David Joselit
Near Contact
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Common Practice New York

Common Practice New York is an advocacy group that fosters research and discussions about the role of small-scale arts organizations in New York City. The members of Common Practice New York are Anthology Film Archives, Artists Space, Bidoun, Danspace Project, Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), ISSUE Project Room, The Kitchen, Light Industry, Participant Inc, Primary Information, Printed Matter, Recess, SculptureCenter, Storefront for Art and Architecture, Triple Canopy, and White Columns.

Founded over the course of several meetings beginning in 2012, Common Practice New York aims to collectively embody the question *What is our common practice and why do we value it?* Each group claims certain benefits to its small scale: sustainability not at the expense of quality; long-term relationships with artists and publics; less compromised access to artwork; and horizontal networks and collaboration. Yet factors such as larger institutions' embrace of new art, ever-adapting commercial environments, novel forms of social interaction, and the rising costs of living in New York City have all created unprecedented challenges for small-scale organizations.

Though our organizations may, by their very existence, negotiate these questions, Common Practice New York acknowledges a growing need for critical discussions that extend beyond the churn of our programming schedules and the rhetoric of our mission statements. The group aims to collectively

examine how small-scale New York City arts organizations are perceived and evaluated by audiences, artists, and funders; identify the challenges of operating in today's climate; and revive discussions of obstacles and inequalities which have persisted since the rise of the alternative space. In doing so, Common Practice New York aims to develop new knowledge and further a discourse on ethical positions for the presentation of art and ideas in the twenty-first century.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, the slogan "Too big to fail" gained wide currency in the United States. Despite its urgency, this phrase was nothing new. It was merely the latest iteration of a principle as old as capitalism itself: "Grow or die." Nonetheless, "Too big to fail" neatly summarized a set of values that often go unchallenged in the context of art. It contended that a bank (or any other kind of corporation of comparable magnitude) is so fully integrated in the national economy that its collapse will lead to systemic crisis. More insidiously, "Too big to fail" implicitly asserted the *public good* of capitalism, which when having attained a scale at which it is "too big to fail," must receive *public* funds.

A certain equation is at work here: BIG = PUBLIC.

The risks of bigness in finance, as when ordinary home mortgages are packaged and repackaged so many times that their potential "toxicity" is buried within countless layers of securitization, is occluded by a fuzzy sense of public good (i.e., making mortgages more widely available; stimulating the economy) without acknowledging wildly disproportionate benefits to the 1%. With the exception of Occupy, there has been little serious acknowledgement that, in fact, BIG = PRIVATE when it comes to the profits reaped from businesses that are "too big to fail." On the contrary, as demonstrated by the bailout of General Motors, our leaders act on the possibly cynical presumption that BIG = PUBLIC.

There is a converse dynamic when it comes to small institutions. If some enterprises are "too big to fail," others are presumably "too small to survive." Why do they refuse to grow? If growth is necessary for success, staying the same size means you are destined to disappear.

When it comes to art institutions, "bigness" is measured not simply by dollars but also by collection, and attendance. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art ranked third and thirteenth respectively on the *Art Newspaper*'s 2013 global survey of museum attendance—their contribution to New York's tourist revenue is significant, but does this enhance or detract from their status

as *public* institutions? They seem to conform to the equation, BIG = PUBLIC, since a large number of people visit their galleries. But if "public" describes *access* rather than gross audience numbers then these large museums have failed us on two grounds. First, there is shockingly limited access to the collections that our tax dollars directly or indirectly help to acquire. Based on information on their website, it seems that MoMA exhibits something like 1% of their collection at any one time.[1] And yet, unlike the New York Public Library, where patrons may request virtually anything in the stacks, the right to view this 99% of our "public" artistic heritage is extremely difficult to obtain, even for scholars.[2] There are certainly legitimate practical concerns and expenses in moving art out of storage and into public view, and yet, how can an institution that functions like a bank, hoarding its assets, be credited as genuinely public—like a library? Shouldn't there be more serious innovation around genuinely accessible "open storage" that would allow for wider enjoyment and study of what is held in New York's great museum collections? And second, with the exception of the Metropolitan Museum, which requests a recommended donation, our big museums are so prohibitively expensive as to prevent many citizens from entering (outside of the short and oppressively crowded weekly

free hours). The newly reopened Whitney Museum charges $22 admission, which is over two times minimum wage in New York. Do we really believe that a "diverse" audience is desired when admission is a quarter day's pay for many New Yorkers (including presumably many artists and art handlers), and when the target audience is visitors to the Highline (which is free), many if not most of whom are presumably tourists? In explaining the Whitney's decision to raise its admission price from $20 to $22, Director Adam D. Weinberg (inadvertently) gave a brilliantly concise definition of how his institution defines the public, in a comment to the *New York Times*: "There was some debate internally, he said, about raising the price to $25, the cost of the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art. But he argued for $22, partly in recognition of the public spirit that fueled the city's $57 million contribution to the project."[3] In other words, the Whitney's obligation to the public vis-à-vis its cost of entry is to provide middle class visitors the extra cash to buy a Starbucks coffee.

On the other hand, the institutions included in Common Practice New York (and all the other small arts organizations in this city and cities around the world) are often considered *elitist*, and therefore not deserving of significant public funding—or even the *insignificant*

public funds that remains for the arts.

Here then are the official assumptions with regard to the question of scale and the public good: BIG (capitalization of finance or audience) = PUBLIC. SMALL (capitalization of finance or audience) = ELITIST.

But in fact this equation inverts the actual situation. It is the "public" (too big to fail) that disproportionately benefits elites, whereas it is the "elitist" (too small to survive) that serves communities in ways that other, larger organizations cannot. Might this ideological inversion be just as insidious and frightening as it sounds? Is it possible that artists in New York City are not only supposed to decorate the salons of hedge fund managers—and thus be implicated in financial elitism—while also taking the rap for intellectual elitism through their lively participation in specialized art discourse?

The term *critique* is tossed around as though it were a grenade with its needle pulled. But where does "critique" inhere? In my view, it is generally ineffectual in individual works of art, whose transgression can be easily neutralized in the halls of BIG. No, our political challenge is to maintain alternate forms of public space for exhibition and debate. To do so, we must exit the ethos of "Too big to fail." What follows is a seven-point litany "in praise of small."

David Joselit

ONE The Institution Is a Proposition

One of the great inventions of conceptual art was its redefinition of the artwork as a proposition. This meant, as Lawrence Weiner famously declared, that whether or not a work of art were physically produced, and in what form, does not matter at all. On the contrary, what does matter is the capacity of the proposition, as a kind of "germinal force," to generate many possible forms. It is no coincidence that the rise of "alternative spaces" corresponds historically to that of conceptual art, since such institutions are themselves *propositions*. A.I.R. gallery, for example, was founded in 1972 in response to a proposition that might be phrased something like this: "There are important women artists working in New York City and beyond, but there is no space for them to exhibit and develop a common conversation in the art world as it is currently organized, a space that A.I.R. plans on providing."

These propositions should be a strong and precise version of the conventional mission statement (which too often pertains to programmatic content but not the institution's form itself). The exigencies of survival can make it very difficult to maintain an institutional proposition. For that reason, proposition-based institutions (which are

typically but not always on the smaller side) must continually evaluate both the validity of their proposition and the degree to which it is realized effectively. Importantly, it should be recognized that sometimes the usefulness and energy of a proposition may wane. In such cases, a perfectly legitimate solution would be terminating the institution.

TWO Produce Networks, Not Audiences

The term *community* is habitually misused. Too often it designates little more than a market niche based on shared identity markers, such as the "gay community," the "black community," or the "Jewish community." When institutions say they serve "communities," what they wish to prove is that their audience possesses a demographic diversity that warrants public approbation. There's nothing wrong with this, of course—even much that is right. But such communities act like an audience (composed of isolated witness-consumers) as opposed to a public, which is united around a shared set of concerns.[4]

If an institution succeeds as a proposition, the public (as opposed to community) it constitutes will include those that hold the value of that proposition *in common*. This commonness of purpose is premised on a dynamic set of

relationships rather than a supposedly stable shared identity. For this reason, propositions may generate networks—defined as a constellation of relationships—which need not be geographically restricted to the physical location of the institution.

I would argue that such networks are the most important product of many small institutions. As a market, the art world is thriving, but the entire world of artists who may or may not make commercially viable art is under threat in New York City and elsewhere, precisely through forms of gentrification that make it difficult for them to live and find workspace affordably. Now it is collectors, not artists, who tend to live in lofts, and those arts institutions that cannot afford big new buildings like the Whitney's Renzo Piano-designed headquarters at the end of the Highline (funded, of course, by collector-trustees who expect their tastes to be exhibited) must struggle to find spaces close to public transportation *anywhere* in the five boroughs. What is needed is not merely the ostensible product of art spaces and museums—more exhibitions and performances to bring in the crowds—but rather more *publics*, more networks. This is what small arts organizations focused around a proposition can produce—in part because instead of trying to attract a mosaic of communities, they wish to constitute a dedicated public. Without such

organizations New York's art world will cease to be dynamic and alive—it will become just another distracting circus, another sanitized spectacular Broadway drawing in tourists at exorbitant prices.

THREE Size Matters

I have already claimed that capitalist values insist that "bigger is better," making it very difficult to justify an institution's choice to stay small. One of the greatest dangers of "Bigger is better" is that an institution may be overcome by the exigencies of survival: of keeping the lights on and the program going in a "bigger and better" space. Suddenly the need might be felt to attract a broader audience, and in so doing the values of programming must be "adjusted" in order to appeal to such an audience. Before you know it, the proposition that generated the institution is secondary to the pressure to fill space and to meet expanded budgets.

For this reason, the question of infrastructure should be pursued creatively. What kinds of facilities are necessary, and afford maximum freedom? How can they be shared with other institutions? How can they be seized upon opportunistically, either in public or through other means? Is it necessary to have a permanent site, or to own one? What is

the optimal ratio between virtual and physical space? Thinking about infrastructure creatively also allows for thinking about "cross-programming": for instance, can or should an exhibition space also have a bar where people can meet informally and socialize? Must white boxes be separated from "black boxes," resulting in media as isolated from one another as different demographic groups have become in the city? The point is: infrastructure has a more determining role on an institution than is often assumed. Infrastructure is not passive: it is a *physical* proposition. Its design and assessment should be taken as part of the creative work of the institution.

FOUR Resignify Art

Regardless of all else it is, art is a tool of gentrification. In New York City it is painfully clear that the widening gap between rich and poor is beautified by the art world's glamour and its paradoxical whiff of populism—a sense of public-ness, which, as I've argued, is very difficult to sustain in actuality. What should the responsibility of art institutions be at a time when the verb *to curate* has migrated from the context of museums to describe, for instance, the choice of amenities in a luxury real estate development, or the selection of artisanal cheeses? In this context *to curate*

belongs to a long line of ideological practices for producing distinction. Do those of us involved in "curating" (artists, critics, art historians, institutional curators, engaged patrons) need to assume responsibility for this massive appropriation of "art" as a tool for prettifying the dominance of the 1%?

Yes, I think so, but the problem is complex. What goes for politics in art is often little more than a good faith effort at preaching to the converted—and indeed in recent years it has typically soft-pedaled any direct critique of the patron class. Conversely, the small proportion of artists who do manage to earn a living from their work, whether politicized or otherwise, risk being considered sell-outs. There are no simple answers in response to these conditions, and this is why we need proposition-based institutions where debates around them can develop with nuance and over time. Here, different models may be tested and evaluated. Indeed, like conceptual artists, such conceptual institutions redefine what art practice can be: they participate in the resignification of art by confronting its discursive corruption through gentrification and huge wealth disequilibrium. The bigger an institution in the United States becomes, the more it is imbricated in the values and objectives of its patrons—just as in politics, where out-of-control super PACs have outsize

influence in American elections. Needless to say, smaller arts organizations cannot *solve* these problems, but they can keep them on the agenda. It is an endless process, an endless discussion. But a sure way to kill this debate is allowing the disappearance of public spaces in which it may flourish.

FIVE Speculate

In its colloquial sense, *speculation* is a future-oriented method of extracting profit from volatile markets. It is also a term with rich philosophical overtones, whose Latin roots encompass the meanings, "to spy out, watch, examine, observe." In other words, speculation is an optical model as well as an economic and philosophical one. What distinguishes speculation is its futurity; in art's context, it is a type of vision that aims to foresee, even to regulate how an artwork will behave once it enters the world.

A proposition is also a speculation on its own future. As its prefix suggests, the *pro*-position takes a position forward into the future, opening onto various formats, actual and virtual. It is worth remembering that art's time signature is distinctive, and largely unsuited to direct engagement in political and economic events in real time. The artwork's temporality enfolds a long succession of pasts

into its speculations in the present, which, in turn, are directed toward possible futures. The artwork is a temporal knot. Its deregulation of commodified time (measured in hours in the factory; in micro- or even milli-seconds in high-frequency trading) is precisely its philosophical and affective value.

Speculation refuses the false dichotomy established by some historians and critics between a withdrawal and surrender to capitalism—or, in other words, between *resistance* and *selling out*. This is because, while speculation is based on engagement, it refuses to engage with the conditions of the present as they are, but rather projects an array of possible futures. In other words, the speculative object (or institution) extracts itself from political exigencies by extending them backwards and forwards in time, and outward in space. Speculation makes an object out of time.

SIX Document

Conceptual art demonstrates the plasticity of information. The term *plastic* encompasses three registers: a now obsolete designation of sculpture, for instance, as a "plastic" art; the malleability and mold-ability of plastic as a material, including its capacity to be recycled; and the biological meaning of *plasticity* as

a capacity for adaptation. Conceptual art demonstrates how new types of value may be produced by configuring and reconfiguring information. Art is one realm in which information is theorized, but unlike in advertising, or even in science, art's attention to informational plasticity is seldom primarily geared to practical ends.

The legacy of proposition-based institutions is in their history—in the succession of different realizations of their proposition. Because such results are ephemeral, and rarely reside in any stable way in single objects that may be collected and maintained, documentation is essential. One might say that documentation is *the collection* of such organizations. Think of the Judson Church for instance. The events that took place there during the 1960s and 1970s have come to occupy a central position in twentieth-century art history, and yet they are known only very partially, largely through a limited number of documentary photographs.

Documentation should not be an afterthought, but rather an essential component of the proposition itself. If there is any truth to the assertion that art, since Conceptualism, has largely dedicated itself to the plasticity of information, then there is little reason to treat "documentation" any differently from other forms of creative expression. Indeed, docu-

mentation is one of very few products that may outlive a non-collecting institution's program of events and exhibitions. It should be devised creatively, and remain at the center of its propositionally based mission. Documentation is and can be more than installation photos or a video recording. The question *What is a document* is one that many artists have explored, in order to test the limits and contours of "truth effects." It is through documentation that institutions can speculate on history.

SEVEN Politicize Information

The struggle over information as *property*, and the corresponding struggle over information as a *commons* where individuals and groups have overlapping rights of access, as opposed to exclusive rights of ownership, are among the central political questions of our time.[5] The list of examples of such conflict is long, and ranges from questions of international policy such as Edward Snowden's disclosures regarding the NSA, to the very intimate and personal threat of identity theft. What rights do we have to prevent the "harvesting" and subsequent monetization of "our" information every time we use a credit card or turn on our cell phones—or enter a hospital for treatment? Information radiates out from our bodies, as it invades their interiors: our "selves" are the

provisional and artificial construction of a contingent ratio between the alienable and the inalienable—or in other words between the information drawn from us that may be bought and sold (i.e., alienable), versus that which cannot circulate separately from us without destroying our personhood (the inalienable). Art, in its capacity to explore and express the plasticity of information, and in its ability to speculate on new forms of information, can probe this shifting terrain. While large institutions *canonize*—i.e., turn information into history—small arts organizations may pluralize its shapes (as in all species of conceptual art), as well as the stories it can tell. To make information malleable and mobile again in unexpected ways, and to resist its enclosure by elites and its reification into dominant narratives is to make art political.

Endnotes

1 My research assistant Joseph Henry made this rough calculation based on comparing the number of works stated as on view on MoMA's website with their stated number of objects in the collection (excluding films and film stills). At the time of his calculation the

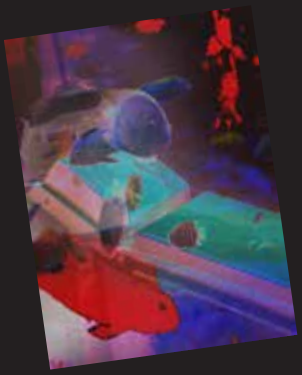
percentage on view was less than 0.68%–1%. Of course, I acknowledge that the number can't be absolutely verified without more careful research (though Henry sought confirmation), but it gives an accurate sense of the magnitudes involved. Interestingly it is not only the 1% who funds museums; MoMA also shows 1% of their art.

2 Incidentally, it is impossible to bring a group of students to MoMA (who have paid admission) and speak to them in the galleries without getting a special permit.

3 Robin Pogrebin, "Whitney Museum Contemplates a Bigger Future, With Bigger Expenses," *New York Times*, April 1, 2015; accessed online http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/02/arts/design/whitney-museum-contemplates-a-bigger-future-with-a-higher-admission-fee.html, 6/28/15

4 See Martha Rosler, "The Birth and Death of the Viewer: On the Public Function of Art," in Hal Foster, ed., *Discussions in Contemporary Culture #1* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987)

5 For a definition of the commons in light of rights to use see Lewis Hyde, *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010)



You are in the old part of town, near the Chinatown. There is a palpable surge in atmospheric aura. A large Baroque church nearby is still swarmed every Sunday, drawing street vendors selling squid balls or fresh coconut water from rusty carts. There are still some staggered buildings that miraculously predate the near-total devastation of the Second World War, but most of the buildings are more recent, some from the ’70s or early ’80s, some

bank buildings from the ’90s or early 2000s. These have all aged alarmingly quickly under the tropical conditions. Everything is crusted over, *like Los Angeles in Blade Runner*, you will crack that cheap joke to a visitor later. Large Chinese-run malls packed with wholesale exports are in the close vicinity. The small alternative art space you are heading towards is in one of these malls.

Where is the nearest subway stop? Probably about a five-minute walk away, the subway system is so efficient here, until it shuts down at 10 pm. Stations are well equipped with clear signage and maps. Estimated arrival times blink on screens. Markings on the platforms indicate where to line up before alighting, and people fall in line.

Public etiquette is deeply internalized, a clear product of the long-running soft-fascistic government, which often exasperates the local art scene. You can recall the funny scenario eight years ago during the last regional economic forum, which was planned to coincide with the city’s contemporary art biennial. Several groups filed for permission to publicly protest, and were subsequently each assigned a booth in some room on the seventh floor of an office building, where they were allowed to hand out pamphlets.

At least there is generous funding for the arts and developed infrastructure. But you

came by taxi. Driving is a totally different story. Everyone here is familiar with the distinct time zone skew that happens on the city's major arteries linking north to south, or southeast to southwest, etc., where seven lanes can be squeezed into six, cars and buses and motorcycles grabbing at impossibly tight fragments of space. The taxi windows are rolled up, keeping the conditioned air in and the filthy air out. There is a traffic jam. Stalled, your eyes track across so many listless, skinny, sun-broiled bodies, perched knees to shoulders in crooked lines along the inter-highway zones, where daily crossings could risk death were they to actually move, but they don't. Huge stained concrete columns hold the highways in place. Some of them are cracked. This large unmoving swarm is an unremarkable texture of the urban interface, which you have come to internalize in the abstract (Poverty). You cut through it daily in some form of fish tank on wheels.

Infrastructure is clearly rotten. Any planned events in this city need to be timed around predictable traffic surges, especially the rush hours that drag through half the day. Time doesn't feel synchronized with itself here, but seems to split and warp according to the fickle movements of this oceanic urban mass. When it rains, which is often, the streets flood and smaller roads around the city are

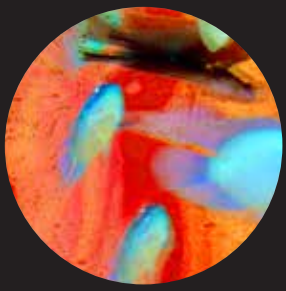
rendered unusable causing surprise traffic clots to spring up all over, meaning most people won't bother leaving the house (excessive rain

can be a critical citywide emergency). An event by some international artist or curator, scheduled many months in advance, might be attended by one or two people due to unfortunate weather conditions. This is embarrassing.

Most people, however—unless there is some imperative family celebration (*grandmother's birthday*, *niece's baptism*), a common occurrence considering the size of most families here—will venture out in even the worst torrential downpour to support their friends, though they will likely show up more than two hours late and miss the event itself, which is still acceptable.

You walk up to the building entrance, where a small smoking crowd dribbles out onto the street. Nobody is speaking English, which comes as a shock to most visitors, to imagine that this *relevant* node in the

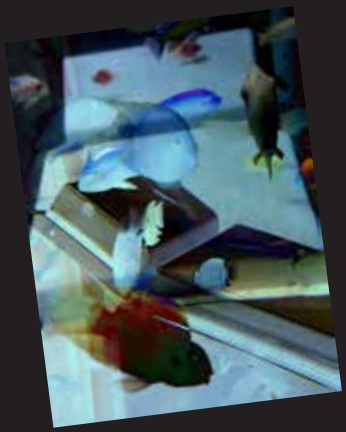
globalized contemporary art network lacks an English base. Of course there are those like you, who speak English at least semi-fluently, who mediate between natives and internationals, and who therefore possess a certain currency in events like this one.



You try to sneak past an artist unnoticed, but too late, he grabs you by the neck with a kind of smothering affection. He is on some drugs or meds or possibly just drunk, eyes bulging out of his sweet grizzly bear face, and jabbering a camp monologue at a quick tempo, complaining about a lazy rent boy who is taking advantage of him, strategizing a play-coup on his gallery, organizing a union of creative class transgenders, talking about how painfully bored he is at this moment with this city with its totally conservative and depressing people, starts to bitchily criticize various exhibitions and endeavors and personalities as embodying Christian Values, which you find entertaining until something flips in him and a kind of sub-monologue emerges from beneath the main one, sentences which bubble up sporadically and unawares which begin to prod at you, the listener.

Say something funny. Tell me something new. Tell me some new gossip. Why aren't you saying anything? You are shocked by the revelation that this performance was actually supposed to be an exchange. You mumble something about shopping for new sneakers. Abruptly the conversation stops and he strides towards a group of swan-like pubescent boys, more eager sycophants.

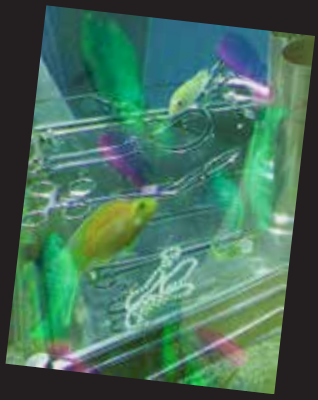
Two pariahs of the scene sit near a clump of roadside weeds. They are a couple in their thirties who have alienated almost the entire local art community through a form of acidic cyber-bullying, mostly via Facebook, and who now seem so tightly bound as a unit that they hardly ever socialize beyond each other. They have a two-year-old son who they bring to all events as though he were a kind of sub-linguistic token of their vitriol. The child keeps attempting to run into the street, and does not stop shrieking the chorus to a recent chart topper, which makes the couple laugh tiredly. Eventually he is



pulled into the arms of his mother, who begins to breastfeed him in plain view of the crowd to keep him quiet. The couple is sitting with someone, obviously a foreigner, and waves you over to introduce him. Still breastfeeding, the woman passionately speaks about their recent online campaign against the government's aggressive privatization of the public train infrastructure (which will result in a near-doubling of fares, *totally debilitating for most of the city's inhabitants*), and her attempts to galvanize people to stick their middle fingers up at the train platform CCTV cameras, whose feeds are streamed live through a government website. She then pulls the "fuck you" stills from the streams and posts them on Facebook, alongside their bitter art criticism. You can sense the foreigner looking at you intently. He wants to use you as a guide for how to respond. Their campaign will never go viral.

You quickly pass a shy and smiling security guard with a rifle, then a pay-what-you-want desk where a sleepy but smiling intern sits with a small metal cash box, and now you are inside the space. Near the entrance there is a small plastic table with some free food, small square-shaped cheese sandwiches, sticks of pork meat, some spaghetti in a gloopy fire-red sauce. There is a large cooler full of beers, distributed by one smiling man dressed kind of like a waiter. Smiling here is a nervous response.

There is art on display and there is a lot of talk, but somehow these two things seem disconnected, the chatter revolves around gossip and many small dramas are ignited ... someone who now lives abroad is coming back to have his first institutional solo show in this city, badly timed because a huge pork barrel scandal in the government just blew up in the media, involving his father, a popular senator,



... and did you see what he posted on facebook about it? he tried to defend the values and moral principles that his father instilled in him, digressing into a story about how he worked all summer flipping hamburgers to support himself in college. cringe. so what if he's spoiled, he should just admit it! but he's a nice guy, lives a modest life, and of course he feels compelled to defend his family's honor ...

... and what about gianni and vincent, who used to be the best of friends but ever

since vincent started dating a member of that group of superficial fashionistas, they stopped hanging out as much. you know gianni was actually in love with vincent? that's probably why he's been acting like such a drunken bitchy faggot recently. it's sad because they were such a great duo, both are so witty and incisive in their judgments, and they wanted to start a project space together which was bound to be interesting because of their good taste, but it had to come down to this instead…

… and did you attend the memorial service for them last week? it's been two years since they were shot to death in their apartment and still no arrest. everyone was crying, crying, seas of tears…

They are referring to two prolific art critics, huge supporters of the local community who

made a committed push to try to consolidate a discourse around an emerging generation of artists, and their unexplained deaths have left a festering wound in the community. Retribution murders are relatively common here if your family is involved in politics or large business.

The two-year-old child is now inside, he has found an empty beer bottle and is throwing it across the room and then chasing it down and then hurling it again. The sharp clanging of glass on cement ripples through the tight space, as the child, totally hysterical with laughter, crisscrosses through the legs of the standing crowd, which now seems to have doubled in size. More people have moved inside to avoid the heavy rain that has started to pour down almost instantaneously, leaving a black-brown slime around the entranceway, indexing an impressive array of footwear. It becomes difficult to hear over the pummeling rain, so people begin to speak louder. A museum director is correcting the commonly held belief that public funding for the arts here is nonexistent, clarifying that it is merely difficult to access, that a huge chunk of the government budget allocated for cultural activities remains unused because most people have absolutely no idea how to handle the convoluted bureaucratic process required for gaining eligibility. He suggests hiring someone

specifically for this purpose, someone specially trained in this kind of bureaucracy.

> *But where do you get the money to hire this extra person?*

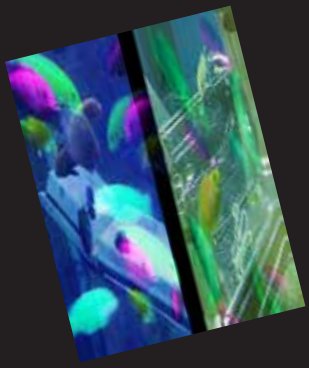
The mention of money reverberates, bouncing wildly around the room in all directions—

> Some nonprofit institution director has sold off an artwork gifted to him several years ago by an artist, using the net gain to purchase a new apartment with his wife uptown. Someone *killed it* in Miami. Someone can't pay their rent again and had to take a loan from their uncle. Some young artist is explaining to her best friend for the first time why she has been struggling these past months to find the time to work on her own stuff. It's because of this full-time shitty admin job that she has had to take up now that she has to send monthly funds back home to her parents who have just lost their pension (*what is the point of living in this low-rent city if you can't free up your time anyway?*). In some other corner there is a fiercely straight-up profession of love for the game

—and amidst this scattered pentecostal frenzy of money-talk, there is the fleeting but vis-

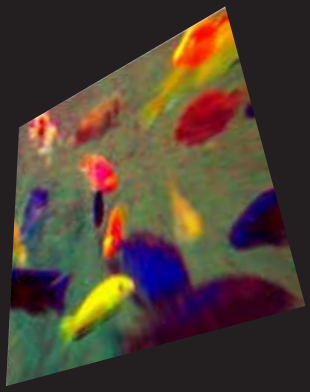
ceral sense of a unitary spirit. You feel in this moment deeply and intimately connected.

For the first time you notice the minimal techno music that is blaring from two tinny speakers, placed on either side of a small stage at one end of the room, which faces a few rows of chairs. A performance is in progress. Two actors onstage wearing everyday clothes (but with perfectly round holes cut out, exposing their bellies, nipples, and knees) stand and chit-chat against a whimsically hand-drawn backdrop of a cartoon dance club. The dialogue refers to people in the audience and makes various art scene jokes in a lowbrow comedic style, with consciously stiff acting. It's quirky and fun, and affirms the importance of these people to each other by feeding themselves to themselves. It's a lighthearted celebration of the social foibles of a rising collective of technologically dexterous youths. The lights cut out, and there is an enthusiastic round of applause. You wish you could partake in this giddily bonded community. You realize that solidarity is hard to construct within such a fractured and violent



environment, and yet you wonder whether it must resort to this base common denominator of corny humor and narcissism.

A friend sitting next to you turns toward you with a shy smile of approval on her face. *I thought that was good*, she murmurs, with a choked giggle. You are surprised. This is someone who is a lot older, who consistently lays claim to having participated in a quasi-fictional wasted era of thirty or so years ago, where the creative foment of a community of cool kids within a nihilistic late capitalist urban landscape had no end goal. And she therefore views all emerging art productions as a kind of gorged and amnesiac art market recuperation of that style, that attitude. Somewhat startled by her positive reaction, you begin recounting parts of the play, in an attempt to locate what struck her, and get carried away.



Umm so you liked the part where they compared the German artist's dick to a potato? The part about the gallerist getting diarrhea from a juice cleanse? The straight dude artist bending

over for the gay mafia? Or the general attention deficit myopia: look at me, I'm lowering the bar on meaning, and it's so funny we can engage these sordid trite banalities of our professional world, suck up to the system instead of try to change it, laugh at ourselves and still look cute…

You notice a frown expanding ever outward on her face, so you trail off. *You don't get it do you? Don't you see the trap that you fall into with your sarcasm? Don't you see how they already embody that self-awareness, and that you're only just reiterating what they already acknowledge? You can't ironize what's already being ironized, you have to change your rhetoric, your attitude, to actually say something about it.* Her scorn hurts. You are embarrassed because she is kind of right, so you smile in discomfort and squirm away.

The rain has stopped now, leaving the air dense and sticky with residual moisture, and back outside you find yourself amongst a large group of people discussing what to do next. You have no idea what time it is, and don't bother asking. There is talk of getting some late night noodles, or going to some dive bar to get more to drink, or to the male strip club up north, or to karaoke, or to someone's apartment, which is all interspersed with a parallel equally drawn-out and convoluted discussion

about who has a car, who has a driver, how many people can fit, what time people need to be home, what they need to do in the morning, where people live, who can share a cab with whom at the end of the night. The discussion slowly dissolves before any clear decision has materialized, and people splinter off in different directions, amidst a flurry of cheek-kisses.

You find yourself crammed into a car driven by someone you don't really know and not exactly knowing where you are going but feeling too exhausted to try to assert your agency in this scenario, just vaguely calculating in the back of your mind how many kilometers away from your apartment you'll end up. The idea of more beer helps. Weekend evening traffic begins to clog the streets, everyone in the car is outdoing each other complaining, and suddenly you are really wishing you were not here, crammed between colleagues and shivering between the cold air and pleather, not here but online, perhaps alone in bed with your laptop propped on your stomach, not having to deal with the incessant chattering rituals

of this world. The car is abruptly stopped by a police vehicle, and the sting of flashlights in your eyes actually feels refreshing in this moment. The driver is slightly intoxicated and has been wobbling between lanes. But she is expertly bartering down the price of the bribe to prevent her license from being confiscated. Everyone in the car has to split the bribe like the check after a good meal amongst friends. The police depart and the car lurches forward. The night continues to unravel in this city like a threadbare pillow, leaking yellowed feathers.

David Joselit's essay "In Praise of Small" was originally commissioned by Common Practice New York as part of a series of invitational roundtables on contemporary institutional practice organized in collaboration with students and faculty from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in fall 2013.

A version of the essay was later presented by Joselit at Out of Alternatives, May 18, 2014, a symposium on the role of small-scale arts organizations in New York City, hosted by Artists Space Books & Talks and co-presented by CCS Bard. Participants included Rhea Anastas, Katherine Brewer Ball, David Joselit, Ralph Lemon, Stephen Levin, Park MacArthur, Nadja Millner-Larsen, and Andrea Fraser and Lise Soskolne for Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), with additional presentations and support from CCS Bard students Sabrina Blaichman, Neringa Černiauskaitė, Andrew Kachel, Clara Lopez, Cloé Perrone, and Carla Acevedo-Yates.

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Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho's "Thought Experiment" responds to an invitation from Common Practice New York to formulate a contribution to be published alongside "In Praise of Small." Lien & Camacho's collaborative practice as artists and writers has existed through a series of geographic displacements: between their respective home cities of New York and Manila; and

recent periods living and working in Berlin, Milan, and Singapore. Accordingly, their work reflects different models of organizing around art—particularly "contemporary art"—both within and outside its supposed centers.

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