



FREE
STORE
LUNCH

Listening, Collaboration, Solidarity

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Between January and August of 2006, *campbaltimore* – a working group of artists and activists in Baltimore – organized a series of collaborative events and interventions in public space.¹ Informed by our understanding of the limits of museums as sites for politically engaged practices, as well as by our frustrations with the isolationism typical of conventional community organizing models in Baltimore, the group helped produce a vehicle designed to travel around the city initiating social and educational events and reclaiming public spaces. Our central hypothesis was that if community organizing in Baltimore has been hampered by the social, political and geographical fragmentation of the city, then circulation and mobility could be used as tools for community empowerment by facilitating communication and dialogue between different groups working for social justice.² To this end, we converted a utility trailer into a mobile and reprogrammable platform: a hybrid stage, kitchen, infoshop, sewing workshop, free store, outdoor cinema and video studio.

As we organized events with the trailer we were faced with many problems regarding the nature of coalition building, collective practice and public space. How can different groups working on their own specific issues and initiatives recognize common struggles and cooperate on projects while retaining their individual autonomy? How can we overcome the territorial boundaries based on race, class, geography and funding distribution that often inhibit collaboration? What is the difference between solidarity and charity? How can we reclaim public spaces for emancipatory collective social uses?

Against the hierarchical and centralized process that dominates most forms of urban planning, the trailer project was intended to generate a participatory process of dialogue from below, aimed at listening to and articulating the needs, struggles and desires of ordinary residents and suggesting the outlines of a more horizontal and democratic city.³ Though the trailer itself was not conceived as a sustainable means of achieving the particular goals of community groups and their constituents, it was initiated to help realize a meaningful prerequisite: solidarity.

Challenges to Organizing

Our early discussions with organizers in East Baltimore revealed community fragmentation, isolation and the inability to form stable coalitions as central concerns. Some were also frustrated with the conventional routines of community organizing, particularly working without municipal or institutional support through endlessly repetitive meetings that result in no action. These conditions left many community members disinclined to participate in organizing. With these issues in mind, we started hosting a series of dinners with local activists, students and artists, so

people could informally socialize and share information about their projects and initiatives. This led to the formation of a network listserv, which is still in active use today. These dinners were also intended to be brainstorming sessions for an upcoming exhibition at the Contemporary Museum called *Headquarters*, which sought to facilitate exchange and collaboration between the activist and artistic communities in Baltimore. Organized by Cira Pascual Marquina, the goal of *Headquarters* was to divert the institution's resources towards activist practices in the city by funding several artists' residencies and projects. The trailer was among the projects funded through the exhibition.⁴

One of many frequent dinner discussions that led to strengthening old and establishing new networks for collaboration among residents and organizations.



Source: Nicholas Wisniewski

In the dinners we explored how groups working on specific issues – ranging from housing to labor rights, prison abolition, and the promotion of gift economies – could extend their networks or form coalitions in a functional way that still allowed them to retain their autonomy.⁵ To a certain extent, the practice of the dinners themselves emerged as a model. Maintaining group cohesion, however, was often a task in itself. In the months since these regular dinners and the trailer activities they inspired, many of the groups have returned to focus primarily on their own projects. Yet participants note that their projects are still informed by the relationships built during this period and are less atomized as a result. They continue to actively use the listserv, sharing information about and participating in each others projects. Many developed new, personal relationships with multiple community groups. While it has been some time since ten or more groups have had members present at a dinner or meeting, a number of individuals now share time between more than one project and organization.

Resistant Sociality, Affective Politics

Drawing from these initial gatherings, we envisioned building a trailer as a means for distributing information – essentially a didactic exhibition-on-wheels. But as we talked further with collaborators, including other Baltimore-based activists and the Barcelona-based collective Taller de Costura de Codigo Abierto (Open-Source Sewing Workshop),⁶ we began to think about incorporating food and other social activities into the trailer's program to create more accessible and active situations and to extend the environment created during the dinners outward into the streets.⁷

For one of the first trailer events we took the group meal to a remote location, an empty lot behind the Progressive Action Center (PAC) in Northeast Baltimore. Just as we began to cook a comically large bowl of paella, torrential rain forced everyone beneath an array of tarps supported by the trailer. Trapped in tight confines, unsettled by the downpour, no one could organize a coherent discussion. Still, we grilled lots of food under the tarps, cranked music up over the roar of the storm, and a crazy, muddy, outdoor dance party ensued. We were joined by random people from the neighborhood who walked by and wanted to get out of the rain. Some teenagers came for the free food. Almost everyone stayed for hours, despite being soaking wet.

In some respects, it was just a party; many people bonded during the event, but none of us ever saw the passersby from the community again in organizing efforts. Yet, while the impact of these ephemeral social events is almost impossible to measure, this night demonstrated that food, music, the rain (and maybe a little alcohol) could help create an inclusive and unpredictable space in which new relationships and solidarities can form based on a shared, affective experience. Such a space, in contrast to that of a conventional meeting, is intellectually, physically and emotionally engaging: it produces some of the important sensibilities needed to form political solidarities that exceed shared ideology, such as affection, mutual care, support and friendship.⁸

Appropriating Space, Making Space Public

We also consider the act of reclaiming or appropriating urban space for collective social activities to be an act of resistance against the rapid privatization and militarization of space in the interests of profit and security. Yet, the act of reclaiming public space is not only one of resistance and negation, but also of possibility and invention, opening a space to unpredictable encounters and new forms of social relations. In this way, the trailer project is directly predicated upon

the concept of spatial justice, in that its interventions attempt to destabilize the discipline and control of urban space, occupying space in experimental and emancipatory ways to subvert the enforced routines of consumerism and security that dominate everyday urban life.

These ideals can be seen in an event organized in collaboration with the United Workers Association (UWA), a group of janitors who work at the Orioles baseball stadium and are currently organizing against the exploitative conditions of day-labor. As

Lunch with the United Workers Association after the “Summer of Justice” march.



Source: Scott Berzofsky

part of their “Summer of Justice” campaign for a living wage, the UWA organized a march and used the trailer as a stage for speeches before it lead the march downtown past the offices of Peter Angelos, the owner of the Orioles. The outside of the trailer was converted into a mobile billboard displaying the UWA’s message demanding “freedom from poverty.” After the march, we used the trailer to take over a downtown sidewalk and serve lunch to members of the UWA, their supporters and passersby. The food and music created such a festive atmosphere on the

sidewalk that a patrol officer from the Downtown Partnership⁹ responded to a complaint from a nearby business and attempted to shut us down. After we ignored his request, he called a City Police officer who was sympathetic and allowed us to continue the event. By calling on the networks established through the series of dinner events, the UWA was able to mobilize a diverse group of supporters to participate in this event, articulating both a demand for a living wage *and* a rejection of the isolationism and fragmentation that so often limits organizing efforts.

The trailer being used for a Baltimore Free Store event in Greenmount West



Source: Scott Berzofsky

Solidarity Not Charity

In an event organized with the Baltimore Free Store, we temporarily occupied an abandoned lot in North East Baltimore with the trailer, set up tables with clothing and other goods and cooked lunch. During the day, as people came for food or some clothes we would engage in conversations, describe what we were doing and distribute copies of *The Independent Reader*, a free newspaper publication produced in collaboration with Baltimore Indymedia. During this event the trailer housed a developing archive/infoshop that included site-specific information about different official neighborhood master plans and other urban planning proposals, including lists of houses sited for demolition and acquisition. The archive was also intended to present our activities – and those of other groups in our growing network – in a clear way. We distributed flyers, zines, pamphlets and contact information from participating groups.

When distributing food and other free goods, we found it challenging to articulate the distinction between this activity and more conventional forms of service provision or charity. While we are interested in promoting the concept of a gift economy or of other community-based reuse and redistribution programs, we do not want to participate in the uncritical practice of distributing free food to the poor (like a soup kitchen), which can ultimately be argued to sustain and symbolically compensate for conditions of economic inequality rather than fostering critical responses to them. Further, the type of one-way exchange embodied in the charity model problematically reproduces the uneven power relations based on class and privilege that we want to contest and reconfigure.

We are more interested in constructing situations in which a productive dialogue can take place between heterogeneous groups of people, where conversation and debate can lead to the production of critical consciousness, formation of resistant assemblies and invention of new political subjectivities. In such situations, food and other social activities are means to initiate dialogue and build relationships and solidarities, not as ends-in-themselves (even if the ends are, in fact, a more equitable distribution of food and goods).¹⁰

Another event that took place during the summer of 2006 was organized in collaboration with Access Art, a free after-school art program for children and teenagers in the West Baltimore neighborhood of Pigtown. For this event, we had a workshop where local kids made stencils and spray painted t-shirts and then collectively prepared a meal of vegetarian spring rolls. After the meal, a member of Critical Resistance Baltimore, a prison abolition group, facilitated a

Kids participating in a cooking workshop in Pigtown.



Source: Nicholas Wisniewski

conversation with the kids about how surveillance cameras affect their neighborhood. Later in the evening, we projected a slide show of photographs the kids had taken of their neighborhood for their friends and family. By using art and cooking workshops to generate participation in a critical discussion about the community, this event came close to producing the kind of active dialogue we envisioned for the trailer.

Moving forward

As we have argued, forming networks and coalitions necessarily precedes a determined response to specific issues. Although the trailer begins to accomplish these tasks, it has many limitations. One significant shortcoming of all the trailer events was their limited duration. Strong relationships and political solidarities are not built in a day.¹¹ Since the summer of 2006, when the trailer was most extensively used (the favorability of experiments in public space is directly

The trailer as a platform for a sewing workshop and free store at the Men's Center back-to-school block party



Source: Emily Forman

related to the temperature outside), we have experimented with more sustainable, long-term forms of engagement with specific communities. In examining the constraints of the trailer, we wonder: what if we continued an event at the same site every day for a month? What if the span of an intervention was extended for a year? What sorts of relationships would result from that kind of duration and consistency?

Our most recent projects are informed by the goals and strategies of the trailer, but have sought to overcome its logistical constraints by focusing on specific places in the city. We are partnering with existing community organizations and programs and seeking to sustain projects through the nonprofit structure. Some people who worked on the trailer project are now working on a sustainable urban farming project on a vacant lot. Others have continued to participate in community-based media initiatives by working on a free newspaper or a nonprofit, community radio station in East Baltimore. These projects have been slower to develop and more difficult to implement, partially because they demand more intense, localized coalition building.

We intend to revive the trailer project alongside these other efforts. Yet many in the group seem to have reached a point of skepticism regarding the ability of informal networking and interaction with people in public to yield a critical mass. Finding it difficult to amass a large solidarity without a specific platform, without a common belief among citizens that they can directly influence policy, we have shifted to organizing more specific localized initiatives. While these practices in some ways resemble the territorial manner of organizing we initially criticized for being limited, they differ in maintaining communication

with groups across the city with the purpose of building broader coalitions.

The trailer project is an experiment, and as such we can learn just as much from the problematic aspects, the awkward encounters, the failed attempts, the antagonistic moments, the conflicts and dissensus, as we can from the more celebratory and easily agreed upon elements. The true test of the trailer's efficacy will be how we build upon this experiment, what new projects emerge and what relationships are sustained into the future.

Campbaltimore is an ongoing project based on research, communication and organizing with a commitment to building solidarities with different groups and individuals working for social justice in the city.

Lead Photograph

The trailer being used for a Baltimore Free Store event in Greenmount West - Scott Berzofsky

Notes

¹ The authors participated in this project as part of campbaltimore, a group composed primarily of former art students who went to school together in Baltimore. The larger network of people who collaborated on the project was racially, economically and generationally diverse, including students, local housing, prison abolition and labor activists, organizers, artists, anarchists, day-laborers, teachers, curators and children. The views expressed in this essay are not necessarily shared by all those who participated in the project.

² For a detailed analysis of uneven geographical development in Baltimore, see David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 133-56.

³ In this regard, the trailer project was inspired by the ethics and ambition of the Other Campaign initiated by the Zapatistas in Mexico: a campaign tour across and entire nation based not on giving speeches or soliciting votes, but on listening and sharing stories of struggle.

⁴ Theorist and activist Brian Holmes essay “Liar’s Poker” is an essential reference here in relation to the strategic instrumentalization of art institutions and cultural capital for activist initiatives. <http://ut.yt.t0.or.at/site/index.html>.

⁵ Some of the theoretical texts that informed these discussions about horizontal self-organized networks included, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁶ Taller de Costura collaborated on the project during their residency in Baltimore as part of *Headquarters*.

⁷ There are too many relevant arts, historical and activist models of mobile vehicles to cite here comprehensively, but a short list would include the Soviet Productivist kiosks of Gustav Klucis and Medvedkin’s *Cinema-Train*, Nils Norman’s *Geocruiser*, the Las Agencias *ShowBus*, Lasse Lau and Lise Skou’s *Mobile Tea House*, and City Repair’s *T-Horse Mobile Public Square*.

⁸ The term affective politics is more commonly used in Spanish (*política afectiva*) within the context of horizontal neighborhood assemblies (*asambleas*) in places like Argentina and Venezuela. Also of use here is the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere’s work on the politics of aesthetics and the distribution of the sensible. See, Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁹ The Downtown Partnership is one of the quasi-public agencies working to maintain a clean and safe business environment for tourists and office workers in Baltimore’s downtown.

¹⁰ We are inspired by the Common Ground Collective in New Orleans and their emphasis on “solidarity not charity.” This approach to community-based work is also informed by the Black Panther Party and their Free Breakfast Program.

¹¹ It should be noted that the time frame in which the trailer activities took place was extremely constrained by the schedule of the *Headquarters* exhibition, the limited length of collaborator’s residencies and the museum’s cycle of funding.