The Art of the Possible: Realistic Pragmatism and Social Service Image Myths

On and around the work of Kenneth Balfelt in Copenhagen

by Daniel Tucker

TAKING A STAB AT AN UPHILL BATTLE

During my early childhood, my father ran a shelter for homeless and substance addicted adults. Following the Vietnam war, the closure of mental health facilities, and immense cuts to city budgets from the Federal government, the late 1970s saw an increase in "street-based people" in the United States. Under the Reagan administration this intensified, with the dramatic decrease in affordable housing[1]. Combined with the increased availability of hard drugs, this was the social landscape in which my father worked on a daily basis. The work was rewarding, while also exhausting, and exposed his heart to the devastating stories of people's hardships and his mind to challenging questions with no clear answers. His body took its own beating, as he was frequently dipping in and out of office work, kitchen work, and breaking up fights over beds, booze and food while dodging the occasional stabbing attempt.

Reflecting on this history and its ongoing manifestations, the role of art in relation to society may not seem particularly urgent to explore. But with the the political and humanitarian efforts engaged in an uphill battle, perhaps there is nothing to be lost and something to gained from

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[1] From http://www.nhi.org/online/issues/135/reagan.html "In the 1980s the proportion of the eligible poor who received federal housing subsidies declined. In 1970 there were 300,000 more low-cost rental units (6.5 million) than low-income renter households (6.2 million). By 1985 the number of low-cost units had fallen to 5.6 million, and the number of low-income renter households had grown to 8.9 million, a disparity of 3.3 million units".

exploiting the formal and communicative potential of art to take a stab at another solution.

BODIES AND IMAGES

The mere presence of homeless, vagrant, dispossessed bodies in the lives of those with homes

and basic necessities does not in and of itself create enough urgency or will to resolve

social/economic inequity. This is observable to anyone who has ever been in an urban area and

experienced people walking past other people in desperate situations and doing nothing. We all

engaged in this practice. I did it today.

The physical presence of the destitute poses a fundamental question for the basis of political

ideologies: What causes poverty and what can be done to alleviate the suffering it causes? When

posed as a rhetorical question, the mind can conjure ideological solutions based on the perceived

or idealized role of the market, the state, the community, or the individual as agents of change.

But bodies on the street that take space, dying and suffering in public, are not rhetorical

questions.

In the project, *Protection Room: Injection Room for Drug Addicts*, artist Kenneth Balfelt (with

architect student Steffen Nielsen) repurposed an underground bunker in Copenhagen and

designed it to be a safe, sterile, and hospitable space for drug addicted needle users to inject. This

responded to the unsafe conditions in which many users injected, often in public parks or streets,

which resulted in a combination of humiliation, criminalization, and inconsistent hygene.The

hospitality of the *Protection Room* was demonstrated by the availability of a nurse to assist the

user with injection, and in the design of a relaxing interior design. The site was private and enclosed, but also drew attention to itself through sheer uniqueness.

Developed initially under the auspices of an art exhibition about public space, Balfelt's project began with deep research into the living conditions of drug users in the city, the debates surrounding criminalization of drugs and legalization of publically funded injection facilities in other countries. The stakes involved in the issues are about livelihood and dignity of users on one hand, and the responsibilities and expectations of the state to provide safe space for all citizens on another. Any artistic gesture concerned with these themes would have to grapple with those stakes.

As the project developed, Balfelt considered how the idea of a highly visible injection facility would resonate as an image of the social and political issues described above. Balfelt's stated intentions were to "to enable a multi-faceted debate on injection rooms. The debate on injection rooms had gone on for a long time. There had been statements from experts, Narkotikarådet (Narcotics Council) and various ministries, but the debate had been exclusively in the spoken and written language. I wanted to bring a visual contribution to the debate." He worked to gain recognition and representation of the project in the media and soon found himself in contact with the police. With threat of being jailed for initiating this project, the artist decided to forbid actual injection in the space - without providing advanced notice to the drug users with whom he had been in touch about the Protection Room. Still, the idea of the project circulated widely in the press. Ceremonial events surrounding its opening drew in some Social Democratic political

figures who were encouraged to publicly comment on the possibility of injection rooms in their policy agenda following the announcement of *Protection Room (a possibility which has since been realized for the first time in Denmark).*

Balfelt's work never achieved functionality in the way that drug users may want or need. One such user, Jørgen Kjær, interviewed after the project was over and the media attention had died down, feared that the decision not to tell users it would not be used for injection made it "superficial" and indicated a lack of trust. He explained that it was really just a "sketch of an injection room" as an art project and pointed out that "If we had made an injection room we would have chosen to prioritise the practical more highly over the aesthetic." For Sophie Hæstorp Andersen, a local politician, it was not a problem that it was an art project as she believes there needs to be visual representations of society's problems and reminded her of the pedagogical role of being a public official. A local social worker involved in the issues that Protection Room was engaging, Preben Brand, concluded that without actual users in the space that it reinforced the idea that "it was all about politics."

Considering these results, this work recalls an art project dealing with homelessness in the United States: *paraSITE* (1998) by Michael Rakowitz. While there is some level of functionality in paraSITE, both projects function as what Rakowitz has called an "agitational device" whereby a designed object, developed in partial collaboration with people living on the streets, is asserted by those people as a material manifesto and symbol in the visual landscape. As Rakowitz has explained,

"This project does not present itself as a solution. It is not a proposal for affordable

housing. Its point of departure is to present a symbolic strategy of survival for homeless

existence within the city, amplifying the problematic relationship between those who

have homes and those who do not have homes.The mentally ill, the chemically

dependent, those who are unable to afford housing, men, women, families, even those

who prefer this way of life are included among the vast cross section of homeless people

in every urban instance. Each group of homeless has subjective needs based on

circumstance and location. My project does not make reference to handbooks of statistics.

Nor should this intervention be associated with the various municipal attempts at solving

the homeless issue. This is a project that was shaped by my interaction as a citizen and

artist with those who live on the streets."[2]

While I am not arguing for an interpretation that soley relies on the artists intentions, a close

examination reveals a symbolic rather than service-oriented work. If read as a work of social

service, it would be deemed a failure as no such injection room service was ever provided.

Balfelt argued that the debate around drugs and injection rooms was stale and needed the

infusion of a new perspective - making media attention crucial to his conception of the project.

From that vantage point, it worked: "It was reported in around 30 newspaper articles, eight radio

items and six TV items during the 3 weeks the project ran for, and for some time afterwards"

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[2] This widely circulated statement by the artist has appeared in numerous blogs, including
http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/006428.html (accessed 7/23/13)

reported Balfelt in his evaluation documents. It offered an image and physical example of what such an initiative might look like in the absence of any such examples. Following these assessments of the work, I must conclude that *Protection Room* functioned primarily as a campaign to disseminate a provocative image-myth (asking what if there *was* an injection room?) in the media and public imagination. It should therefore be evaluated as such.

Had the injection room become functional, it would have thrust the body of the user into the social sphere under newly aestheticized terms – no longer simply ignorable, but as the recipients of a new and highly visible public service that encourages rather than discourages their presence. But without the sustained involvement of such people, the project is rendered into an into an "agitational device", an image-myth of what could/should/might be.

The art of the real

In the 1930s, a young Saul Alinsky was crisscrossing the Back of the Yards neighborhood of Chicago's Southwest Side talking to union members from the meat packing plants and neighboring residents about his theories on poverty. Soon he had convinced the union that their work would be greatly improved if there was a parallel organization outside of the workplace - a union for the neighborhood - and the modern concept of "community organizing" was born.

Alinsky went on to theorize this work in two guidebooks, indispensable to politicos in the United States, the first *Reville for Radicals* (1946) and finally *Rules for Radicals* (1971). The second

book resonated with young activists of the New Left who were burnt out on protests and wanted to get things done and was marketed directly to this generation, carrying the subtitle "A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals" on its cover.

Alinsky explains in the introduction, "As an organizer I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be. That we accept the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be—it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be. That means working in the system." After attacking idealists and ideologues, he later follows up with "Political realists see the world as it is: an arena of power politics moved primarily by perceived immediate self-interests, where morality is rhetorical rationale for expepedient action and self-interest."

From this foundation, *Rules for Radicals* outlines basic tactics for organizing in a community, developing a campaign, and handling communication. His emphasis on the creation of symbols to encourage unity positioned his pragmatic realism in an image war with bosses, politicians and neighborhood polluters. Not unlike the tradition of tactical media (described by filmmaker and AIDS activist Gregg Bordowitz as: "It is, what is, when it needs to be"[3]), this style of community symbol creation adapts itself to the style, context, rhetoric and conditions of its target. This kind of fluidity is predicated on an assumption that the people you are organizing know what they want (or that the organizer knows what they want, and will use their charisma to convince the people of that objective being desirable).

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[3] Virtual Casebook: Defining Tactical Media (Bordowitz, Gregg contribution from March, 2003) http://www.nyu.edu/fas/projects/vcb/definingTM_list.html (Accessed 7/23/13)

The pragmatism advocated by Alinsky has inspired generations of organizers and organizations to implement an approach to image production that targets the "arena of power politics" described above. These campaigns tactically assert sympathetic images into the daily news cycle in order to pull public opinion and support into their favor. An example of this kind of thinking can be found in the Rukus Society's *Checklist for Effective Direct Action Media,* in which they outline what to do before the action: "*1) Decide what person or persons will be in charge of media strategy. 2) Settle on one simple message. 3) Choose a strong image that clearly communicates the message, 4) Craft sound bites that communicate the message and enhance the image, 5) Choose a date and hour for the action that will maximize your chances for coverage.*"[4]

A training manual of the SEIU (Service Employees International Union), the largest and fastest-growing union in the United States, outlines this in their media strategy:

> "Media coverage and advertising can help to ...Maintain morale among your members; Give customers, clients, investors, and others in the community reasons to cut off economic ties with the employer; Encourage politicians and regulatory agencies to take actions that support our campaign or to at least stay neutral; Encourage members of other unions and community groups to get involved in strike support activities; Make individual managers nervous about the effect bad publicity may have on their careers and reputations; Successful use of the media also is important to counteract management's

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[4] Rukus Society's *Checklist for Effective Direct Action Media* can be read in full at http://ruckus.org/article.php?id=107 (accessed 7/23/13)

propaganda"[5].

The result is that large organizations orchestrate the bodies of their membership into images of engagement, outrage and desperation by the less powerful (workers, teachers, students, the poor, etc). The hope of this kind of organizing, choreographed for the ease and convenience of the nightly news is that the powerful start to feel threatened through images running counter to their aesthetics of power and control.

The community organizers deployment of images often require manipulation of the "real" in order to produce authentic-seeming and high quality compositions that will adequately resonate with the target audience. This dimension of public relations can at times compromise the empowerment agenda articulated in the rhetoric and stated mission of such organizations of marginalized people. Unfortunately many organizations seem incapable of balancing these goals, resulting in an unevenness of quality across the field of community organizing. Some invest in the cultivation of leadership and empowerment by those most affected while projecting poor quality images of themselves in public, while others accept a more professionalized structure and often hierarchical division of labor suitable for the projection of sophisticated image-myth campaigns, often rationalized by the Alinsky-ite conception of a pragmatic realism. This distinction can be articulated as a difference between two approaches: a redistributive (of wealth and/or resources) and a representational (a depiction of a social/economic order) approach[6].

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[5] Excerpted from the training manual "Pressuring the Employer" published by the liberal website http://crooksandliars.com/david-neiwert/right-wing-union-bashers-trying-turn following an attempt by conservative media to "expose" the union's pressure tactics. (Accessed 7/23/13)
[6] While my use of this dichotomy stems from my reading of the work of Walter Benn Michaels on photography and diversity, this kind of distinction has been elaborated on very constructively (and quite

REDISTRIBUTIVE IMAGE-MYTHS

In some views images are considered the domain of artists, with the creation of representations being synonymous with the creation of art. And while the production of sophisticated images has also been a tool of successful politicians and activists (as with those described above), it has always benefited from the skills central to most art in terms of framing, composition, symbolic imagery and distillation of complexity into form. This mariage of politics and representation has often manifested in the form of documents.

Today much contemporary art is preoccupied with documentation, especially for artists working with both the subject matter of social consequence (most artists do this) and the form of the social (other human beings). The documentation forms a particular kind of representation - one imprinted with the social form through the implication that this image will only work through its circulation. This creates a distinction between what the work is *of* and what it is *about*. The work is a representation of an injection room, or "sketch" as described above by a potential user. But the work is about the need for debate about injection rooms. This distinction is where I locate the artist's intentionality, and the primary difference between images which are self-consciously produced as art and the activist image campaigns described above.

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differently than Benn Michaels) in the book *Redistribution Or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* by Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (Verso, 2003)

This tension is palpable in the participant evaluations of Balfelt's work shared about Protection Room. The user, the politician, and the social worker all articulated the outcome and effect of the project differently. Without having direct contact with the individuals myself, my crude interpretation of these differences is that they fall roughly along the participant's proximity to power and their attitude towards the political projects of redistribution versus representation. Consideration of both factors allows for a combination of the Realpolitik and the ideological together. For example, while a Social Democratic politician may be ideologically committed to redistribution of resources, their situation within the "arena of power politics" and representational government may give them a proclivity to appreciate the symbolic introduction of public debate catalyzed by Protection Room. On the other hand, a drug user or social worker concerned more tangibly with criminalized and precarious bodies in the street - may be more inclined to read a debate as "politics as usual" in the absence of any new resource distribution.

How did we get to this inability to balance redistribution and representation? Is it that political activists since the innovators of tactical media in the Civil Rights and early Environmental Movement have become so preoccupied with image campaigns that it has superseded any ambition to actually win? Is it a problem with ideology - a lack of articulating what, how and for whom the redistribution will be directed? Or is it simply that the challenges are too immense to be counteracted like the uphill battle that my father encountered in the 1970s and 80s in a climate of massive dispossession?

Historically, the desire to make an image is not the explicit ambition of a social worker, a

politician or a community organization - yet they all make images. In many cases, all they produce is images - representations of politics in action, of the dispossessed getting served, of the powerless fighting the powerful. Perhaps it is time for a more intentional discussion of the relationship between realistic pragmatism and image myths?