

PLATFORMS AND SHELTERS

A REFLECTION ON *#TRANSACTING* – *A MARKET OF VALUES*

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This article is a conversation between two members of Critical Practice Research Cluster as they assess both the build of *#TransActing: A Market of Values* and market day. Amy McDonnell and Eva Sajovic use this dialogue as a way of reflecting and getting to grips with the cluster's terminology and modes of working developed over more than a decade of their existence, with both practitioners having joined Critical Practice in the later stages of the five-year period of research leading up to *TransActing* (McDonnell in 2013 and Sajovic in 2015). In keeping with Critical Practice's drive for transparency by feeding a wiki page with all of the productive messiness of organizational meeting notes, updated project descriptions, funding forms and 'to do' lists, this exchange between the two 'CPers' incorporates multiple formats: email, transcribed conversation and subsequent additions, which appear as textual annotations. This means that a conversational inquiry is maintained

along with researched accompaniments that respond to ideas that surface during the exchange. Rather than present a unified, conclusive, singular edit, this article shows how ideas have developed between McDonnell and Sajovic over time, hopefully providing more space for readers to intervene, disrupt and make new connections as they engage with the text.

 **From: Amy McDonnell** 13 January

Hello Eva,

With Verina Gfader at Borough Market when having coffee, we started to think around what makes a market a market. What is 'marketness'? Qualities we came up with included shared space, want, need, exchange, trust, ritual, noise. We considered the physical requirement of some sort of platform like a town square or flat ground and a stall or table from which to sell wares, as well as a kind of shelter, perhaps a tarpaulin, to shield goods and provide protection from the sun or rain.

The concepts of 'platform' and 'shelter' function in differing, seemingly oppositional, ways that necessarily intervene with one another. The openness of the platform and the covering, perhaps nurturing space of the shelter.

The idea of the platform reminds me of the project *Public Sculpture on the Outskirts of Monterrey* (2003–06) by the Mexican collective Tercerunquinto. Apparently humble for public sculpture, rather than creating a monumental form, the group made a 50 square metre concrete platform on the sprawling edges of the city. Before long, plastic chairs were placed on the platform and it became a makeshift barber's. Over time, the chairs were removed and it then became a place to drink and dance. The platform continually changed usage until one day someone decided to take spontaneous ownership and use the concrete as the foundations of a house, bringing Tercerunquinto's project to an end.

You run The People's Bureau [I will expand on here so readers of the article will understand], which is an artist-led process dedicated to the exchange of skills and needs, run from a shopping cart based in Elephant and Castle shopping centre, an area in South London undergoing one of the largest regeneration projects in Europe. The project operates as an informal consultation place and a catalyst between different parties including the developer, the local council, local people and organizations, London College of Communication and other public institutions. I see this project as acting both as platform and shelter. How do you see these qualities playing out differently from their use in *TransActing*?

Best wishes,

Amy

 **From: Eva Sajovic** January 16

Hi Amy,

In terms of 'platform', there are parallels: if you look at *TransActing* mainly as a community of evaluation, both communities were created out of an interest in democratic exchange, collective production and act as a site of negotiation. The Peoples Bureau's aim is to make visible the cultural capital existing in the regeneration area as a counter to the threat of homogenization at the hands of developers. *TransActing* also critically examined hospitality, democratic ways of working and the complexity of holding multiple types of interaction by different parties in one space.

There are differences in these approaches as well. The Peoples Bureau is a long-term, embedded process using interaction as a tool to make apparent diverse narratives and is based on a gift economy. *TransActing* was a one-day event, which interrogated the concept of value by producing multiple systems of exchange, including the gift economy, but only as one type of transaction amongst many.

Eva

Figure 10.1: Tercerunquinto, *Escultura pública en la periferia urbana de Monterrey* (2003–06). Public sculpture. Courtesy of the artists and Proyectos Monclova. Photo credit Tercerunquinto.



**At the South London Gallery No. 67 cafe,
8 March 2016.**

Amy McDonnell: Is it best to start from the image I shared in our emails – the work by Tercerunquinto?

Eva Sajovic: Yes. Was the house built? Or...

AM: Yes, now there is a house that exists on the site.

ES: Incredible. So public became private?

AM: Yes exactly. But I had not thought about it in that way. The interchange between public and private is useful for viewing platforms as sites of engagement and potential, along with the shelter, which creates a more closed or intimate space, perhaps limiting or concealing. In other words, the two seemingly opposing, yet apparent sides of a market's structure.

ES: I was looking again at Nicholas Bourriaud's *Postproduction* (2000), where he talks about artists from the nineties who engage in 'market as form', such as Jason Rhoades. On the one hand, *TransActing* could be seen as a continuation of this model aesthetically, yet there are important differences including context (it took place outside of the white cube) and its platform structure (rather than an installation for proposed social activity that an audience/participant may or may not carry out. Critical Practice's market worked with practitioners who were required to take up their own space in the market structure in order to activate it). However, I like Bourriaud's emphasis on the creation of new interactions and that actually, within this marketplace, the most important transactions are the negotiation between people – that it is a space of heterogeneous relationships.

Annotation: Critical Practice often describes their curatorial activity as creating platforms for others to plug into. *TransActing* clearly demonstrates this, as Critical Practice provided the basic market requirements of seating, stalls and shelter for individuals to enter and set up their own independent activity within one, shared space. 'Platform' models became important to Critical Practice from its earliest investigations into free and open-source software culture. The 'platform' provides the 'infrastructure', the 'base upon which other applications, processes or technologies are developed' (Techopedia n.d.: n.pag.). The concept of the market is imbedded in this software culture as the term 'bazaar' was used to describe the development of the operating system Linux, one of the most prominent open-source software collaborations amongst engineers. Rather than being carefully crafted amongst a few programmers working in close-quarters, Linux was developed over the Internet in public view. Eric Raymond, one of the programmers who initiated this process, writes, 'the Linux community seemed to resemble a great babbling bazaar of differing agendas and approaches [...] The fact that this bazaar seemed to work, and work well, came as a distinct shock' (2001: 3).

Annotation: In *Postproduction* Bourriaud argues that the passage of art from the 80s has changed from a 'shop window' to a 'flea market' aesthetic; in other words, from, Jeff Koons to Rirkrit Tiravanija (2000: 28). The curator writes that this bazaar or souk aesthetic relates to temporary, nomadic gatherings, representing a collective form that, 'does not depend on the command of a single author [that it] embodies and makes material flows and relationships that have tended towards disembodiment with the appearance of online shopping' (Bourriaud 2000: 28–29).

We would make two assertions in relation to Bourriaud's description of a 'market aesthetic'. Firstly, the French curator's understanding of collective forms as the reverse of an individual artist's practice has its limits, as when has art ever depended on a 'single author'? A babbling noise of influences and assistance is of course behind any one person's 'production'. We would also dispute the way Bourriaud sets up an opposition where the 'bazaar' reacts against online activity, since software culture is an essential part of contemporary collective forms of production that are not as simple as one being 'socially engaged' and the other 'socially disengaged', as we know hybrid activity takes us in a constant to and fro with on and offline spaces, which interact with one another. However, Bourriaud's text is useful for seeing the platform as a potential for multiple iterations: 'Every work is issued from a script that the artist projects onto culture, considered the framework of a narrative that in turn projects new possible scripts, endlessly' (2000: 18).



ES: Perhaps this can be linked back to the Tercerunquinto sculpture and the interaction between the public and private, the platform and shelter. I was reading Jane Rendell – she writes a lot about sculpture in public space and the assumption that this space is ‘democratic’, which in a way can neutralize the tensions found there, or it can hide the multiple negotiations that manifest in market forms such as *TransActing*.

AM: Yes, it is important to make apparent the transactional negotiations that produce space. There is always a condition to relationships and to one’s presence in any space. Sites of interaction, such as the market, the platform, are actually negotiated through these conditions of presence even before any exchange behaviour takes place. In other words, a platform is never neutral, even before participants have entered this structure there are certain requirements that have to be fulfilled, these act to include or exclude.

ES: Thinking back to *TransActing*, what was very valuable for me – and I wish that I had had more time – was the period of constructing the market stalls together and how this enacted relationships between us through the physical act of sawing, hammering and problem-solving together with a shared goal and sense of urgency. Sociologist Richard Sennett (2012) talks about the ‘craft of cooperation’ citing the workshop as a key example of a collaborative, working model where repetition of action both develops skill and makes ritual. It felt as if the exhibition was a disruption to this process of honing certain practices together (preparing food, cutting wood etc.), that this sheltered act of embedding ways of working, routine and interaction between a small group of individuals was abruptly stopped.

AM: Yes. With the building, there was a real sense of ‘lived exchange’ as the activity set a daily rhythm for those involved centred around a shared task, whereas I felt distracted in the market. Suddenly there was a clamouring, multiplicity of interactions carried out for just one day. Although it was valuable in a different way, as an opportunity to give a ‘public face’, to ‘exhibit’ sets of behaviours and test them more broadly, incorporating new voices. This did not have the same nurturing quality as the more sheltered building activity. Perhaps this is part and parcel of the platform as a structure? With increased openness, a supportive, nested environment is harder to produce.



Annotation: Rendell considers the mutable quality between concepts of 'public' and 'private' with regards to 'place': 'For those who support the public realm, "privatization" is associated with replacement of public spaces by a series of private places with exclusive rules governing entry and use. But if we take instead a liberal rights-based perspective, then privacy is understood to provide positive qualities, such as the right to be alone, to confidentiality and the safeguarding of individuality [...] The terms "public" and "private" do not exist then as mutually exclusive categories; rather, their relationship is dependent and open to change' (2006: 6).

Annotation: Philosopher Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) describes an 'open' society—which he opposes to 'closed' totalitarian or communist societies—as free from any sort of set hierarchy. Popper argues that the open society is self-determining: 'Personal relationships of a new kind can arise where they can be freely entered into, instead of being determined by accidents of birth [...] one of the most important aspects of the open society [is] competition for status amongst its members [...] our modern open societies function largely by way of abstract relations such as exchange and cooperation' (1945: 173–74). We can equate this 'open' with the platform, whose unprescribed space creates the 'noise' of the market environment where value, or the negotiation of relations, is in a process of constantly being made through transactions.

Annotation: Critical Practice has explored the concept that outside of traditional, structured imaginings of community (such as institutions) new ways of associating can be formed around groups or 'communities of evaluation', whose conditional tie is the endeavour to focus on a shared issue at hand and to produce or re-perform the perimeters of value in doing so. During the development of *TransActing*, Critical Practice held a conversation with artist-economist Hans Abbing to discuss the concept of 'evaluation'; how 'value' is, and could be perceived, constructed and measured (see October 2013 in 'Partial self-portrait of Critical Practice'). Could 'communities of evaluation' cohere to make value judgements that are, 'always situated and specific'? Abbing provocatively suggests that exclusivity within these communities is not necessarily a negative quality, that we should not automatically be seeking an 'open' or the most inclusive platform possible. Abbing asks Critical Practice: 'Do we really care what other people think? Why not commune with other believers? You look shocked!' Critical Practice responds: 'It is just rather [...] insular, no? Narrow? Self-affirming?' 'Why is this so upsetting?' he retorted (Critical Practice 2013: n.pag.).



ES: Yes, this continual sense of movement. I keep thinking of the quote by Rendell, which discusses the messiness between public and private, how opposing concepts can flip between them.

AM: Perhaps this brings us to a final point, the idea that, strangely, platform and shelter can be adhered to both in public and private, in neo-liberalism and socialism, which makes it so important to trace how ideas are used to fuel specific dialogues. The platform can be seen as a space of open abstract relations (i.e. not pre-determined), a space of opportunity, where new values are formed through exchange and competition, where 'communities of evaluation' can grow. The shelter restricts and covers, making it a space of protection, where experimentation can occur in a safe yet exclusive way, taking us from the space of public to concepts of privatization, all in a constant shift between the open and the closed.

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