

Jean Pitman
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Dr. Karen Kosasa

Michael Hoyt and The Norae Shanty: Dialogical Artistic Practice and the Reclamation of Common Space

I was born and raised in the rural American upper Midwest where I had an experience of having endless access to vast amounts of outdoor space. As a child, I had the assumed privilege and innate permission to run to the horizon for as long as I physically could. I could fall down drowsy in sweet alfalfa fields and sleep for hours unnoticed, unmolested and in complete peace. No one was worried about me; I could be gone for days. Some might find this to be a case of parental neglect, but the truth of the matter was that my parents couldn't get me to stay indoors, no matter what. We all had an understanding that no danger lurked outside our door. Acres and acres spread out in all directions without fences. Our home was basic but roomy and surrounded by rotating corn, soybeans, oats and alfalfa. The outdoor world was mine, all mine.

One of the things I recall as being dull and unadventurous in my vivid outdoor fantasy life was going to see my grandpa and uncles during ice fishing season. I would go with my dad, the youngest tomboy daughter, and closely follow him around. I think I was dragged along so that my father would have an excuse not to stay long. We would go from shanty to shanty, my father popping his head in

here and there among shouts of recognition. I remember I felt I was entering a discreet outpost of slightly drunk, slightly stinky, unshaven men who would grin at me and reach out to mess up the top of my head, glad to see my father. While I never felt any threat there, I felt like there was no way I could ever be there without my father, nor would I want to be. There were dogs, sons, snowmobiles, brats cooking, pin-up girls, beers being offered around and fishing, of course. My father did not have a shanty and did not fish. My father had made a decision to divorce “that life” and became the only one (out of eleven) to attend college. His mother had completed the eighth grade, his father (my grandfather) had not gotten that far and was illiterate.

Ice fishing in the upper American Midwest is proudly symbolic of white (European settler, in the case of my grandfather) male working class power and resourcefulness. Men coming together to take free food from the plentiful outdoors and bring it back to hearth and home; fierce, independent, solitary, heroic. Ice fishing, like hunting, becomes a symbol of being a real man and providing for your family. It is also a place of solitary respite and great peace. The quaint still frozen lake serves as a highly romantic site of the public imagination as well, which lures and calls people with its siren song of idealized nostalgia steeped in Currier and Ives Christmas cards, snug uncomplicated burrows of warmth in a cold winter wonderland. Longing for a time and place of simplicity, away from pretentiousness, devices and deadlines; the ultimate

leisure activity is to hang the “gone fishing” sign and step away from time and space and mundane responsibility. Simultaneously, heading out into the “great outdoors” to hunt, fish and camp is a multi-billion dollar business for gear, equipment and vehicles in addition to being a tourist economy that stimulates small towns as other industries dry up. American outdoorism is a significant trend particularly as destinations outside of our borders continue to be perceived as more and more dangerous.

Visual artist Michael Hoyt constructs a *norae bang* (Korean-style karaoke room pronounced ‘no-ray-bong’ that translates into “song room”) on a small frozen lake in Minnesota, United States, situated within a predominantly European-American annual ice fishing community. He names this artwork the Norae Shanty; a hybrid of *norae bang* and ice fishing shanty. This tiny shack is based on a small karaoke room that can seat around 10 people at most. According to Hoyt, these cozy rooms have the potential to and allow for a unique bonding that is rare and the opposite of the embarrassing and competitive karaoke atmosphere that occurs in American bars. Hoyt first experienced a *norae bang* during his first trip to Seoul, South Korea with his wife Sarah Michelson, a Korean adoptee, to be re-united with her birth family. It was a very emotionally complicated trip on a variety of levels but Hoyt describes how the *norae bang* became a significant site of meaningful reunion and connection across cultures, languages and identities;

“When karaoke first became popular in the US, I did not really understand the draw. I was perplexed as to why this public display of often drunken crooning was so popular in every back water bar in America. Even now the idea of being in front of a group of surly strangers, singing you heart out, seems unsettling. It was not until my first trip to Asia, Korea specifically, that I was introduced to a very different form of karaoke. It was there that I was introduced to the *norae bang* (Song room). It was there, surrounded by my wife’s Korean birth mother and relatives (three generations worth) that I stood up and sang karaoke for the first time. And so it was in a *norae bang* that I came to love singing karaoke. Mainly because I was introduced to it by a host of Korean relatives that were also perfect strangers, aching to connect on some meaningful level across culture, language, and lost time. So we sang; little children, family elders, cousins, English translators, neighbors, husbands and wives... we all sang. And instead of the pressure and fear of public humiliation, we found sweet comfort in this beautiful and imperfect heartfelt exchange.¹”

It was here that the *norae bang* became deeply etched in Hoyt as a metaphorical symbol that he would try to use to visually communicate the concept of authentic connective experience across real, imagined and metaphoric “distance”. It has also become a container and vehicle for him to explore

¹ Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006.

connective experience, in addition to supporting its spread which he feels is the final and most important outcome of the Norae Shanty.

Hoyt is a painter and captures the images of visitors singing and interacting in the shack through digital photographs. These he translates into tightly composed paintings on paper that often incorporate the image of televised lyrics, referencing karaoke. To Hoyt, these paintings are his own indulgence and may never be shown or viewed by the public. Some of these paintings may be given away. Some of these paintings can be seen inside the shack and some are used as invitations to the Norae Shanty. Some do end up in regional exhibitions. A disclaimer is pinned up inside the shanty among paintings. Visitors may or may not be aware that they are being photographed or that they are being looked at as artistic subject matter by Hoyt. Why is a painter investing his time and energy creating a place to draw his imagery from? Why doesn't he just paint? Is painting not enough for Hoyt? Hoyt replies:

“Since finishing my BFA in '94 as a painter, I began to use painting as a primary tool to create spaces, environments, or installations. I knew that I wanted to communicate through the process of painting, yet I was not interested in presenting flat, 2d work. I felt that the activity of painting was important, yet it did not stand up on its own and communicate on the many levels I wanted it to. So they started to grow, take on new forms and employ new materials,

dimensions. They became installations (at least that is what I called them). I still struggle to keep drawing and painting relevant in my work. I think that painting (drawing more accurately) was my initial push to create/communicate. I've never felt that I was a "painter" in a very pure sense. I know many "painters" but I don't feel that I am one by modernist standards. I have always had a side of me that has enjoyed constructing things, spaces, etc. I wanted to explore different ways that experiencing paintings/drawings could be more engaging to a viewer by manipulating how 2d images can change in a 3d space. Is it possible to restructure the presentation and experience of painting outside and beyond the canvas? If so, is it still inherently a "painting" or something completely different? The inclusion of different media in a process devoted to painting does not imply that I think that painterly practice is obsolete, but rather I hope would point to a mutual dependence. I also hope that painting can break from its modernist confines and push the limits of its contents far beyond aesthetics or other internal painterly issues. It is in this hybridized extension of medium that I hope to find an explanation of why it is that painting has not become defunct as an art form, carrying within itself the potential for renewal.²

My next question to Hoyt: The Norae Shanty is so social and your paintings are created in isolation. The Norae Shanty is spontaneous and uncontrollable and your paintings are very tightly composed. Whats up with this? Does the social

² Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006.

fuel of the public space create fodder for the individual fuel of your private space? Can you help me understand the importance of this to you?

“I can best associate this phenomenon to how my work has been developing in recent years. I think that the shanty is a reversal of my previous processes. I have essentially created an installation from which I can draw on, collect, assimilate a huge amount of shared experience and documentation to distill down to the simple act of making paintings. So now I have a cultural container to create work from, verses making a bunch of stuff and trying to assemble it into some type of hybrid “meaning.”³”

Michael Hoyt grew up near this lake and is of Chinese and indigenous Hawai’ian descent. He was adopted and then raised in Plymouth and then moved into the City of Minneapolis as an adult. He describes his recent reunion with this particular lake and suburb;

“I grew up in Minnesota. I lived near that very lake. I grew up in a white working class family. I ice skated & ice fished on that lake as a child. These things are part of my own history. As someone who is hapa, that grew up transracially adopted, I grew up in the suburbs and am used to being in the minority. Yet the first ring suburbs are changing and there are more people of

³ Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006.

color living there now compared to when I grew up there 20 years ago. I would say that I was somewhat surprised by the ethnic diversity of visitors to the Norae Shanty.⁴

I would venture a guess that the more diverse local visitors were pleasantly surprised to find Hoyt's shack, as well. This situation is created as part of an annual winter event called Art Shanty Projects out of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The Twin Cities area of Minneapolis and St. Paul and surrounding suburbs is home to around 2.5 million people. Art Shanty Projects is a community of people (including artists) committed to exploring the frozen surface of Medicine Lake as an alternative temporary outdoor site of creativity. Hoyt's project was one of 24 projects that occurred on Medicine Lake in Plymouth, Minnesota, a transitional yet still predominantly white middle class first ring suburb of Minneapolis. Each project is reviewed and some are provided with stipends⁵. None are rejected, all are facilitated/assisted by a group of paid and unpaid helpers. This is the first year that Hoyt has installed his own shanty on Medicine Lake. Previously, he has installed a karaoke setting inside other spaces both outdoors and indoors at various locations including art galleries and exhibition venues, regionally. When his own shanty is not on a frozen lake, it is stationed in his backyard in the urban core of Minneapolis. The activity and site he makes

⁴ Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006.

⁵ Art Shanty Projects, 2005 <www.artshantyprojects.org>

moves with ease through a variety of social, economic and political stratospheres in its portability as Hoyt himself does. Hoyt creates the site as a place to gather material for his paintings through a digital conduit. Hoyt clearly states; “...I still consider the basis of my artistic process to be painting. I am currently exploring digital photography, video and installation art as a means and towards a traditionally drawn or painted end.” He creates a site from which to glean images for his rather obscure final product. How do people come to know about Norae Shanty and why do they visit?

A wide variety of people visit Norae Shanty. Hoyt has listed his shanty on a local website that publicizes karaoke locations. As a life-long fixture of the Twin Cities, he has an extensive emailing list that calls members of his various personal and professional communities to Norae Shanty the times it is open. Art Shanty Projects pursues publicity initiatives for all the shanties through television, radio and print. Each weekend of the six weekend run, the small lake fills with sometimes close to fifteen hundred visitors. The coverage for this event explodes because this is the annual “dead zone” for news regionally. Reporters and writers are searching for any kind of optimistic special interest, art or non-urban cultural community event to cover and even better if its all three. The winter holiday is over and the gloomy mid-winter doldrums hit full force. People either look for any excuse to get out of their cabin fever or use every excuse imaginable to stay in and hibernate.

Most small lakes have the quality of a kind of place that rarely exists anymore; it is a *common* space, fluid or frozen. Neither public nor private, it is a space held in common by all. Common space as described by Gaye Chan and Nandita Sharma in their work titled Eating in Public (2006), belonged in perpetuity to the community as a whole. Self-sustenance was dependent upon the ability of people to common (to hunt, graze, forage, fish and later, to farm). Commoning was well understood in early seventeenth century England as the only way of life in which people could remain free from complete bondage. Chan and Sharma explore the path of the development of private and public ownership of land out of “the commons” as a device to promote ideologies of state power and legitimately sustain unjust social relationships for financial gain and control⁶. Not unlike the concepts of land-use among First People, this longstanding and ancient cross cultural model of the commons was swiftly obliterated to be replaced by nations with borders.

As Hoyt describes it, this space/place has few rules, no utilities, no boundaries and no established aesthetic. This site provides Hoyt with the opportunity to step outside of his known construct and into unfamiliar territory as an artist. Singing cuts through social awkwardness and is an opportunity for people to be

⁶ Chan, Gaye and Dr. Nandita Sharma.. Eating in Public (Honolulu: Nomoola.com 2006)
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vulnerable and real with each other. Hoyt claims that this activity is reassuring in that it is “not fighting and not hiding”. Hoyt heartily participates himself and loves to sing. Hoyt is also presently exploring the similarities of the words “shanty” and “chanty” or old sea-faring work songs sung by men. While a bridge does not exist linking the notion of song with architecture, he is interested in the idea of men singing across bodies of water while they work. This acts as a metaphor related to the Norae Shanty on Medicine Lake which was an important lake to Native American tribes in the area, in addition to being a significant ice-cutting (refridgeration) source before electricity.

Viewers and participants who would not visit a gallery or museum can go to the surface of the frozen lake and support art, get involved in art-making and interact with artists. Even though the work presented may charter unfamiliar subject matter, the site does not because its held in common. Going to an unfamiliar social space to have an art experience is juxtaposed by going to a familiar commonly held social space to interact with art work. Which do you suppose might be the most effective in creating a connective experience or having a more lasting impact? This has not been studied at all but as Chan and Sharma point out, the enclosure of “the commons” has been accompanied by the enclosure of our imaginations. The commons of small lakes in Minnesota still retain traces of these more equitable relationships that inform these sites to this day. While the ice fishing season only lasts six weeks and a permit and a license

are required to place a shanty and fish (cost: twenty-five dollars for both) it is a highly unregulated and “free” space that anyone can go out on and do pretty much whatever they want within eyesight and earshot of others present. An unspoken high level of tolerance is enforced by neighbors. Since no one owns anything, no one can be prevented from entering and no one can be kicked out, unless its for a clear and obvious consensus-driven grievance such as making too much noise that scares away the fish.

Hoyt skillfully pairs the notion of the commons with another kind of commons that is an action we are all capable of doing: singing. While Hoyt acknowledges that “its possible that the pre-existing fishing community could perceive us as cultural colonists”, he feels that because of the common (non-ownership) nature of the space and the temporal aspect of the time spent together, potential conflict is thwarted and in fact, has never been a issue. It is all fodder for the rich storytelling machine out on the lake.

Hoyt is one of very few non-white European individuals to build and occupy a shanty on Medicine Lake. I asked Hoyt a question about this. “Are you challenging racial boundaries through this piece? His reply; “I have always been most interested in the points of cultural intersections, what I refer to as the hyphen...it is there that I feel culture is born/defined/redefined. That’s a difficult questions because its such a layered and heavy issue. I would say that I

stay away (run away) from looking at issues of race in simple “black & white” terms. To me those conversations and dialogues have never served much purpose.⁷”

As Hoyt describes, each winter weekend features a pilgrimage of friends that include a strong constituency of young Asian and Asian American men to Norae Shanty not only to sing but to grill out, drink alcohol, play cards, goof off, have fun and tell stories by candle light together. The pairing of stereotypes; White male Lake Wobegon Minnesotan (ice fishing shanty) and Asian American male karaoke heart throb (noraebang) may be a device employed by the artist to grapple with the endless binary struggle between mutable poles of identity while also exploring some truly remarkable similarities. Hoyt did, after all, grow up near this lake and was raised in a white working class home. These two caricatures can be explored when walking in the door and may be totally debunked by the time one leaves through the act of unceremoniously jamming everyone and their cultural baggage together into a small room and singing like crazy. Plenty of non-Asian visitors enter the site with their own preconceptions and stereotypes that are often transformed as well. Does understanding and tolerance multiply through sheer mutual silliness?

⁷ Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006.

It is this artist's intention to bring together two culturally disparate yet socially similar sites of connection. While he does not openly acknowledge this, I believe he is bringing people together to explore very powerful stereotypes in an relatively innocent guise. Hoyt may be courageously appropriating a site whose occupants might not care for it to be appropriated for such exploration, overtly. As an artist, he sees this kind of place as new grounds for dialogue. In fact, it has always been a discursive place for dialogue and stories but Hoyt is a new generation that introduces new challenging points of departure. Lucy Lippard examines a new spin on assimilation through hybridization when she describes the work of two artist/writers; Richard Rodriguez and Guillermo Gomez-Pena in Lure of the Local. Rodriguez, a gay Chicano-Mestizo writer and commentator whose resistance to multiculturalism has made him an outcast in many progressive Latino circles enters the fray with a complex argument that assimilation can be a subtly aggressive act against the dominant culture. In his work he reverses the history of the conquest, wondering who assimilated whom: "I represent someone who has swallowed English, and I claim it as my language, your books as my books, your religion as my religion...maybe this is the most subversive element of the colonial adventure." Performance artist and writer Gomez-Pena also advocates mixture as a weapon against conformity and repression. He contends that he no longer has a one-word identity⁸. According

⁸ Lippard, Lucy. The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multi-Centered Society (New York: New 1997) 63

to Hoyt, “Bangs, like ice (fishing) houses, serve as a retreat, a small and isolated space for small groups to participate in a shared activity away from the stress of everyday life.”. He goes on; “...to me this process reflects a simple contemporary construct, a frantic assimilation and reprocessing of images, objects, story, history and experiences in an attempt to manage meaning and identify place/order in a complex and rapidly evolving technological and cross-cultural sphere.” As stated earlier, Hoyt seeks to “illuminate the hyphen” of his own Asian-American identity and create work that “represents the enormous richness, contradiction and vitality that defines the American experience” and to “stimulate debate, raise awareness and build bridges within and beyond our known or defined communities.”⁹ I believe that Hoyt, like Rodriquez and Gomez-Pena, navigates a subtly subversive appropriation process. In Hoyt’s case, he is appropriating the stereotype of male Eurocentric “red-neckism” by installing himself and his cadre out on the ice. Their physical visual presence truly challenges this homogenous stereotype and the predominant “guys on ice” are confronted with young Asian and Asian American men that sound and act just like they do. All of our American winter wonderland fantasies of Currier and Ives prints do not include any pictures of Asians participating in picturesque winter activities.

⁹ Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006.

What is the role of the public imagination in this work? According to anthropologist Arjun Appaduarai, “ordinary people have begun to deploy their imaginations in the practice of their everyday lives”. He goes on to say that he describes the imagination as something more than a kind of individual faculty and something other than a mechanism for escaping the real. He asserts that the imagination has expanded into the creation of multiple horizons of possibility. My understanding of what this means is that in the case of Hoyt’s work, people can imagine themselves differently through his shanty not unlike trying on different costumes and assuming different persona, all within the realm of daily existence which in this case would be on the even plain of a frozen lake. In this particular piece, Hoyt draws from his background of designing theatrical sets when exploring models of presentation of his work. He says, “There has always been a tension or play in my work between the individual painted object, its context, and the sum of its parts, as well as the relationship between the viewers experience and how the work is presented. In an attempt to invert my previous methods of painting to create installation, the resulting *Norae Shanty* documentation and artifact is ultimately reprocessed and presented through the action and perhaps exhibition of a new series of paintings.”¹⁰ While I certainly appreciate his paintings and their scale, precision and tenderness, they feel more like nostalgic souvenirs or keepsakes of the real force of his work which is the shanty itself and what happens in it when it comes to life. Hoyt has

¹⁰ Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006.

deep admiration for the work of Kerry James Marshall which I can certainly see; but not as much through his paintings as through the shack itself- it is like a Marshall painting come to life and is better than any painting could ever hope to be because we all get to enter it and participate in it, not just stand off to the side and look at it passively. Another of Hoyt's influences are comic books and graphic novels. Again, he aligns himself to an egalitarian form, a part of mundane life, mass produced, tossed across your bedroom floor. Not unlike Marshall's paintings or a copy of Jaime Hernandez's *Love & Rockets*, the production of locality is as much a work of the imagination as a work of material social construction. Hoyt's work generates locality in that it unites various individuals under the roof of a shared physical experience. In Marshall's paintings (he has created a comic book series also) or Hernandez's comic books, a narrative picture/story is created and shared with the viewer that is seeded with recognizable signals that includes the viewer as opposed to excluding the viewer; as in the Norae Shanty. The question of the role of the public's imagination in the Norae Shanty is echoed in the question about what this space actually is. Is the Norae Shanty a theater set or a studio? Is Hoyt trying to create an illusion or de-mystify one? I asked Hoyt if he painted in the shanty and he replied;

“...I did, yet not as often as I would have liked. It was not set up for that activity as much as for singing. And once I was in the shanty, people were

knocking down the door to sing. It created a really difficult dilemma (to make in isolation, or to sing with people)?¹¹”

I believe that this ambiguity actually helps to decenter all participants (even the artist) but the karaoke paves the way for acceptance and insures the success of connection; it is the seeding of the recognizable. Some lack of clarity may be beneficial when chartering the realm of human imagination; it may be useful to blur some boundaries in order to create new alignments.

Does dialogical artistic practice which acknowledges art as a privileged realm, act as a shoehorn to venture into discursive process to mobilize various forms of aesthetic knowledge? Does this facilitate one of the “new mythographies” that Appadurai states are “charters for new social projects”¹²? While I am convinced that yes, public imagination can and is being deployed in new ways, my main criticism of Appadurai is that he is mute about the exploration of harnessing this power. The Norae Shanty is certainly a site that generates locality through engagement of the imagination as Appadurai describes. The Norae Shanty is a container for a process to engage, witness and cultivate this new level of public imagination in a highly democratic way. Appadurai asserts that the image, the imagined and the imaginary (all terms that direct us to something critical and

¹¹ Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006.

¹² Appadurai, Arjun. Modernity at Large (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1996) 15

new in global cultural processes) are a social practice. No longer mere fantasy or escape or elite pastime and no longer mere contemplation, the imagination has become an organized field of social practices; a form of work and a form of negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility. This unleashing of imagination links the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order¹³. In Hoyt's work, the participant goes onto the frozen lake that many may have only walked upon in their imaginations. Others have literally walked it before but never experienced anything like this. This is certainly a pathway of agency.

Appadurai also discusses the idea of deterritorialization which may apply to Hoyt's work. According to Appadurai, deterritorialized populations yearn for contact with homelands which are sometimes invented and temporary. Is Norae Shanty a kind of portable temporary homeland for Hoyt and his aficionado's? Aren't all clubhouses and tree forts a re-territorialized space? How do we define a deterritorialized population and is it linked to how we choose to identify ourselves from one day to the next? Are there not parts of ourselves that are deterritorialized and parts that are territorialized?

¹³ Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 31

In Fresh Talk, Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art, Margo Machida states;

“As the American art world, like society in general, becomes an increasingly hybrid, transnational environment, fundamental issues of meaning and cultural translation are assuming an ever more prominent position. It is not simply a politics of inclusion that informs our efforts (i.e. for Asian Americans to put forward images they create as a counterweight to imposed stereotypes and omissions), but rather an interest in generating *new ways of thinking* about this art (italics hers).¹⁴”

I propose that the process of exploring identity politics through dialogical practice generates new ways of thinking and perceiving, period, not just about “this art” (although that is important, also) but about ourselves.

Art’s potential role, according to Suzanne Lacy in Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art, is in maintaining, enhancing, creating, and challenging privilege. Power relationships are exposed in the very process of creating, from news making to art making.¹⁵ Anyone who participates in artistic dialogical

¹⁴Kim, Elaine H., Margo Michida, Sharon Mizota, eds., Fresh Talk, Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art (Berkeley, University of California 2003) xiii

¹⁵ Lacy, Suzanne, ed., Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art Ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay 1995) 31

practice (artist, viewer, participant, funder, administrator, technician, etc.) has the capacity to explore their identity, consciousness and privilege from the inside-out by participating in the process. Lippard argues that artists can make connections visible and guide viewers through sensuous kinesthetic responses to topography, lead us from archeology and land based social history into alternative relationships to space. Artists can expose social agendas, bring out multiple readings that mean different things to different people at different times rather than merely reflecting beauty back into the marketplace or the living room¹⁶. An example of this exists in Hoyt's Norae Shanty. To some, his work is very campy; they enter and have fun and act up. To others it is a serious expression of feelings through singing a favorite song that may represent one's identity or very present strong feeling of the moment. To others, it may be a way to loosen emotions or try on a new persona. Through this, Hoyt provides a container for a passing variety of meaning and agency to the viewer and through the viewer.

Artists have an assumed cultural capital assigned to them by the dominant society. This capital is immediately at their disposal and allows and encourages a temporary suspension of all doubt and suspicion. I am reminded of an experience I had co-teaching a class led by artist Mel Chin in Minneapolis, Minnesota. We met in the lobby of the Holiday Inn where he was staying. We

¹⁶ Lippard, 19

took up an entire lobby, there were so many of us. Mel told us we were now going to take over the entire motel for five minutes and we did. The amazing thing is that the management of the motel let us, based on the fact that we were artists and this was an “artistic exercise” for art students (this was pre 9/11). This “opening” of space in our contemporary culture allows free inquiry that could not be acceptable anywhere else in our society. Artists step in from outside; that is how they can see what we on the inside cannot see for we are too familiar with it. Art and artists encourage us think in uncommon ways and give temporary permission to explore, dream and spend time in our imaginations. WochenKlausur, an interventionist group of artists committed to dialogical artistic practice states; “Art context places us outside the narrow thinking of the culture of specialization and outside of the hierarchies we are pressed into when we are employed in an institution, a social organization, or a political party.” Artists can present what they find and mirror it back. Ultimately, a piece of art has this same capacity. Artists and art context re-map a constantly changing topography. This is not a panacea; artists as interventionists must set a very specific time frame or address a specific problem and find resources and facilitate resolution through a concentrated series of acts that incorporate creative thinking, problem solving and intersubjective communication skills. But art and art context can and does have value and relevance far beyond the making of pretty paintings. While dialogical art is localized between social work, politics, media and management, the interventions are nonetheless based on the

discourse of art. As artist Jay Koh says; “these dialogical practices are a platform where we use the medium of contemporary art to intervene in social processes and structures.¹⁷”

Dialogical art¹⁸, a term coined by Grant Kester in Conversation Pieces grew out of the work of pioneering conceptual artists like Vito Acconci who rejected the optical or even the object based condition of art entirely and instead focused on the ways in which optical experience is conditioned by a social context or physical situation where the viewer as participant was key in completing the piece. It was Acconci’s intention to subvert the intransigence of the market economy that he felt had ruthlessly undermined the art world. He made work that could not be purchased. While the minimalists and most conceptual artists were not really interested in communicative or interactive dialogue, Acconci’s steps toward interaction in the early 1960’s gave way to more encompassing approaches like those of Adrian Piper, Judy Baca and Meirle Ukeles. Dialogical aesthetics acknowledges art as a privileged realm of self-expression that provides a quasi-protected opening to venture into a broader cultural and political area within which various forms of aesthetic knowledge can be mobilized. This socially discursive realm of shared experience, dialogue and physical movement can re-locate the mutable aspect of art through the very

¹⁷ Kester, Grant. Conversation Pieces: Community+Communication in Modern Art (Berkeley: University of California 2004) 102

¹⁸ Kester, 1

process of communication the artwork catalyzes, not through changing objects which is the old avant-garde paradigm.

I asked Hoyt, does it matter if the people entering the shanty know that you are an artist? His reply;

“No. I think they don’t know what they are entering into unless they had already read Art Shanty Project press releases and event info. If anything, they are looking for some type of experience or social interaction. There is a risk that is taken once you enter a shanty. It’s a closed or intimate space. Some folks who were a bit apprehensive just sort of hung around the door while others sat right down, took off their hats and mittens and picked up a song book.¹⁹”

This modality of engagement, as opposed to the traditional modality of indifference (when a viewer enters a gallery or museum) creates an empathic identification. Visual artist Adrian Piper cites this as a necessary component to de-center a fixed identity through interactions with others²⁰. Once a shocked or “de-centered” viewer or participant perhaps feels confusion, how can they then enter the process of consciousness-raising with an encounter with these others?

¹⁹ Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006

²⁰ Kester, 77

For Hoyt this answer arrives in a place of comfort and security, doing what we all can do- sing. There is an awareness of negation and universality implicit in unstructured discursive interaction. Identity is formed and transformed through our encounters with others not with the intention of creating binding relationships but simply to create provisional understanding. Again, Lacy states; “ dialogical works challenge dominant representations of a given community and create a more complex understanding of and empathy for that community among a broader public.” She argues that there are basically three functions: 1.) the creation of solidarity, 2.) the enhancement of the creation of solidarity and 3.) the counter hegemonic.” Dialogical projects will operate in these multiple registers and are also reciprocal, not only one-way²¹. The artist is as profoundly transformed as the viewer. Hoyt says, “ ...we all like to sing, especially if we are among people that will encourage and support us. We also like to witness people singing, letting it all out, getting to that raw and vulnerable place.²²” But doesn’t the Jerry Springer Show function in a similar way on national television? How is this different? Its different in the case of the Norae Shanty because its localized. I also suspect it is different because it is not a mediated situation (broadcast television). Appadurai states that the production of locality is an effort to produce a sense of continuity in the face of the temporariness of things. The temporary nature of a lot of physical spaces and places shoots any project of

²¹ Kester, 67

²² Hoyt, Michael. Email and telephone interviews, February 28-May 6, 2006

producing locality through with a constant under-text of anxiety. This tension is frequently articulated in collective forms, such as ethnic violence²³. But what if this tension is channeled into other kinds of projects and activities toward something connective, positive and creative?

The Norae Shanty demonstrates a partnership of Appadurai's theories of new definitions of imagination and Kester's exploration of a shift in artistic modality. Appadurai states that;

“its in the work of the imagination, I think, that the cultural dimension now really lives. Culture means not that you can simply say, ‘I belong to this community’. I think it means, ‘I inhabit a terrain of possibilities, constructed through the work of the imagination, in some social context which I inhabit, which allows me to infuse my life with meaning, with value, with belief.’ These are well known features of the word ‘culture’...when I talk about the cultural dimensions of globalization, I try to de-link culture from place and make it more an aspect of practice.”²⁴

Kester's notion of dialogical art practice is about de-linking art from the optical along with a re-linking of the aesthetic with the process, not just the product.

²³ “Illusion of Permanence: Interview with Arjun Appadurai”, July 14, 2002 Perspecta 34, The Yale Architectural Journal 44-55 (Boston: MIT Press 2002)

²⁴ “The Right to Participate in the Work of the Imagination”. (Interview with Arjun Appadurai by Arjen Mulder) date unknown, 2002 Transurbanism: 33-46 (Rotterdam: V2 Publishing/NAI Publishers 2002)

Both theorists employ the word “practice” to describe the long-term commitment to a relational and thoughtfully explored process of establishing connective experience in a dominant culture exclusively engaged in individualism.

Human societies throughout history have always displayed some form of behavior that can be called “art”. Dr. Ellen Dissanayake, a physical anthropologist, believes that this behavior fulfills a fundamental biological and evolutionary need. According to Dissanayake, this behavior plays an integral part in daily social life and functions as a communal activity whereas the dominant idea about art in our present culture has been that it is superfluous. Dissanayake argues that by idealizing aesthetic experience and assigning it to very specifically sanctioned objects, our modern view of art controverts its biological and evolutionary significance. What artists do is merely an intensification and exaggeration of what everyone does quite naturally which is to “make special”. If the notion that everyone is an artist seems foreign to our highly specialized society, it is only because art has been falsely set apart from life in the course of which it has lost its communal nature and function. According to Dissanayake, *Homo sapiens* could just as easily have been named *Homo aestheticus* since humans universally display a unique propensity for aesthetic behavior. Currently we are in a paradoxical spot because Western society treats art as a dispensable luxury, when it is really an innate behavior that

is essential to our human biological nature²⁵. In light of this, it would appear that art may, once again, function as a connective cultural glue among societies. Dialogical art practices and new social practices of global imagination may be new terms and theories for truly ancient ideas reformed to suit our present time.

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²⁵ Gablik, Suzy. Conversations Before the End of Time (New York: Thames & Hudson 1995) 38

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