HEALING IN TIME
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INTRODUCTION. The first question to ask about “Culture in Action” is how to approach it. What attitude, what state of mind, is needed in order for its emotional, intellectual, and artistic substance to reveal itself?

Giving yourself to “Culture in Action” means feeling the discomfort of irresolution and allowing it to become a condition while your responses evolve.

Giving yourself to the eight community-based or community-oriented, site-specific projects in “Culture in Action” is every bit as important as giving yourself to the pictorial and imaginative processes of an old or modern master. If you are going to appreciate the intelligence, commitment, and complexity of Matisse, let’s say, you are going to have to put aside a lot of assumptions—about his immediate accessibility perhaps, or the easy pleasure of his work, or about the potential for genuine courage in an art of political disengagement. If you do give yourself to Matisse’s work and enter the process of discovery it makes available, it will lead you beyond most assumptions and preconceptions you brought to it. The questions and answers you have at the end of your exploration and investigation are likely to be very different from the ones you had when your assumptions and preconceptions mediated your response to the work.

The same is true with “Culture in Action,” but knowing how to give yourself to it may be far more difficult. For one thing, the object can seem so mundane, so familiar, so fully integrated in everyday life, that it may not be clear where a particular project begins and ends, or even what or where “the work” is. The primary content of a project may be hard to define. The rules of interaction between the art and its audiences may seem so loose, so fluid, that they can be determined only by the dynamics of the situation. As a result of all this unknowing, it is almost never apparent upon encountering the art by what, and by whose, standards the success or failure of a project, or of the entire program for that matter, can be measured.

Even for critics and artists steeped in community-based, site-specific art, giving yourself to “Culture in Action” means, almost inevitably, throwing yourself into the water and learning to swim. It means feeling the discomfort of irresolution and allowing it to become a condition while your responses evolve. It also means hearing the clamor of long-held artistic and...
political questions—about quality and community-based art, perhaps, or about the social value of community-based art, or about the effectiveness with which an alternative arts organization such as Sculpture Chicago, with its largely corporate board, can make a commitment to voices and audiences with no previous access to institutional power. It means listening to these reservations and then being able, for a while at least, to put them aside. Without a willingness to relinquish control and follow the projects where they lead—into the thoughts and realities of communities, into the hopes of the artists, into the artistic possibilities of these collaborations—the richness of these projects, and their real strengths and weaknesses, cannot emerge.

"Culture in Action" demands an extraordinary commitment not only from its artists and from the communities with which they collaborated, but also from anyone determined to engage the projects in a fair and thorough manner.

The projects unfolded over an extended period of time, and the way they appeared at the end of September 1993 was in most cases very different from the way they appeared the previous May, when "Culture in Action" was inaugurated as a public event. In addition, the projects developed in parts of Chicago that were not only distant from one another, but also, in most instances, far from any convenient tourist base downtown. Staying with the projects over months meant traveling all over the city and returning again and again to the kinds of neighborhoods most art museums have become fortresses against. It meant trusting the unfamiliar, trusting process, and trusting fluctuations of response toward some or many of the projects that could be more chronic and disorienting than those aroused over several months by any traditional sculpture and painting.

In these and many other respects, "Culture in Action" is fundamentally different from its two most important predecessors, Kasper König and Klaus Bussmann's 1987 "Skulptur Projekte" in Münster, Germany, and Mary Jane Jacob's 1991 "Places With a Past: Neue Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto Festival." Both these ambitious undertakings—"Skulptur Projekte" invited more than sixty artists, "Places With a Past" twenty-three—reflected the sea change in art in public places that took place during the years of bitter controversy over Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc," the 120-foot-long and 12-foot-tall bend of steel that was installed in Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan in 1981 and removed in 1989. The three-day public hearing about this work in 1985 revealed and reinforced a wall between the array of art professionals testifying in favor of the work and members of the general public who wanted it removed.1 For many artists working in the realm of public art, the breach those hearings exposed between art insiders and audiences with little or no interest in modern and contemporary art remains an open wound.2

In 1989 the art critic Arlene Raven published an anthology called Art in the Public Interest, which documented the growing dissatisfaction among artists with the materialism and self-absorption of the institutionalized art world in the 1980s and the growing need among more and more artists to make socially responsible art that would help bridge the gap between art and life. Essays in the
Both "Skulptur Projekte" and "Places With a Past" come out of museum thinking but they also move away from museums in the force with which they challenge artists to conceive of installations that engage and comment upon the history and social dynamics of place. Both argue for the need to root public art in the physical, historical, and emotional texture of its site in such a way that voices shaping the past and present of the site also shape the work. "Skulptur Projekte" and "Places With a Past" responded to the pressure that was building in public art, and in contemporary art in general, to listen to forgotten histories and to voices outside institutional power, and to develop the kind of poetry and punch that could affirm the possibilities and importance of socially responsible artistic statements.

But the allure of these experimental festivals still depended upon the romantic images of their cities. Münster has a strong medieval past. Charleston is one of the architectural jewels of the South. "Skulptur Projekte" and "Places With a Past" led visitors all through these cities, through ordinary and working-class neighborhoods but also to the kinds of historic sites that draw people from around the world. In addition, while Münster and Charleston inspired installations so dependent upon their sites that they were unimaginable in another location, a number of the artists, including Donald Judd, Claes Oldenburg, and Richard Deacon, in Münster, and Chris Burden, Christian Boltanski, and Cindy Sherman, in Charleston, produced work that would have been just as successful in a New York gallery or museum.

"Skulptur Projekte" and "Places With a Past" raised as many questions as they answered. Who were these projects really for? Many art-world visitors came through and art critics wrote about them, but what were their effects on the people who lived with the works, whose lives were formed by the histories with which the artists were concerned? The artists in these exhibitions were moving toward audiences outside galleries and museums, and often they had contact with them while conceiving and making the works, but did the show really touch them? Was the gap between the art public and the nonart public, art and life, that many artists in these exhibitions were trying to bridge, really closing? While "Skulptur Projekte" and, to a far greater degree, "Places With a Past," essentially rejected the notion of a permanent public-art monument imposing an artist's view on a public site, and while they pointed eloquently toward the kind of intimate relationship between artist and place that is now characteristic of the most influential public art in the United States and Europe, the success of these two endeavors still depended, to some degree, upon the tourist and museum experience.
"Culture in Action" does not. It is smaller, more intense, and less conducive to a hit-and-run approach. None of the artists in "Culture in Action" is known as an object-maker. All are known for collaborations. All are activists. Almost all belong to the tradition of socially based community or interactive art that includes the Russian Constructivists, Joseph Beuys, the Situationists, Allan Kaprow, and Christo – a tradition that has never been fully at home in galleries and museums. With the exception of Lacy’s quarried limestone blocks commemorating 100 Chicago women, which were arranged around the Loop, all the projects unfolded in working-class or poor areas that hardly anyone outside Chicago would think of when picturing the greatness of this city.

"Culture in Action" had a grittiness that made it extremely difficult for visitors to encounter its projects without experiencing the social and economic realities and the humanity of the communities with whom the artists worked.

One of the most important and telling aspects of "Culture in Action" was its reversal of power relations. In this program, the insid[ers were not members of the gallery and museum worlds but communities whose members tend to feel that museums like The Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Contemporary Art have nothing to do with them. Encountering the artistic collaborations in neighborhoods, members of the gallery and museum worlds were the outsiders. To experience the eight projects, people affiliated with the institutionalized art world had to understand something of the foreignness that residents of these neighborhoods may feel in art institutions.

In the Art Institute, what Latinos in West Town, African-Americans on the South Side, or Mexican-Americans on Maxwell Street feel about the paintings and sculptures on the walls and floors is essentially irrelevant to the standards by which the institute appreciates and judges its work. In "Culture in Action," museum standards are essentially irrelevant to judging the success or failure of the chocolate bar, the hydroponic garden, the block party, the parade, the ecology class, or the paint chart, to cite some of the objects, events, or situations that resulted from the artist-community collaborations. The shoe was on the other foot. In order to stand on solid ground in experiencing and evaluating the projects, the communities had to be entered, their voices heard, power shared.

"Culture in Action" has an idealism that has always characterized the most ambitious socially based art. It was driven by a belief in people and a faith in the ability of art to deal with social crises. Each artist in the program is aware of how violently fragmented America has become and how seriously the social contract among its citizens has been broken. Each artist believes in the power of art to break down walls and build trust. To resist "Culture in Action" before understanding what it has to offer is to reinforce the same kinds of defensive-reactive attitudes that have made community-based, site-specific art an increasingly urgent matter. A program that is so much about the outlook for trust and respect must be trusted and respected before it is judged.
What I want to do in this essay is articulate what "Culture in Action" had to offer and why it has the ability to deepen the way everyone thinks about the multiplicity of audiences that make up the American public, as well as, therefore, about the enormous and complex field of public art. I want to explain why "Culture in Action" has the ability to deepen the understanding of art. To assume that because many of these projects take place in communities with little connection to galleries and museums, and because they produce very little that looks like art, that "Culture in Action" has nothing to do with gallery and museum art, would be a serious mistake. It has as much to do with the essence of art now as anything in a gallery or museum. It is precisely in the areas of ambitious and responsible artistic community involvement where you are now likely to find art and artists with the kind of mission and responsibility that has driven so much of the work that has made twentieth-century art a vital human and spiritual matter.

**THE OBJECT AND TIME.** One way to approach the differences between museum art and "Culture in Action" is through the object. A great painting is an extraordinary concentration and orchestration of artistic, philosophical, religious, psychological, social, and political impulses and information. The greater the artist, the more richer, line, and gesture becomes both a current and a river of thought and feeling. Great paintings condense moments, reconcile polarities, sustain faith in the inexhaustible potential of the creative act. As a result, they become, inevitably, emblems of possibility and power.

This distillation and compression create an extraordinary pressure within the work, that can make a painting seem complete, self-contained, inviolable. To audiences who love painting, the experience this kind of concentration and coherence offers can be not only profound and poetic but also ecstatic, even mystical. Spirit is incarnated in matter. People and events seem locked into and yet liberated from their moment. The human capacity for revelation is manifest. Not only does an invisible, spiritual world seem to exist, but it appears accessible, within the reach of anyone who can recognize the life of spirit in matter.

Modernist painting encourages viewers to assume that reality can always be seen, shaped, ordered, created. This, too, helps explain why painting is almost inevitably an emblem of power.

But painting also has the weaknesses of its strengths. At its best, it is so contained, so intact, that it becomes not only a conduit— from longing to light, muteness to eloquence, everyday life to a spiritual realm— but also a wall. It has become so much an emblem of power that it
can only function to a limited degree as an interrogation of power. Its illuminated coherence encourages people to take refuge inside it. Its capacity to evoke an experience of transcendence allows it to become for many people a release from the world around them. It is precisely the blend of spirituality and control that makes it so desirable to collectors who want to partake of its talismanic vitality—and so essential to a market system that has had no trouble converting a charmed and empowering pictorial presence into a coveted commodity.

What art of such internal pressure can do to only a limited degree is lead outside itself into social and political situations. No matter how much a painting may be about someone or something outside painting, it always pulls attention back into itself and holds it there. Titian’s portraits of the rich and famous of sixteenth-century Venice are unforgettable because they are great paintings, and the imagination of the paint is more memorable in the end than the particular representatives of religious or secular power. Van Gogh’s mesmerizing paintings of Arles and Cézanne’s of Aix-en-Provence have inspired generations of people to visit these places, but it is almost impossible then to stop seeing them through these paintings, and through these artists’ eyes.

A painting concentrates and distills; a “Culture in Action” project expands and flows.

And it is into the world outside art that an increasing number of artists, overwhelmed by the social and political conflicts around them, want to go. All the art in “Culture in Action” is intended to lead away from the object into the lives of real people, real neighborhoods. All the art is designed to challenge institutional power by fighting stereotypes, by building bridges between people pitted against one another, by empowering the kinds of audiences that do not feel comfortable in art museums, by underlining the richness of culture in the housing project and street. “Culture in Action” is intended to develop the ability of art to respond directly to social situations and appeal to a sense of collective responsibility as a means to personal redemption and power.

The imagery of its eight projects functions very differently than the imagery in a painting. Not primarily as a repository, although the “We Got It!” chocolate bar, the paint chart mapping American public housing, the hydroponic garden, the granite floor, and the limestone rocks bearing plaques honoring women may eventually become that. The chocolate bar, the paint chart, the garden, the granite floor, and the limestone rocks are successful only within the context of this program in so far as they lead away from themselves, toward actual people and real-life situations. A painting concentrates and distills; a “Culture in Action” project expands and flows.

The differences between museum art and “Culture in Action” are just as profound in their attitudes toward sound. In most art museums, as in most cathedrals (except, of course, during Mass), silence is golden. For the artists in “Culture in Action,” silence is less a condition of respect and prayer than a symbol of repression whose rule must be broken. A painting may orchestrate many different voices but they are felt and seen rather than heard, and, as a result, it is easy for viewers to tone them down or tune them out. The “Culture in Action”
projects depend upon and conjure up a myriad of actual conversations. They are generated by and they generate speech. In the rambunctious noise of the parade organized by Daniel J. Martinez and VinZula Kara, and in the pounding and restrained cadences of the block party organized by Halseo Manglano-Ovalle, the models were not museums but street art, and the currents of sound were such that silence seemed not only jolted but broken. **A multifaceted**

**Cubist painting offers a private experience of spatial dynamism. These artists ask visitors to experience the multifaceted, unrestrained dynamism of the real world.**

Art that does not result in the kind of object in which a viewer is encouraged to dwell has the potential to throw the idea of ownership into question. However successful it may be in building a social bridge, no project in "Culture in Action" encourages a sense that conflicting viewpoints can be distilled into a seamless whole. No project allows anyone to say for sure: I have the work, it is mine, this is where it is. "Culture in Action" does not encourage a sense of control. None of the projects has the dense and sometimes wondrous consistency of a painting. All of them are ephemeral and unframed. One morning or evening the parade and the block party were there. Then they were gone, and all the people who participated in or observed them were left with mere memories of the marching bands and video images and words and the pressure to interpret what the sounds and sights of the block party and parade meant. The images generated by "Culture in Action," such as the paint chart, the chocolate bar, and the hydroponic garden, point toward realities without getting in the way of experiencing them. The process of engaging the "Culture in Action" projects offers visitors an experience of embeddedness in the world around them that no painting of those communities could offer to anywhere near the same degree. Paintings, no matter how ebullient and gregarious they may be, are essentially centrifugal. The art in "Culture in Action" is centrifugal.

**At the heart of the difference between the aims and functions of art as object and art as non- or anti-object is a radically different approach to time.**

Nothing is more important to the magic of a great painting than the sense of the concentration and sacralization of time. Time seems gathered, poured, molded into canvas or wood with paint. It is held there. It seems to be held there in a way that is totally distinct from its absolute refusal to be frozen, even for an instant, in daily life. Power over time is something human beings are not permitted in their lives, but in a painting it seems possible to hold time and feel that it is responsive, even obedient, to the human hand. The consent of time is one reason a painting can seem like a blessed event.

"Culture in Action" secularizes time. It does not try to stop time. It does not in any way encourage the belief that time can be organized into a unified narrative framework, or that the "fall into time" is a Biblical curse, or even a fall, or any mark of human frailty and sin. On the contrary, its projects deliver themselves to the disorderly flow of time, and ask everyone exploring the pro-
jects to consider flux home. The immersion in time means a different kind of participation than the kind encouraged by a painting. Building on historical precedents such as Russian Constructivism, and reflecting the growing public dissatisfaction with the limits of art institutions and the struggle within many of them to question and expand their understanding of the public, the projects require visitors to get out of the gallery and into the city, into real rather than pictorial space. They also all but demand an emotional and intellectual interaction with many different kinds of situations and people.

The rewards of trusting rather than resisting the call of real time and space in “Culture in Action” are enormous and surprising. While the immersion in everyday existence may seem to offer no myth, no poetry, no ritual, no sense of access to a privileged realm of feeling and experience, there is a powerful lyricism in the projects of Haha and Daniel J. Martinez, and for many of the artists in “Culture in Action,” including Lacy, Martinez, and Manglano-Ovalle, ritual is essential to their ability to focus attention on social issues. A number of the projects offer a sense of initiation. It can come at any stage in the discovery of the work. It is not likely to come all at once, like a revelation so consuming that the work remains a personal landmark forever. Once a project does seem to reveal itself to you, however, the sense of recognition and intimacy is likely to remain for every bit as long as it does after it is generated by a painting.

Anyone who meets the temporal demands of these projects will be stretched into several worlds. In order to understand the paint chart that Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler developed with the Ogden Courts Residents Group, it is helpful to visit the Ogden Courts housing development on the South Side of Chicago and speak with a member of that group. It then begins to become possible to comprehend the realities of the Chicago housing developments and the heroism and humanity of ordinary citizens, such as Arrie Martin, a leader of the group, who struggles each day to build hope in young people and make life in Ogden Courts better.

After visiting Ogden Courts, it is easier to grasp the real and symbolic importance of paint in the residents’ lives. Many of the apartments were painted once, more than twenty years ago, and never again—although many residents have asked the Chicago Housing Authority to repaint, and although cracking paint can be a health hazard. It is the responsibility of the CHA to maintain the buildings. Developing a paint chart and naming the colors after events in the history of public housing—or which not only inner-city housing but also the White House, shown on the cover of the chart, is part—and naming colors after individuals in the developments (for example, “Arrie’s Dazzle Blue”), are political acts exposing the role of institutional indifference in the widespread stigmatization of public housing and in the stereotyping of its residents as unknowing, uncommitted people.

Only by visiting Ogden Courts is it possible to sense the distance between its residents and the artists. There are roughly sixty-five apartments and four hundred African-American residents in Ogden Courts, and ninety-five percent of its households are run by single mothers. Ericson and Ziegler are white and live on the East Coast. The paint chart is the evidence of a small bridge across race and class that can continue to grow as the chart finds its way into True Value Hardware Stores across the United States, or into some other public arena, and the information on it is spread.
Experiencing the different realities that began to communicate in the paint chart is one of the sparks that can bring the project to life. This experience opens up other layers. If the search for a bridge across race and class is part of the content of the work, so are the previous attitudes of Ogden Courts toward white artists from the East and toward Sculpture Chicago, which prior to “Culture in Action” was widely seen in African-American and Mexican-American neighborhoods as a white downtown organization that was not interested in the rest of Chicago. So are the assumptions about the housing project and the people in it that Ericson and Ziegler brought with them. So will be the responses to the paint chart once it becomes public. In so many ways, the paint chart expands outward, unfolding in many directions, flowing into personal, social, and political worlds.

**And into art.** The paint chart speaks to the history of Conceptual Art, including the photographs and installations of Gordon Matta-Clark, who was passionately interested in the ordinary American house and in the social conditions of the people who lived in it. It also needs to be understood in the context of the careers of Ericson and Ziegler, who were once house painters, Ericson for more than fifteen years. Much of their work has been an attempt to empower ordinary people and explore the conventions and meanings of house painting, and ways in which a culture develops and spreads ideas about house and home. They have worked with individual homes and their residents in suburbs and in small cities like Charleston, where they participated in “Places With a Past.” For “Culture in Action,” they conceived a project that could benefit tenants in the urban environment of Chicago’s South Side and at the same time suggest the vast and complex story of American public housing as a whole.

In short, the involvement in real time and space opens up the projects in “Culture in Action.” And the importance of this kind of involvement to an understanding of the projects raises with particular urgency one of the most fundamental of all contemporary art issues: responsibility. This is not an easy issue for museums to tackle. They are now so dependent for support upon dealers, collectors, patrons, and artists that hardly any major museum can risk asking the questions: to whom and to what are we really responsible, and how does our dependence upon these various, and sometimes competing, interests affect the ways in which art is defined, artists are recognized, and institutions are seen?

**The blockbuster shows that big museums still covet for their ability to generate crowds, publicity, and money mediate against commitments to reflection and time.** Such exhibitions almost obliterate the question: what does it mean to approach responsibly an artist such as, let’s say, Matisse? When exhibition becomes spectacle, it is easy for viewers to rationalize their fifteen to twenty seconds with a painting and one to two hours in a major show. Well, they kind of knew Matisse anyway, and after all they did respond to some works, and they can always see other works of his in museums near their homes and in books. It is not hard to come away from a blockbuster and toss aside the nagging sense of frustration over not being able to deal with its challenges.

**Healing in Time**
"Culture in Action" is different.

Although many of its projects promise pleasure, none promises a quick high. Many of them all but demand to be understood in context, which means visiting their sites, listening to their multiple voices, and approaching them from several sides. Because "Culture in Action" confronts visitors not with a work on a wall or floor but with real-life situations and real people, it is harder to brush off the discomfort of not being able to grasp fully its challenges. Its projects apply considerable pressure to think about what responsibility—of the artist, critic, audience, and participant—now means.

Inigo Manglano-Ovalle’s “Tele-Vecindario: A Street-Level Video Project” is an example of the highly developed sense of responsibility and extraordinary commitment of time that successful community-based art requires. Manglano-Ovalle lives in the community with which he worked, which meant that he was constantly around the youths he was collaborating with, and constantly in a position of discussing their project with other members of the community. The stakes for which he was playing were so high that his project had to merge art with life. If his video project succeeded, the young people he worked with would see themselves more constructively and the community would see itself more in communal terms. If his community felt he had not been responsible first and foremost to its needs rather than to his own, or to someone else’s needs if it felt exploited or betrayed by him, he would be marginalized within it.

Manglano-Ovalle’s August 28 video block party was the culmination of months of collaboration between the artist and a group of twelve-to-fifteen mostly Latino teenagers in his West Town neighborhood. All were between sixteen and eighteen years old. Some were former gang members. All understood the power of the electronic media to control the way they are seen by constructing stereotypical and often unflattering images of them and then spreading them through American culture as a whole.

Manglano-Ovalle spoke with these young people, met them after school, respected their suspicion, learned what was necessary to gain their respect. He enlisted the cooperation of a dynamic community leader: Nilda Ruíz Pauley, a teacher and the coordinator of the School-Within-a-School program at nearby Wells High School. He arranged for video equipment to be made available to the students and brought in local video professionals like María Suárez and Paul Teruel to work with them on videos about themselves and their neighborhood, and to help them form the Street-Level Video group. Over several months, the members of Street-Level Video shot and edited a score of videos about themselves, their families, their friends, their daily lives. The videos documented street codes and gang codes. They asked questions about age and youth, race and gender—access and ownership. “Is this my neighborhood or your neighborhood?” some young people ask the viewer in one video. “Is this my reality or your reality?”

The videos changed a great deal in the months leading up to the block party. Many of the early videos zeroed in on someone, got an expression, a response, a statement, and moved on to someone else. When the young people asked questions of others, there was rarely a follow-up. These videos tended to move fast and cut sharply, suggesting lives of great speed, little distance, short attention spans. Then Street-Level Video began to make slower videos that were more responsive to older
people and respectful of the gravity of harsh events, such as gang killings. By the time of the block party, everyone in the community seemed to be acknowledged not only in the content of the videos but also in their rhythms.

Like all the artists in “Culture in Action,” Manglano-Ovalle wanted to open doors, build contacts, establish conversations. “What I was trying to do was create an event that focused on the potential for discussion and discourse and dialogue in the street,” he said. “The main issue at the very beginning was there wasn’t any dialogue and discourse on the street. But it was as well about discourse and dialogue between generations, as well as between youth. Then it folds and unfolds and keeps going, so now it’s between streets and the different loops of communities that come in.”

All over the world, from prehistory to the present, there have been images believed to have the power to purify body and mind.

The block party featured seventy-one monitors showing forty-six videos. The monitors were in the street, behind fences, in yards, on steps, in doorways. They made the street seem like one giant living room. As it became night, the screens animated and haunt ed the darkness pavement with the voices and faces of community residents. One video showed, over and over, in close-up and slow motion, people counting money—both acknowledging and questioning the kind of business done on the street all the time. “Rest in Peace” was a video installation in an empty lot that commemorated, through the fairly rapid succession of testimonies juxtaposed with still images of flowers, the loss of young people to gang violence.

The videos mapping the faces and hearts of the neighborhood offered a journey through space and time. They encouraged everyone who saw them to look at people, places, social structures, and also economic and political situations—like gentrification, which threatens the community from the outside, just as street violence, turf wars, and social fragmentation threaten it from within. At one point on Erie Street, videos symbolically formed a barricade that ended the block party in front of a sign announcing the construction of four new luxury apartments, each with two-and-a-half baths, “Euro kitchen,” and marble foyer, each with a $234,000 price tag.

One video, standing on a crate, replayed the words, “Our community is not for sale.”

This video block party did indeed inspire community feeling. The day before the event, Manglano-Ovalle met with members of different gangs. Thirty assigned themselves to the protection of the monitors and people. Normally, Pauley says, there are hundreds of police at block parties. None were present and none were needed. Outsiders who would not normally visit West Town moved through the block party in complete safety. The party brought together people from a mixed but mostly Latino neighborhood and the institutionalized art world and put them in a shared and welcoming space in which they could begin to relate to each other as individuals.

Some of the video equipment has been given to the Street-Level Video crew. One hope is to use the videos at community centers and in local high schools and involve at least one of the original participants in the discussions. Pauley has no doubt about the positive effects of the block party and videos on the youthful video crew. “They’ve taken ownership,” she says, “and people see them a little differently.”

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"Our kids don’t see a future in this community," she says, "and that bothers me tremendously. And if people like Iligo and if money for community artists can float into a project and give our kids a concept of a tomorrow, I’m 100 percent for it, because our kids don’t see a tomorrow."

"Iligo has become part of the community," Pauley says. "Now a lot of them will come to him and he will support them."[9]

An art object cannot do what Manglano-Ovalle’s "Tele-Veicindario: A Street-Level Video Project" did. A painting can be an inexhaustible world that inspires a profound sense of pleasure, poetry, meditation, and prayer. It cannot easily inspire young people to seek control of their lives and communicate with others, and it is no longer a world that engages audiences as different as the usual ones for Sculpture Chicago and the residents of West Town. An art object can suggest the spiritual possibilities of human beings through its illumination and transformation of matter. The community-based art in "Culture in Action" can not only expose the energy and depth of ordinary people but also help these people develop their human potential in individual and communal acts.

A successful painting can live on in the mind as personal landmark and cultural beacon. Successful community-based art keeps unfolding in the mind in the ways it allows real voices to be heard and the dignity and dilemmas of real communities to be felt and real dialogues across race and class to develop. Community-based art will never replace museum art. But museum art cannot substitute for what community-based art can do. If community-based art offers a different experience of time than a museum object, it also offers a different experience of space. One consequence of the current polarization of American life is that people feel no distance between themselves and others. People different from us can seem to be impinging upon us, to be leaning against us, to be giving us no air. The gap between us and them is experienced, paradoxically, as an absence of space. Giving yourself to "Culture in Action" means entering the gap between Ericson and Ziegler and the Ogden Courts residents, or between West Town and downtown Chicago. The gap seems inhabitable. It becomes space. The experience of elastic, unstable, unboundable time can encourage people to feel an abundance of space and air.

From Egyptian statuary, Etruscan tomb painting, and Byzantine mosaics; to Chinese landscapes, Indonesian Buddhas, and Indian miniatures; through Picasso, Giacometti, Pollock, and Serra, the spatial imagination has been essential to aesthetic experience.

The community-based art in "Culture in Action" works toward a new kind of space, one that encourages a sense of place outside the gallery and museum, in unexplored neighborhoods of the heart, and in the unfamiliar storefront, marketplace, park, and street.
HEALING. Healing has always been one of the functions of art. All over the world, from prehistory to the present, there have been images believed to have the power to purify body and mind. In many African countries, images have been used to drive away evil spirits. In many European countries, images were seen as having the ability to relieve physical misfortune. “The stories about divine statues performing miraculous cures belong to the repertory of all religions,” wrote the art historian Moshe Barasch. “They also abound in Greek literature in antiquity.”

With the development of modernism, Western art became more systematically involved with healing than ever before. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with Romanticism, Realism, and Impressionism, much of the most influential Western art has been a response to conflict and crisis. The sensitive, compassionate individual cut off from the impersonal conformity of the group; human beings cut off from nature; members of different classes, genders, and races cut off from one another in a world structured on inequality and power—these kinds of ruptures are staples of the modern experience. Modernist painting and sculpture reflect the shocks of modern life, sometimes lamenting them, sometimes celebrating them, sometimes deploiring and exalting them together, almost always trying to relieve the experience of shock through the healing power of materials and images.

So many of the enduring images of the late nineteenth century are both endorsements of the modernity of disjunctiveness and convulsion, and struggles to harmonize and heal. In his paintings of water, trees, and hills, Monet accommodated an acute awareness of flux and uncertainty within his Edenic images of peace and bloom. In the tumultuously organic shapes and rhythms of his Provençal landscapes, van Gogh imagined a community of spirits bound by caring, respect, and love. At roughly the same time on the other side of the Atlantic, Winslow Homer composed genre scenes, portraits, and landscapes in which the differences among Americans and within nature were speaking in an independent yet integrated pictorial manner.

Responding to crisis, acknowledging its ability to stimulate creativity and change and at the same time struggling to overcome the danger and loss that accompany it, is part of the fabric of modernism.¹⁴

Modernist painting and sculpture argue implicitly that there is no trauma or crisis, no personal, social, or spiritual illness or upheaval, that cannot be faced in art, and that cannot, through art, become a source of revelation and strength.

In its vibrant spaces, Cubism, inspired by Cézanne, met the artistic challenge of fragmentation and, in the process, embraced the modern reality of multiple points of view. Responding in his own way to the modern condition of crisis, Matisse, who discovered painting during an appendicitis attack when he was twenty years old, attempted, through color and light, to “relieve,” to “alleviate,”

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to "heal." Surrealism saw disjunctiveness and incongruity as sources of the marvelous. Abstract Expressionists offered vast contemplative or cathartic spaces in which they believed personal and collective trauma could be transformed through imaginative participation.

In the 1960s, everything changed. The social conflicts discerned by early modernists such as Courbet and Manet no longer simmered more or less beneath the surface, but burst into the open. Inequalities resulting from institutionalized attitudes about race, gender, and class exploded into debate, violence, and action. Social tensions could no longer be contained within any existing social framework; it was no longer enough for artists to substantiate and explore social conflict within the confines of the frame and the pedestal. As the crises of the cities and the environment intensified, art moved into the street, into the landscape, and, in '80s public art endeavors such as "Skulptur Projekte" and "Places With a Past," into prisons, dungeons, churches, garages, universities, and city halls.

The healing power of images now seems limited. Most of the responses of modernist painting and sculpture to dislocation, displacement, and injustice — and to the denial and defensiveness of institutional thinking — found their homes in living rooms, galleries, and museums. The museums with which modernist painting is identified are now establishment institutions whose curatorial decisions inevitably define the social and economic interests of their well-heeled and mostly white corporate boards of trustees. The increasing isolation of modernist painting and sculpture from the texture of the world in which they were created has reinforced the view that modernism is now itself both a symptom and a victim of the fragmentation and divisiveness many modernist artists tried, in their own ways, to heal.

Modernist painting and sculpture will always offer an aesthetic experience of a profound and indispensable kind, but it is one that can now do very little to respond effectively to the social and political challenges and traumas of American life. Its dialogues and reconciliations are essentially private and metaphorical, and they now have limited potential to speak to those citizens of multicultural America whose artistic traditions approach objects not as worlds in themselves but as instruments of performances and other rituals that take place outside institutions. The greatness of an early modernist such as Manet lay in his ability to locate social divisions, to build into his compositional structures a consciousness of them, and at the same time to organize them into a magisterial moment in which the fault lines of French society seem to emerge on their own and yet any tendency toward futility is conquered by the luminosity and synthesizing potential of paint. The challenge for contemporary artists inspired by Manet may be to use art to bring all the audiences Manet was aware of into actual conversation.

Certainly images whose homes are galleries and museums can do very little to respond to the present crisis of infrastructure in America. Largely as a result of the greed, egotism, and carelessness in Reagan’s and Bush’s America, the social fabric was torn up in the ‘80s. Not only do many roads and bridges and buildings in America now need to be repaired, so do roads and bridges between people. Building human and societal infrastructure is a goal of community-based art. While in their rejection of the present and longing for a new start, modernist avant-garde painters and sculptors struggled again and again to return to the childhood of painting, the origins of culture, the
The tradition in which the "Culture in Action" artists are rooted is one that does not seek to heal through the art image but by bridging the gap between art and life. The Russian Constructivists, whose revolutionary program included making everything art, and who felt, with the poet Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky, that "the streets are our brushes, the squares our palettes," are part of this tradition. So is Marcel Duchamp, who proved that almost any everyday object, from a urinal to a bicycle wheel, or even his life, could be art. So are the Situationists, whose visual and verbal outbursts in public places helped make absurdity, appropriation, and the use of the spectacle against what they saw as the spectacular nature of industrial life, into avant-garde strategies that challenged the museum and all other forms of institutional power. So is Christo, who made negotiating and collaborating with the public a basic part of his grand, transitory, ceremonial performances. And Allan Kaprow, whose "Happenings" transformed into performances the performance aspect of Pollock's dancing and tossing gestures in his "drip" paintings, and who has argued that even in the most common everyday act, like brushing one's teeth, it is possible to find the visual and intellectual surprises and questions that help define an aesthetic event.

For "Culture in Action," the most prophetic voice in this tradition is Joseph Beuys. He believed art had not only the ability but also the obligation to help heal an enormous wound. For him, the wound was in Germany, as a result of the sickness of its Nazi past; it was in Cold War Europe, divided by the Berlin Wall; and it was in societal thinking, fractured and shriveled by the tendency to see everything in categories and compartments instead of as an interconnected whole. Beuys's vision of social change, like that of many other artists during the 1960's, "centered on repairing a divided world and a divided self," Temkin writes, "Beuys framed his work as a form of homeopathic therapy: 'the Art Pill.'" 

For Beuys art had to be a way of life, not a profession. In his concept of "social sculpture," everything was sculpture, everything was art, and every aspect of life could be approached creatively, with a sense of inventiveness and ritual. "The social order is a living being," Beuys said. Art had to be brought to the people and made by the people if society had any chance for structural change. "Everyone is an artist," he said, in one of his best-known statements. "I am really convinced that humankind will not survive without having realized the social body, the social order, into an artwork. They will not survive," Beuys said. Beuys fought against polarizations such as science and art, East and West, warm and cold, solid and fluid, rational and intuitive, animal and human. He also fought against any reductive view of an artist's life and career. He was a politician, helping to form the Green Party. He was a teacher who performed on blackboards and worked to make classrooms, in effect, into galleries. He was a maker of objects that could seem prehistoric
and yet forever unfinished. In his “Actions,” he was actor in and director of ritualistic public performances in which people would see him with living or dead props in situations that encouraged a deeply felt experience about political, environmental, and human issues.

In almost everything he did, Beuys encouraged a freshness of response, a skepticism about all systems, a consciousness of the human connection to nature, and an awareness of the importance of ritual and myth in everyday life. Believing that empathy builds bridges and carries with it the potential to heal powerlessness and neglect, he worked toward what the curator Bernice Rose called “empathetic healing.” Empathy for other people was not enough. “Empathetic imagination has its roots in nature,” Rose wrote. “If we can leave behind our own identities to identify with the other – the suffering of the animal in nature – then we have sensitized ourselves so we can be social beings.”

For Beuys, art had to combine the gentleness of healing with an activist toughness. “I am no longer interested in covering up maladies and wrongs,” Beuys said. “I consider it my democratic duty to shake things up and to teach larger numbers of people.” Art had a human and social mission. In 1985, the year before he died, Beuys described his art as an attempt to find “the only way of overcoming all the surviving racist machinations, terrible sins, and indescribable darkness without losing sight of them even for a moment.”

**Beuys’s view of art as life, and life as art, leads to a notion of time very close to that in “Culture in Action.” If art is life, then there is really no beginning or end to it. There is no frame around it. Nothing about it is fixed. Art, like life, is chaos, then it comes together, then it dissolves again, then it comes together in a new manner, then it breaks apart....**

Nothing is stopped for long; everything shifts back and forth between disorder and order, everything is open-ended and unstable. Every artistic event, however finished it may seem, is incomplete since it always flows out and back into a ceaselessly fluid and infinitely complex social, intellectual, and spiritual network.

If “Culture in Action” is informed by a sense of time that reflects Beuys’s vision, it is also informed by a Beuysian belief in the importance of trust, empathy, and ritual, and a Beuysian faith in the role of art in survival. In their projects, the artists in “Culture in Action” are determined to use art to heal social ills such as racism, sexism, and many other forms of injustice. Like the art of Beuys, “Culture in Action” is concerned with crossing barriers, building bridges, breaking down walls – creating dialogues that get people normally cut off from one another to sit down together and listen.

A number of the projects in “Culture in Action” suggest a commitment to art as education. In “The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group,” Mark Dion developed a classroom situation for twelve high school juniors from two magnet schools – Providence-St. Mel, a mostly African-American school on the West Side, and Lincoln Park, in mostly white north Chicago. The group traveled to Belize, in
Central America, during the Christmas break in 1992, then met regularly for eight months to discuss ecological issues, including the relationship between the ecology of the rain forest and the ecology of the city. Students of different economic classes worked together. The project also created a bridge between ecology, identified mostly with affluent whites, and the inner city, whose residents are rarely given the opportunity of experiencing the grandeur and lushness of tropical nature. Dion enabled the students to recognize themselves in and yet respect the otherness of nature. He showed them that the field of ecology is applicable to anyone and anything. He also showed them that art, which like ecology is a field that tends to be identified with an affluent white elite, can touch just about anyone and enrich the experience of anything, from a classroom to a rain forest.30

In “Naming Others: Manufacturing Yourself,” Bob Peters set out to explore that emotional, psychological, and political realm of words that wound. With responses to surveys given to visitors to Chicago at the Urban Life Center on the South Side, he created a lexicon of hundreds of words used to describe men, women, whites, blacks, gays, and foreigners. He then built these words, as well as his assimilation of the respondents’ survey comments on what it felt like to be involved in name-calling, into a telephone survey. Callers were led on a six-to-twenty-minute journey in which they were asked to relate themselves to many different naming classifications — or, as Peters says, to “locate themselves in abusive language.”31 The results clarify the dehumanizing impact of this kind of language and the way such words as fag, dyke, kike, wop, spic, and nigger reinforce social and psychological barriers by covering up feelings of anxiety, fear, impotence, anger, and neglect. Such words not only offend people who use them against those different from them; they also defend people against aspects of themselves with which they are uncomfortable.

But Peters has something of Beuys’s distrust of all ideological systems and wariness of viewing anything in overly simple terms, and he came away from his project respectful of the richness and inventiveness of figurative language. Fascinated by the phrase “Red Sea pedestrians” that one respondent used to describe Jews, he emphasized that naming others can also be a testimony to the wit and inventiveness of the imagination.32 He also believes banning abusive language would not protect differences among people, but on the contrary make it harder for those differences to be expressed and explored. In addition, since offensive naming is a potential source of access to essential pockets of pain and creation within the namer, declaring such naming taboo risks cutting off access to some of the deepest recesses of the self. From Peters’s project it is clear that names given to others — to the other — are repositories of cultural meaning so filled with energy, both creative and destructive, that our inability to deal with them deprives us of access to essential parts of ourselves. These abusive words can lead to sickness, or they can lead to health, or they can lead to a greater understanding of ways in which sickness and health can be intertwined. One way to heal the personal and collective wounds they expose is to examine them fearlessly — which is what Peters says he intends to do in his university classes and in speaking engagements. “Naming Others: Manufacturing Yourself” encourages communication among the many components of the self, as well as among the many different components of society.31

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Every project in "Culture in Action" fights neglect and indifference and works for an environment that fosters the kind of respect and trust that make dialogue and healing possible. Every project is intended to create a climate of empathy that will encourage people to identify with people different from themselves. Every project reaches out to people outside art institutions and emphasizes the potential richness of everyday life.

Every project builds a road or bridge where there may not have been one before.

The first part of "Consequences of a Gesture" brought together members of Mexican-American and African-American communities in Chicago that do not normally speak to one another and attempted to bind them together through the ceremonial ritual of a parade. Although these communities formed the core of the parade, it was organized by Daniel J. Martinez and VinZula Kara as a multicultural event that also included Asian-Americans and whites. Just as important, it was an attempt to weave together a broad range of cultural expressions, from high school marching bands, to Dion's Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group (wielding butterfly nets), to the community-based Red Moon Theater (which performs primarily for children), to television and comic books: Martinez, marching at the head of the parade, wore a cartoon Tasmanian Devil T-shirt and a jester's hat; at different points during the parade Kara, its Pied Piper, played a melodica. At all three of its stops, the procession of around five hundred people offered unsuspecting onlookers—who had no idea where the parade came from and what it was doing in their neighborhood on a sleepy Saturday morning in mid-June—a carnivallike event in which each component was a distinct yet integrated part of an organic, cacophonous whole.

Each of the three loops for the parade was in a part of Chicago where parades do not occur. The first stop was the Mexican-American neighborhood of Harrison Park. The last stop was the African-American neighborhood of Garfield Park. In between, the parade marched along Maxwell Street, the site that oriented the parade and clarified its intent. Maxwell Street is one of the richest historic areas in Chicago. In the 1800s, it was one of the birthplaces of street blues performances. It was still drawing blues musicians from the South in the 1950s. Bo Diddley played there. It was an essential part of a neighborhood through which many immigrant groups, including Jews, Poles, and Italians, passed after arriving in the United States. It is a site of labor and civil rights struggles.

Maxwell Street was designated a market area in 1912. For years it was open every day. Now it is an underground market, run almost exclusively by African-Americans and Mexican-Americans, and open only on Sundays, when it is often packed with upwards of 5,000 people. And it is in danger of becoming one more victim of university expansion and malignant urban neglect. This bustling and blighted market area has been so consistently encroached upon by the University of Illinois campus that its future is unclear. The university opened alongside the market in 1965, and while it never attracted as many students as it expected, it continues to acquire land in the market area, and its officials talk of building research centers, parking lots, or recreational facilities there. The parade celebrated the site and exposed its participants and passers-by both to the continuing vitality of the market and to the degree to which its African-American and Mexican-American vendors depend upon it. The processional movement of its young marching bands and its third graders hanging
water cans with ice cream scoops and its costumed students from Project Africa, a summer program of the Henry Suder Public School, had the effect of weaving a protective spell around it.

In the second part of his project, called “100 Victories/10,000 Tears,” Martinez zeroed in on Maxwell Street and went a good deal further than he and Kara did in the parade in responding to institutional indifference or resistance to the kinds of immigrant, labor, nonwhite histories with which he and many other artists in “Culture in Action” are concerned. And to the ways in which representatives of these histories continue to be displaced. Martinez was responsible for a raised granite floor installed in July near the center of an abandoned lot west of Halsted Street in the Maxwell Street market area. It was made up of thirty-two granite slabs, each weighing eighty-five thousand pounds, that had just been torn down after being used for raised walkways and outdoor forums and four lecture centers on The University of Illinois at Chicago campus. The walkways were one of the most visible elements of a widely criticized Brutalist architectural conception. In the ways they blocked light and left students physically exposed, they came to be for Martinez and many others symbolic of the university’s insensitivity both to its own community and to the communities around it. Martinez’s floor is itself a forum where anyone can walk or sit, and people in the market can congregate, proclaim, or simply find peace and air.

On the fences to the north and south of the floor, Martinez placed twenty-four small signs—each resembling the brown and white signs of the university warning strangers to keep out—that refer to the convulsive labor and civil rights history of the area. “Haymarket Square/Desplaines + Randolph May 4, 1886/176 Policemen attack 20 workers 4 Die,” one sign reads. “Laeger-Beer Riot/Clark St. Bridge April 21, 1855/250 Vigilantes Attack & Kill German Workers,” says another. These signs suggest that a terrible pattern of initial welcome and subsequent exclusion and violence has characterized the experience of many foreigners, outsiders, and workers in Chicago. The floor is itself high-spirited and welcoming, but it is also sharp in its questioning of institutional power and in its bitterness about the ways migrant and dispossessed people, and labor and civil rights histories, are rarely given the institutional respect they deserve.

The futility, rage, wit, and defiance within the work meet in a sense of absurdity that is something of a Martinez signature. “Look & Laugh,” one of the signs says, appropriating the words of Felha, an African musician and revolutionary; “Absurd in Reality Is Absurd,” says another, appropriating a phrase of Kara’s. A sense of absurdity acknowledges the force of conflicting emotions and in some way bridges them. The floor is a lyrical gesture of invention, insolence, and freedom. It is also a welcoming, exposing, and energizing act. It is an attempt to dramatize a history of institutional brutality and neglect. It is a plea to protect Maxwell Street and not to let the market die. It is a call to action. To one side of it stand almost 200 of the granite posts that had served as the railings on the walkways. Now they are clustered together, the chains that once connected them wrapped around them, seemingly waiting like political prisoners for release and mobilization. The placement of the floor is itself a statement of empowerment and healing in its ability to define Maxwell Street not just as a beleaguered tertiary market, but also as a privileged platform from which to view the city that now threatens its existence. The site of the floor is so remarkable—with the Sears Tower and university to the north, a housing project to the

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west, an expressway to the east, abandoned industrial remnants to the south — that someone standing on it, breathing the vast open space around it, looking at the grand skyline in the distance, could feel that this officially spurned, run-down, fenced-in area is special, if not blessed.

Both the Martinez-Kara-organized parade and the Martinez floor have a strong educational dimension as well. With its procession of elementary school and high school students, the parade is a call to young people to find their own ways to develop the multicultural collaboration and political possibilities of the parade. Since the floor used material discarded by the University of Illinois to call attention to practices — and to a state of mind — that devalue the lives and histories of working-class, immigrant, or marginal people, it is a challenge to universities to look at themselves. Both projects, particularly the floor, suggest the need for the kind of educational emphasis and reform Beuys was after.

For an activist artist, the trick is not to allow the ritual to become so compelling, so much a world unto itself, so easily repeatable, that it pushes aside the issues that inspired it. One way to deal with this problem is the way Beuys dealt with it, by making the ritual ephemeral.

One potential form of healing of which Martinez and Kara are very much aware is ritual. The parade was a ceremony; almost anything taking place on the stage of the granite floor has the feeling of a ceremonial event. Ritual is a way of giving weight to the moment, of establishing the importance of an occasion, of making everyone shaping and experiencing the occasion into a participant in an event. The block party organized by Llodo Manglano-Ovalle not only showed West Town the efforts of the Street-Level Video crew, it also consecrated those efforts. The ritual of the block party created a sense of confidence, energy, and togetherness, because of the compression and concentration of emotion and experience in the parade and block party, these two rituals are likely to remain seeds of inspiration for everyone touched by them.

For an activist artist, the trick is not to allow the ritual to become so compelling, so much a world unto itself, so easily repeatable, that it pushes aside the issues that inspired it. One way to deal with this problem is the way Beuys dealt with it, by making the ritual ephemeral. The block party existed for six hours, then it was gone. The parade marched, then it vanished. Because these ceremonial events were so transient and expansive, they survive not only as fixed images, but also as unrealized hopes and unfinished plans. They remain in the mind as sources of pressure that can only be relieved by subsequent action. The Manglano-Ovalle and Martinez-Kara ceremonies place the responsibility for developing the healing and empowering process on the shoulders of their participants.

No artist in “Culture in Action” has been working longer than Suzanne Lacy to put ritual in the service of action. Her projects for “Culture in Action,” like her previous communal projects, are highly ritualized. She organizes events that attempt both to collapse time by identifying them with rituals that have recurred through the ages, and to open up time, by inspiring participants to rethink social and political structures and change their personal and political lives. Her emphasis on cycles and repetitions is intended to ground responses and actions in myth; her focus on actual conditions is intended to invest the ensuing resolve in the present and future.
All of Lacy's contributions to "Culture in Action" were clearly ceremonial and clearly political. One morning in May, Chicagoans in the Loop found 100 large, scattered chunks of limestone that seemed to have dropped overnight like a meteor shower. Affixed to each rock was a bronze plaque bearing the name of a woman who had made a significant contribution to the life of the city. The rocks were cut in an Oklahoma quarry owned by women. The honorees were selected by a coalition of Chicago women. Before the rocks appeared, there were no sculptural monuments to women in all of Chicago. Now there were 100, commemorating women living and dead, representing different races, religions, and cultures. Suddenly women could find the achievements of other women recognized in bronze; and just by noticing the names on a handful of the plaques, men had to become more aware of the role of women in Chicago's history.

These women were celebrated at a ceremony in Pritzker Park, a 1991 Sculpture Chicago project designed by Ronald Jones to be both an intimate oasis of air and greenery in the Loop, and a call to community and civic responsibility. When Lacy read off the name of each living woman commemorated on a rock, it was the signal for the woman to walk down a winding path and gather with the others. The success of community-based art cannot be measured without taking into account the responses of the audiences to which the art is directed, and for many of the women honored in the heart of Chicago, this ceremony clearly created an enormous sense of pride.

The concluding event of "Culture in Action" was a September 30 dinner at the Hull-House Museum. Fourteen prominent women from around the world were brought to this late nineteenth and early twentieth century center of educational experimentation and social reform founded by Jane Addams, one of the most admired figures in Chicago history. With its nineteenth-century decor and menu, and its profusion of video equipment set up to capture every nuance of the occasion, the dinner was the most formalized of the events. It commemorated Addams, whose remarkable achievements in many fields provided the inspiration and historical context for Lacy's action; it commemorated the fourteen women; and it commemorated the importance of the evening meal as an indispensable everyday ritual traditionally prepared and perpetuated by women. By ritualizing dinner and making this dinner into an event, Lacy emphasized the importance of daily rituals and the place of women through time.

But Lacy also brought the ritual into the present. Eventually she directed the dinner discussion to the current situations of women and to possible collective action that would better the conditions of women in the future. In short, Lacy used ritual both as an empowering and healing device and as a stepping stone to action. Her art places culture in the service of political action. It puts myth in the service of history; or in Mircea Eliade's terms, it puts mythical time in the service of concrete time. The primary movement in Lacy's art is not from the particular to the general, or from the secular to the religious, but the reverse. She wants to put the general in the service of the particular, the transcendent in the service of the everyday. In her tableaux spilling out into Chicago and, through the dinner guests, into foreign fields and cities, she uses ritual to heal and act.
ONE PROJECT: HAHA AND FLOOD. Haha is a collaborative group based in Chicago. Its four members – Richard House, Wendy Jacob, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof – met as students of The School of The Art Institute of Chicago, from which Palmer and Ploof graduated in 1988, House and Jacob in 1989. They began working as a group in the summer of 1988 and became Haha in the fall of that watershed year in the history of this illustrious educational institution. That May, at the annual student exhibition, David Nelson, a graduating senior, displayed a savagely satirical portrait of the recently deceased Chicago Mayor Harold Washington wearing women’s underwear. Even as the painting was being installed, word about it began to spread among African-Americans throughout the city. Nine black aldermen marched from City Hall into the school. Two of them, Dorothy Tillman and Alan Streeter, removed the painting from the wall and threatened to burn it in the president’s office. The acrimonious media and political attacks that followed the installation underlined the severe racial and political divisions within the city, and the degree to which highly visible institutions such as the School of the Art Institute were identified by many African-Americans with white power. It was hard to be a student at the school and not be aware of the gulf between the small, institutionalized art world and the city around it. It was “painful,” House said, thinking back to that time. The distance between the school and many communities in Chicago provoked a need, Palmer said, to “heal the gap,” to work toward greater communication, toward some sense of common ground, some situation in which people could speak to one another with trust. The group had no interest in an art world phenomenon such as Neo-Expressionism, whose big canvases, big stars and big egos had helped fuel the art market boom of the ’80s. Haha was repelled, Palmer says, by “individualism and competition and that whole system.”

The group did not want to be part of any artistic development in which the artist’s personality commanded more attention than the issues within his or her work. The greed and narcissism of the art world in the ’80s, and its tendency to detach itself from the broad fabric of American social and political life were instrumental in leading Haha, like many other artists coming of age at the end of that decade, to pursue a socially engaged and interactive artistic direction.

For Haha, process is more important than product. The group is committed to a collective identity in which the four individual voices speak with communal purpose. Its members value interdisciplinary thinking; they do not want any aspect of their work to be seen in isolation. Dialogue is crucial. Discussion and communication are so important to them, in fact, that they are often not so much means to an end as ends in themselves. The group has been striving for upbeat, educational, open-ended projects in which as many people as possible, inside and outside the art world, will feel welcome to become involved on their own terms.

The operational base for their “Culture in Action” project, “Haha and Flood: A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare,” is a storefront on a quiet side street in Rogers Park, a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, lower- and middle-class neighborhood in northern Chicago where all four members of Haha live. The heart and soul of the storefront, and of the project, and the lifeblood of a complex caretaking system is an unassuming yet magical hydroponic garden producing green, leafy
vegetables that are known to strengthen the immune system, for people with the HIV virus and AIDS. Hydroponics, as it is defined on one of the numerous information sheets displayed in racks alongside the vegetable garden, "is a term used to describe the many ways that plants can be raised without soil." One advantage of indoor hydroponic gardening is that it makes it possible to garden year-round and thus produce more. Another is that it produces vegetables with less bacteria than vegetables produced in soil. For people who are HIV-positive, all bacteria must be removed from food, but they cannot be removed from soil-grown vegetables without also removing some of their nutrients.

With the help of its allure, its need for tending, and also of the symbolism of the garden – even the choice of plants, such as Osaka Purple Mustard, Swiss Chard, and Red Russian Kale, reflects a will to inclusiveness – Haha brought into being a small community of people, including artists, writers, a designer, a teacher, and a chef, that decided to call itself Flood. "We liked the connection with water," explained Caroline O'Boyle, a Flood member and the project director of Career Beginnings, a program organized by Chicago's Columbia College to help disadvantaged youths. "The idea was that Flood would spread out and seek a lot of different corners. It would go in all directions at once."30

The storefront is at once a horticultural laboratory and a laboratory for the imagination. Behind the building is a dense, rough and tumble, vegetal free-for-all abundant with plants that have some medicinal effect, such as garlic, fennel, black radish, chamomile, peppermint, acacia, and astragalus (which can be taken after chemotherapy to strengthen the immune system). In the neglected dirt in the tree border in front of the building, Flood planted another garden that during the summer gave the block a festive, tropical, even a Mediterranean air. Its burst of tall, yellow-and-black sunflowers brought a touch of natural profusion to an urban setting largely dissociated from the exuberant vitality of summer nature. The sunflowers let passers-by know that something unexpected, inventive, even a little bit fantastic, was happening here.

The storefront is also a classroom. Along with tending and cultivating the plants, Flood meets there once a week, around the brightly lighted hydroponic garden, to discuss AIDS-related issues. The group organized public lectures about herbal remedies, alternative medicines, and AIDS. Each member of Flood, including the four Haha artists, is a volunteer in a Chicago AIDS organization, such as BE-HIV, Open Hand Chicago, and the Chicago Women's AIDS Project. Most of the vegetables, Ploof said, "are washed and put into bags and distributed to Chicago House," which runs hospice-like residences for AIDS patients.31 "We want to work with these other organizations and not in competition with them," O'Boyle said.40

The hydroponic garden encourages trust and hope. It is insufficient to say that its effect is non-aggressive and nonconfrontational. The garden is extraordinarily gentle. Visitors can encounter it and feel the project is so modest and so void of drama that there is nothing to it. This is the most egoless of the eight "Culture in Action" projects, the one in which ambition is the most concealed. It applies no pressure. "We hate the word 'should,'" Ploof said. "I don't think any of us feels we can say to another person, you should do this, you must do this."
But its softness can be misleading. The project is simple but also multilayered, practical but also lyrical. It reflects a search for an artistic undertaking that can combine an openness and intimacy that seem almost innocent, with a social commitment and the most knowing use of symbol and display. The project is built around an image—the garden—that has the purpose and concreteness of good activist poetry. The project also has in abundance a quality that is shared by much of the most successful community-based art: goodness. It points beyond self-interest and self-importance toward an ethical imperative that Haha is wagering all human beings carry inside them and want to see developed, and therefore revealed, in charitable and compassionate acts.

The hydroponic garden could not touch so many people if it did not function on a number of metaphorical levels. For example, the thirty parallel rows of vegetables in their long, thin, eight-foot-long by one-and-a-half-inch-thick white trays, under two harsh 1,000-watt halide lights, and the troughs and tubes bringing nutrients from the plastic garbage pail-tanks to the vegetables, suggest a hospital room. For much of the six-week growth cycle, the vegetables themselves, each alone in a small rock wool bed, speak of organisms so naked and defenseless that it seems as if nothing could keep them going.

But the vegetables have been nourished by an effective nutritional system and by a group of people who tended them with great care. Crops flowered. As they did, the collective bloom of the leaves blotted out the hospital whiteness of the trays and the isolation of the young plants. The general atmosphere of the storefront is one of both clinical sterility and irrepressible growth. The cycles of the garden suggest that even in a fragile antiseptic state, caring is essential and life goes on.

Flood suggested to some of its members the power of a certain kind of communication. “It’s taking ideas and giving a physical manifestation of them,” O’Bye said of the project. “I’m not of the art world but this seems to me what art is giving, a physical manifestation of thoughts and ideas that is not literally what it is.”

“I feel pretty grateful to have stumbled into this project because it really opened my eyes to a lot of things I was just completely unaware of before,” O’Bye said. “For example, that you can participate in a significant way in a project that calls itself art. For people like me that has always been a very intimidating thing, like, well, you can’t draw very well, Caroline, so you’re not an artist, and you can’t be one, and that was the message I got in first grade.”

The Haha and Flood project is very much part of its time. There is now a tradition of artists using gardening as a way of fighting narcissism and neglect. Since 1984, Meg Webster has been planting gardens in museum settings in an attempt to encourage a caretaking mentality, as well as a greater sense of connection to the realities of nature outside clean white gallery and museum walls. Since 1991 Mel Chin, building on the pioneering environmental artworks of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, has been experimenting with gardens that can make sick earth healthy. His “Revival fields” in St. Paul, Minnesota, and in Palmerton, Pennsylvania, are attempts to use plants to pull heavy metals, such as cadmium and zinc, out of the soil by drawing them into the biomass of the plants; when harvested, the plants remove the metals from the soil. When the plants are incinerated, the metal can be reclaimed from the ash. The primary aesthetic factor, for Chin, is the look of the earth when healthy fields return.
In more and more parts of America, city agencies have been using gardens to foster communal hope. In 1984 Operation GreenThumb, a program of New York City's General Services Administration, began a grand effort to transform hundreds of abandoned and often junk-filled lots in blighted areas throughout the city into community-run gardens. In a number of the gardens, artists have been selected to make sculptures or paint murals in order to reinforce the ability of the gardens to generate respect. In one of these gardens, in the Morrisania area of the South Bronx, Gail Rothschild, commissioned by Operation GreenThumb to make a sculpture for the site, also planted medieval herbs that are freely available to the fifteen or so caretakers who keep the garden going.43

Haha and Flood's hydroponic garden can also be understood in relation to modernism, particularly to the beloved pictorial flowerings on the walls of The Art Institute of Chicago.

Impressionism's presence in Haha's storefront was at one time immediately suggested by the conspicuous placement, in a tiny pond (a rectangular tank) just inside the entrance, of two water hyacinths, reminiscent of Monet's Water Lilies.44 Throughout Impressionism, as in this project, there was an attraction to the sidewalk and street, a feeling for the romance of many people together, an upbeat gentleness, and a feeling for the power of vegetation to communicate intimacy and hope. Just as important, the dazzling flowers and foliage of Monet and Manet, like Flood's hydroponic garden, grow not only out of a sense of enthusiasm and good will and a fascination with the bloom of the moment, but also out of an experience of uncertainty and loss. In effect, the Haha-Flood project takes plants out of the Impressionist picture frame and makes them a gathering point for real people driven by feelings of reverence and emergency that have inspired so many artists since modernism began.

STANDARDS. One of the thorniest issues raised by community-based art is the one of standards. What distinguishes a successful community-based art project from an unsuccessful one? A good one from a bad one? A trivial one from a profound one?

I am not going to pretend to offer definitive answers to these questions, which depend on as many variables as the success or failure of museum art. I do believe it is important for the entire field of contemporary art that critics, curators, and artists grapple with the possibilities and difficulties, rewards and dangers, of community-based work. I am less concerned here with providing the right answers than I am with asking the right questions.

What is clear is that no evaluation of community-based art can be made without some understanding of context. Community-based art is shaped by a particular place and particular conditions and a particular political and artistic moment. It is designed to respond to very particular situations. Unless those situations are grasped or experienced to some degree, it is very hard for any evaluation of a project to be responsible or just.
The first requirement is that the community-based art project benefit the community. The community with which the artist has collaborated must be the primary audience for the work. This community must not feel exploited by the artist; that is to say, its members must not feel that the project is serving the interests of the artist – or, for that matter, of an institution – more than it is serving them. It must be clear that for the duration of the project, no one owns the project more than they do.

Sometimes it is easy to gain a clear sense of community response. There can be little question, for instance, that Llúdio Manglano-Ovalle’s project had a positive effect on West Town. The videos were forceful, intelligent, and responsive to the character and personalities of the people. The Street-Level Video crew was committed to using video to articulate the concerns and struggles – and the energy – of the community. The block party that established the videos in the life of the community encouraged a spirit of curiosity and cooperation. From the videos and the party, there could be no doubt about Manglano-Ovalle’s affection and respect for his neighborhood, or about the pressure his project put on its residents to think actively and creatively about it, both as an entity with the freedom to define itself, and as a broad mix of individuals with roles to play in the larger world.

There are a number of ways to consider a project’s ability to affect a community. For example, if one of the goals of Ericson and Ziegler’s project has been to build bridges across disparate worlds, the community it has worked with should feel at the end of the project that it has greater control over the way it is seen. One reason the residents group from Ogden Courts cooperated with Ericson and Ziegler was that its members saw a way of countering stereotypes of public housing tenants. “They kept saying we're really tired of people thinking we're stupid, people thinking we're all drug addicts,” Ziegler said. The intelligence and the historical awareness built into the chart helped residents of Ogden Courts contribute to a public image of themselves that can begin to counter the negative image of housing projects that is now part of the national consciousness.

Along with the chance to participate in a document that could help to de-stigmatize public housing, the Ogden Courts Residents Group decided to collaborate with Ericson and Ziegler because the project would give Ogden Courts some feeling of access, through the downtown arts organization Sculpture Chicago and its largely corporate board, to people in power. In return for working with well-connected organizations, communities with little or no voice in the corridors of power are going to expect some contact with people of influence. This expectation must be respected not only in the short run, in other words, for as long as a project is developing, but also in the long run. With “Culture in Action,” Sculpture Chicago reached deep into the city and the divergent needs and manifold perspectives of the city must continue to inform the organization’s mission.
In any consideration of art for public places, it is important to make a distinction between projects that result from collaborations between artists and communities and projects conceived by artists to call attention to communities.

The more audiences an artist brings into a work, the harder its overall success may be to evaluate, since each audience has its own demands and context. How the paint chart would affect people who encounter it in stores across the United States is an important question that cannot now be answered. Will people actually order "Arnie Martin Blue," "Hull House Radiance Red," or "Cabrini Green?" Will looking at the paint chart affect the way people think about public housing? Will it lead anyone to consider the quantity and potency of social and political information that is conveyed on something as "neutral" as a paint chart?

And when the paint chart is included in Ericson and Ziegler exhibitions in galleries and museums, will viewers think more about Conceptual Art and Ericson and Ziegler's artistic career than about life in Ogden Courts? And so, is this all right? If a community feels it genuinely benefited from a collaboration with an artist, is it then legitimate for the artifacts of their collaboration to take on a life of their own in the art world, entirely removed from the community texture that helped bring them into being?

In any consideration of art for public places, it is important to make a distinction between projects that result from collaborations between artists and communities and projects conceived by artists to call attention to communities. The Martínez-Kara-organized parade was a collaborative, community-based project that cannot be fully evaluated without considering its effect on its participants and on the neighborhood organizations that engaged in discussion with the artists in order to help make it possible. The parade was a group activity, and any consideration of its success must keep its participating communities in mind.

The granite floor, on the other hand, was architectural. Its location amidst so many abandoned lots meant that it was likely to be experienced personally, alone. It was conceived by Martínez to call attention to the plight of Maxwell Street and to the social and political context that help make that plight understandable. The floor is so much about drawing attention to Maxwell Street and to the kinds of communities that participated in the parade that its effect on the vendors and shoppers who live with the floor may not be decisive in determining its success. Since its primary audience includes outsiders whom Martínez wants to experience the human and visual drama of the market area, visitors are more free than they were with the parade to take their individual responses and run with them.

The most responsible evaluations of the floor are likely to come from those people who have experienced both it and the parade. The parade dramatized the realities of Maxwell Street and the African-American and Mexican-American communities that now give it its vitality. The floor then provided a platform, a forum, a stage, on which their stories could be analyzed, debated, celebrated, and broadcast. For those who had been at the parade, the floor was likely to have had a particularly strong poetic and metaphorical power. Martínez focused on particulars and yet...
presented them in ways that enabled participants and visitors to feel and think of them as their own. His ability to call attention to the institutional threat to immigrant and minority freedom while inspiring the freedom to dream and imagine is an act of imagination. Imagination is as important to the evaluation of public art as it is to the evaluation of art in museums.

The kinds of demands facing anyone evaluating community-based art can be suggested by one of the most charismatic projects in “Culture in Action,” Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio’s collaboration with the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers’ International Union of America Local 552. Grennan and Sperandio went to art school at the University of Illinois at Chicago. They are interested in using art to support labor and to make more people aware of labor issues. For their “Culture in Action” project, they collaborated with twelve line workers at the large Nestlé plant in Franklin Park, just west of Chicago. Through the collaboration, the line workers were able to produce their own chocolate bar, deciding everything from the ingredients to the design for the wrapper—with its yellow, purple, and white colors and its American flag promoting American products—and the name: “We Got It!” Thousands of these chocolate bars were distributed to grocery stores in several sections of Chicago. In addition, a poster showing the smiling workers holding an oversize image of the chocolate bar appeared on billboards on the south and west sides of the city.

The process of discussion and production created in the workers a strong sense of pride. “They were very happy,” said Jeffiro Head, the president of Local 552. “What they got most of all out of it was the knowledge that they can do something besides this division of labor stuff that they do everyday.”

One reason Head was eager to support the project was that he saw that the chocolate bar could be a way of gauging relations between union and management. Nestlé had just initiated a Total Quality Management Program that meant, in principle, giving workers more input and power over their conditions and the general functioning of the plant. For Head, the chocolate bar tested the good will of this program, and with it of management, at a point just before crucial negotiations between union and management were about to begin. If management was serious about the principles behind Total Quality Management, Head believed it would be enthusiastic about the chocolate bar idea since, at little cost, it encouraged greater knowledge and independence on the line.

At first, the company did support the idea. But it backed off at the last minute, much to the dismay of Grennan and Sperandio. Only after considerable pressure from Head did management give the workers a paid week off to produce the candy. The process confirmed Head’s suspicions that management was only feigning interest in giving workers more power. The chocolate bar project served as a cautionary tale that Head could relate to his union if its members ever took management’s gestures of real sharing of power at face value. The project was also a way in which he could suggest to Grennan and Sperandio the pattern of raising hopes and then dashing them that he says are characteristic of management methods.
Are the pride and knowledge gained by the union workers in conceiving the product, the existence of the billboards and production of the snappy-looking chocolate bar recognizing the good work and good will of the union, and the internal role of the chocolate bar in clarifying Nestlé's management-labor relationship enough to justify calling this project a success?

Other factors need to be considered. For example, while the chocolate bar was distributed in several sections of Chicago, it was not distributed in neighborhoods around the Nestlé plant or in neighborhoods in which the line workers live. Therefore the project was not available to the people who could best have related to the workers' accomplishment and what it meant to their lives.

Furthermore, as a product, the candy bar was not a roaring success. The quality of the chocolate was, by almost all accounts, low. The Market Place Foodstore, the fancy grocery store near Lake Michigan where the project was kicked off in May, sold only about 150 “We Got It!” bars in four months. The store felt the chocolate bar was out of place there, and by September wanted Sculpture Chicago to take back the unsold boxes.

If this project were really going to improve the situations of the line workers, would the chocolate bar have to have real rather than symbolic value? Or, in order to have symbolic value, does it not have to make the public want to buy it so that people will then pay attention to the producers and remember them with respect? Without an effective product, can there be a bridge between the line workers and the general public?

Just as important is the information that is not provided by the billboard message of smiling workers or by the message on the back of the chocolate bar: “In February 1993, a Team from Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers’ Union Local 552 and the Artists Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio designed We Got It! This bar is dedicated to Labor and to all people who work on the line to make the products that we buy. We are proud to present We Got It! Now, YOU get it!” The wrapper suggests a harmonious situation in which workers are comfortable with their jobs and no labor conflict exists. If the chocolate bar were going to encourage real awareness, would it not have had to suggest, in some way, the complex labor-management reality at the Nestlé plant?

A basic issue here is that the project had two primary audiences. One, the union at Nestlé, is very specific. The other, the public looking at the billboards and buying the chocolate, is general. “There’s an inside-outside thing, and they really do meet at the candy bar,” Sperandio said. “The public buys the bar, they read the information, they get a sense of what happens, and they take that away with them. The use the union has in terms of its negotiations with Nestlé’s, in terms of some kind of rallying point or source of pride, is intangible, and they’re the internal audience. The meaning that the whole thing has for them is different from the meaning that it has for the person who goes into the store.”

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Once the chocolate bar becomes a product that functions in the world outside Nestlé's management and labor, however, then the response of the union is no longer enough to decide the success or failure of the work. Once the chocolate bar exists as a product in the larger world, the response of the union is no longer the decisive factor, even if the union was thrilled with the collaboration. When an object enters the real world, it must function in the real world. If the public response conflicts with the internal response, if the union is grateful for the chocolate bar but the public comes away from its encounter with the chocolate bar with an oversimplified and perhaps even disrespectful attitude toward those who produced it, then the success of the project is mixed at best.

The questions that can be raised about this project might actually make the chocolate bar more interesting as art. Its Warholian irony, which is that an ephemeral object as intellectually insignificant as a chocolate bar can be intricately connected to so many large human issues, is intensified by the problems, which help make the chocolate bar a repository. The questions do not diminish the impact of the chocolate bar as a work of Conceptual Art, but make it stronger.

But these questions do shake the identity of the chocolate bar. Was it first of all a Conceptual Art object, or first of all a servant of community needs? If one measure of the success of community-based art is that it functions first as community service and only secondly as a work of art, then the chocolate bar project may turn out to be, in the end, an instructive failure.

**Does this mean that community-based art should not be discussed as art? Of course not. Context has come to be synonymous with political and social context, but art is part of the context of a project as well. And since one goal of this kind of art is to bridge the gap between art and life, art must, at some point, become part of the conversation.**

The art world life of these projects matters. Knowledge of art and artistic thinking is part of the formation of the projects in "Culture in Action." All the artists in this program have been educated in art, and all of them want to have an effect on art. They all feel part of one or more artistic traditions, and their thinking about these traditions has been indispensable in developing their ambition and nerve in risky, open-ended, community situations. Competition with other community-based artists, and a need to go one step farther than other artists around them or working within the same traditions, can paradoxically make a community-based project more selfless and communal.
The avant-garde pressures to be inventive, to be original, to do something that was not possible before, are part of what drove the artists in "Culture in Action." Lacy is eloquent in the way she talks about "pushing the envelope of art" and "changing the vision of art." She wants the attention of the art world, or at least of those conceptual, theoretical, and feminist segments of it of which she feels a part. For her the will to become part of the debate in the art world helps free her from asking for appreciation in the communities in which she works. "Where I want my recognition is in the world of ideas," she said. It is in the art world where the efforts of these artists will be recorded and discussed and where the thinking will evolve that will enable other artists to engage communities as well as or better than they have done here.

In serious discussions of community-based projects, however, the effect of the art on the communities must not be forgotten. And, ideally, not just the effect at the time of the project or immediately after. So many of the projects, particularly those involving young people, reach into the future.

It would be helpful if there was some way of following up on the effects of these projects over the years, let's say, when the Street-Level Video crew and the Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group are adults, or when the Cardenas Elementary School students from the parade are in high school, or after Bob Peters has spent several years discussing with students the issues of abusive language.50

When the aim of a project is to serve a community, its success is inseparable from its aesthetic impact. The effectiveness of the Manglano-Ovalle- and Hall-inspired projects, for example, inspires confidence in the projects, in the artists, and in the community or group. This success and confidence help invest the garden and the block party with the kind of power that keeps them in the minds of everyone touched by them. The garden and the block party become images, but of a very elastic and fundamentally unframable kind. The communities are part of them; so are issues that brought the projects into being; so is the coming and going, the concentration and dispersal, of real faces, real bodies, real concerns. These images are not fixed. They are not objects. They are at once actual places and imaginative spaces that are likely to make the same hypnotic, obsessive claims on the heart and mind made by exceptional art of any kind. "Culture in Action" leads into real life and it leads into art. Its projects create an awareness of the potential for goodness in people and the potential magic of art, and I am not sure how well contemporary art made for galleries and museums can, right now, do that.
1. The artist Virginia Maksymowicz has written that “Dissidents for the concerns of the people who were to live permanently with the sculpture was not only evident in the selection of the art, but in the hearings as well. The testimony of officials and workers were often ignored by ‘Titled Arc’ defenders. Rather than stimulating real dialogue, Serra’s sculpture resulted in an obdurate standoff between artists and the nascent public. Whether or not it was good art, it had been put in the wrong place – or at least put there in the wrong way. In terms of artist-community relationship, ‘Titled Arc’ was an absolute failure” (Virginia Maksymowicz, “Alternative Approaches to Public Art,” in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., Art and the Public Sphere (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), p. 156).

2. There is little question that the troubled history of Titled Arc is decisive in the development of public art during the last ten years. Within most advanced public art circles, the rejection is now nearly complete of the idea of large-scale sculpture, made of permanent materials, that controls the response to a public site. There is increasing resistance to a public art process in which the many audiences who live with the commissioned work are not included in the selection of the artist and in discussion of the evolution of the work. And also to a process that does not provide some just means by which a commissioned work could be removed.

But the ideological weight of the current reaction against Titled Arc continues to create its own problems and distortions. When Suzi Gablik wrote in The Reenchantment of Art (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991, p. 173) that Serra’s “is not interested in the public’s response to his work, having no stake in it and no loyalties,” she is misrepresenting Serra, who was passionately interested in initiating among both workers and viewers an active rather than a passive response to the working conditions in and around the Jacob K. Javits Federal Building that towers over Federal Plaza, and in provoking a critical awareness of social and political responses implied by the architectural relationships within the site. For Serra’s explanation of the site-specificity of this work, see “Paper Presented by Richard Serra to ‘Titled Arc’ Site Review Advisory Panel, December 15, 1987,” published in The Destruction of “Titled Arc” Documents, ed. Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk (Cambridge, MA, and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991), pp. 160-87.

The rage against Titled Arc has also blinded people to the remarkable context in which this sculpture was formed. On October 26, 1963, when Serra was a graduate student in the painting department at Yale, President John F. Kennedy gave a speech at Amherst College on the occasion of the dedication of the Robert Frost Library. In it he defined the artist as a solitary figure, “faithful to his personal vision of reality,” the “last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state.” The Art-in-Architecture program that commissioned Titled Arc and indeed the National Endowment for the Arts founded in 1965, were shaped by the idealism and absoluteness in this talk, as well as by Kennedy’s belief that artistic creation needed to be protected against “polonies and ideology.” This speech deserves the closest attention, not only for the attitudes toward art and culture and its non-loss governmental ease with art, but also for the degree to which its cultural idealism pragmatically played a central role in the Kennedy administration’s struggle to show the world that America was superior to the Soviet Union, where the kind of abstract art Serra would make was condemned and artists were expected to uphold institutional laws.

The Cold War ended in 1989, the same year Titled Arc was dismantled, the same year the attack on the funding policies of the endowment effectively dismantled the New Frontier’s formulation of a national artistic mission. The Kennedy speech is published in its entirety in The New York Times, Oct. 27, 1963, p. 87. The speech is discussed in John Netemilll, “Camere’s Legacy to Public Art: Aesthetic Ideology in the New Frontier,” Art Journal, winter 1989, pp. 303-308.

3. Arleen Raven, Art in the Public Interest (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1989). The David Nelson painting is discussed in greatest detail in Part III of this essay. Malpoda and Leyco are also discussed in Geblik (note 2), pp. 102-105, 109-11. On pages 69-76 Gablik discussed another of the canonical figures of community-based art, Miere Lademans Heikes, who has been working with the New York City Department of Sanitation on grand yet intimate collaborations since 1978.

4. Michael Ventura, who grew up in the South Bronx, has articulated this foreignness. “The Metropolitan Museum of Art – however much my mother loved it,” he has written, “made me afraid. For one thing, the people there weren’t like us. Our best clothes weren’t as nice as their casual dress. They spoke differently. And if they spoke to us, it was with that slightly thickening of the voice that people have when they visit the sick in hospitals. But, really, it was the art that made me most afraid. What was it about? Who was it about? Here and there, I would recognize something as almost human, almost natural (‘natural’, for me, meant the street), but ‘almost’ wasn’t near enough. Every hall, every wall, had one message for me, and it was the same message I saw on television: ‘You don’t exist.’” See Michael Ventura, “Love Among the Rules – An Appreciation In Three Parts,” in Houston, Contemporary Arts Museum, South Bronx Hall of Fame: Sculpture by John Ahern and Ripoberto Torres (Houston, 1991, p. 42).

5. The New York Times music critic Bernard Holland could have been speaking about museums when he wrote, “Never forget that concert halls are built not for so much to keep music in but to keep the rest of the world out” (see Bernard Holland, “Critics’ Notebook: Mozart and D_fname Two Kinds of Religion,” The New York Times, Feb. 26, 1994, p. 13.).

6. “Eminent Domain” was taken through the research and development phase in “Culture In Action” to the point where the paint chart exists in prototype form. Because of graphic design and production delays, the project was unrealized within the time frame of “Culture In Action.”
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10. "What I tell everybody who comes into the project," Mangel-Okalvi said, "is you're going to be tested by these kids, and the best thing you can do for them and for yourself is chill out and listen, look them straight in the eye and don't talk too fast to them, and make sure they ask questions. When they stop asking questions, you know you've lost them. If it looks like they're understanding everything you say, you've lost them because these are kids who are very independent, questioning, stubborn, and it's good." Conversation with Iliga Mangel-Okalvi, May 25, 1993.

11. Ibid.


14. The last ten years has seen a tendency among critics and historians to demote modernism, finding in it not only expressions of racism, sexism, and imperialism, but even the causes of everything evil. In her Reenchantment of Art (note 2), Suzi Gablik wrote beautifully about the need for a new kind of art in the service of healing, compassion, and dialogue — for the kind of art encouraged by "Culture in Action" — but she underestimated her message by caricaturing modernism as little more than the alienating impulses to individuality, originality, and self-expression. Her book is a fervent attack against dualistic thinking of all kinds, yet she set up a textbook dualism, with noble, empathetic, community-based art on one side and ignoble, self-centered, misguided modernism on the other. Her distortion of modernism is an example of the kind of dehumanization of what one is not familiar with and not normally drawn to that her book argues so forcefully against.

15. Cited in Pierre Schneider, Matisse (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), p. 10. Near the end of his book, discussing the paper cutouts, Schneider wrote: "More than ever, the basic criterion of Matisse's final works is utility rather than beauty. He considered a work of art successful when it was able to "cure," to alleviate suffering — in short, when it affected life. Only when it functioned poorly did the merely aesthetic come to the forefront." (p. 706).


17. Anderson cited West's remark in his book Race Matters (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) about the "unprecedented collapse of meaning" in America. West spoke with Anderson about the importance of establishing a "framework in which we can come together for dialogue, an open-ended conversation within which other constructive voices might emerge." (p. 43).

18. This is not the place to debate whether this tradition is partially or wholly part of modernism, or whether it is something that is in the end entirely different. The point I want to make here is there is no either/or polarity between "Culture in Action" and modernism. The quality of attention to the world outside the art; the distrust of institutional power; the heightened awareness of the psychological, cultural, and political collisions and conflicts in an ever more global and technologically world; the respect for the powerless and for the outsider; the struggle to offer artistic experiences that can set a moral and human example; the awareness of the fragility and sacredness of life — all of which has help define "Culture in Action" — are characteristics of modernism after Courbet and Manet.


27. Ibid., p. 110.


30. One of the students, Nena Beckwith, remarked that "Nature forms humanity and I think people have to contribute to art and nature. Through our activities we will try to improve the ecology of Chicago" cited in the "Culture in Action" program guide, p. 21.


33. The discomfort now generated by abusive language, and the institutional reluctance to engage the issues it raises, is reflected in the response to the script of the telephone survey by the corporation that provided the toll-free number. In June 1993, Ameritech Audiotex Services was contracted by Sculpture Chicago to establish the number. Then, without contacting Peters or Sculpture Chicago, Ameritech delivered the inauguration of this voice-mail service from July 4 to July 13, and it built into the recording a disclaiming that could not help but undermine faith in the project. "You have reached 800-800- THEM," callers heard. "The program 'Naming Others: Manufacturing Yourself' is a project by Bob Peters. This program is part of 'Culture in Action,' a public arts project by Sculpture Chicago, and is sponsored by Randolph Street Gallery. This service contains material that is explicit and vulgar. At times listening to this program may be uncomfortable. Callers under the age of eighteen should obtain their parents' permission prior to calling. To hear this program in its entirety, please hang up and dial 1-708-956-1599. If at any point you find this material offensive, please hang up. Thank you." In many letters and phone conversations, Peters tried to encourage Ameritech to discuss its reason for distancing itself from his script. As of April 1994, Ameritech's response to Peters' requests for clarification and dialogue has essentially been silence.


36. For a thoughtful chronicle of and meditation upon the events surrounding the Nelson painting, see Carol Becker, "Private Fantasies Shove Public Events: And Public Events Invade and Shape Our Dreams," in Raven (note 3), pp. 231-53.

37. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from a conversation with House, Palmer, and Pielit, May 24, 1993.


40. Conversation with Caroline O'Boyle (note 39).

41. Ibid.


43. The water hyacinths, like all the plants in the storefront, were part of Flood's medicinal experimentation. Water hyacinths, House said, are used in Belize to clean sewage.

44. Conversation with Ericson and Ziegler (note 9).

45. When asked why the residents felt involved with Ericson and Ziegler, Eric L. Bailey, the resident initiative coordinator for Real Estate Management and Housing Consultation—which manages the Opent Court apartments for the city—and a constant presence around Opent Court, made it very clear that the group wanted to break its isolation and open lines of communication to the movers and shakers of Chicago (conversation with Eric L. Bailey, Aug. 30, 1993).


47. "It's very, very clear now that we're at the end of the project in terms of getting things done," Grennan said, "that management had no intention of doing anything with this at all from the beginning, so that dialogue has also been a dialogue of a particular kind of double-speak" (conversation with Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperrando, May 24, 1993).

48. Conversation with Grennan and Sperrando (note 47).


50. Nilda Ruiz Pauley suggested the value of following those projects into the future. "It's like teachers being mentors and not knowing how much effect they have on them until years later," she said. "It will be very interesting to know what comes out of this" and how it affects "people who will become men and women very soon" (conversation with Nilda Ruiz Pauley (note 12)).
OUTSIDE THE LOOP

Mary Jane Jacob

ART IN CONTEXT. The nature of contemporary art during the past three decades has led art out of the museum into the world. Art has demanded spaces beyond the galleries of the institution because of its scale, its tie to the land or a given location, or because its message depended on a social context. For those artists with a pronounced social and political agenda, their work reached a desired, wider audience by being placed in a particular, everyday setting that actualized their critique of culture. Some even brought the audience into their work, extending the boundaries of the work of art into that of social sculpture. For others working in a post-Dada, post-Fluxus vein, the aim of having their work approximate, even be mistaken for, life was fulfilled by the site; being in the reality of the world increased the work's readability as a part of the cultural or physical landscape rather than artifice. Those who sought to depart from purely personal artistic expression also found noninstitutional venues a more sympathetic forum for achieving cultural expression. Moving away from the context of the modern museum as the repository of works of art of individual genius, artists were able to create contemporary idioms that incorporated past cultural traditions - Western and non-Western - and often included performative, interactive, or other collective elements. Museums have usually excluded such forms from their domain by virtue of the authority they have placed on the object. It was often necessary, too, to leave the institutional framework to satisfy an artist's needs when the organizational structure and object-based operations of the museum inhibited experimentation or were at odds with the artist's experiential, temporary, idea-based approach.

Thus, the use of exhibition locations outside the museum has been motivated not only by a practical need for space, but also by the meaning that such places convey and contribute to the work of art, the freedom they allow for innovation, the potential they offer for public accessibility, and the psychic space they afford artists and audience.
The organization of temporary exhibitions for museums and the administration of art for public spaces have become more closely aligned in recent years as both have adopted the practice of commissioning artists to create new works, installations, or projects for specific sites. Unlike conventional curatorial connoisseurship, whereby existing works are selected for an exhibition, this newly created art uses the actual exhibition opportunity in formally, conceptually, and critically interpretive ways. Thus, by extending the museum's walls to indoor or outdoor spaces brought into service on the occasion of an exhibition—abandoned buildings, the subway, or the street—or using the museum itself as a site-specific venue, the art museum has entered a territory previously identified with public art. Public art, on the other hand, has taken on exhibition attributes by staging installations of temporary works.

Contextualizing the work captures a premuseum state of art as much as it may take an oppositional stance to institutions. In order to become part of the "natural" surroundings and daily experience, contextual art integrates object with site, promoting the concept of art as environmental and experiential; it looks to traditional art forms, such as parades, or employs vehicles of modern-day media, for example, billboards. It re-investigates the place of art in society; it presents the artist as a catalyst or activist for change while it reintroduces the artist as shaman or healer in the community; it seeks to broaden the public for art that has taken on privatizing aspects in a world of museum parties, memberships, and admissions, and in cities where social boundaries corresponding to geographic divides inhibit audiences from reaching the doors of the museum. And art outside the institutional framework raises questions that, in turn, lead to parallel reflections about art inside museums: Who is the public for art? How does art address various publics? What is the role of artists today? Can art contribute to society? What is the place of our art institutions in the broader realm of culture?

These questions, now in the forefront of the museum field, emerged in the 1980s concurrent with the multicultural movement, postmodern critical thought, and site-dependent developments in contemporary artmaking. Museums today are experiencing a new age of accountability and responsibility to audience. They are facing demands from local communities and funding agencies to be audience-responsive, increase accessibility, provide didactic materials and educational programming, and expand their role beyond that of keeper and exhibitor of culture. Within museums, audience is often conceived in self-reflexive terms; the audience for art is that which comes to the museums; the definition revolves primarily around the question of museum attendance. The dilemma of bringing in new constituencies is often left to be solved by membership offices, museum stores and cafes, and museum education departments. The educator, for instance, is given the task of filling in the gaps with outreach programs that aim more to colonize individuals and communities and turn them into museumgoers, than to establish continuing vehicles of exchange and mutual respect. But in their Western art-collecting focus, demographic composition of boards and staff, and even Beaux-Arts style, museums as they developed in America since the end of the nineteenth century often find that at their core, they are essentially at odds with a new, multicultural agenda.
The art museum, in fact, may not be the most appropriate starting point for certain audiences to become involved with contemporary art; it may never be the venue that some frequent. Yet, just because an individual does not visit museums, it does not mean that he or she has neither the interest nor the capacity to relate to what contemporary art has to offer. Art existed long before museums, yet we have come to define art today according to that which the museum sanctions. The implicit hierarchical division between what is inside and outside the museum walls creates a high and low art distinction. One culture’s works are elevated over another’s; a particular medium is more esteemed; purely aesthetic works are favored over those with a practical function; works by famous artists are valued over those identified only by their culture or produced by collectives, especially if composed of nonarts professionals. This value scale is also reflected in and reinforced by a market system that prizes works of “museum quality,” equating monetary value with aesthetic value. Thus, the art museum, which may already pose a physical and mental barrier for some audiences, further removes itself from some constituencies by defining art in ways that deny or demean the value of artistic forms of cultural expressions outside its own space.

Artists, often working independently, are exploring community relationships that can serve as valuable models for cultural institutions. By stepping outside the domain of the museum to work in the public arena, the artist can escape the Western hierarchy implicit in traditional art institutions. Art can become more experimental in nature, expanding upon the usual museum genres and finding a conceptual link to its audience by rooting itself in a specific site. The artist’s engagement of cultures existing outside the dominant cultural venue of the museum establishment also points to a reconsideration of the operations of these art organizations at the center of cultural power and their relationship to the so-called margins. Thus, site-dependent artists’ projects—both inside and outside the museum—and recent site-related public art may serve as an apt testing ground for the issues surrounding the relationships between institution, audience, and the artist.

Should museum programs reflect the identity and present-day concerns of the surrounding community? If so, how should these issues be presented and what place does the public have in determining its own representation? How does the museum address different publics?

What are the responsibilities of the maker, presenter, and viewer of art?¹

By designating the physical and conceptual locus of a work of art outside the institution, art is taken to its audience, even if viewers are brought into the experience unknowingly. Thus, recent developments in curatorial practice outside museums and in public art have made the audience a new frontier for contemporary art. If, in the 1970s, we were extending the definition of who the artist is along lines of nationality or ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation; and in the 1980s the place of exhibitions expanded to include any imaginable venue, such as churches, prisons, schools, and so on; then in the 1990s we are grappling with broadening the definition of who is the audience for contemporary art. Arthur Danto wrote in 1992 that: “What we see today is an art which seeks a more immediate contact with people than the museum makes possible—art in public places, specific to given sites—and the museum in turn is striving to accommodate the immense pressures that are imposed upon it from within art and from outside art. So we are witnessing, as I see it, a triple transformation—in the making of art, in the institutions of art, in the audience for art.”²

Outside the Loop
Resituating audience outside the art center, whether in the city-at-large or within a community, site-specific public projects challenge definitions of audience as much as notions of art.

PUBLIC ART. Public art accepts and claims an unbounded, infinite audience simply by being in public view. Educational or evaluative tools are not regularly employed, so the only gauge of a work's success or failure in reaching its audience is when debate erupts into protest. Committees of a handful of representatives stand for "public" approval. For all intents and purposes, contemporary activity in public art dates from the establishment in 1967 of the Art in Public Places program at the National Endowment for the Arts and the subsequent formation of state and city percent-for-art programs. Government funding seemed to promise democratic participation and the expression of public, rather than private, interests. Selection panels of arts and civic leaders were appointed "as the representatives of all the people" by mayors, who were initially enlisted to authorize NEA applications. The late 1960s and early 1970s was the era of the civic art collection more related to art history than to city or cultural history, and which fulfilled the NEA goal "to give the public access to the best art of our time outside museum walls." Commissioned based on approval of a maquette, these large-scale sculptures were closely related in style to their smaller counterparts in collections and signified the expansion outdoors of the private museum viewing experience; communal festivals, rallies, or other plaza gatherings supplemented, but were not integral to, the work of art. Because these works were public art monuments representative of the personal working method of the artist, rather than cultural monuments symbolic of contemporary society, the controversy they engendered necessarily centered around artistic style (that is, abstract versus figurative art), rather than around public values.

It was precisely at the time when the NEA launched its public art program by commissioning Alexander Calder's Grande Vitesse in nearby Grand Rapids, Michigan, that private foundations in Chicago made possible the fabrication of Picasso's Head of a Woman, catapulting Chicago to the position of leader in the field. Up until that time, public art in the city had been figurative, as was characteristic of the late 1800s and early 1900s, and dedicated to real personages and mythical personifications (the Republic, the Great Lakes, Music, Brotherhood, Time, Peace). These works of art were primarily civic monuments commemorating heroes and ideals. With the unveiling of the Picasso on August 15, 1967 in the new Civic Center
Plaza, commented critic Franz Schulze, the situation in Chicago "shifted radically and layman and expert alike began to think differently about public art... it cleared the way for the appearance of many more objects like itself: large, often mammoth works executed in the 'modern manner' (seldom definable as somebody or something), erected in public spaces at considerable public expense, and accompanied by public fanfare... more than any other object or event [the Picasso] ushered in a new period in the history of public art."*1 Ironically, it also signaled the supplanting of public art commissioned by private benefactors and special interest groups as a show of civic pride in favor of publicly funded commissions of works of solely personal artistic expression. Art that had previously been known by the subject—the Grant Memorial, Shakespeare, Alexander Hamilton, Lincoln—now became known by the artist's name. So, too, the place of art narrowed from the ring of neighborhood parks planned by Daniel Burnham that spread to the city's interior, to a concentration in the one-mile square area called the Loop. Even more specifically, a downtown strip of Dearborn Street became the favored location for what Schulze called "a veritable public museum of modern art on a gargantuan outdoor urban scale."*2

This new focus on downtown as the prime space for public sculpture emerged just as the Loop, like many American urban centers, was in decline and businesses were vacating this area for the suburbs. Over the next decade Chicago's commercial core of diversified office and warehouse buildings was transformed into a high-end financial, governmental, and cultural district employing a far smaller percentage of the city's work force than ever before.

Here, as throughout the country in the late 1960s, modern art was called to come to the service of urban renewal and revitalization in an attempt to reestablish the value of place and provide it with an identity.*3

Art on the plaza, however, often seemed physically and socially divorced from—even discordant with—its surroundings. Recognizing the aesthetic and functional benefits of integrated urban design, in 1974 the NEA began to stress that public art should be "appropriate to the immediate site."*4 It encouraged proposals that integrated art into the site and moved beyond the monumental, steel object-off-the-pedestal. By the end of the 1970s, it embraced "the wide range of possibilities for art in public situations" of "any permanent media, including earthworks, environmental art, and non-traditional media, such as artificial light." In order to extend the field, the commissioning of younger and mid-career artists, who might offer innovative solutions, was also promoted. As site became a key element, the mechanisms by which public works were commissioned also required revision. The NEA sought to institute the artist's direct participation in the choice and planning of the site; by 1982 the Visual Arts and Design programs joined forces to encourage "the

*outside the loop
interaction of visual artists and design professionals through the exploration and development of new collaborative models.” Some of these site-specific works had a practical function. To the general viewer/user, such works appeared less self-indulgent, remote, and precious, and more engaging and accessible. They were seen as more than “just a sculpture”; use helped to mediate the expenditure of the people’s tax dollars or, at least, make it seem like a wise investment. Scott Burton, one of the most accomplished artists of public art in the 1980s, fully understood the potential of this way of working. He believed that “what architecture or design or public art have in common is their social function or content... Probably the culminating form of public art will be some kind of social planning, just as earthworks are leading us to a new notion of art as landscape architecture.”

Chicago did not acquire its first outdoor site work on an environmental scale until 1991, when Sculpture Chicago commissioned Ronald Jones to revamp a city block slated for demolition. It was proposed for Sculpture Chicago to hold its customary biennial event of jury-selected sculptures on this site. It was subsequently agreed, however, that this should be a single, integrated site work, and that a curatorially selected artist be given charge of the project. The result is the now-permanent Pritzker Park, a park-cum-artwork. The only public green space in the Loop, its gently graded, undulating floor slopes to below street level, providing the visitor a moment of retreat and it is a park with a story to tell through its sculptural elements and overall plan.

Like Jones’s park, the nearby works of Houston Conwill, Estella Majozo Conwill, and Joseph De Pace; Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler; Joseph Kosuth; and Tim Rollins & K.O.S., commissioned just prior for the Harold Washington Library Center—a pinnacle of the city’s percent-for-art program under the leadership of Jim Butris—sought to update the nineteenth-century tradition of public works on Chicago subjects, interpreting them through the means of Conceptual Art. These artists raised a number of questions: What can a contemporary artwork commemorate? What is the new urban monument and what can it signify to its audience—The public of Chicago? Emerging out of a decade of postmodernist critique, this public art took site not only as an element in need of physical enhancement, but also as the inspiration and departure point for the content of the work. This approach paralleled works being created for a host of site-specific exhibitions in Western Europe and the United States which also explored the subjective possibilities offered by site. In these projects for exhibitions and public art commissions, artists in the 1980s moved from predominantly formal considerations to themes of social history and cultural identity.

While interdisciplinary collaboration, or at least cooperation, among design professionals was encouraged by the NEA and the integration of site and object deemed essential to the successful public art commission, the relationship of art and audience, and the responsibilities of the artist and administrator to the public, remained on the sidelines until the 1990s. Up until that time public information about public art took the form of modified museum education: lectures, display of the maquette, and publications. In 1982 Mary Miss, whose work beginning in the 1970s had focused on large-scale outdoor constructions and public projects and who became a spokesperson for the field, wrote: “Artists need to engage with a community at the beginning of a project rather than retroactively at
the end." This interaction took forms as wide-ranging as planning visits to the site, to open forums in the community, to Christo's negotiations and enlistment of others in the production of his massive projects. Yet Mary Miss was not merely offering a word of warning to artists to help dispel disputes, but was pointing to the formative role that artists can take in affecting communities and shaping our world: "Art and artists are likely to remain on the periphery of our culture unless they are permitted to become actively engaged. Many are attempting a more integrated role, but their efforts must be recognized and supported. The visual sensibility of our best public artists can provide insight into our complex environment and possibly help to create a pathway through it." Mary Miss pointed to how the artist's visual acuity and sensitivity to the formal elements could be brought into solving problems in the aesthetic design of our built environment. Community-based artists a decade later have adopted this notion of a cooperative artist-audience relationship to demonstrate how the artist's unique perceptions and creative mechanism can be employed to solve problems of social design in our urban environment – to show that the artist can contribute socially as well as visually to our world.

Site as a forum for dialogue and action takes public art from the passive disposition of objects, functional design, or conceptually appropriate thematic works, to social intervention.

In the late 1980s an activist strain of contemporary art, though present since the late 1960s, became more pronounced and recognized. This aggressive stance may have grown out of postmodernist criticism's support of a social and political dimension for art. Public art, not confined to the museum or gallery space and audience, offered a direct route for artists to get their message out in order to influence or transform society. Modes of collaboration among design professionals fostered earlier by the NEA took on new meaning by extending to any discipline and including the public itself as collaborator. This work changed the definition of art as we have known it in this century by bringing the community into the creative process as coauthor, rejecting the modernist notion of the artist as sole heroic artistic genius, and returning art to its communal origins, especially as evidenced in non-Western traditions. As public art shifted from large-scale art objects, to physically or conceptually site-specific projects, to audience-specific concerns (work made in response to those who occupy a given site), it moved from an aesthetic function, to a design function, to a social function. Rather than serving to promote the economic development of American cities, as did public art beginning in the late 1960s, it is now being viewed as a means of stabilizing community development throughout urban centers. In the 1990s the role of public art has shifted from that of renewing the physical environment to that of improving society, from promoting aesthetic quality to contributing to the quality of life, from enriching lives to saving lives.

Community-based art emerges today as the new public art at a time when NEA Chair Jane Alexander is building her platform on the concept that the arts build communities. In a utopian spirit, many are looking to art to empower communities and to act as an agent of social change. But as socially minded artists work to make their projects more inclusionary and

What is the role of the artist in the public arena and in society?
bring those usually outside art institutions into their work - through subject matter, noninstitutional locations, or actual involvement by nonarts participants - many from the art world audience flee; a substitution rather than expansion of audience occurs. Is the art world audience separating itself from community-based projects because individuals feel uncomfortable that they are not part of the targeted community? Do they believe that their art - mainstream Western contemporary art - can have a universal audience? The concentration of the community-based projects around subjects pertinent to those marginalized by society (women, youth, the poor and lower class) can seem exclusionary - an act of reverse discrimination - exploitative, or romanticizing of a community's problems. Is it because this work is understood and "aesthetics" to those uneducated in contemporary art, and so must represent the lowest common denominator and lack quality, that the art world finds this work to be less than art? Is it because the appeal of art for many in the art world may be its very refinement and remove from the everyday and everyone?

Some art critics have claimed that community interaction is at odds with quality artistic practice and challenged whether social issues are a proper domain for art. The community-based artist's emphasis on process - events, education, dialogue - rather than object-driven concerns, and the political and social orientation of these public works are seen to override aesthetics. Yet the Russian Constructivists early in this century certainly provided a model in which aesthetic quality could comfortably coexist with the social activism of the artist. Is it the functional nature of this work in addressing social needs that lessens its status as art, and subjects community-based work to the same high-low dichotomy that has traditionally existed between painting and crafts? Surely the many recent, distinguished site shows in Western Europe and the United States have demonstrated how the most important artists of our time can poetically and visually create great art outside the museum or gallery.

**CULTURE IN ACTION.** "Culture in Action" merged curatorial and public art administrative practices of recent decades. The projects that comprised this program were temporary, commissioned works whose nonarts institutional context and public siting of activities or objects were fundamental to their meaning. As with public art or museum ventures in open-access locations, there was an opportunity for audiences who might not attend an art event to partake in these projects. But unlike museums and public art as we have known it, the process of establishing these works was an integral part of the art, as important as any objects created; members of the audience were engaged from the point of conception. In focusing on the community-based practice of artists working outside the museum, "Culture in Action" responded both to changes in contemporary artmaking and to a diversified audience for contemporary art.

"Culture in Action" began by questioning assumptions: Who is the audience for public art? How can public art represent the public when there are many publics?
Is community-based public art better suited to today's urban environment than monumental art objects? What ramifications might this work have for cultural institutions, for public art, contemporary art, art education? What is the role of the artist in the public arena and in society? How can artists collaborate with communities? Can artists work in communities that are not their own? How can public art contribute to community? Can art empower a community and can art affect society?

What are the aesthetic forms by which art can reach different audiences?

In addition to rethinking the form and audience for public art, the format and scope of site exhibitions and public art were reconsidered. How to make a public art exhibition program for a major urban environment? A walking tour would necessarily be confined to a neighborhood or, as in past sculpture Chicago programs, to a downtown district and usually on private land, often areas under commercial redevelopment. "Culture in Action" looked to bring public art back into communities from which it had sprung more than a century earlier, recapturing its role as a cultural symbol and galvanizing force in contemporary terms. Initially conceived of as "New Urban Monuments," this program positioned itself in relation to public art as it had existed in Chicago since the 1860s.

"Culture in Action" aimed to bring into being public art that was as much about the public as about art. It revolved around notions of public or social space: contested public space (the street, the market); public housing; candy counters and hardware stores; public education and the environment; public health; and the public telephone. It was less about geography than it was a topography of social and cultural forces within the city. And while it was specifically linked to Chicago, this city became a paradigm for the urban condition in the late twentieth century. Most important, while "Culture in Action" adopted the mode of scattered-site exhibitions—depending upon where the artists found their subject and collaborations—it also defied a single, contained time frame. Each project was dictated by its own timetable and, because process and programming were an intrinsic part of each project, the work existed over time and on multiple levels. Education and communication did not take the form of museum programs (lectures, docent tours, publications) modified for public art and presented upon completion of the sculpture, but were conceived and developed with the artists as part of the artmaking. This was not outreach designed to educate an audience about art, but an attempt to establish a dialogue.

This program also sought to build upon the nearly ten-year history of sculpture Chicago, which had offered to emerging and Illinois artists a public space and funds to make and show work that could not be realized in a studio setting. It had the additional goal of demystifying art for the uninformed audience by publicly revealing the process of making during a six-week open studio-on-the-street. "Culture in Action" continued to commission younger artists from Chicago and elsewhere, but extended its salient features by commissioning projects that intentionally broke with studio tradition, whose shape could not be predetermined in a maquette, and, by moving into the public space of the city, demanded interaction with its audience. "Culture in Action" brought the public from various Chicago communities into the process of the work of art as active participants and cocreators, rather than as casual, albeit new, spectators.

Outside the Loop
"Culture in Action" was developed over long periods of discussion beginning in 1990 – among arts professionals, community organizers, neighborhood groups, citizens, artists, board, and staff. From the outset it sought to give new meaning to public art through a pilot program of experimental projects that could help to build a new model for public art. Invited artists began to come to Chicago in January 1992 to help shape the program and propose a project that would confront the gap between artist and audience. While the idea of creating works of art jointly with the public was considered, it was not designated as a consistent theme of the program until after a year’s dialogues. Likewise, the subjects, locations, and participating constituents were determined by the artists over time through discussions and repeated visits. By December 1992, in an open forum and series of roundtables, the notions explored by artists and local constituencies were brought to professionals and representatives for debate.

As it developed, "Culture in Action" did not become characterized by a single style so much as by its audience-generated and audience-responsive orientation, related strategies, and their exploration of routes of exchange with multiple and different audiences. In each case the process began with a small group of people, and a ripple effect ensued.

Recognizing that there are many publics, "Culture in Action" addressed itself first and foremost to its constituent collaborators for whom the social issues addressed by the artists in their work were aligned with this audience's life concerns.

Thus, from the start, issues that were meaningful to a specified population were the focus of the project. These audience-participants and the artists shared responsibility for the statements made. And the most in-depth and privileged experience of the art was not reserved for individuals distinguished by wealth, reputation, or art knowledge, but was available to any who cared about the issues and wished to become involved. Audience was not so much an issue of numbers, of reaching the undefinable, elusive masses, but of who and how.¹⁶

Objects that resulted from the interactive process of "Culture in Action" were the locus for shared sentiments and means of communication with other audiences. Their form, even if unconventional and more tied to Conceptual genre than tradition, did not pose a barrier: artists and audiences intersected at the point of meaning and joined in determining the form of expression their dialogues would take. This mode of collaboration is not without its complexities of familiarity, trust, and aesthetics; authorship continually had to be renegotiated between individual and group interests.

But through this process of exchange and dialogue, public art was reinvested with cultural meaning.

While each project in "Culture in Action" can be identified by a central theme, the artists and their groups recognized that the issue they were dealing with could not be viewed in isolation; it was not purely a question of education, housing, jobs, health, gender, or ethnicity, but of intertwined issues. The spirit of Jane Addams, a touchstone of Suzanne Lacy’s project, offered a guiding principle. Addams perceived the emerging social ecology of the modern world and understood that to rectify one social ill, multiple concerns of various peoples had to be addressed. The same issues that the artists
collectively addressed in “Culture in Action.” Addams addressed in the sweeping social agenda of Hull-House. The projects in “Culture in Action” did not claim to provide solutions, even answers, to these complex concerns, but they did take a constructive approach. By translating local manifestations of these issues into meaningful aesthetic metaphors, the artists and their collaborators sought to illuminate personal ways in which the individual could deal with these overwhelming global problems. They sought within the specific milieu that generated each project a means to tap into the human experience of other audiences in Chicago and beyond. The temporary nature of the projects was crucial to setting the tone for fluid and open experimentation, and to avoid the compromises and delays that plague public artmaking. In rejecting the goal of the universal artistic statement, concerning itself with the immediate crisis of contemporary life both locally and globally, it favored temporary, interactive forms over formalist sculpture.

How can the arts become a meaningful part of everyday experience?

In order to function as a catalyst for community dialogue and change, “Culture in Action” directly engaged audiences – physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. A metaphor first identified by Iriquo Manglano-Ovalle is applicable: each project and the program overall became an ongoing tertúlia, a constantly evolving conversation among circles of “neighbors.” Conversations extended throughout the summer-long general public phase with five-hour bus tours that became seminars across multiple, site-specific venues. Even though Sculpture Chicago’s involvement has ceased, discussions between artists and their constituencies continue still. This publication will also serve a discursive function within its readership. The eight projects had an immediate impact. Yet they live on, too, sometimes stronger than physical monuments, in collective memory and myth, in the lives of individuals, and in programs that continue and will follow.

Questions remain: How can we broaden the audience for art outside the art world? How can our cultural institutions find ways to relate to multiple audiences and varied communities and develop sustained relationships with these audiences? What are the aesthetic forms by which art can reach different audiences? How can the arts become a meaningful part of everyday experience? How can we support the artist as cultural worker as well as object maker? How can public art be supported as a temporary activity, as well as permanent object? How can we explore and enable artists to contribute creatively to other fields, to the needs of society beyond the realm of aesthetics? How can this practice enter the mainstream?

Art’s role in our society will not be effectively established until it permeates our social systems and is not thought of as just something that happens inside the doors of a museum. Working outside the institution – in other sites, with everyday means, with daily issues – is a start in shifting the ideological position of art in our culture. By acknowledging the social function of art, by viewing art as an activity and creative problem-solving mechanism with applicability to all walks of life, it can go even further. This does not require so much of an alteration of the definition of the work of art so much as an expanded definition of the work of the artist. The broader realm of art in life still remains to be explored and the conduits through which art can engage audiences outside the art world are largely untapped. Working with communities is an important step in demarginalizing contemporary art and artists, building new bonds with the public, and establishing a valued place for art in our society.