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Brandon LaBelle

The Living School

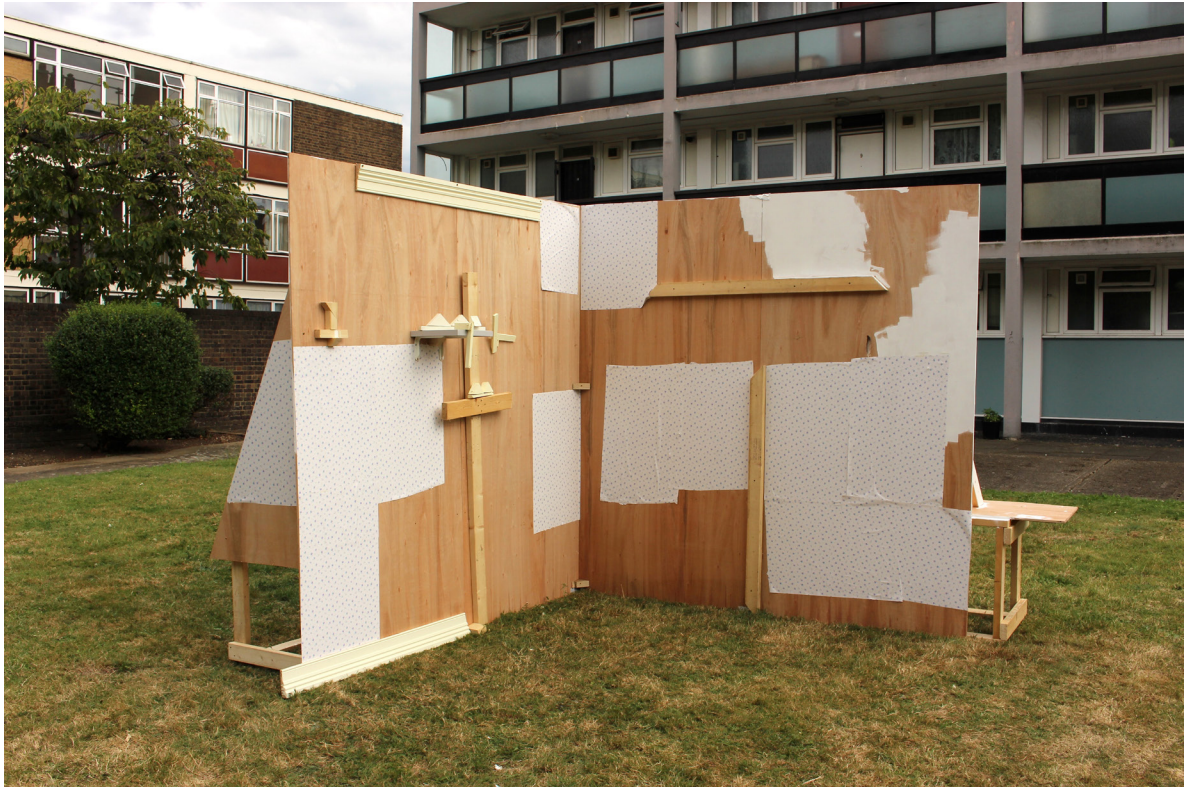
What forms of resistance can be deployed to counter the ongoing privatization of the public domain? Against the political rationality of market-based society, how do we understand public life and ethical obligations towards others? From within the dominating 'logic of expulsion' identified by Saskia Sassen as central to neoliberalism, based on the continual extraction and enclosure of global resources, is it possible to counter the general insecurities that govern people's lives and homes? (Sassen 2014: 78)

Following this direction of questioning, I've been interested in developing artistic work that nurtures a politics of possibility. This politics is one shaped by crisis and political homelessness, as well as by the critical and creative dynamics of what Dimitris Papadopoulos terms 'Generation M' (Papadopoulos 2014). According to Papadopoulos, the conditions and activities of contemporary subjectivity and its engagement with 'making' signals a deep potentiality, one that is currently inspiring new forms of public solidarity and self-organized instituting mostly extending beyond governmental and academic offices. The Making Generation is cast as an emergent social body of contemporary subjects, one shaped by collective intelligence and new sensate knowledges gleaned from network culture and its coalitional possibilities (see *ibid*). In this regard, experiences of expulsion and insecurity, of eviction and crisis pervading contemporary life are countered through acts of joining together and building commonality, which, as can be seen from the mayoral platform initiated by Ada Colau in Barcelona, may lead to new possibilities for participatory governance (see Colau 2014). Colau, whose work with *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH) aimed at finding solutions for the loss of homes and livelihoods throughout Spain following the economic fallout in 2008, has continued to develop new institutional structures specifically designed to support citizen practices and notions of the common good.

It is against this backdrop that *The Living School* was developed and organized. Held between February and June 2016, *The Living School* focused on questions of social housing, rights to the city, and conditions of precarity central to the contemporary neoliberal experience.

The project developed out of an artist residency I had at the South London Gallery beginning in 2014, and which culminated in *The Living School* activities. Organized in collaboration with the gallery's education and outreach program, which primarily focuses on working with local residents of nearby housing estates, the residency coincided with an intensification of protests and debates against the privatization of the city's social housing stock and the related demolition of major housing complexes, for example, the Aylesbury Estate in Elephant and Castle. In fact, from the beginning I found myself confronted with a deeply challenging situation; in order to participate as an artist-in-residence it became clear that my activities should both engage and be guided by prevailing debates, confrontations, encounters and protests that were specifically surrounding the gallery and its outreach program. At the same time, I was aware how my role as an artist could perform a 'gentrifying' act, capturing these challenging realities within an artistic project that would inevitably fall short of providing 'critical solutions' while additionally appropriating real crisis into the marketplace of creative capital. Like many artists, these are questions I often confront. In the context of *The Living School* project, I attempted to work through this conflict by expanding the frame of the project as much as possible; by creating conversations with a range of contributors and participants, collaborators and partners, and involving them in the project. I felt this might work to integrate the tensions embedded in the issue of social housing while also unsettling any dominating artistic tendency or authorship. Instead, I was interested in developing a social framework within which a range of voices and positions could be active to complicate the project.

From the beginning it became necessary and important to take a number of steps toward those active in local protests, though I was also interested in the ways questions of social housing were activating other social and cultural arenas and communities, for instance within academic and artistic environments. My approach was nurtured not only through direct conversations, meetings, and readings, and following related activities in the city, but additionally by organizing a number of 'research



Fig_1: Brandon LaBelle and participants, *The Living School*, 2014, Elmington Housing Estate, London

events'. These took the form of one public event located on site at the nearby Elmington Estate in Camberwell, and a public seminar presented at the South London Gallery on the topic of 'neighbors and strangers'. Each event included invited collaborators who gave input through critical reflections and reports, as well as through material works and creative expressions. Each event attempted to create an interweave of theoretical concepts and embodied activity; it felt important to support corporeal engagement with local politics along with conceptual ideas and references, and additionally, to complicate and enrich critical thinking by grounding it within particular sites and acts of participatory making.

For instance, the event at the Elmington Estate, which focused on a participative, self-build activity, provided an opportunity to think through how to create a bridge between the larger artistic agenda and the local realities of the estate and its residents. I was acutely aware that the event would circulate through the gallery's communities of artists and academics, but I was not so sure how it would appeal to local residents of the estate or what it might ultimately offer in terms of reframing the topic of social housing. Even with the gallery's long-standing involvement in local estates, it became difficult to attract residents to join the event; instead, the event was mostly attended by artists and academics from across London. It was only toward the end of the day that a group of local boys and girls joined us, along with one resident who pulled his stereo out onto the lawn to provide a steady mix of reggae, thereby shifting the group dynam-

ics through their input and social energies. Through this rather unsteady mesh of participation, the resulting form of the self-build activity – the construction of a set of walls standing freely on the lawn of the estate – did come to reflect a certain diversity: this half-formed 'room', erected rather clumsily and with a set of awkward appendages and random sculptural embellishments, beautifully articulated not only the meeting point of different people, but equally that between a particular artistic and intellectual aim (my desire to bring into play the basic architectural elements that make up a living space) and the desires and spontaneous responses of those who happened to join in. This structure, this strange room, inspired *The Living School* as a project that might amplify the passions and disappointments, the hopes and realities intrinsic to living and working with others.

Following the initial events and research, *The Living School* was finally organized as four one-day public sessions held at different venues in the city of London. Each session brought together artists, researchers and activists to present ideas, share knowledge, and engage in open discussions and processes of temporarily working together. It was the overall intention of *The Living School* to approach pedagogy as an experimental and situational event – to ground it within particular contexts while using these contexts as a space for nurturing 'free thought' and being; a type of 'free zone' defined by those in attendance, their wishes and hesitations, and by the desires and expressions that often arise through the intensities of temporary gathering.



Fig. 2: Brandon LaBelle and participants, *The Living School*, 2016, mixed materials, Peckham Liberal Club, London

Importantly, these conditions and dynamics were shaped by incorporating a set of prepared artistic and documentary materials to act as a general 'scenography' that could performatively enrich discussions. It felt important to insist on the 'materiality' of the sessions, to envelope pedagogical and discursive practices with an artistic expressivity, which might complicate or reframe the hard facts of local conflicts with the vibrant presence of an imaginary construct. For myself, I felt this to be a way in which 'aesthetics' could work to interfere with the smooth operations of discursive and academic presentation. I understood these scenographic elements as forms that might both ground intellectual thought, acting as a material stage, while adding a base from which to connect ideas to the deep materialism of social experience.

Each session included a diversity of workshop strategies, from roleplaying and collective sharing to experiments in group dynamics and performative actions: walking tours, participatory work, embodied knowing, and playing around; these were essential to broadening pedagogy toward the question of living through conflicted experiences. Through diverse and explorative approaches the sessions were less about arriving at points of conclusion and more about building the conditions for coming together and engaging issues of concern – and the desire and curiosity to see and experience what might be possible.

Adopting a performative approach in organizing sessions operated as a general method, which carried over into actual presentations and discussions. By moving to

different venues for each session, constructing a scenographic framework, or inviting participants to undertake certain activities together, the School tried to expose different perspectives on the politics of social housing – to make it available to the senses and material contact, to acts of doing things together, to the sharing of knowledge and how it may inspire new outlooks on local struggle.

The sessions were framed around four topics: expulsion, poverty, self-building, and shared space. The topics acted to identify particular aspects of the issue of social housing, while expanding beyond local disputes so as to build a larger framework of reflection. From such an approach, the question of the right to housing was placed within a broader territory from which discussions and debates could be fueled by a broader set of terms and knowledges. I imagined the guiding topics as points of concern and discussion, often touching very real and personal experiences, and as platforms for nurturing strategies – of creative work and critical thinking, of collective resistance and emancipatory positioning. I sought out contributors and partners whose expertise and knowledge could assist in this process, while trying not to end up aligned with any single or homogenous school of thought. It felt necessary to make bridges, to surprise, and to create an unexpected intermingling of people and thoughts.

In keeping with the experimental and situational nature of *The Living School*, I'm interested in continuing to explore methods of pedagogical work as part of my creative work as an artist. In short, I'm looking for ways



Fig_3+4: Brandon LaBelle and participants, *The Living School*, 2016, mixed materials, Limehouse Town Hall, London



Fig_5: Brandon LaBelle and participants, *The Living School*, 2016, mixed materials, Open School East, London

to construct projects out of collaborations and from the position of *making do*: to craft works that relate to emergent cultures of making and that carry the textures and tones of an art of survival.

It feels important within today's social and political environment of crisis and conflict, of expulsion and enclosure, to search for new ways of integrating within creative work gestures of social solidarity, which may support in their small way the co-production of knowledge and dissident imagination. While allowing for opportunities to

engage in conflict – to support what Jacques Rancière terms 'politics' (Rancière 1999), which flows from the plurality of differences – I've also been led to think more about creating 'shelters' in which to house the politically homeless. If, as Sassen suggests, neoliberal experience is one of expulsion and eviction, working to generate new practices through which to find shelter may provide a means to challenge dominant systems.

An outline of

The Living School sessions:

Session 1: Expulsion (held at Peckham Liberal Club)

The evicted, the dislodged, exiting and then entering – where? with whom? – to come up again, against the odds, in the ruins, a disintegrating fabric, and the narratives of loss, expelled hopes, exiting and entering, again: Shall we mobilize the idea? Shall we search for a new country? Shall we gather – to rewrite the script, the future, the project, with the tragedies, movements and knowledges of displacement? A homeless thought, island to island.

With contributions by:
Jane Rendell, professor, Bartlett School of Architecture
zURBS, artist collective
Irit Rogoff, professor, Goldsmiths College / freethought

Session 2: Poverty (held at the Ivy House Pub)

Without, and threadbare, under and under, a stressed pocket, a lost education, the conditions of despair, empty, to steal and to give, to search, this margin so central: to pool resources, to ask for help, to occupy what is left, to gather the pieces, to search for possibilities, with and through others, what might become a strategy of the weak: resilience, love, commoning.

With contributions by:
Andrew Conio, artist, lecturer University of Kent
Andrea Luka Zimmerman, artist, Fugitive Images
Liz Allen, archivist, Toynbee Hall

Session 3: Self-Built (held at the Limehouse Town Hall)

Gathering of gleaned materials, twist, then knot – will it stand? The politics of space, and this territorial dispute, in the gaps, cut, then thread, the needs and necessities, glass or metal, the thread, and the exchange of know-how, knowing and sharing, squatting, the construction and the making of this thing, a shelter, an assemblage: forced entry, and the self-organized protocols by which resistances and hopes are sheltered.

With contributions by:
Chris Jones, activist, 56a Archive
RUSS, urban solutions initiative
Elyssa Livergant, artist, Limehouse Town Hall

Session 4: Shared Space (held at Open School East in collaboration with the Anti-University)

Us, them, this, that and the living side by side, within this sudden opening, pressed and pressing: shall we dance? To generate this sudden opportunity. To celebrate the fragile formation, and the hands that hold, then let go, into the overlays of meanings of site and those that remember, the passions and the constitution of community – and what of hospitality? The welcome, and those who arrive: listen, and pass from hand to hand, the frictions and enthusiasm of being amongst others, and the creative spaces between.

With contributions by:
Aria Spinelli, researcher, Radical Intention
Jonathan Hoskins, researcher
Brandon LaBelle, artist-in-residence, South London Gallery

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Fig_5: Brandon LaBelle and participants, The Living School, 2016, mixed materials, Open School East, London