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LET'S DIALOG

Reflections on Dialog:City's involvement at the DNC.



Note to reader, my position in this article is not intended to seem authoritarian, but more inquisitive, a stance taken as to better understand the intentions of Dialog:City—An Event Converging Art, Democracy, and Digital Media,[1] the Democratic National Convention (DNC), and Denver's relationship to such initiatives.

This place, Denver, high ground, became the platform of our nation's Democratic Convention, and for a brief period climbed that ladder which seeks cultural capital amongst the greats. It goes without saying that national political conventions spark a sense of urgency and immediacy, undoubtedly producing an odd abstraction from one's daily experience of the world and all its socioeconomic spheres; at moments embracing what Marxist theorist, Debord describes as *alienation*. [2] Had I not been a native, I might not have recognized this spectacle in relationship to Denver's bid for defining itself as a worthy stopping point between Chicago/NYC and L.A., a crucial reference when critically engaging with the DNC and Dialog:city. Understanding the consequences of the DNC, especially in regard to art's relationship to the political sphere, and/or the overarching agency of art as cultural production, it's helpful to negotiate the goals set forth by Dialog:City and critically engage their potentialities and lived experience.

As liaison, Dialog:City sits asunder a larger beast —that which seeks to make Denver a contender in a larger social playground. [3] Having helped produced these activities, witnessed many of its iterations before and during the DNC, I have started to believe more than ever that Denver will be challenged by the balance, or imbalance it creates in regard to the production of culture. More specifically, to what degree do we produce culture from within, or seek that which can be brought to Denver?

What struck me during the DNC and many of the Dialog:City events was my experience of the enacted projects in relation to their proposed intentions —via promotion (web, media, word of mouth) and what I suspect will become documentation. "Dialog:City is an arts and cultural event that catalyzes civic discourse by inviting internationally renowned artists and designers to create participatory, interactive, and dialogical site-specific works in neighborhoods across the city of Denver for citizens and audiences of the greater Denver region." [4] The promotion

of Dialog:City persistently refers to many of the ideas captured in Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another: Site-Specific and Locational Identity*, begging one to (re)visit the text. As in the second chapter, Kwon definitively evaluates the "real"^[5] and much of what Dialog:City purports to accomplish, but drifts dramatically when acknowledging undeniable agendas:

Certainly, site-specific art can lead to the unearthing of repressed histories, help provide greater visibility to marginalized groups and issues, and initiate the re(dis)covery of "minor" places far ignored by the dominant culture. But inasmuch as the current socioeconomic order thrives on the (artificial) production and (mass) consumption of difference (for difference sake), the sitting of art in the "real" places can also be a means to *extract* the social and historical dimensions of these places in order to variously serve the thematic drive of an artist, satisfy institutional demographical profiles, or fulfill the fiscal needs of a city. It is within this framework, in which art serves to generate a sense of authenticity and uniqueness of place for quasi-promotional agendas..."

For those of us here, Denver's cultural producers who seek balance between seemingly conflictive agendas, we might consider, with critical force, understanding the impact Dialog:City plays as an initiative of the Denver Office of Cultural Affairs and DNC. The events participate in the seduction akin to that offered by local projects The Lab at Belmar, the new Museum of Contemporary Art building/programming, and the infamous architectural addition the Denver Art Museum, the promise of an accessible "high" culture and visibility in an all too inaccessible art climate, all of which fit nicely in threads concerned with institutional critique. Frankly, I'm torn. Maybe the rest of the country/art world needs to see Denver as a potential host? A vibrant city that can challenge some of the concerns currently circulating within the art world, one worthy of hosting artists who unarguably engage a much larger audience. What an opportunity to connect with artists that might otherwise never be so accessible. But are we acting too big for our britches? Are these initiatives outbidding what could become support for building more defused culturally diverse infrastructures for Denver, potentially presenting a more multivariate action? The decisions often fall in the hands of a few, a few that perpetuate bringing art to Denver under the umbrella of showing us what's out there, agitating what's already a festering Denver inferiority complex. This follows suit of much of what we see in the world today, cities claiming right to a uniqueness unmatched by any other, competitors in a feast for economic viability. What agency might be gained by establishing an alternative to the architectural jewelry touted by so many of the "big" hitting public projects of the day? Dialog:City is certainly a great direction. So what do we embrace?

Again, I think there could and should be a balance, however I don't imagine this happening without a community willing to bridge the gap that keeps much of the Denver community in a cultural bubble. Denver can embrace its identity for what it is –a small urban center situated in the "American West", and still voice to the powers-that-be that there are viable relationships to be made between the work being produced here and that greater art world. This can allow for the most interesting of exchanges –between those from within and those external.

It's my belief, and Dialog:City solidified for me, that change will be imposed upon us. Policy is pointing in that direction. Rising transportation costs will implore us to adapt. The unbelievable shoestring budget Dialog:City operated on consistently begged the question of how institutions will seek creative solutions to presenting high caliber work, without breaking the bank (and without exploiting the able and willing creative community). The obvious answer to this concern will be acknowledgement and creation of work within the region that is manageable and of quality. This can happen at every level Dialog:City proposes—"to build innovative education initiatives with Denver Public Schools and Denver-area higher education institutions focusing on technology and civic literacy through the arts."

I'm excited by the challenge, so let's dialog, beyond the DNC!

-Charles Roderick

Citations

1. Kaplan, Richard. "Alienation and the Corporate Takeover of Culture: Guy Debord's Theory of the Spectacle" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, TBA, New York, New York City, Aug 11, 2007 Online <PDF>. 2008-08-20 http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p184885_index.html

For more info about Dialog:City, see www.dialogcity.org

[1] Dialog:City is an eco-system of cultural, civic, and creative investigations. As an exhibition, Dialog:City follows in the footsteps of such projects as Culture In Action curated by Mary Jane Jacob, as an exhibition engine that finds itself both making and showing ideas with publics and in public space. Leaving the walls of traditional galleries and museums behind, Dialog:City leverages the collaborative thinking embedded in "New Genre Public Art". Presented in a festival-like structure, the exhibition has multiple projects simultaneously available to audiences over the week, but also includes a staggering schedule that features each individual project. With diverse forms and subject matter, there is likely an event or exhibition program that will engage you. <http://dialogcity.org>

[2] In 1967, Guy Debord published his landmark analysis of the "spectacle." Building on Marxian theories of reification and alienation, the spectacle reflects the citizen's passive spectacular relation to an economic and social world that appears as an overwhelming external, law-bound natural entity. Divorced from our creative praxis in constructing our social world, the individual is reduced to consuming corporate-supplied entrancing narratives that confirm us in our passivity even as they celebrate the freedom and meaningful lives of our Hollywood celebrities and governmental leaders. http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p184885_index.html

[3] Denver Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Denver and The Lab at Belmar

[4] Dialog:City "A Guide to Exploring the Exhibits"; <http://www.dialogcity.org/education/education.html>

[5] Kwon, Miwon; [One Place After Another: Site-Specific and Locational Identity](#); pg. 53