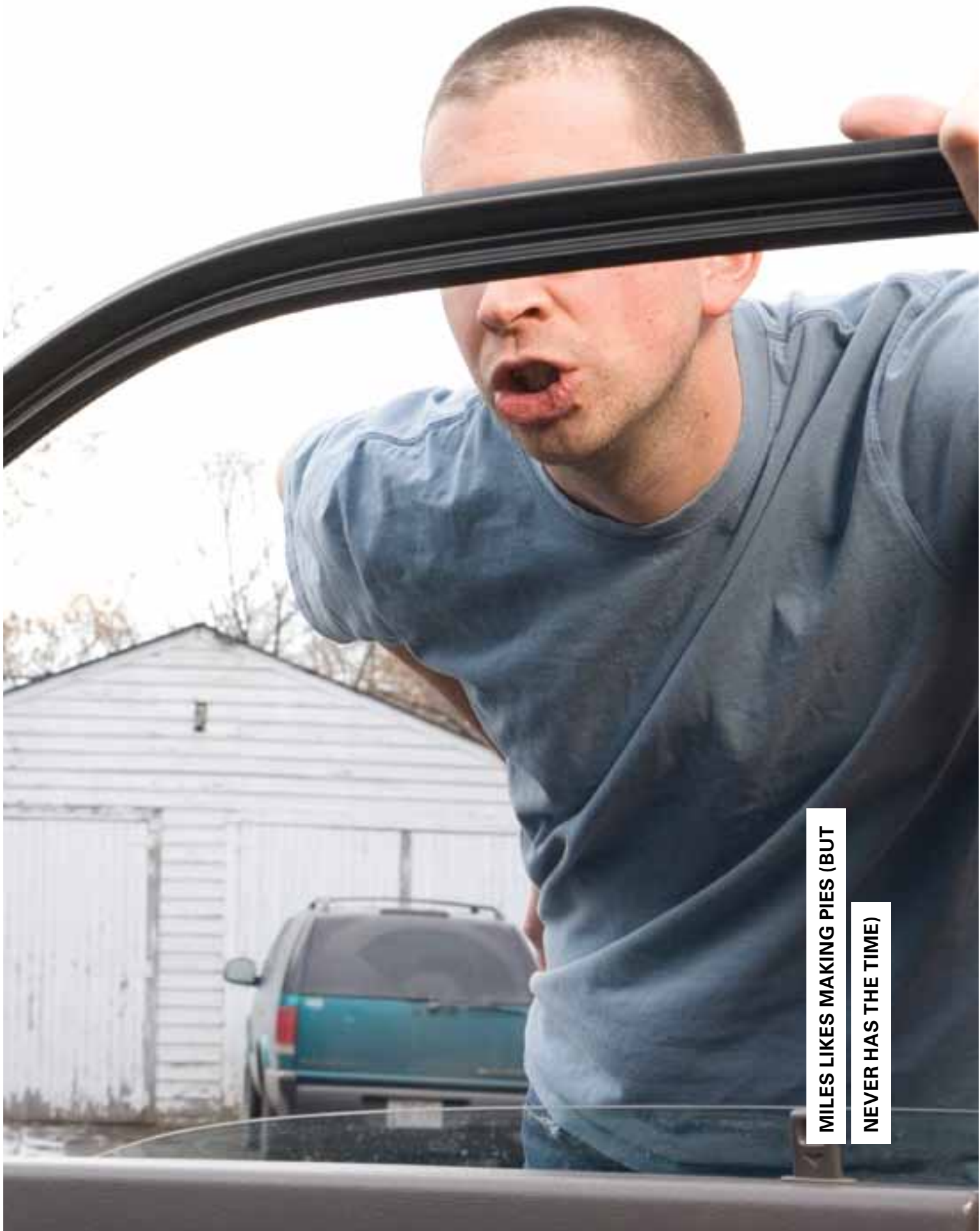


**THE EXTRAORDINARY
OF IMAGINARY ORDINARY
BY MELANIE BENNETT**

My husband and I moved from Southwestern Ontario to Calgary during Stampede in the summer of 2006. Calgary was at the peak of riding Alberta's dramatic growth wave making it the envy of the rest of Canada. With a naïve sense of adventure and anticipation for our new life in Canada's promised land, we purchased an old rusty moving truck for \$500 in lieu of the inflated \$3,500 price-tag that U-Haul was charging for truck rentals moving West (even U-Haul was cashing in on Alberta's fortune). Bumbling along the Trans Canada Highway, we could hardly contain our excitement as we began to see the first hints of the city on the horizon. The sun shone brightly (as it normally does in Calgary) on a skyline of sleek glass office buildings and construction cranes that seemed to welcome us as we made our way to our rented apartment. As our truck crawled along the congested streets of the downtown, we watched cowboy hats bobbing along the sidewalks, heard people laughing and shouting, and admired all the shiny luxury vehicles with country music blaring from their open windows. The vibe of the city was confident, vibrant, and youthful. Upon arrival to our apartment, we wondered if we had the wrong address, since the alley behind the building was populated with about a dozen homeless people and the building looked rundown and dirty. We were shocked to discover that this apartment located in what's known in Calgary as "crack alley" was to be our \$1,200 /month one-bedroom apartment. We had been on several




MILES LIKES MAKING PIES (BUT

NEVER HAS THE TIME)



DAMON TAKES PRINCE TO

FOOTBALL GAMES



waiting lists before being contacted that we could sign a one-year lease at this place in a “prime neighbourhood.” This was the beginning of what became a tumultuous love-hate relationship with Calgary.

No city is particularly generous during an intense flourishing economy. With a remarkably low unemployment rate and housing crisis, a spirit of competitive recklessness where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer is inevitable. It is also foreseeable that artists – a demographic normally among those least likely to be among the economy’s beneficiaries – will respond to such a problematic culture climate. It was during Alberta’s boom that I first met Eric Moschopedis, a Calgary interdisciplinary artist whose recent practice involves creating events that cultivate a sense of community. With a background in theatre, Moschopedis is among the recent surge of artists who desire to create new forms of intersubjective experience that connects art with the broader social sector. His projects are generous, friendly, and critical. Moschopedis defies the city’s conservative ideology and Wild West mythology by creating projects that promote a broadened concept of what it means to be a Calgarian. For him, it is more important for a city to be inclusive of a wide variety of perspectives than to hold onto alienating outdated themes. Moschopedis’ artistic values and practice resonate with my own work as a site-specific performance practitioner and researcher. By participating in and attending his and others artistic projects over the past few years, I discovered the fruitful potential of Calgary as an ideal place for experimental performance. These events and the people I met there also helped me create a feeling of belonging in a city I didn’t think I could ever call “home.” This article reflects upon Moschopedis’ most recent project *Imaginary Ordinary* as an alternative to the assumption that Calgary is an ungenerous city that lacks a sense of community. I am interested in analyzing the effectiveness of this work in its attempt to be accessible to broad perspectives.

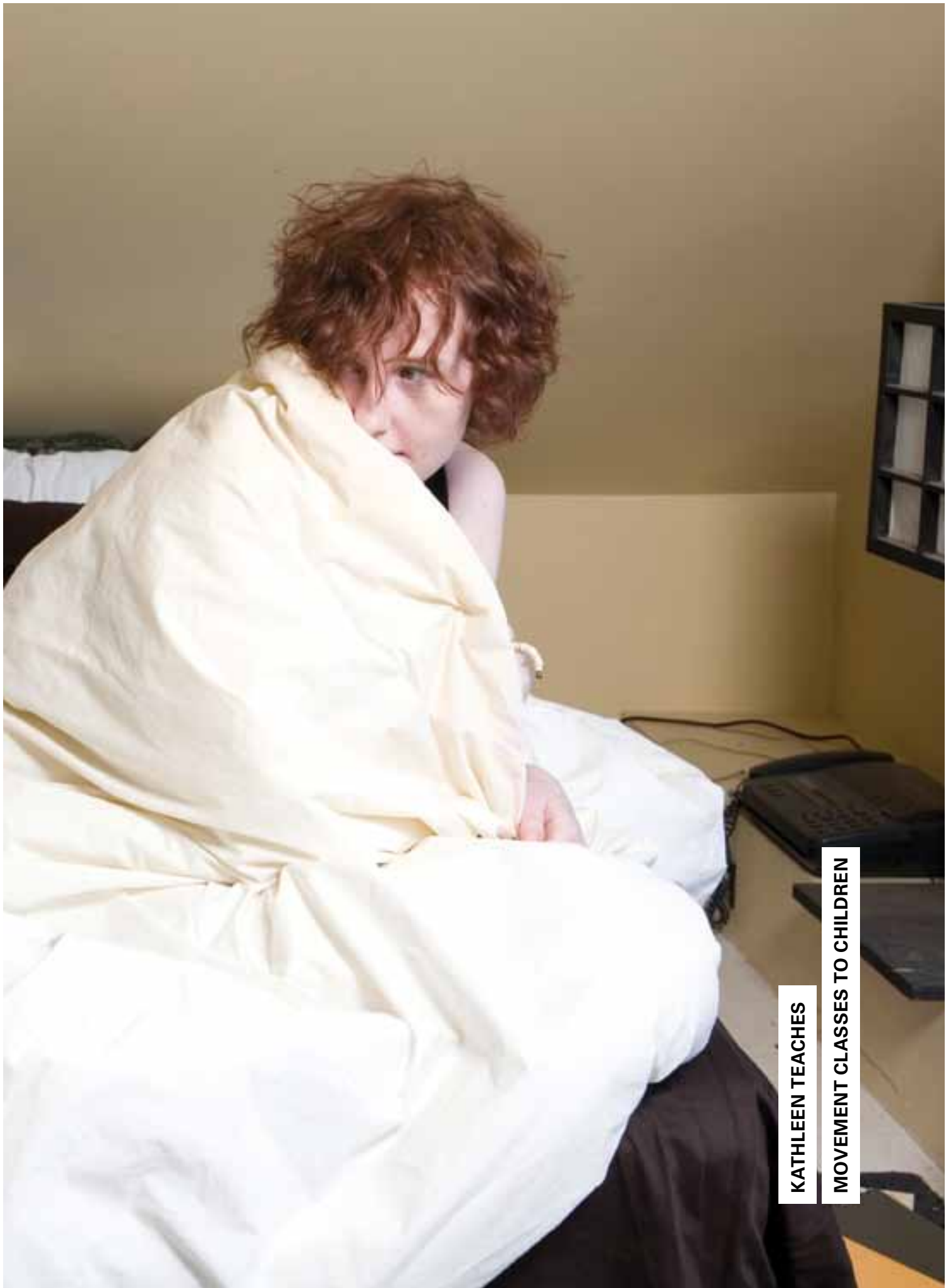
Imaginary Ordinary is a community-mapping project that is designed to foster social networking in and around the Calgary neighbourhoods of Crescent Heights, Regal Terrace and Renfrew during the summer of 2009. Co-creators Eric Moschopedis and Laura Leif wanted to create a space where community members could connect with one another, socialize and participate in various scheduled activities. Together they transformed an abandoned storefront located on Calgary’s busy Centre St. into a welcoming gathering space. Cheerful mural-covered walls, celery green chairs, a large coffee table to gather around, and a kitchen for making tea and cookies are among the items used to create a welcoming comfortable aesthetic. As part of the project, community members are invited to sign out one of several “Library Kits” located at the back of the store. These yellow suitcases contain different objects that provide the borrower with everything they need to complete a task, such as filming a movie, bird watching, starting a guerilla garden, drawing the clouds, concocting a romantic drink, interviewing your neighbour

with a series of questions, and speaking your mind with a megaphone. The playful childlike tasks are meant to encourage the community members to become self-reflexive tourists in their own neighbourhood. Visitors of *Imaginary Ordinary* can also create a "community kit" to be hung on the wall of the storefront once completed. These glass case shadow boxes resemble scientific specimen displays similar to those found in museums. Participants are invited to create their own specimen display with objects from their neighbourhood. Discarded shopping lists, bottle caps, gum wrappers and even dead insects are among the quirky collections that people made.

In addition to these assignments and just being a nice place to rest, *Imaginary Ordinary* hosts regular scheduled events. For example, on Wednesday evenings, participants are invited to become flâneurs as they accompany the artists on a drift through the streets and back alleys of their neighbourhood with the purpose of discovering something new about their community. Ask An Expert invites community members to speak and answer questions about a specific area of expertise. Potlucks, show-and-tell, tap lesson, garden lecture, a silk screening class, clothing swap, collective drawing of a mural, grocery store tour, dance parties, and music concerts are among the other scheduled events.

Moschopedis and Leif wanted to emulate the spirit of an inclusive community centre where people of all races and socio-economic backgrounds could connect. As an art project, *Imaginary Ordinary* challenges the assumption that experimental art must be shocking or difficult to understand. Deviating from the tradition of object making and adopting a process-based approach, artists like Moschopedis and Leif are "context providers." [1] In *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Grant H. Kester states that relational artists "have defined their practice around the facilitation of dialogue among diverse communities" (1). These works rely heavily on the participation of community members. By designing a "creative orchestration of collaborative encounters and conversations" (Kester 1), *Imaginary Ordinary* hopes to create a positive project in a democratic space that is directed towards the world beyond art enthusiasts and theatre patrons. Its utopian framework built around the fantasy that a shared geography will be enough to unite people, creates an optimistic politics that is increasingly prevalent in a lot of current urban community art initiatives. In practice, however, most of these practices appear to attract the young, educated, middle-class art connoisseur demographic.

The hidden stories and spaces that a lot of these projects uncover work to reinvigorate an identity ignored by a city's official themes, but they inevitably endorse another, albeit alternative, elitist enclave. While the idea that by reframing our engagement with each other, we reframe our engagement with the city has good intentions in theory, as artists practicing this model we need to question who this work benefits. Laura Levin and Kim Solga's article, *Building Utopia:*



KATHLEEN TEACHES

MOVEMENT CLASSES TO CHILDREN

IN GRADE ELEVEN

PETAR LEFT HIS HOME COUNTRY



Performance and the Fantasy of Urban Renewal in Contemporary Toronto, offers a critique of the emergence of grassroots performance encounters that claim to have “a belief in the socially liberating potential of creative play to transform the city from a place of alienation to a space for meaningful connection” (43). While the artists working in this model assert that their work is “free and open to all,” they have the potential to erect their own “barriers to access, built upon unacknowledged assumptions about which spaces and citizens count and which don’t” (45). What I’ve always admired about Moschopedis is his continued commitment to breaking down barriers that could emerge in his projects. Given his prominent role in the Calgary arts community – a role he both embraces and resists – Moschopedis is always sensitive about how his work is viewed by those in the community who may not be among the arts community. He advocates for an aesthetic that invites differing meanings, interpretations and points of view. For him, art can be viewed as a kind of conversation.

The whimsical imaginative quality of the kits is meant to be playful and facilitate new discoveries of community, but its artful framework and aesthetic tends to attract participants who have time to complete the assignments (bird watching, making a movie) or possess some creative aptitude (drawing a picture). For someone like my husband who has no experience or interest in performance or visual art, these kits weren’t of any interest. Rob’s desire to participate in order to feel included in the community project meant that he was drawn more to the activities where participants engaged in conversations. In order for an event to feel equalitarian, it needs to cater to or at the very least, acknowledge various types of people instead of assuming a “consensus over what constitutes community values, morally, aesthetically, and politically” (Levin and Solga 52). Moschopedis is sensitive to those community members who may not be inclined to attend art events, so he tries to include activities where anyone can participate. *Imaginary Ordinary*, with its potlucks, neighbourhood walks, and dance parties works to not only create a space for neighbourhood residents to meet, but to tighten the gap between self-proclaimed artists and those who don’t claim they are artists. Moschopedis and Leif would most likely argue that trading recipes at a potluck or exploring the back alley’s of a neighbourhood can be every bit as creative as painting a mural and that’s what makes *Imaginary Ordinary* so refreshingly charming.

I am delighted that there are many artists in Canada recently who are replacing conventional theatre with “sociopolitical relationships” that link new forms of intersubjective experience with social activism (Kester 3). As an artist whose performance practice is directed toward the world beyond the purpose-built theatre and gallery walls, I am passionate about wanting to advocate for this kind of work and continue to see it flourish in Canada. I wonder, however, if there are even more ways of creating community events that have the potential

Essay

to include the marginalized and are accessible to a broader spectatorship than art and theatre patrons. Perhaps these events could extend into a spirit of community volunteerism, where a portion of the work concerns offering services to those in the neighbourhood who are marginal – the sick, elderly, single parents, and homeless. Furthermore, as Levin and Solga suggest, instead of creating a utopian ideal of community that leaves no room for other points of view, these events could explore the varying multi-perspectives that may conflict with the ideals of the artists. An authentic intersubjective exchange is one that embraces the complexities and contradictions that exist when various people live and work alongside each other in urban communities. These are some of the dreams that *Imaginary Ordinary* inspired in me on the flight from Calgary back to my current place of residence in Toronto. There's something about these relational projects that make me want to be a better citizen in my own community. How can I take the kind of spirit of playful citizenship that Moschopedis and Leif created and model that into the way I interact daily with my own neighbourhood? How do I imagine making the ordinary in my community more extraordinary?

MELANIE BENNETT

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Works cited: Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004. Levin, Laura and Solga, Kim. "Building Utopia: Performance and the Fantasy of Urban Renewal in Contemporary Toronto." *TDR: The Drama Review* 53:3. Fall 2009. New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

[1] The term "context providers" was developed by British artist Peter Dunn.