Talking Points

María del Carmen Carrión and Meredith Johnson

SINCE 2007, New York-based Meredith Johnson has been curator and director of consulting at Creative Time, a nonprofit organization that commissions and presents public arts projects of all disciplines. She has also served as a curator at long time alternative space, Artists Space, and assistant director for Minetta Brook, a nonprofit arts organization that commissioned public projects throughout New York state. Quito, Ecuador-born and New York-based independent curator and art critic María del Carmen Carrión is director of public programs & research at Independent Curators International. Given their expansive views on public practice, they were invited to create a text for this publication premised on a series of informal conversations about the politics of public space, the importance of art as a mode of activism, and the role of the artist in making change.

MARÍA DEL CARMEN CARRIÓN: *Could you outline some of the peculiarities of working in public space?*

MEREDITH JOHNSON: Although one might imagine commissioning projects in public space as a restrictive process, the reason I've focused my curatorial work in this area is because of its freedoms. I say this for a

couple of reasons. 1. Projects in public space until very recently existed on the periphery of the art world—because they weren't easily definable, and because they weren't in a museum with a structured mediation of experience. 2. For projects in public space to be powerful, their development requires a trust and close collaboration with the public and a deep partnership with the artist. Art that I respond to is ultimately about relationships, listening to and understanding the many stories present on a site, and proposing new or untold perspectives of a place. Its about making connections. Now I'm not necessarily talking about public art in the percent-for-art-type model of permanent commissioning, but the kind of work we do at Creative Time or when I was at Minetta Brook—temporary interventions by artists at a specific place and time.

MDCC: *Defining what constitutes public space is a challenging task, one that I would like you to take on. Especially in terms of the possibilities and limitations that city-owned spaces might offer, as opposed to private spaces, which could have a commercial inclination rather than a civic one. Creative Time has had several large projects sited on privately owned spaces, such as their recent project with Kara Walker.*[1] [Fig. 1]

MJ: The line between public and private space is often a blurry one. We live in a time when public space is often privately owned and where even publicly owned space can have private or corporate interests, which makes working in this realm a puzzle. Creative Time has often situated work on privately owned spaces—like our video commissions for the *59th Minute*[2] [Fig. 4] project on the Panasonic screen in Times Square, with MTV in *Art Breaks*, in the many private spaces Paul Ramirez Jonas invited people to unlock for his *Key to the City*[3] project in 2010, and even in Creative Time's first projects in the 1970s and 1980s on vacant land and in abandoned storefronts in Lower Manhattan—to me the bigger question than who owns the space is what is the public's relationship to it? In some cases, publicly owned spaces can be more limiting to the artist or public than a privately managed one. There can be long lead approvals, hearings and the mountains of paperwork behind a project, and it can sometimes be easier to get a timely project in front of the public or more directly interacting with a public when a site is privately owned. Look at projects like Karen Finley's piece in *Public Works*, *1-900-ALL-KAREN*, a 1998 performance sited on a 900 number. This virtual space was home to a daily message from Finley, providing a regular and intimate relationship to a viewer through sound. Was this 900

1 Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* was presented by Creative Time in 2014 at the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, New York

2 The *59th Minute* was an ongoing series of one-minute video commissions presented by Creative Time on the Panasonic Screen in Times Square from 2000–2007.

3 *Key to the City*, by Paul Ramírez Jonas, was a public project presented by Creative Time in 2010 that invited thousands of participants to present and receive keys that unlocked 24 locations throughout New York City's five boroughs, many never before accessible to the public.

Fig. 1 Kara Walker, *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, 2014. Courtesy of Creative Time

Fig. 2 Tamms Year Ten project performance still at 2013 Creative Time Summit (Darrell Cannon, Reginald "Akkeem" Berry, Sr., and Brenda Townsend); two former Tamms prisoners stood on stage in silence one minute for each year they were in solitary at Tamms and a mother of a prisoner stood for her son. The men walked away after eight and nine minutes; Townsend was on stage for fourteen minutes. Courtesy of Creative Time.


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number public space? I would say yes, anyone can call and one could contend that all space where anyone can listen in, access, or tune into is ultimately part of the public domain. It is art's role to push these boundaries of civic space, political space, and personal space.

MDCC: *When you talk about projects pushing the boundaries of civic space, or creating a public space, the moment that tension happens is the moment when these projects start getting real.*

MJ: The context is obviously shaped by the city and community you are working in, and we should note that we sit here talking about this in NYC. This is a layered city in terms of what public space is, because there is really very little "public" space in NY that isn't privately invested in. You have civic spaces such as public parks and roadways, but the majority of public spaces in which one could present art—billboards, plazas and green spaces, building facades, vacant lots, historic buildings, etc., have private interests involved.

It ultimately comes down to how open the person or group who controls the site is with the artist and their ideas. A site owner can be a true partner in the process of commissioning or they can be restrictive, and that is the case both for public or private entities. The larger problem for me is when a site owner, public or private, attempts to mediate or capitalize on the content of an artwork. This is where issues of censorship and access come in, and where public art risks being used as a marketing tool for a site. Artists and arts presenters need to be keenly aware of the context of a site and its ownership, and willing to discuss in depth what the impact of participating in a particular location is. How do the many communities tied to a site engage with the artwork, and is the work contributing to the dialog of this place in a positive way? There are profound responsibilities in participating in public space, and this is where the public/private question becomes pressing for me.

MDCC: *If there is a blurry line between space that is publically or privately owned, then are we left with little or no true democratic space? Does all of the space we navigate respond to the contradictions of public/private perspectives, and is there something interesting in that contradiction? When you go to a museum you are not seeing a contradiction; it has gone through so many layers and committees that you are seeing a very filtered-down narrative.*

MJ: Is that because museums and the art world in general are now more heavily mediated by private or corporate interests?

MDCC: *Of course. Considering these public/private issues, what do you make out of the intersection of art and activism? There has been a lot of criticism of the limits that "artivism" can have vs. the impact of some actions coming directly from an activist perspective and not being framed by the art world. What is the role of curators, artists, and audiences in setting up or pushing those limitations?*

MJ: What is so effective about activists who use art as a vehicle for radical change are the freedoms in art that you don't get in other areas. I say activists who engage in an art practice, as art, is one of the oldest tools of activism and revolution. Artists can take personal liberties, explore other roads to a narrative that can resonate in a profound emotional way. There is a comfortability in approaching something as an artwork. Art is at its most powerful when it seamlessly makes a connection for participants between their personal narrative and the universal experience of being human. An artist can bridge gaps and blur lines that both provocatively challenge viewers and bring people to the table who otherwise might not participate in a civic dialog.

Fig. 3 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance: Sweep 7, Staten Island, 6:00 a.m. Roll Call*, 1977–1980, City-wide performance with 8,500 NYC Department of Sanitation workers. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

MDCC: *Do you think it comes to a point where there is no follow-through of the actions? So the moment an idea is contrived in the art world, it becomes an object, an image, without any connection to its original intention as a catalyst for action. Activism is a practice that aims to go through until final consequences are met, whereas art, most of the time, stops in the art world.*

MJ: I think that's a core issue around socially engaged art as it becomes part of the larger art system, which is inherently a market driven world. For as progressive as art and artists can be, the field of art is still very conservative and reductive around the notion of what constitutes an artwork or even an artist. There are of course those who will use the language of community engagement as marketing for a work, rather than developing a sustained, respectful, and honest conversation around issues presented. Likewise, there are those who are deeply invested in a site and the outcomes of a project, but whose extensive work in these areas might not be as transparent to those who visit an installation or read a short blurb about it.

We see the sincerity of public projects debated more and more as socially engaged works grow in visibility. I was just reading the series of articles around Christoph Büchel's mosque for the Icelandic Pavilion in the Venice Biennale (2015), and whether you agree or disagree with a particular critic I think it is important to interrogate the level of community engagement an artist or organizer commits to.[4] I can't speak to how that particular project was organized, but in general I think the question of what kind of information viewers are presented with in order for them to come into the process of an artwork informed is key. It is also important to consider how early engagement begins in a community before an installation opens, and ask what a work is proposing in the way of action. Ideas are only as good as the sincerity behind them and the groundwork done by those who carry them out. To me, the key work in presenting public projects is in the research, outreach, and on-site production decisions. Communities need to be partners in the making and translation of artworks asking them to participate—you can't just use the history of a place and its people as a landing pad for an idea conceived in a bubble. I'm interested in questions like: how do projects bring hidden narratives out into the open? How does artwork represent a place and its people? How do artists contribute to shifting dialogs in society?

If a project has a profound impact on viewers and the public sites they engage with, does it really matter whether we classify a project as a discrete

4 Hrag Vartanian, "Why I Don't Buy the Premise of Christoph Büchel's Icelandic Mosque Pavilion," *Hyperallergic*, May 22, 2015. http://hyperallergic.com/209399/why-i-dont-buy-the-premise-of-christoph-buchels-icelandic-mosque-pavilion/

Fig. 4 Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman, A Beggar Woman, and A Laundry Woman*, 2005. Times Square, New York City. Courtesy of Creative Time


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artwork as long as it's a profound catalyst for discussion and change? Laurie Jo Reynolds is an excellent example to look at, as she is such an effective activist operating both in and out of what one might consider an art world context. Her work focused on the Tamms Correctional Center with the *Tamms Year Ten* project, launched in 2007 with inmates, families, and other artists, was not to comment on the conditions of the notorious supermax prison to an art audience. It was a true grassroots effort to shift the culture and policies around this place and ultimately our understanding of the larger system in which these prisons reside. She and her collaborators did not stop until there was a result, until Tamms was shut down in 2013. [Fig. 2] Laurie Jo and her partners were able to do this amazing thing not because the art world got behind them, but because they used the tools of culture, activism, and lobbying to reach a wide range of audiences, including policy makers. I think until we stop being so concerned with the idea of artist as the maker of a discrete artwork, and until we begin to examine the act of artmaking in the larger cultural sense as a tool for social change, only then can art have the ability to subvert systems and make substantial political waves.

MDCC: *What is the most radical public project that you've seen or experienced?*

MJ: Laurie Jo's project at Tamms is definitely one. I think she is one of the most important artists working today. A while back, Creative Time did a project with Steve Powers as part of *Democracy in America* exhibition in 2008. Steve brought in lawyers working in the area of human rights to be waterboarded off a small alley in Coney Island. It was accompanied by his animatronic *Waterboarding Thrill Ride* , touching on the history of political amusements on Coney Island.[5] After the lawyers were waterboarded by a former interrogation expert, they discussed in both personal and legal terms what they had experienced. This was at a time when the Bush administration was still actively using waterboarding as an interrogation tool, and trying to justify torture through legal jargon. Steve was also waterboarded so he took on the same experience he asked of the participants. It was a small audience, and the most intense performance I've ever witnessed. It was really hard to watch, and was truly one of the gutsiest projects I've seen to date—I wish more had seen it.

Given these two projects, I think our systems of incarceration and prisons are a key issue to investigate in relationship to public space—when is our freedom to navigate public space taken away and who are the powers

5 Steve Powers' *Waterboarding Thrill Ride* was presented as part of the 2008 Creative Time exhibition *Democracy in America: The National Campaign*, curated by Nato Thompson.

6 Since 1977, Mierle Laderman Ukeles has been the artist in residence at the New York Department of Sanitation.

that control this. Prisons are civically owned public spaces that the public has little access to or understanding of.

MDCC: *or privately owned . . .*

MJ: Large amounts of public money flow into them, huge numbers of our citizens end up in them—overwhelmingly young men of color—and taxpayers support this institutionalized system that is inherently flawed and grossly unjust. In relationship to an issue this large, this important, *Tamms Ten Year* may be one of the most civic projects to date as it was truly art and activism working together in an effective way on an urgent subject facing this country. Why is it that we don't have more artworks, or projects with artists as initiators, that result in a systematic change, especially if artists have the privilege to explore issues those working within a system may not have the freedom to explore? If artists are free to call out social injustice, why aren't more involved in leading policy debates rather than just commenting on them? Laurie Jo has called her work "legislative art," which I think is key in thinking about the kind of power artists can have.

MDCC: *But people respond to that.*

MJ: Going back to your first question, I think the big dilemma for those working in public practice is: How do we get past the idea that artists operate in an art world vs. the world at large? Part of that question requires us to know why artists aren't valued in society as community leaders, and how we change that. Why aren't artists today considered an important voice in a civic dialog in the US? This is what many of the projects in *Public Works* are pushing at—like Mierle Laderman Ukeles's ongoing work as the artist in residence for an entire city agency in New York.[6] [Fig. 3] Is it that society in general doesn't value culture and the expertise of artist, or is it that we as a field can't look past ourselves to see the broader applications of a project and its core ideas?

These are the questions I ask every day, along with how we move the barriers (or weight) of what history considers proper vehicles for art. I firmly believe that in art there is freedom, and artistic exchange is one of the fundamental platforms we have as a society to explore ideas core to us as humans in an unabashed way.