

The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbor

Marjetica Potrč

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Community Garden, Photo: Elke Krasny, 2009



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In a time of collaboration, the artist is a mediator and the role of art is to mediate.

Today, when I give talks about my on-site projects, I describe myself as an artist-mediator and art as “a medium of expression where the individual and culture come together”. In other words, in my on-site projects, the role of art is to mediate. Speaking generally, art mediates our relationship with the world. In more specific terms, as for example in the on-site project *The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbor* (2009), it can mediate the relationship between the residents of a neighborhood and the city they live in. In that project, a community garden became a relational object used by residents as a tool for changing their culture of living. By reaching out to the community in a shared endeavor, the artist and art become engaged in social processes that aspire to transform society from below. Along the way, the artist loses the aura of individual authorship and art loses its objectiveness.

The notion of art as mediation is disturbing to some in the contemporary art realm. They are uncomfortable with two things in particular. The first concerns the role of artists in today’s society: Should artists be social workers? Or, even worse, activists? The second is about the nature of art: Can something as utilitarian as a community garden or a dry toilet really be “art”? Is it not better to think of them as social projects, infrastructure, or just gardening? But this is exactly the point. Contemporary society, in search of new knowledge – perhaps for the simple reason that today’s complex challenges demand complex, outside-the-box solutions – needs the kind of collaborative approach that is nurtured in the sharing of knowledge across disciplines. Creative people have the ability to do this, whether they are artists, architects, social workers, or horticulturalists. And what is more, outside the art world, no one really cares very much about the definition of contemporary art.

The controversy is more about the degree to which art and artists should get directly involved in society. While the art audience has become accustomed to institutional critiques, community-based projects feel too up-close and messy. They lack the safe distance of the institutional critique. What is interesting, however, is that both strategies have the same goal – to bring about social change. My personal strategy has been to work on community-based collaborative projects that can have an impact on government policy. I like to work with governments, not against them. From Dry Toilet in 2003 to today, this has been an intuitive and simple decision. For me, it makes sense to do something “real”, to work with others to create something that affects how people live their day-to-day lives.

In a time of collaboration, sharing is essential.

If there is an obsession at the heart of my on-site projects, it is the notion of sharing. Let’s all exchange our ideas, knowledge, and experiences; let’s learn from each other so we can make something together; let’s share. This “something” to which everyone contributes is the fruit of

Sharing Food in the Community Kitchen
The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbor, 2009



our common endeavor. By sharing the process of its becoming – an organic process – we who contribute to it become, through the project, an organism. This “something” I call a “relational object”. For those of us who are directly involved, it is a physical, bodily experience: we carry heavy bricks up the hill of a barrio or get our hands dirty planting vegetables in a community garden. We know that if you want to bring change to society, it is not enough to simply talk. The relational object is what matters.

Why is it so important to do field research, to learn from the people who live in the location? When I begin working on a new on-site project, I try to learn as much as possible. I try to be a container of knowledge, about the place, the landscape, and the people who live there. I dwell in their culture. It takes time before I can become a mediator for envisioning and realizing a project that will be a catalyst of change for the local community. But this is nothing unusual. It’s a natural process; it is people learning from each other. Today, the sharing of knowledge is necessary for many reasons, but perhaps the most important is that we are haunted by the lost promises of modernism and feel that the world needs to be reconstructed.

In a time of collaboration, community-building thrives.

Since I began working on my on-site projects, I have discovered similar efforts all around the world, most of them outside the art discourse, such as Barefoot College in the Indian state of Rajasthan or the Universidade da Floresta in the Brazilian state of Acre. A crucial aspect of all these initiatives is the use of “redirective practice”, a collective action that demonstrates the process of cultural remaking. The sheer number of these bottom-up initiatives makes me ask whether, taken together, they are building to a critical mass. Instead of viewing them as the ebb of a wave, temporary and fragile, in humanity’s consideration of collectivity, I would suggest that today the idea of collective action is taking root – building to a critical mass and proving its relevance. Could this become a global movement?

If that is true – and this is the beauty of the idea – then it is possible to transform society from below, in an organic way. Think of the world as an organism. When something does not work



The future Community Kitchen before its Transformation
The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbor, 2009

anymore, people develop new practices. New practices matter. It is easier to build a new object (such as a dry toilet in a Caracas barrio) than to change human behavior (the way we use a toilet). It must be a strong impulse that triggers the desire to change one's behavior – to do the more difficult thing. If people change their behavior, change their way of living, doesn't this tell us that these communities are intuitively working through a crisis and that this is what enables them to change in the first place?

Community-based projects are laboratories for the world.

Crisis as a positive experience? I certainly believe this. In my work, I have received many invitations to do projects in places in distress – from the informal city in Caracas and the threatened forest communities of Acre to post-Katrina New Orleans and a modernist Amsterdam neighborhood facing redevelopment. The interesting thing is that, for one reason or another, the communities in these various places have been forced to live outside the illusion of stable modernity. For example, they have had to live outside the municipal water-supply grid in a Caracas barrio, or cope with rising waters in New Orleans, or survive in Amazonia without over-exploiting the forest. For me, these are places of hope. I believe that these communities are pioneers in the way they envision new practices in a place of crisis. They have literally forged new knowledge, and others learn from them. Sharing knowledge, after all, is a basic and important aspect of the human condition: we tell each other what we have learned.

To persuade the world to see hope in crisis communities is a hard sell. It is easy to label the practices of these communities as "survival strategies" – a negative interpretation applied by people whose lives are stable, people for whom the problems, and solutions, of these various communities are not an immediate concern. The ideas I find inspiring – such as community building, small-scale projects, and bottom-up initiatives – are easily tainted by negative associations. What is more, speaking about communities based on participatory democracy or even consensus can raise fears about social segregation, no doubt because of our attitudes about wealthy "gated communities", a phenomenon that, unlike these other communities, is rooted in the neoliberal model. Ultimately, however, both models of shared living involve a certain

degree of isolation from the rest of society. From my work with communities in crisis, I have learned that, for communities based on participatory democracy, relative isolation can be beneficial. Once they reassert their difference, they have to protect their territory and their knowledge. They become a nucleus that can resist shocks from the outside world (which is not true of gated communities), but they also reach out to others – as is only natural. Only now, the connections they make with the outside world are on different terms, on a more equal basis than before. They are reconstructing the world. Moreover, their local solutions become a social laboratory for different ways of living together. This is exactly what we need. Today, we must think differently, not the same. "Survival strategies" do matter after all.

Another consideration: Can we simply dismiss these communities as "utopias"? Recently, in a discussion with a friend, I was reminded that, during the twentieth century, ideologies created an interest in the future and therefore in utopian societies. Now that these ideologies have fallen, it becomes natural to focus on the present day. Community-building is not a utopian project; it is a much-needed laboratory of human coexistence.

The idea of the collective: Where does it come from and where is it going?

My practice is hopelessly relational. Among other things, it merges art and architecture, anthropology and the social sciences. For me, this comes naturally. I understand human knowledge as an ongoing construction in which different disciplines feed the process. There is no *final* knowledge. No doubt, my upbringing has played a role in shaping the way in which I work. I was raised in a family of writers, and I know that storytelling – the construction of meaning through language – is an important part of what I do. The merging of disciplines by learning from people with different backgrounds is another way of constructing meaning through language, only now we do it together. Collaborations make sense to me not only because you achieve more by sharing knowledge as a team, but also because the society I was raised in helped shape this attitude. Having grown up in a socialist country – and Slovenia, in Yugoslavia, was the "Westernmost" part of the Communist world, not only geographically but also politically – I understand subjectivity as something that includes social awareness: the individual always stands in relationship to others, never alone. My sense of the importance of sharing almost certainly derives from this. Where I come from, art was always an idea, a concept; it was not about objects.

Although community-building used to be viewed as something negative, in which a collectivist ideology tried to impose a top-down organization on society, today the notion is gaining momentum as something positive. It is even acknowledged by politicians who want governments to devolve power. I find it amusing that the current right-of-center British government talks about "a ground-breaking shift in power to councils and communities", a phrase one might sooner expect to hear from Hugo Chavez, the populist leftist president of Venezuela. But beyond making strange bedfellows, this enthusiasm for the local pushes us to redefine what "social innovation" and "sustainability" mean today. Both terms have been clouded by neoliberal discourse and hijacked by neoliberal practices in order to accommodate the middle class.

The focus on the local, the small, and the independent comes into play most strongly when that which is missing – the lost promises of modernism, the hopeful equalizer – becomes important, such as with the decline of the social state and the decentralization of the state in the European Union. It is at this point that we seek to understand the potential of small-scale territories (the local) and social architecture (people). What does sustainable living mean after the disintegration of twentieth-century modernism? What do self-sustainability and living “off the grid” mean? How much can the individual contribute to the world? The construction of the world from below, from the bottom up, must be viewed as a viable, important paradigm, one that makes an essential contribution to our knowledge. After all, this is what we already live with. The world needs community-based projects, so it can learn from them and be inspired by their creativity.

The on-site project *The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbor* consists of a community garden and a community kitchen in the Nieuw West district of Amsterdam. This was a collaborative project initiated by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, which lacked a permanent exhibition space in 2009 and so pursued activities in other locations throughout the city. Soon after the Stedelijk Museum invited me to do a project in Nieuw West, I discovered that Wilde Westen – a collective made up of a cultural producer, a sociologist, two architects, two designers, and an artist – had already carried out research there the year before, so we joined forces as the core group behind the project. Over the year in which *The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbor* developed, however, neighborhood residents themselves became the most important people involved, and after Harvesting Day, on September 27, 2009, they took over its management. They formed a committee of eight residents, which is responsible for the two spaces. During the six months when the project was taking shape, Wilde Westen and I had the role of mediators between neighborhood residents, the municipality, and the Far West Housing Corporation. Today, we serve on an advisory board that also includes representatives from the Stedelijk, Far West, and Koers Nieuw West, as well as Geuzenveld-Slotermeer district authorities; we meet as needed with the residents’ committee to discuss the life of the project. The interest this project has generated is not surprising. With its focus on local food production and neighborhood development, it redefines the state of urban-rural coexistence and contributes to the city’s network of green and



The Cooks and the Farmers
Source: *The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbor*,
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The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbor
A vacant Islamic butcher shop became
a meeting place and the community kitchen.
Photo: Elke Krasny, 2009



garden areas, which serve a similar purpose. I am very proud that the community garden and community kitchen have generated new connections between neighbors and between the neighborhood and the municipality. Right from the start, the project attracted the involvement of many individuals, local initiatives, and institutions. It offers a good example of redirective practice – that is, a collective form of action that demonstrates a process of cultural remaking. It illustrates the fact that *community* develops from working together in ways that transcend the limits of any one discipline.

The community garden and community kitchen are located on Lodewijk van Deysse Street in the Geuzenveld district, which is part of the post-war modernist development of West Amsterdam. Today, however, it faces widespread unemployment and difficulties in integrating new arrivals. At the same time, Nieuw West is one of the largest residential redevelopment areas in the European Union. What happens here has the potential to help mold the redevelopment of modernist neighborhoods elsewhere.

As a local case study in Nieuw West, our project articulates practices designed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The existing policy for redesigning the modernist district foresees an increase in the density of the built areas at the expense of open public space; it would also mean the relocation of low-income families. Our project, in contrast, views the current low-income population, which consists mostly of immigrant families, as an “added value” in a sustainable neighborhood. It rejects the 20th-century modernist ideal of the metropolis and opts instead for a city composed of strong, smaller-sized neighborhoods; in other words, it shrinks the city, so to speak, into smaller parts. Here, green area is preserved and its potential is exploited as agricultural land, which in fact parallels the use of the area that was farmland as recently as fifty years ago. Public space is transformed from an open, undefined space into a community space. The project shows us that not only is it desirable for residents to participate in designing “their” city, it is also possible. The project introduces a bottom-up process in an over-regulated Dutch society where residents have become passive and frustrated, while housing corporations, which have been given carte blanche in the redevelopment of the district, simply reproduce unimaginative formal designs.



Community Kitchen
The Cook, the Farmer, his Wife and their Neighbor, 2009

A previously unused house at Lodewijk van Deysse Street 61 is now a community kitchen and a meeting place for the community that has formed around the project. It provides a center around which the community can engage in the process of “building a place” – a much-needed ritual in a climate where families experience continual resettlement. Beyond the core group of residents, the community kitchen attracts other residents, too, who take part in various activities there. With its open-door policy, now in effect for a full year, the community kitchen has also brought security to the street, another added value for the neighborhood.

The community vegetable garden is located behind the kitchen on land that used to be fenced off. Today, twenty-two families from seven ethnic groups take care of the garden. Opening up the fenced-off lot can be seen as a form of reappropriation of the land by the residents and a symbolic act that articulates their need to be involved in redesigning their neighborhood.

As I noted, Nieuw West Amsterdam was agricultural land only half a century ago. In 1934, the architect Cornelis van Eesteren drafted a master plan for the area. Construction began soon after World War II and a garden city, a Dutch version of modernism, was laid across the fields. As with many modernist developments, there was money for the construction of buildings but not for developing the public space, which van Eesteren understood as playing an important role in social integration. So the public space remained largely open and undefined. This turned out to be a happy accident, since, in the 1970s, open space represented the open democratic society. During the 1980s, however, this space turned into a no-man’s land, and in the 1990s, many of the lots were fenced off and became “look-only gardens” (*kijkgroen*). Residents paid for their maintenance but could not enter or use them. In 2004, facing bankruptcy, the city handed the space over to housing corporations, an act that sealed the fate of public space in the district. Today, the link between residents and the government is broken, while the housing corporations see no reason to maintain the open public space, which holds next to no value for them; in their view, it is simply a source of continual maintenance costs and is also potentially dangerous. By engaging the residents of the neighborhood, the project *The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbor* employs an entirely new perspective. The public space is designated as community space, maintenance costs are reduced, and the area becomes more liveable and more stable. Both residents and the city win. The space is not only reclaimed, but is also redefined. Beyond issues of space and place, though, the project visualizes the potential of social architecture. Simply

put, the community garden and community kitchen serve as catalysts of change for the community that takes shape around them, and Lodewijk van Deysse Street as a whole is transformed.

I recently heard from Lucia Babina and Henriette Waal, members of Wilde Westen, that the project has secured funding for at least another year. Residents have built a greenhouse in the community garden in anticipation of the new growing season, and several communities from the neighborhood and beyond are planning to follow the example set by the project.

One of the most striking things I learned from *The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbor* was the importance of ritual for the community that cultivated the garden. For them, community was an organism: they worked on the land together. Working together was an act of empowerment through which they were intuitively reclaiming their community, their neighborhood, and their city. They worked on the land not only to grow food for themselves but also to “ground” themselves, for they had been living in a state of constant migration: first, migrating from their native countries (for this is a neighborhood of immigrants), and then being forced to move yet again by redevelopment. The community garden was a relational object, a catalyst for change for their community, as well as for the city. It was the frank acknowledgment that today we live in cities in transition, where the culture of living is being redefined.

By focusing on small-scale areas and local knowledge, we reaffirm local culture at a time when the world is experiencing a backlash against globalization. Project areas become a laboratory for asserting local knowledge, for exchanging knowledge with others, and making connections based on the values of a new culture of living. They are places where differences between communities are rediscovered and reassessed. Their existence, and the practices that sustain them, offer hope for the world.

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