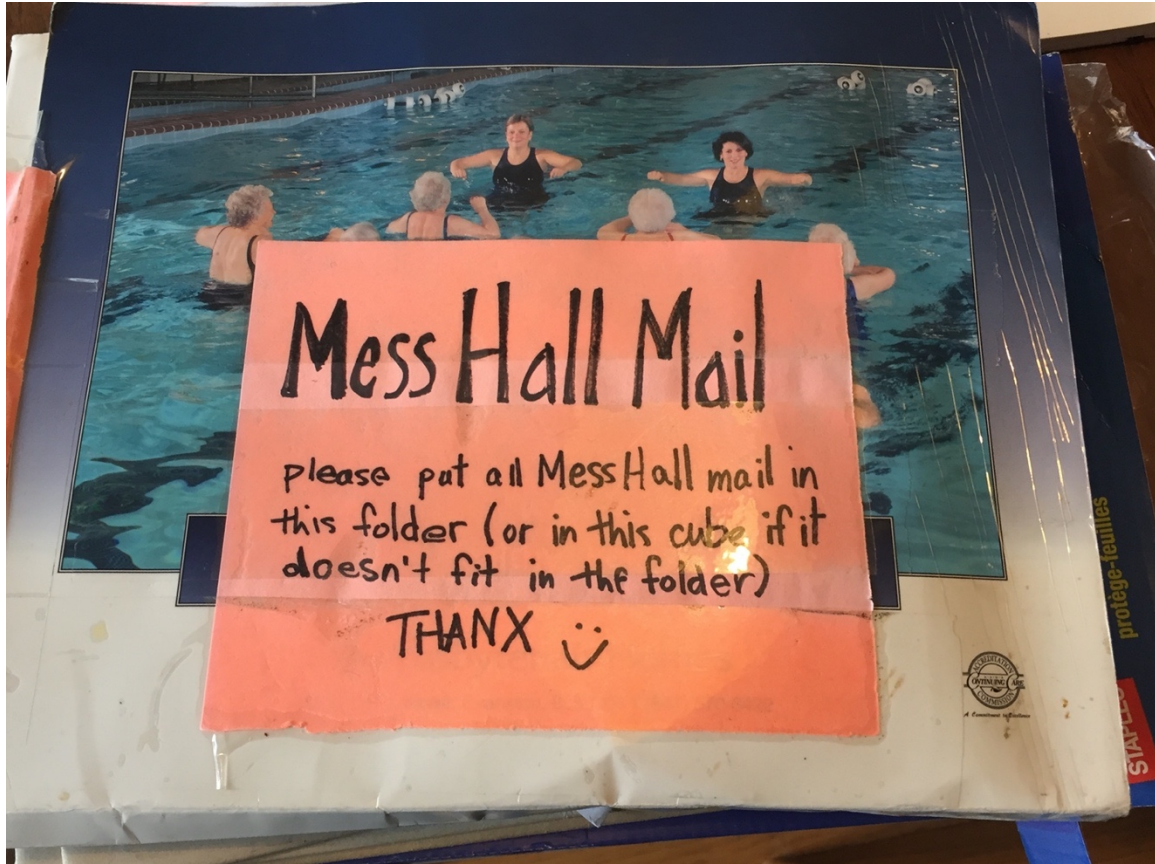


Figure 4.2: Mess Hall mail folder
Photo: Author, 2019.

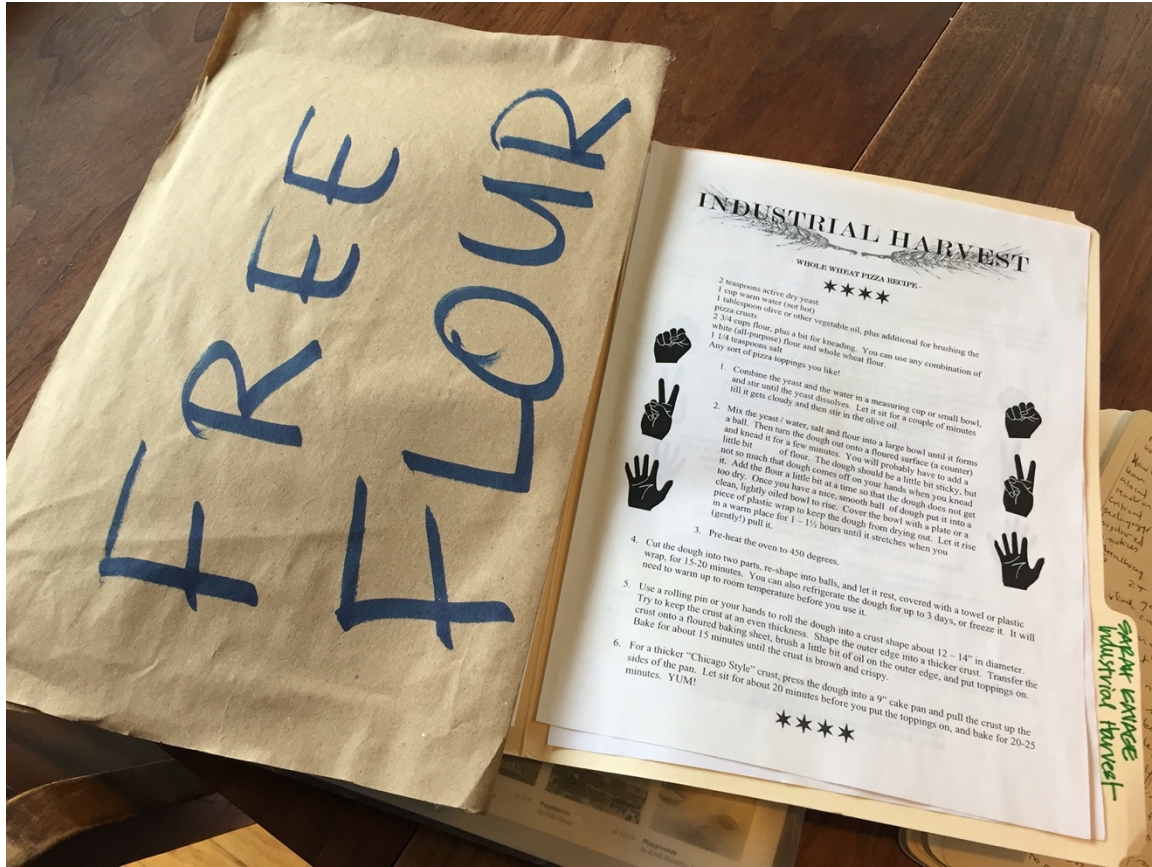


Figure 4.3: Mess Hall project archive with free flour signage and associated pizza recipe—Sarah Kavage, *Industrial Harvest* (2010)
Photo: Author, 2019.

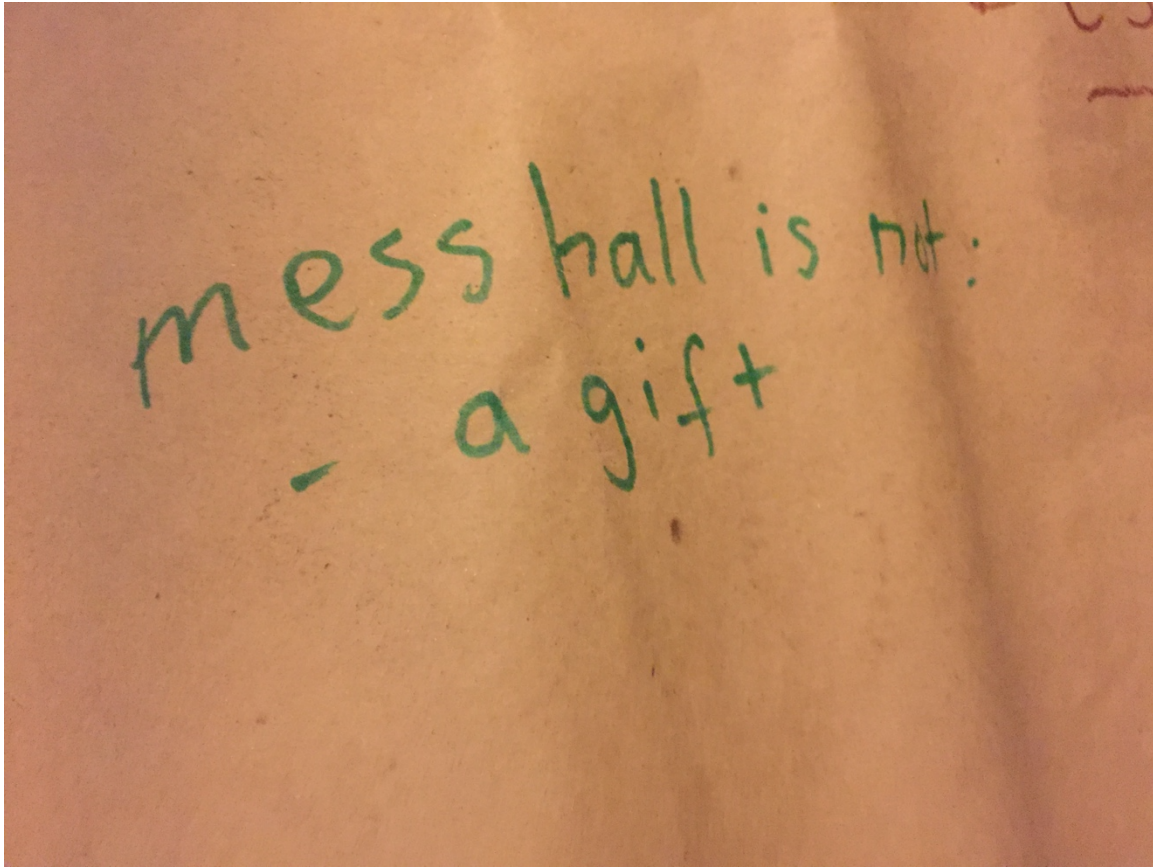


Figure 4.4: Mess Hall project archive with detail of keyholder meeting note
Photo: Author, 2019.

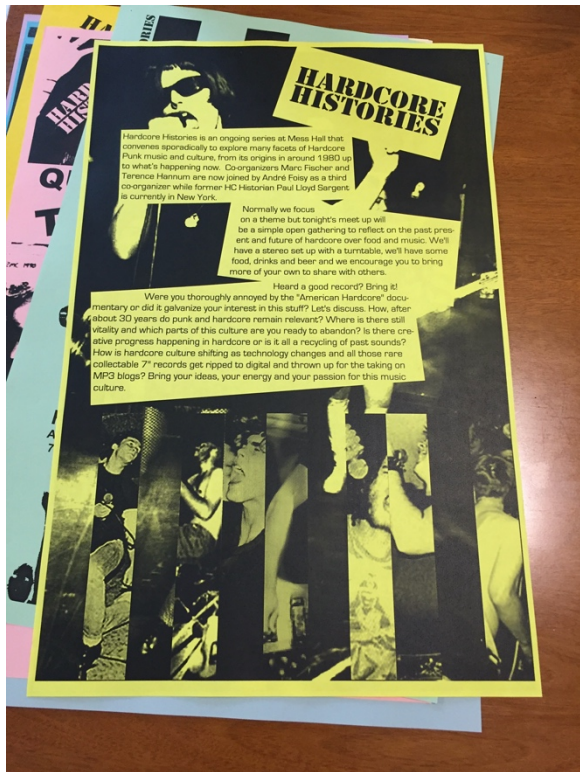
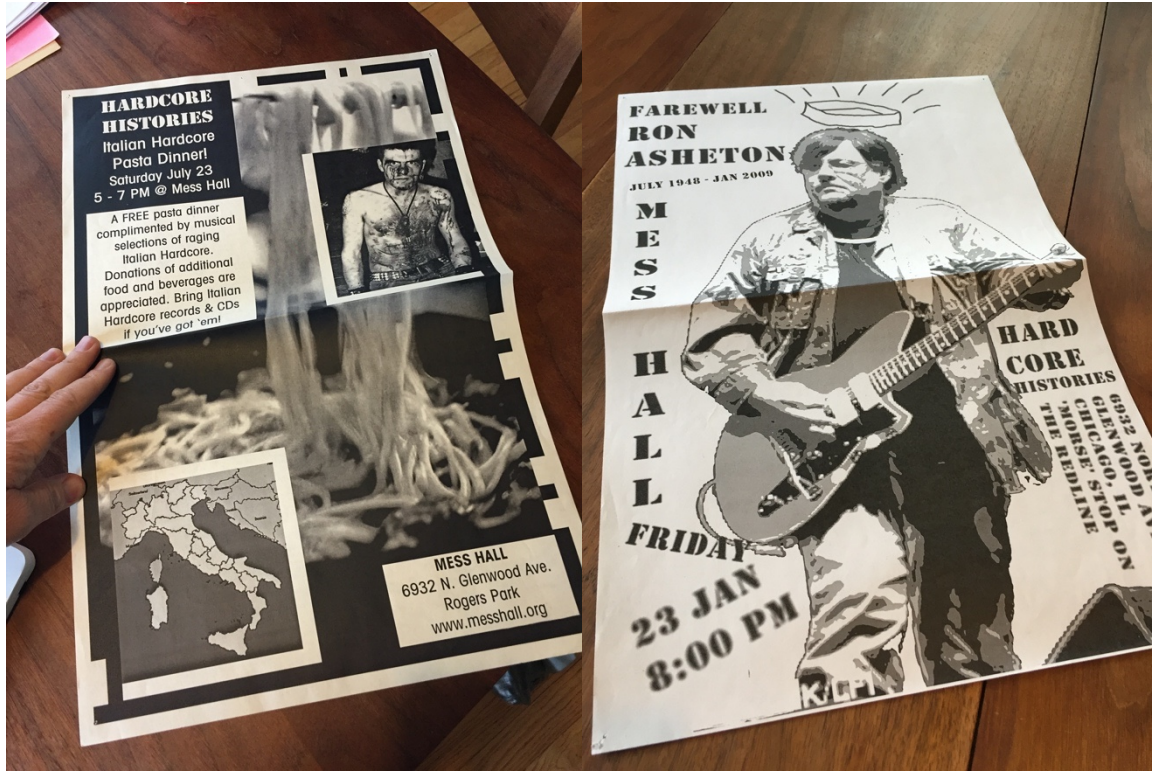


Figure 4.5: Mess Hall document archive with event posters—*Hardcore Histories* (2005–2006)
 Photo: Author, 2019.

HUMOR	THE OVERHEARD	EMPATHY	MACHINE PROJECT
NON-ABJECT	MEMORY LIVENESS	HYPER-LOCAL	ELSEWHERE
FREE	THE UNPREDICTABLE	HARDCORE	MESS HALL

Figure 5.1. Beyond the social: Principles of practice aligned by artist project space
Diagram designed by author and Peter Taffs, 2021.

HYPER-LOCAL	FREE	THE UNPREDICTABLE	PLATFORM AFFORDANCES
EMPATHY	HUMOR	HARDCORE	STRUCTURING BEHAVIORS
THE OVERHEARD	MEMORY LIVENESS	NON-ABJECT	PARTICIPATORY EXPANSIONS

Figure 5.2. Towards structural change: Principles of practice aligned by structural impacts
Diagram designed by author and Peter Taffs, 2021.

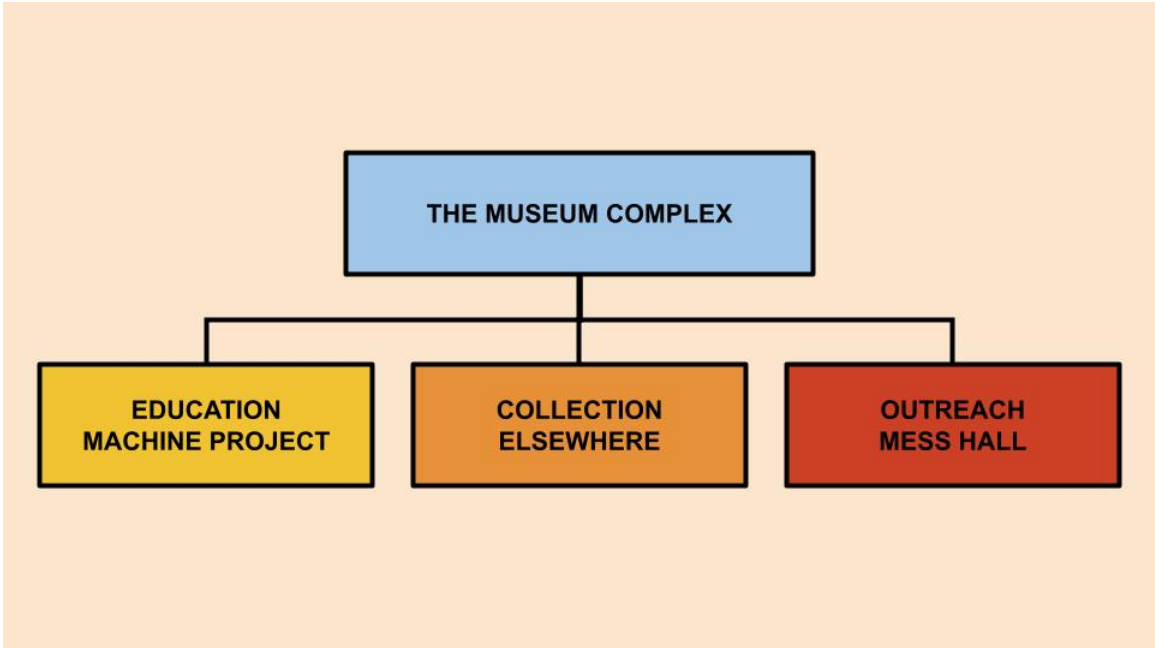


Figure 5.3. Museum organizational chart: Artist project spaces aligned by museum department
Diagram designed by author and Peter Taffs, 2021.

Bibliography

Bibliography

- Allen, Mark. "A conversation between Mark Allen and Anthony McCann." In *Machine Project: A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, edited by Mark Allen, Jason Brown and Liz Glynn, 54–60. Los Angeles: Machine Project, 2009.
- . "The Curiosity Effect." Essay posted Sept. 15, 2015. <http://www.markallen.com/s/The-Curiosity-Effect-With-Illustration-Appendix.pdf>.
- . "Hello, have you been here before?" In *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection (Live by Special Request)*, edited by Mark Allen & Rachel Seligman, 40–69. New York: Prestel, 2017.
- . "Interview with Eric Klerks and Chris Kallmyer." In *Public Engagement Artist in Residence: Machine Project – Hammer Museum*, edited by Mark Allen and Allison Agsten, 78–83. Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2012.
- . "Interview: Emily Lacy, November 28, 2010." In *Public Engagement Artist in Residence: Machine Project – Hammer Museum*, edited by Mark Allen and Allison Agsten, 65–68.
- . "Interview with Nate Page." Posted June 8, 2012. <https://machineproject.com/archival/projects/interviews/interview-with-nate-page/>.
- . Machine Project Guide to Curating and Planning Events. Posted February 2018. http://www.headlands.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/allen_m_curating_2018.pdf
- . "Notes Toward Socratic Gardening," Essay posted Sept. 15, 2015. <http://www.markallen.com/s/Notes-Toward-Socratic-Gardening.pdf>.
- Ault, Julie. "Active Recollection: Archiving 'Group Material'." In *Self-Organized*, edited by Stine Hebert and Anne Szefer Karlsen, 102–112. London: Open Editions, 2013.
- Bailey, Joss. "How has Visual Culture been Defined." Essay posted (blog), 2013. <https://jossbailey.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/defining-visual-culture.pdf>.
- Beery, Tal. "Instituent Practices: Art after (Public) Institutions." *Temporary Art Review* (Jan. 2, 2018). <http://temporaryartreview.com/instituent-practices-art-after-public-institutions/>.
- Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and The Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso, 2012.
- Bloom, Brett. *Petro-subjectivity: De-Industrializing Our Sense of Self*. Ft. Wayne, IN: Breakdown Break Down Press, 2015.

- Bloom, Brett and Salem Collo-Julin. "Together: Resilience." *The Remedies Issue, Proximity Magazine* 004 (Spring 2009): 24–36.
- Bloom, Brett and Nuno Sacramento. *Deep Mapping*. Auburn, IN: Breakdown Break Down Press, 2018.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods. Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2002.
- Bromberg, Ava. "Creativity Unbound: Cultivating the Generative Power of Non-economic Neighborhood Spaces." In *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity*, edited by Tim Edensor, Deborah Leslie, Steve Millington, and Norma Rantisi, 214–225. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010.
- Brown, Bill, "Thing Theory." In *Things*, edited by Bill Brown, 1–6. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Brown, Jason. "The Ones That Got Away," in *Machine Project: A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, ed. Mark Allen, Jason Brown and Liz Glynn (Los Angeles: Machine Project, 2009).
- Cavalier, Jodie. "An Interview with Sarah Witt." *Drain* 14, no. 1 (2016). <http://drainmag.com/an-interview-with-sarah-witt/>.
- Checa-Gismero, Paloma. "Book Review: Yates McKee, Strike Art, (Verso Books: London, 2016)." In *Field Journal* 4 (Spring 2016). <https://field-journal.com/issue-4/review-yates-mckee-strike-art>
- Collo-Julin, Salem. "Dear Chicago." *AREA Chicago* 1 (August 2005).
- Cotton, Charlotte. "Field Guide for Machine Project." In *Machine Project: The Platinum Collection (Live by Special Request)*, edited by Mark Allen & Rachel Seligman, 146–186. New York: Prestel, 2017.
- Critchley, Simon. *On Humor (Thinking in Action)*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1995.
- Ehrlich, Ken. "Introduction." In *Art, Architecture, Pedagogy: Experiments in Learning*, edited by Ken Ehrlich, 5–9. Valencia, CA: Viralnet.com, Center for Integrated Media, California Institute of Arts, 2011.
- . "Learning from Learning: Machine Project Workshops as a Laboratory in Context," In *Machine Project: A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, edited by Mark Allen, Jason Brown and Liz Glynn, 93–96. Los Angeles: Machine Project 2009.

- Elms, Anthony and Duncan McKenzie. "Episode 108: Marc Fischer," *Bad at Sports* (podcast), Audio, September 23, 2007. <http://badatsports.com/2007/episode-108-marc-fischer/>.
- Elsewhere Programs Department. *Elsewhere Tour Guide*. 2020.
- Ensminger, Emily. *Elsewhere Parks & (Re)creation Services, Power Hour(n.)*. 2015.
- Finkel, Jori. "Arty Subversives Storm the Museum." *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/arts/design/30fink.html>.
- Finkelpearl, Tom. *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.
- Fischer, Marc. *Against Competition*. Chicago: Half Letter Press, 2014.
- Gluek, Grace. "Art Review; Making History a Part of Today With Some Artifacts and Whimsy." *New York Times*, Section E, Aug. 15, 2003, 31. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/15/arts/art-review-making-history-a-part-of-today-with-some-artifacts-and-whimsy.html>.
- Gokcigdem, Elif. "Introduction." In *Fostering Empathy in Museums*, edited by Elif Gokcigdem, xix-xxxii. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- Gould, Sam. "Flatlands: Non-Hierarchical Space and its Uses." *Journal of Radical Shimming* 9 (2010): 652–673.
- Grandakovska, Sofija. "Lightness of the Dissident, Brightness of the Critical Mind." In *Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternate Spaces*, edited by Steven Rand and Heather Kouris, 154–171. New York: Apexart, 2010.
- Groys, Boris. "The Weak Universalism." *E-flux Journal*. no. 15 (April, 2010). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61294/the-weak-universalism/>.
- Hammer Museum. *Public Engagement Artist in Residence: Machine Project–Hammer Museum*. Los Angeles, CA: Hammer Museum, 2012. https://hammer.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/2020-06/Machine_Project_Public_Engagement_Artist_in_Residence_Report.pdf
- Helguera, Pablo. *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011.
- . "Notes Toward a Transpedagogy." In *Art, Architecture, Pedagogy: Experiments in Learning*, edited by Ken Ehrlich, 99–112. Valencia, CA: Viralnet.net, Center for Integrated Media, California Institute of Arts, 2011.

- Holmes, Brian. "Art After Capitalism." In *It's the Political Economy, Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory*, edited by Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler, 164–169. London: Pluto Press, 2013.
- . "DIY, Why?." *Prompt Magazine: Practical Revolutions*. October 2008.
- Jackson, Shannon. "Performativity and Its Addressee." In *On Performativity*, edited by Elizabeth Carpenter. Vol. 1 of *Living Collections Catalogue*. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2014. <http://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/performativity-and-its-addressee>.
- . *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.
- Joliet, Laure. "7 Questions for Mark Allen of Machine Project." *Dwell*, Feb. 10, 2009. <https://www.dwell.com/article/7-questions-for-mark-allen-of-machine-project-1a0c93f9>.
- Kavage, Sarah. "Crunching the Numbers at Mess Hall." *Industrial Harvest: An Exploration of Growth, Exchange and Rebirth in Three Acts*. September 26, 2010. <https://industrialharvest.wordpress.com/2010/09/26/crunching-the-numbers-at-mess-hall/>
- Klein, Alex. "Back to the Future (of Art School)." In *Public Servants*, edited by Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, Dominic Willsdon, 299–312. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.
- Koster, Emlyn. "Foreword." In *Fostering Empathy in Museums*, edited by Elif Gokcigdem, vii–xii. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- Kwon, Miwon. "Approaching Architecture: The Case of Michael Asher." In *Michael Asher*, edited by Jennifer King, 169–179. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.
- . *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
- Laymon, Kiese. "Keise Laymon's American Memoir 'Heavy.'" Interview by Joshua Johnson *1A*, WAMU NPR, October 17, 2018. Audio, 35:22. <https://the1a.org/shows/2018-10-17/kiese-laymons-american-memoir-heavy>.
- Lee, Nancy J. *Elsewhere: Self-Assessment of Organizational Capacity*. Minneapolis, MN: Larson Allen Nonprofit and Government Group on behalf of Warhol Initiative, June 9, 2011.
- Linares, Nati and Caroline Woolard. *Solidarity Not Charity: A Rapid Report*. Bronx: Grantmakers in the Arts, March 2021.
- Lippard, Lucy. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: The New Press, 1997.

- Manalansan, Martin F. 'The "Stuff" of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives.' *Radical History Review*, vol. 2014, no. 120 (Fall 2014): 94–107.
- Machine Project Archive. "Machine Project Emails up to 3-17-16." Unpublished Word Document, 2017.
- Mahony, Emma. "The Critical Art Institution and the Neoliberal State." PhD diss., National College of Art and Design, Dublin, 2016.
- . "From Institutional to Interstitial Critique: The Resistant Force that is Liberating the Neoliberal Museum from Below." In *Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change*, edited by T.J. Demos, Abhijit Banerjee, and Emily Eliza Scott, 409–417. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.
- Mayer, Anne. "Artist-as-Consultant, Monograph-as-Transparency." *X-Tra* 20, no. 2 (Winter 2018). <https://www.x-traonline.org/article/artist-as-consultant-monograph-as-transparency/>.
- McAnally, James and Stephanie Sherman. 'Organization towards a Commons.' *Healers on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown, Terremoto Magazine* 11 (2018). <https://terremoto.mx/revista/organization-towards-a-commons/>.
- Yates McKee, *Strike Art*, Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2016.
- Merritt, Elizabeth. "Keynote." July 24, 2014. The Future of Museums Conference, Atlanta, GA. Screen recording, 58:45. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2vKb0x5C1c>.
- . *TrendsWatch 2017*. Washington, DC: American Alliance of Museums, 2017. <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/center-for-the-future-of-museums/trendswatch-2017/>
- Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics Thinking the World Politically*. London and Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2013.
- Nilsen, Adam P. and Miriam Bader. "The Psychology of Empathy." In *Fostering Empathy in Museums*, edited by Elif Gokcigdem, 115–130. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- O'Malley, Anne, K. "LACMA during the Pleistocene Epoch." In *Machine Project: A Field Guide to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, edited by Mark Allen, Jason Brown and Liz Glynn, 22–29. Los Angeles: Machine Project, 2009.
- Peltomäki, Kirsi. *Situation Aesthetics: The Work of Michael Asher*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010.

- Puett, J. Morgan “Being as Practice.” In *I’m going to live the life I sing about in my song, How Artists Make and Live Lives of Meaning*, edited by Jen Delos Reyes, 18–39. Chicago: Open Engagement, 2016.
- Purves, Ted. “Introduction.” In *What we want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*, edited by Ted Purves, ix-xii. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.
- . “Throwing Stones in the Sea: Georg Simmel, Social Practice, and the Imagined World.” In *The Everyday Practice of Public Art, Art, Space and Social Inclusion*, edited by Cameron Cartiere and Martin Zebracki, 103–119. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.
- Raunig, Gerald. “Instituting and Distributing: On the Relationship Between Politics and Police Following Rancière as a Development of the Problem of Distribution with Deleuze.” Translated by Aileen Derieg. *Art and Police, Transversal* (October 2007). <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1007/raunig/en>.
- . “Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming.” In *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, edited by Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray. 3–12. London: MayFlyBooks, 2008.
- Reynolds, Laurie Jo. “Interview: One Question About Critical Art in Chicago.” *Proximity* 003 (Winter 2009): 71–75.
- Rogers Park Builders Group. “Sun-Times Editorial Features our own Al Goldberg.” *Rogers Park Builders Group Newsletter*, May 2018. <https://rpbg.org/index.php/latest/news/218-sun-times-editorialfeatures-our-own-al-goldberg>.
- Satinsky, Abigail. “Mess Hall is a compass (2003-2013).” *Bad at Sports* (blog), March 12, 2013. <http://badatsports.com/2013/mess-hall-is-a-compass-2003-2013/>.
- Scheer, George. “Deploying Place: A Cultural Economy of Art and Urbanism in the Great Recession.” PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2019.
- . “Thing Tank, Elsewhere—Where Else.” Event hosted by Elsewhere and Cabinet Magazine. Unpublished audio, May 13, 2017.
- . “Session Notes.” *Instituent Practices: On Founding and Succeeding an Arts Organization*, Common Field Convening, Philadelphia. April 27, 2019. <https://www.commonfield.org/convenings/1949/program/2677/instituent-practices-on-founding-and-succeeding-an-arts-organization>
- . “University of North Carolina Students Accuse Administration of Artwashing.” *Hyperallergic*, June 12, 2018. <https://hyperallergic.com/446551/university-of-north-carolina-art-students-artwashing-accusations/>.

- . “Up to code but caught on the fringe: holding alternative space in emerging cultural economies.” *Temporary Art Review*, Jan. 13, 2017.
- Schultz, Sarah. “Summer Jubilee: An Interview with Mark Allen of Machine Project.” *Walker Art Centre Magazine*, Sept. 17, 2012. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/summer-jubilee-an-interview-with-mark-allen-of-machine-project>.
- Schwenger, Peter. *The Tears of Things, Melancholy and Physical Objects*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Searle, John R. “What is an Institution?” In *Institutional Critique and After*, edited by J. C. Welchman, 21–52. Zurich: Ringier. 2006.
- Sholette, Gregory. *Dark Matter, Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 2011.
- Smith, Stephanie. *Institutions and Imaginaries*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Spinello, Anthony. “Dirty Girl—Stephanie Sherman.” *Dirty Magazine*, Aug 23, 2011.
- Stevens, Susan Kenny. *Nonprofit Lifecycles: Stage-based Wisdom for Nonprofit Capacity*. 2nd ed. Scottsdale, AZ: Stagewise Enterprises, Inc., 2008.
- Stonestreet, Tracy. “Breaching the Document/Artwork Divide: Performance, Hybrid Artworks, and the Lingering Problem of Categorization.” *Art Documentation* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 137–152. The University of Chicago Press.
- Temporary Services with Dorothee Boehme, Kevin Henry, and Lindsay Bosch. “Do-It-Yourself Interview.” In *Pass It On! Connecting Contemporary Do-It-Yourself Culture*. Chicago: Temporary Services, Feb. 2007. https://issuu.com/brettbloom/docs/diy_interview.
- . *Art Work—A National Conversation About Art, Labor, and Economics*. Chicago: Temporary Services, 2009.
- . “Episode 218: Temporary Services.” Podcast recording by *Bad at Sports* (podcast) Nov. 1, 2009, Kankakee, IL. Audio, 1:08:03. <http://badatsports.com/2009/episode-218-temporary-services/>.
- . with Matteo Lucchetti and Judith Wielander. *Free For All. Art As A Service To Others*. Bielle, Italy: Visible Publishing, 2013. <https://halfletterpress.com/free-for-all-art-as-a-service-to-others/>.
- Thompson, Nato. *Seeing Power*. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015.
- Thorne, Sam. *School: A Recent History of Self Organized Art Education*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017.

- Wagley Catherine. “8 All-Important Things to Know If You’re Crazy Enough to Start an Alternative Art Space.” *Artnet News*, January 17, 2018. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/eight-lessons-for-running-an-independent-art-space-1200137>.
- Wang, Dan S. “Mess Hall: What It Is (After the First Year).” Booklet text, 2004. <https://web.archive.org/web/20041204070748/http://www.messhall.org/wimh.html>
- . “Mess Hall Ends Its Haul.” *Propositions Press 2.0* (blog), March 1, 2013. <https://prop-press.typepad.com/blog/2013/02/mess-hall-is-ending.html>
- Whitworth, Zach. “A Haggadah for Passover – Pesach for a Digital Diaspora.” Seder storybook. Elsewhere, Greensboro, April 11, 2020. <http://www.goelsewhere.org/seder/>.
- Wolf, Mike. “Can Experimental Cultural Centers Replace MFA programs?” In *Support Networks*, edited by Abigail Satinsky, 187–195. Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2015.
- Žižek, “Slavoj. “It’s the Political Economy, Stupid!,” In *It’s the Political Economy, Stupid!* ed. Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler, 14–31. (London: Pluto Press: 2013).
- Zorach, Rebecca. “Making Usable Archives.” In *Unfurlings: Explorations in Art, Activism, and Archiving*, edited by Daniel Tucker and Rebecca Zorach, 11–13. Chicago: Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry at University of Chicago, 2014. https://neverthesamedotorg.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/unfurling_complete.pdf.

Vita

Clare van Loenen is a cultural programmer, educator, and researcher in Richmond, Virginia. She teaches Museum Studies and Arts Administration for the Art History Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. Previously, Clare held roles in the United Kingdom at the Hayward Gallery, Architecture Center Network, World Event Young Artists as part of the Cultural Olympiad, and Nottingham Castle. She was a Trustee for Nottingham Contemporary in its launch phase.

Clare completed a Master of Arts in Museum Studies in the Museum Studies Department at Leicester University, and undertook a Post Graduate Certificate in Education at Homerton College at the University of Cambridge. Her undergraduate degree was in History of Art with History at Bristol University. Informing her research focus are a Production Residency at Elsewhere, a Living Museum and Artist Residency inside a Depression-era thrift store in Greensboro, North Carolina and a Fellowship in the Photography Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Clare built a collection of contemporary international photography for Nottingham Castle, developed emerging-artist festivals, and was a Peer Reviewer in film and new media for the Arts Council of England. She moved to America in 2011 when Barack Obama was President.