

3

Seven Reflections on Reconstructing the Civic

Aaron Levy

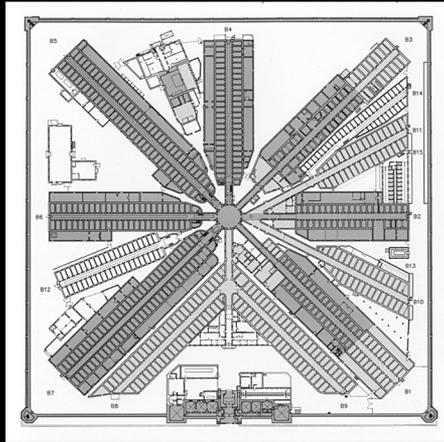
Seven Reflections on Reconstructing the Civic

This document is part of a larger series of PDFs organized and published by Bodega on the occasion of *First Among Equals*, an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia that considers the various modes contemporary artists have developed to work with their peers. Contributors to the series offer various perspectives on the social, political, and economic relationships that inform contemporary artistic practice. All PDFs from this series are available at bodegaphiladelphia.org.

Aaron Levy is a Philadelphia-based educator and urban curator whose initiatives and collaborations recover and redeploy histories of advocacy and practices of engagement. His most recent publication, *Four Conversations on the Architecture of Discourse* (AA Books, 2012), explores the vexed relationship between architecture and its publics, and the role of cultural discourse and display in a politicized society.

Image credits: Mimi Cheng

Transcribed from a conversation with Bodega
February 2012



1. Over the last few weeks my colleagues and I have been thinking about Charles Dickens' visit to Philadelphia in the 1840s. He basically traveled all the way to Philadelphia to visit Eastern State Penitentiary, an institution of incarceration and social isolation. He found deeply troubling and inhumane the way in which it deprived its inhabitants of social intercourse by visually, verbally, and physically isolating them from each other. For Dickens, this social deprivation was emblematic of the city of Philadelphia itself, whose city plan was predicated on a severe logic of regimentation and segmentation.

Dickens' reading of the city – his concern for the social isolation it entailed for its inhabitants – can inform contemporary readings of Philadelphia as well, and perhaps also constitutes a methodology of engagement. I'm interested in the role that small non-profits perform in this regard, in helping others evade this sense of social isolation. Small institutions, on account of their agility and intimate scale, incubate new relationships, exchanges, and conversations that re-negotiate and re-imagine the city in powerful ways.

Dickens visited Philadelphia only briefly, and his published account high-

lights his concerns and suspicions concerning one of the city's largest institutions. But what of the city's smaller institutions? Would he have found them equally pernicious, or progressive? I raise this question because we know that Philadelphia remains a city that is predicated on the small and informal, even as its public image has been constructed around the large. If we continue to image the city in a way that privileges the geographic footprint, financial resources, or cultural offerings of large institutions, we are profoundly misreading and misrepresenting the demographics and needs of the city in which we live.

According to a recent study by the Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, nearly 46% of the city's roughly 940 cultural non-profits are not just small, but very small. At the same time, around 1% of the city's roughly 940 non-profits receive the vast majority of philanthropic resources in the city, leaving those 46% of institutions basically perpetually struggling to exist.

2.

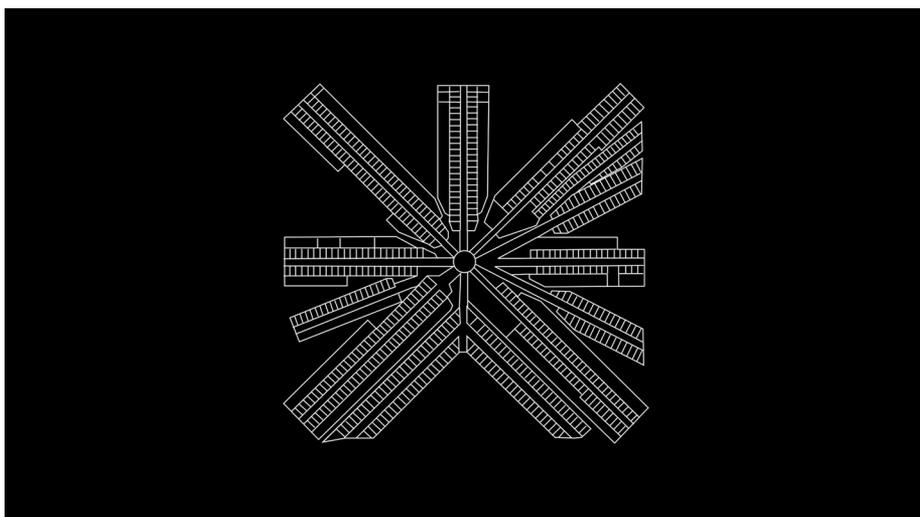
Philadelphia is situated at the intersection of a specific series of tensions. Foremost among these is that it is a peripheral city marked by profound socio-economic inequality and racial division. These tensions are further exacerbated and reinforced by an institutionally uneven and culturally conservative landscape, one consequence of which is limited funding for more progressive sensibilities. These are not just abstract concerns; they are legible within the very fabric of the cultural community, its artists and their practices, and the social relations that constitute the city. My work is a consequence of these tensions.

I work each day at 40th Street and Walnut Street. I can walk North on 40th toward the Mantua and Belmont neighborhoods, for instance, or West on Walnut Street. I can also walk East towards the University of Pennsylvania, or South towards Baltimore and Chester. Regardless of the direction in which I walk, within one linear mile I will encounter a considerable shift in public investment, institutional opportunity, social relation, and formal economy. These shifts are not just of philosophical concern; they literally act as borders. The city is experienced by me and many of those I know and work with as a city of borders.

As a cultural practitioner, the question for me is: what is the role of the cultural practitioner and what is the role of the small non-profit in a city of borders? I am always thinking about the way I can be attentive to this fact, and in particular how small non-profits can respond to this fact by recovering some of the vernacular histories of this city. These vernacular histories can in turn be radicalized in the service of a methodology.

Take Philosophical Hall, for instance, which is immediately to the left of Independence Hall in historic Philadelphia. This small building is part of the

American Philosophical Society (APS), an institution which was founded in 1743 by Ben Franklin and others to promote practical knowledge. Philosophical Hall is less important as a building than as a sort of agency which incubated other organizations, relationships, and ideas. The University of Pennsylvania, for instance, had its first classrooms there, Charles Wilson Peale's Philadelphia Museum was sited there as well. Despite its very small footprint, we should nevertheless think of it as a small agency that curated relationships and enabled practical knowledge. Where might we find such agencies in the city today and what sorts of relationships might they be enabling? Would we find these agencies in the center of the city or would we find them in marginal neighborhoods?



3. Whether we are conscious of it or not, whether we chose it or not, we inherit the history of the city in which we live. It is important to think of cultural practice and curation itself along similar lines. It is imperative that I be attentive and responsive to the urban realities of the city, and in particular the need for the city to not be as socially isolating as Dickens and others have historically found it to be.

My work is reflective of a desire to encourage and facilitate basic conversations and relationships. This may be contrary to the way many contemporary practices and discourses are playing out. I am not particularly interested in the cu-

ratorial, at least in the conventional sense of curating objects or artists or displays. I am not trying to determine, regulate, or adjudicate what a “legitimate” curatorial or activist practice should be, though I may accidentally imply or suggest this from time to time.

Rather, my intention is to facilitate and incubate relations, to undertake processes that are generative of new relations and not necessarily always determined by me. These relationships, whether on the level of the individual or the institution, play out over a span of time that allows for ideas to develop, processes to be reflected on, conflicts to be negotiated, and adjustments to the process to be made. They may occasionally generate an act of cultural display, or the documentation of a particular aspect of the process, but this is besides the point.

4.

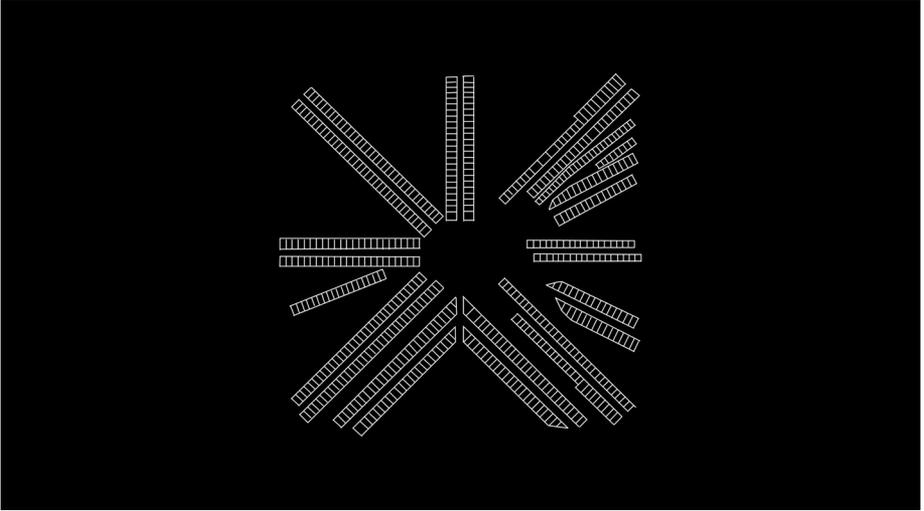
Where does the local end and the global begin? Where does the city begin and the city end? Where does the neighborhood begin and the region end? It is not clear today where or exactly how the borders are to be found and negotiated between the local and the global. At the same time, there is a profound danger to thinking of everything globally, in a way that erases the local.

One of the things Mimi Cheng, Ken Saylor, Megan Schmidgal, and I have been doing over the past few months is visualizing what we call the invisible infrastructure of our small non-profit. By invisible infrastructure, I basically mean the informal economies and relationships that constitute our organization, and is our essential methodology as well. Our projects emerge from them, and the organization survives and is in turn shaped on account of them.

I say invisible because they don't show up on a map – or at least they don't show up on a typical map. Typically we read a map of Philadelphia in terms of the geographic footprint of certain institutions and infrastructures. This implicitly privileges and preserves the hegemony of the large institution, however. What if you mapped all of Bodega's relationships with individuals and other institutions, for instance? Now, you would have to draw them in a way that acknowledges the feedback scenarios built in to them. Suddenly the map of the city would suggest a hive of relationships, and perhaps these relationships would extend outside the city too. It would be a different map than the one we began with. The city of Philadelphia would now register as a city of inter-personal relationships and movements across neighborhoods and neighborhood fault lines.

If you think of the city this way, large institutions tend to be seen less as repressive than as almost isolated and impotent. Different opportunities begin to emerge. So for me it is always a question of how you visualize the invisible infrastructure that defines the kind of organization that Bodega is - or any organization

for that matter that is trying to be responsive and changing in time, and not necessarily legible according to the conventional geographic footprint alone.



5. Collaboration is invoked everywhere today. When certain keywords have become ubiquitous if not co-opted, one ought to interrogate and negotiate one's identification with those keywords; by not doing so, the risk is that the underlying problems remain untouched.

I wonder if the concept of the dialogic is a more productive framework than collaboration. Mikhail Bakhtin beautifully articulates the concept of the dialogic in his writings on Dostoevsky and the novel, where he suggests that an individual negotiates and constructs his identity with and through relationships with others. Here, identity is something malleable, emergent, curious, and vulnerable. I'm interested in the methodologies and practices we can extrapolate and articulate from Bakhtin's ideas. What would it mean to perform a dialogic model of cultural practice or cultural production?

There are interesting precedents for the sort of networked practices that we're undertaking these days at Slough with projects such as *Mixplace*, *Perpetual Peace Project*, and *Fairytales Project* in particular. The work of the European collective Multiplicity, for instance, comes to mind. Such work represents a more dialogic model of production than the one we may be accustomed to here in the United

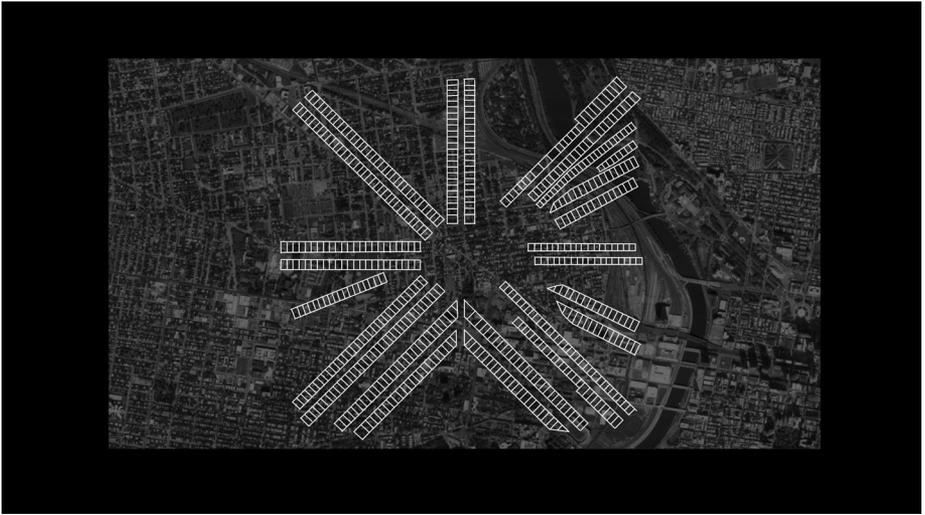
States. Here authorship is negotiated, distributed, and shared across a network. Instead of discrete individuals, each with a proper name and engaging in collaboration with other proper names, all of whom are caught up in a culture of display, we find something more cooperative emerging, which transforms culture from a mode of presentation into a mode of co-production. Identities begin to fluctuate, as practices are negotiated in time and constructed in relation to and with others.

6.

In conversations with artists, administration and bureaucracy are inevitably invoked as restrictive to their autonomy. Basically, there is a tendency to speak of culture as if it were not yet implicated or compromised by larger tensions or forces. Culture is seen as being threatened by administration, and administration is seen as lacking creativity and culture. It's interesting to consider what the Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno says about this in his essay "Culture and Administration." Essentially, he suggests that there can be no concept of culture without the concept of administration, and that we frequently overlook this fact by constructing a false opposition between culture and administration. Our task today is to acknowledge how these terms are fundamentally intertwined by performing creative administration and administrative creativity. This entails a very different understanding of culture, however, than the one that we've inherited from our cultural institutions.

On a related note, I recently concluded, together with Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss and Katherine Carl, a five year research project on evasiveness as it concerns arts and culture. In the publication for the project, we explore the question of what it means to find oneself entangled in and complicit with structures that one may not find entirely progressive, but that one can't necessarily neatly disengage from either. Eduardo Cadava contributed a beautiful essay to the project entitled "The Promise of Emancipation," in which he explores Emerson's own negotiation and struggle with this question. Specifically, he discusses a remark by Emerson about how you need to have a foot on the shore in order to push off from the shore. I think Emerson's remark encapsulates the complexity that many artists are negotiating today in the United States. How to change the cultural landscape that you are also part of? We are implicated by all that which we wish to change.

If one takes Emerson's remark seriously, one can no longer speak of either engagement or disengagement. Something more performative emerges, that entails a sort of constant negotiation, and our role in the institutional landscape begins to change. Whether we acknowledged it before or not, we now have to negotiate the reality of our being compromised too.



7.

One of the difficulties that informed *Into the Open*, an exhibition that I co-curated for the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2008, was that we were trying to organize a modest exhibition. We were trying to create a space in which to have a discussion about particular disinvested neighborhoods and communities in America, and the way architects are responding to the challenge of mitigating the severity of this crisis.

It was meant to be a modest exhibition – modest in the sense that it was not meant to be spectacular, entertaining, or particularly uplifting. It was meant to be sobering and addressed to a community of practitioners. We wanted to explain what the stakes were for art and architecture in a politicized society, but we were in the middle of a fun palace. We were trying to have a sober conversation amidst the Venice Biennale, basically. Now it would have been easier to simply announce all of these intentions to those gathered there, but that would have been a highly problematic gesture. To state that you are trying to be modest is, after all, the most immodest of pronouncements. We couldn't announce our methodology; instead, we had to perform it.

I think Bodega is facing a similar challenge today. One can't necessarily announce that one's organization is founded on a collaborative ethos, or that one is organizing an exhibition that embodies collaboration, because that is a very peculiar pronouncement to make. Instead, we have to perform it, and in so doing we redefine and negotiate the concept of collaboration, with all the complexity that this entails.