

**sara reisman**

republicart-interview on *inscribing the temporal*  
vienna | 16 01 2003

**raimund minichbauer:** *inscribing the temporal* presents non-institutional projects in new york and has also started with setting up an archive of viennese projects. you curated the show and you also work yourself in this non-institutional field in new york city. how did the idea for this show evolve from this practice?

**sara reisman:** for the last three summers i have been organizing the *tugboat film- and video series*<sup>1</sup>, which is a site-specific outdoor project taking place on the waterfront with experimental and avant-garde films that are thematically and aesthetically linked to the locations within the series. sometimes screenings took place on boats or on a pier or on a barge. what ended up happening was that a few times i have been asked - or it has been suggested - to do a film program using those films for a gallery. this didn't make so much sense to me, but i considered how something like that would transfer into an indoor setting. one of the challenges of site-specific projects is that you do so much work for what is briefly realized. it is not that it feels wasteful, but sometimes it is hard to maintain energy to keep producing. and so there was some appeal trying to figure out how it could be in a longer exhibition format. at the time, when i started thinking about that, there was a lot happening in new york. there are other projects like the *brewster project*<sup>2</sup> and *16beaver group*<sup>3</sup> that take place outside of art contexts and at the same time involve so many artists. but - sometimes, because of the fleeting nature of these projects, they have been, at times, under-recognized. also, the conceptual premises are complicated and people don't understand it because it is not straightforward in a way that a gallery space presenting an exhibition is. so it was this question of would it be useful or worthwhile to put together a show about these kinds of projects and how they function in the public realm, and the ways in which they are accessed beyond an intentional art audience. of course it is complicated, because the work is not necessarily meant to be seen in a gallery, so i just tried thinking about how an exhibition dealing with these questions could be realized, and that's where *inscribing the temporal* began. i made a proposal to the kunsthalle exnergasse. and their response was that it would be really good if we could link it to what's happening in vienna, because there are similar kinds of projects happening but not a lot of them are really known about in a formal way.

**raimund minichbauer:** what are the preconditions in both places?

**sara reisman:** new york has this strong history of alternative spaces that, over the last 25 - 30 years, have offered different kinds of exhibition opportunities to artists. but then, what has happened to the alternative spaces: they have been forced to become more institutionalised in terms of operations, which means they need to be more polished and respond to fundraising pressures, and so there are these - not limitations -, but there is just more pressure to plan really far in advance, thus losing some of the spontaneity and flexibility upon which they were founded. so what it means is that an artist or curator can approach a space and it could take like a year and half before they give him a show. so i think also what is interesting about projects like *16beaver group* and *brewster*, was people taking matters in their own hands and saying - 'well, the alternative space, it is not an alternative any more. it is where you go to get a certain kind of recognition to keep going through this sort of path in the art world.' then, as i was looking at these kinds of projects, i was looking at the *center for urban pedagogy (cup)*<sup>4</sup> and *cabinet magazine*<sup>5</sup> as also different uses of space or different alternatives to exhibition venue. on the one hand *cabinet magazine* functions as this portable venue for artists to propose projects like the *paper sculpture*

---

<sup>1</sup> cf. <http://www.workingwaterfront.org/dyncat.cfm?catid=149>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.brewsterproject.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.16beavergroup.org/>, see also the text by helen gyger:

[http://republicart.net/art/concept/inscribingsymp\\_gyger\\_en.htm](http://republicart.net/art/concept/inscribingsymp_gyger_en.htm)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.anothercupdevelopment.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/>

show<sup>6</sup>. but then, on the other hand you have something like the *center for urban pedagogy*, which is not about an opportunity for artists, but it is about an analysis of how public space is used and how it can be envisioned differently. *cup* is interesting for *inscribing the temporal* in a different way than the others, because their work examines the politics of public space and then attempts to envision how it can be used. they produced a couple of shows in new york in alternative spaces like the *storefront for art and architecture*<sup>7</sup> and the *tenement museum*<sup>8</sup>, which is also with public components, because both spaces function as storefront galleries.

**raimund minichbauer:** were the public components a basis / point of departure?

**sara reisman:** the projects that were the starting point of the show, which was *brewster project*, *16beaver group* and *tugboat film and video series*, had a very public component, putting art in non-art environments. this requires a certain form of collaboration with the community that uses the sites or that becomes the site of the work that is made or presented. an alternative space may require collaboration with a community, but there is something very different if you operate a space, and you pay rent - you are entitled to do what you want with that space, whereas if you are doing something on the waterfront or in a village outside of new york city, you do have to negotiate with people on a local level, and i think that is really integral to the work. I am interested in this potential for collaboration and dialogue between arts and non-arts.

**raimund minichbauer:** you already mentioned that *cup* was in an other way interesting than other projects in *inscribing the temporal*. in which ways does *cup* participate in or intervene into urban planning processes?

**sara reisman:** they are not intervening in a heavy-handed way, but for example in new york city, there are local town hall meetings and open meetings that anyone can go to, but many people don't know about them or just wouldn't get involved. the members of *cup* have taken on certain issues or used space issues like *governors island*<sup>9</sup>, and they have done a lot of work on housing laws. they are considering how the ability to live in new york, to afford to live in new york is really changing (which has a direct impact on how artists can or cannot survive in New York City). these housing laws that *cup* has been involved with in the discussion or that it is documenting is a way of understanding the politics of how different neighbourhoods are zoned in terms of housing laws. in new york, if you are lucky, you move into an apartment that is rent-stabilized, that means that the rent each year can only go up two percent or four percent, but those tenement protection systems have really changed a lot and deteriorated because of the real estate market. what *cup* did with these - they went to meetings, they interviewed people about housing, they investigated the public housing system, and asked a lot of questions about 'how does this work?', 'how can you be involved...?'. on the one hand *cup* functions by intervening in the process itself, but then they are also presenting that intervention in a way that is educational and has the potential to change how individuals think about their role in the process. some of their works are exhibitions, but just as often they facilitate educational programming that informs the aesthetics of their design and artistic work.

**raimund minichbauer:** *cup* shows in the exhibition a wall-installation. was it produced especially for the show?

**sara reisman:** it is a combination of documentation of different projects that they put together just for the exhibition. the piece is called *this is what democracy looks like!*

**raimund minichbauer:** is it the same aesthetic language they use in their own shows, or are their own shows more like information exhibitions?

---

<sup>6</sup> cf. <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/events/papersculpture.php>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.storefrontnews.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tenement.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.anothercupdevelopment.org/GI.pdf>

**sara reisman:** it varies. i remember when they did their show at the *storefront for art and architecture, the programmable city*. they invited several architects to make proposals - architectural models articulating possibilities for ideal housing structures in urban contexts. i think the aesthetics range from very clean architectural design, to photographs, which are more like documentary aesthetics - very realistic and there is something very straightforward about it. but they also sometimes involve students in their projects where they do educational programs in schools, in elementary and middle school about zoning laws and how that affects life in the city. then saying to kids like: now that you know how urban space is zoned, how do you think urban space should be organised in a way that benefits? it is like giving them the overview of how cities are planned or could be planned and then asking them to envision that. from those kinds of activities, there are drawings or pieces produced by students, and so they included this one in *this is what democracy looks like*. for example, a map that a student drew, it is a utopian vision of how the city should be physically organised.

**raimund minichbauer:** a number of pieces in *inscribing the temporal* are connected to the *brewster project*. what is it about?

**sara reisman:** the *brewster project* is a situationist art event that takes place for a weekend in summer. brewster is about two hours from new york city by train. it is a small town that first for some years functioned as a commuter town, where people would commute to new york city for work, and now it is more developed. what's interesting about it, and why i think it was chosen by the three organizers, was that if you look at it, it just looks like a very typical small town with a main street and a little diner and a pool hall. there are very typical american things about it, but it also has an interesting socio-cultural mix. there is a growing latin american community and there are also people who have lived there for a couple of generations. so in its way, it is diverse. the background of the project was that these three organizers wanted to just produce a situationist weekend and invite artists and curators to come and make projects in response to the location and in some cases create site-specific, situationist, and performative work. part of the appeal of brewster is that the people who live there were interested in hosting it. there are a couple of main organizers from brewster who agreed to work on the project, but then there are a lot of people who were sort of bystanders, who then became involved as things were happening. i don't know if they took ownership or how they regard it, but ... they made it happen. without a community around it, most of the projects couldn't have happened. and also there is a factor of people experiencing the work which makes it real, gives it life in a way it isn't just for ourselves in the art-world.

**raimund minichbauer:** is it an open invitation to participate?

**sara reisman:** yes, the people who organise it invite curators and the curators invite artists. there is some letting go of control by the organizers who invite curators to invite artists. so there is also a social component. it is like if you have a dinner party and you invite people to bring friends. you don't know what will happen; there is a lot of that within the project.

**raimund minichbauer:** one project from *brewster* here in the show is the video *reading public meaning*.

**sara reisman:** matthew buckingham has done his ongoing video series of *reading public meaning*, where he goes to a city or to a location and invites people to read from books that are important to them. in brewster he worked with the public library to invite people to take their favorite book from the library shelf and read the first paragraph. it is a performance, but you also see how people read and maybe what meaning they emphasise in the text and what it means to them. here in vienna we were going to work with the public library, but what became more interesting, was to think about the *wuk*<sup>10</sup> as a place, where all these associations and corporations of different cultural groups are located, and to ask them to read from books within their spaces. many of them have little libraries, like a corner where they keep their books. and they all seem to function very

---

<sup>10</sup> socio-cultural centre in which kunsthalle exnergasse is located. <http://www.wuk.at/>

differently, there is the persian corporation, which has the most formal and the biggest library of all the places we saw. and then there is the school here, the kids were like 7 or 8 years old. so, it was maybe a more diverse approach than in brewster. that's a different way of inscribing the temporal, taking this site-specific project and just doing it in a new place and seeing how the conditions of the new place and the dynamics of the new place reshape the work.

**raimund minichbauer:** how did the recontextualisation reshape these processes?

**sara reisman:** well, it reshaped it in that there were seven different locations throughout the *wuk*, where buckingham initiated the readings. more ground is covered here in vienna than in brewster, where it was just in the library on one table. so, there was a dynamic moving around the *wuk* to see these different locations and people in these locations. for the most part it seems that people who read had some strong relationship with this place. we don't know if people who came to the library in brewster went to the library a lot. and also, maybe there were people just passing through certain locations here, but it seems that the *wuk* functions as a community centre to more communities than it might be the case at the library in brewster.

**raimund minichbauer:** how were the other *brewster*-projects in the show transferred?

**sara reisman:** there are a couple of works in *inscribing the temporal*, that are by artists who were at brewster, but there wasn't a way to recreate what they did at brewster for *inscribing the temporal*, so they made other projects. for instance, the *social labels* piece by austin thomas. when she was in brewster two summers ago, she was doing a series of public projects called *perch*<sup>11</sup>. a perch is like a patio, or like a deck that she would build out of wood and you can climb onto it and get a new perspective on a situation conceptually, but it also becomes it's own social space, where she hosts people. so she made a perch. it is a pretty big piece, and we talked about a possibility of shipping it. and she said, 'maybe i'll think about doing something that enhances social space and addresses social interactions.' so she came up with the idea of social labels, which are these labels on the beer bottles that were donated for the exhibition<sup>12</sup>. so, that wasn't at brewster, but we had to be open to the idea that some of the works wouldn't transfer here. and also the *bandrider series*<sup>13</sup> by jennifer and kevin mc coy - they did a project for brewster two summers ago that was called *every shot, every episode*<sup>14</sup>, a video database of shots from the original starsky & hutch series. they created digitized archives of television shows, that are ubiquitous in american culture, or at least the reruns are always available. they have done this for different tv shows, and in that project they archive starsky & hutch. they asked viewers to function as performers in the piece by sitting down and then watching starsky & hutch, and then narrating what they are seeing. part of the idea was the subjectivity of how television media is viewed, but also how entertainment media is constructed from the experience of seeing it. we talked about doing that here in vienna, and in the end they had just done this *bandrider series* at the *smack mellon* in brooklyn in new york. we just decided it might make more sense to do something like this, because it translates maybe in a simpler way. there is a similar theme within it, because the *bandrider* is the list of objects, that an artist or celebrity requires to be present in their dressing room, when they make their appearance. brewster - it is not like you could take a whole thing, like everything from the project and present it here; you would need a whole show on it's own. so, the idea was: let's take some projects from the project and see how they translate here, or transfer.

**raimund minichbauer:** what are the political approaches in the projects?

**sara reisman:** within the range of works in the show, or within the range of projects that have been broader than the works - they all function in a political way, but i guess the question is: how do you define politics? for example *cabinet magazine* does not take a direct political position, but many of the texts are critical and open and it is a form of alternative media. and if you look at the

---

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.brewsterproject.com/2001/2001Gallery\\_A20.htm](http://www.brewsterproject.com/2001/2001Gallery_A20.htm)

<sup>12</sup> <http://kunsthalle.wuk.at/archiv/2003/1e/programm.htm>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.mccoospace.com/bandrider.html>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.mccoospace.com/ese.html>

*brewster project*, they are not taking a political position, but in new york or in the us, it might be political to say, 'we are going to put on an arts program that is free to the public and responds to everyday situations.' the way the projects function politically varies greatly - the *tugboat film and video series* has an environmentalist approach in that the *working waterfront association*<sup>15</sup>, which produces the project, advocates for environmentally feasible uses of the new york - new jersey waterways. it also works to maintain the waterfront lands as public space with public access, and to keep people aware of environmental issues on the waterfront. and *tugboat* in a way acts as like a publicity project for the *working waterfront association*, the films and videos within it are about the waterfront thematically and aesthetically, but they are not like commercial videos for political lobbying or for preservation efforts. it really just brings people to the waterfront where they get to see the natural beauty of the waterfront that is there. and they might start using that pier more and then have a larger stake in maintaining these places as they are for the public. a little bit background is that the *working waterfront association* was founded almost six years ago in an effort to raise awareness of the effect of redevelopment. there are sections of the waterfront that are privately owned, and then there are sections that are public. and for a lot of the public lands there have been efforts from real estate developers to buy them up for private use. so, *working waterfront association* brings people to the waterfront to use it. they have also done advocacy for cleaner waters, and one of the things they do every year is *swim the apple*<sup>16</sup>, where they take people out on a tugboat and then they go swimming in the hudson. and the hudson is *not* clean. but the idea is that people are going to know that someone swam there, and to ask how clean it is. they have done production for other arts programming on the waterfront, like martha bowers<sup>17</sup> site-specific community based performance *safe harbour* presented in red hook, which is a neighbourhood in brooklyn that is also on the waterfront with an interesting cultural history.

the *center of urban pedagogy* is very directly political. they are taking the strategies of working within the system and then revealing those processes. it also shows that the system is quite opaque unless you are committed to being involved in these processes for many years.

for *16beaver group*, what i think is really interesting is not so much their politics externally, but the internal politics...

**raimund minichbauer:** *16beaver*<sup>18</sup> started three years ago as a group that rented a space in manhattan's financial district, renting out sections of it as studios for artists. there is also a collective space, which functions as the physical base for an open platform: people, who are not necessarily connected to the group, use it for screenings, readings, discussions, there are open mailing lists...

**sara reisman:** *16beaver* is often described as a collective, sometimes as a collaborative group and some people say, 'no no, we are individuals, who are connected to this space.' so there are all these different ways of thinking about it and in some way that is a very political thing to do, to say: we can be all these things and we keep going forward. it is not necessarily anarchistic, but it can be really difficult to work through those differences and ideas about how this should work. to me it is amazing that within these varied definitions of the working relationship between ten to forty people at a time, they are able to accomplish so much. i think it is possible, because it is an open framework. they have a space and they are able to say: o.k., every monday we do something and different people can participate. it is like a number of networks that converge at *16beaver*.

**raimund minichbauer:** can these forms of cooperation be described a bit more in detail?

**sara reisman:** there is not a closure on how the process is described. it is never like: 'this is how we work.' they just have a framework of the space and certain ongoing projects, but the process is not closed. i think, they are unwilling to say: 'this is exactly what we do, this is how we always

---

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.workingwaterfront.org/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.columbia.edu/~mh22/swimtheapple/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.dancetheatreetcetera.org/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.16beavergroup.org/>

work.' because, if that is always how they work, how is there room for other people to enter into that? maybe there is room, maybe there is not. and actually by not being totally clear about the process, maybe some people say: 'i don't understand that and that creates a kind of exclusion.' in a way that's maybe a selection process for who participates, if people are comfortable with the openness of the process.

**raimund minichbauer:** how was it possible to represent this openness in the exhibition? <sup>19</sup>

**sara reisman:** their art is the process of dialogue or the process of creating a link. the *information sandbox*<sup>20</sup> they created managed to capture that for a show. it is a place on the floor where gallery visitors can sit down at and sift through these objects that are put together. within the *information sandbox*, there are a lot of layers of projects. one thing they wanted to do for this exhibition, was a series of projects called *strategies of resistance*<sup>21</sup> and i think that the *homeland security cultural bureau*<sup>22</sup> and *radioactive*<sup>23</sup> really fit in with *strategies of resistance*. They made an invitational description and posted it on their website for the show here, just to say 'if you want to participate', like inviting participation, so that there could be the development of a network amongst different cultural producers and artists and writers and thinkers to discuss, what strategies of resistance in these political times are with the idea that the result of this thinking and dialogue could be presented in the exhibition.

another thing they wanted to do for this show and which is also a kind of ongoing work, is this banned film and video series. the idea was to collect - and it fits into the notion of strategies of resistance - films and videos from around the world that were banned and to put them together in an archive.

there is also this project *souvenir*, for which they asked artists to come and make souvenirs to be sent to vienna for the show. some people made very finished objects, and some people brought in objects that are always around in the financial district, like souvenirs of assaulted gift shops in these tourist locations, because *16beaver* is in the financial district, but also right next to battery park, which is a historic site and a point of departure for tourist things (you can get the ferry to liberty island or to ellis island). i think with the souvenirs, it is just like a way of capturing the aesthetics of that neighbourhood. it is like 'these are the objects that you can find anywhere' or 'these are the objects to be souvenirs from our neighbourhood but from us specifically'. so the idea is that you can sit down at the *info sandbox* and there different things were redone. they also included readings from recent reading series they have organized on monday nights and what has shaped their thinking as a group. i think, for how large they are, for how many people participate, they really managed to come up with a good way of presenting what they do and what they are about. i also think that what they were most interested in doing was recreating *16beaver* here. they created this kind of framework, where you can go and look at the website and you can look at the objects of their work and piece together things and maybe have a dialogue inspired by their dialogue.

**raimund minichbauer:** what are the problems in this cooperation?

**sara reisman:** what i did see, is that certain people put in a lot of work and i would think that it is hard for a group, that everyone gets credit in a certain way, when it is a small number of people putting in the work for the most time. But, who knows? it has only been around for three years. there can be a long time to really look back and reflect on how *16beaver group* has worked consistently, because there are different variations, and there have been different people involved, so it is very much about the combination of personalities for a given moment. that is something you can't describe so well in a show, but you can show maybe one version that a group came up with leading up to the show.

---

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.16beavergroup.org/vienna/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.16beavergroup.org/vienna/sandbox.htm>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.16beavergroup.org/vienna/strategies.htm>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.hscb.org/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2002/09/11/30280.html>



**raimund minichbauer:** there are plans to produce a second exhibition of *inscribing the temporal* in new york?

**sara reisman:** i'm not sure it makes sense to present work that has been seen in vienna. but maybe we can create an archive and that can be the beginning of something else, it could be an ongoing project. what is being accomplished here and seeing how interesting the archive is made me think about that maybe there is a point to setting up a show in new york where we bring in some work from vienna that's not been seen in connection with the archive that is developing here, but maybe it's about setting up an archive for new york. i think the question i am getting to, is: is it worthwhile to create an archive in new york and will people be interested in that and will they use it? a couple of non-profit places have slide-registries, and the galleries have slide files where the pieces get categorized by different formal aspects, and then curators come in and do research for a certain kind of work. maybe the work of these independent groups has a place in some kind of structure that's similar. but the question is, in a place like new york who would provide this space, who is interested in it then? does it become an administrative thing only, or is there a kind of a curatorial component? maybe that's looking much further ahead than i can do in terms of just a new york version of the show, but there could be a focus on setting up an ongoing archive similar to what's been established here at *kunsthalle exnergasse*.

**raimund minichbauer:** thank you very much.