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THE THIRD DEGREE

Grassroots Culture, Los Angeles

ROBERT HERBST

The night before war started in Iraq Jennifer Murphy responded to a semi-anonymous email and left her home in Highland Park, Los Angeles. Walking to the corner of York and Figueroa she was surprised to see other people attending the candlelight peace vigil. "It's amazing to me that I didn't know them all a year ago," she now reflects. Fritz Haeg bought a geodesic dome on the other side of the mountain from Jennifer. He felt obligated to do something with it. "It's absurd that it be for one person. Houses have other jobs than just living in." Down the arroyo in Chinatown, a bunch of MFA grads came together in 2000 to build upon the camaraderie they shared in school. And three bumpy miles up First Street, several bikers found that they could share their tools, some beer, and their expertise creating The Bicycle Kitchen.

It's a cliché to refer to Los Angeles as a collection of suburbs in search of a city. Demographically, it is multiple. And like most other cities, its centralizing power and institutions have a difficult time containing the many faces of a place that is continually changing. Last year the city finally recognized my own neighborhood as Filipinotown, fifty years after the fact of Filipino settlement. Meanwhile, according to the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, local government arts funding is miniscule in comparison to elsewhere. (The city of Los Angeles allocates \$1.56 versus San Francisco's \$15.96 per individual in the arts.) I suspect that this only continues the disenfranchisement of the many communities that make up our living cultural infrastructures.

You may not know it but there is a renaissance of sorts currently underway here. You can't read about it writ large, but you may receive a snippet of it if you are on one of many email lists. If you check the Los Angeles Independent Media Center website, you might see the odd item about it. Like most other subsidized functions and societies in this city



(including black churches, *quincaneras*, Santa Monica Pier's fishermen, gardeners, street races, etc.), growing numbers of art and non-art groups are supporting themselves through self-generated, often collective and open, "anti-" institutions. They offer culture for free, working against a profit motive at interactive levels. While arts organizations and the art press generally spend their time navel-gazing at decontextualized objects, new spaces like C-level, Sundown Salon, The Bicycle Kitchen and Flor y Canto are making culture to the extent that theory becomes practice, and art blurs into life. By means of start-up projects as well as facilitated events, these venues are contributing to Los Angeles' proliferating contemporary grassroots cultural scene, which should be understood as both casual and political.

Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967) is a book cited by Anita Martinez as her inspiration, perhaps influencing the development of Flor y Canto. Because the Highland Park "info shop" doesn't display overtly political posters and "looks like someone's living room," Anita says that folks sometimes refer to it as being run by artists and not "real activists." Vaneigem's paean to find-

ing incentives outside of programmatic or ideological givens but within life itself, as revolutionary praxis, aptly fits this highly functional space. "People appreciate that we don't get paid for this," adds Esteban Tuborcio, another Flor y Canto facilitator. As an illustration consider that last summer, after a gunman robbed the place, a rare call for help by the Flor y Canto community brought in more money than the thief got away with.

Flor y Canto comprises a welcoming seating area, a free foosball table and a row of computers. On one wall is a well-stocked selection of books in Spanish and English. In the summer there is also ice cream for the neighborhood kids. Book sales and the tiny computer charges cover their operating costs. During the day it's all foot traffic from the surrounding working class Latino neighborhood, with kids doing homework, people talking politics, or playing foosball. At night, folks drive in from more distant communities, including Jennifer Murphy's North East Neighbors for Peace and Justice, which now holds weekly film screenings there, like the ever-popular screenings of both artistic and factual documentaries on bio-diesel fuels. At times A Free University also uses the space to hold

“classes” in people-centered education. “Teachers” dialogue around topics that are their own “inspiration for liberation.”

A few miles away, Ben Guzman describes The Bicycle Kitchen as a place to foster bicycle culture in a city that is notoriously car happy. “We socialize,” he says, “we are creating a society because we are sharing a part of our lives.” By offering advice or repairs ranging from cheap to free in a fluid environment, Ben knows that he and his partners are helping the city, and more importantly themselves. Besides operating the shop two nights a week, they run a program where kids get to assemble their own bikes from recycled parts. The group also just started an evening called “Bicycle Bitchin, at Bicycle Kitchen” to support a greater presence of women. Relating to the city in an alternative manner to that of chronic drivers, bicyclists have different priorities. “We are riding bikes because we’re dropping out,” declares Guzman.

Like the idealized art gallery, these spaces offer support for alternative worldviews to the mainstream. Sundown Salon’s Fritz Haeg sees the act of holding themed salons for everyone from knitters to architects as adding to the city’s overall artistic ecosystem. In a similar vein, the members of the cooperative C-level stress that works shown in their space need not succeed in material terms as

long as the ideas they generate are compelling. To illustrate this point, Michael Wilson recalls the night that artist Aaron Gach presented a cricket-launched missile system designed to defend old-growth forests from logging. The technology failed and the rocket missed its target. But there was palpable excitement amongst the artists, technologists, environmentalists and others in attendance. Says Mark Allen, another dues-paying member (fifty bucks a month), “I used to judge the success of an event by the size of the crowd, but now I don’t. That’s a gauge of how well you’re doing your publicity. If only four people come to see a presentation—if those are the four people that need to be there to meet and talk, then that’s great.”

At C-level Mark tries to put together events that combine the carefree sociality of a party with the intellectualized atmosphere of an art opening. Marc Herbst (who is my brother) says that people come to C-level so they can stand in the alleyway above the basement space, smoke a cigarette and choose whether or not to talk about the event happening below their feet. Rather than describing hosting events as an “art-work,” both members prefer the term “cultural practice.” Mark Allen explains. “I could say that I am a cultural practitioner but every human does that. A lot of what we do comes from a deep desire to extend creativity into every level of people’s lives. It is beside the point to have a career; it’s a maladapted response.” Michael Wilson agrees. “C-level doesn’t fetishize these things. It doesn’t create a stage that is supposed to stand in for social interaction. It is the stage. We’re not talking about social interaction; we’re actually doing it. Relational aesthetics only fetishizes the social in an attempt to colonize it, instead of employing it.” He goes on to mention artists who package themselves as creating objects or situations for social exchange. “Look how inclusive I am—now give me money. It’s the same model that non-profits have used and that are now such miserable failures.” (All of the groups I have discussed have considered becoming 501(c)(3)s but have resisted so far, fear-



ing the resulting bureaucracies would kill projects done out of love.)

Allen points to a C-level-generated project as emblematic of what the space does best. Peter Brinson, Christina Ulke and Michael Wilson wanted to develop a night of video programming that would find its own “self-organizing principle.” They came upon the concept of karaoke for an event called “All You Can Eat.” Any video that could be construed as karaoke would be shown. The project created a framework for others to make work—in this case, musical videos. The event then created an additional framework for more people in C-level’s community to perform in, one where they could sing along.

Over the past year there have appeared several articles on art collectives. One by Michelle Grabner in *X-Tra* praised the political subtleties of European collectives like N55 and Superflex, while pooh-poohing the apolitical, “countercultural” approach of North American counterparts like Milhaus and Royal Art Lodge. But these critical comparisons rarely consider the economics underlying them. Scandinavian artists in particular, with access to greater public funding, are able to build careers around socially minded projects. American artists, on the other hand, feel the need to market themselves commercially, often thinking that they can start a revolution through style alone. Meanwhile, grassroots collectives are beginning to take hold in Los Angeles, finding new ways to accomplish both.

THE THIRD DEGREE is a regular column by different writers on rotating critical issues. ROBERT HERBST is a Los Angeles-based artist and the editor of the print and web magazine *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* (www.journalofaesthetics-protest.org).

