



Alternative Spaces in Chicago, Alternative Histories of Chicago

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in Karlsruhe, Germany, posits it as a sort of *arché*, or generative origin, of contemporary neoliberalism—its Bauhaus-inspired futuristic design now underscoring the proximity between this dynamic management tool and the operations research models of economist Friedrich Hayek and other Cold War think tank luminaries that in fact helped overturn Allende's rule. Exhibit B is even more emphatically located in a present moment in which contemporary artists such as Jamal Cyrus, Trevor Paglen, and Jill Magid, in their different ways, play off a media dynamics in which the phenomenon of *leaks*—starting with RAND military analyst Daniel Ellsberg's 1971 release of a huge trove of classified information on the Vietnam War to newspapers—gives political secrets a new and spectacular visibility. Theirs are works that stage or aestheticize contemporary strategies of concealment or censorship, giving form to the liminal fascination for that which hides in plain sight. The think tank itself—presumably haughtily closed off, yet dynamically all over the place—might in fact be a key instance of such liminality.

That such qualities obviously also resonate with the perennially troubled knot of phenomena that is contemporary art speaks to the way in which this brilliantly researched and argued book might actually also be seen as a contribution to recent discussions about close correspondences between artistic and social/economic forms of abstraction. These are, notably, discussions that expand the notion of abstraction in art way beyond the tropes of painterly nonfiguration. What is perhaps missing from this account is a more systematic engagement with the very thing that is key to the book's thesis, and that is further underscored in the coda on the relationship between the Metropolitan Museum and the David H. Koch Charitable Foundation: the very notion of *sensibility* as a defining trait of the think tank, at least to the extent that think tanks may be understood as expanding networks of cultural-political associations and effects. In recent years, the field of atmosphere theory that harks back to the work of, among others, Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, has constantly sharpened its vocabularies and perspectives in order to deal with the vague, fuzzy, or ambient dimensions of that which is collectively held yet escapes precise definition, sense of scale, and cause-and-effect

explanation. As Friedlind Riedel has argued, atmospheres are essentially contagious phenomena that bring into appearance that which cannot be deduced from or reduced to the bodies present in a situation or referred to in terms of a single specific source.² While earlier and more spatially inclined theories of atmospheres could easily be charged with providing a too unitary or coherent notion of social affect (as seen for instance in the idea that atmospheres “reign” over a situation), more recent approaches, such as Derek P. McCormack's concept of envelopment, see atmospheric “things” as processual fabrications activated through relations among bodies, elemental conditions, and devices/technologies—a perspective that is congenial with the feedback dynamics animating the think tank sensibility.³

To the extent that think tank sensibilities may be a key feature of the globally extended spirit of neoliberalism, it is of course also interesting to note the strong preponderance of atmospheric modes of construction or articulation among the generation of post-1990s artists who shifted attention away from the (by now) more traditional forms of institutional critique in art in order to tackle the more elusive or existential dimensions of the new modes of power and government. Some of them, like Liam Gillick, would even repeatedly evoke the shape-shifting form of the think tank as a general model. Yet, if Lee does not quite go there, her great achievement is to provide a set of sharpened historical and ideological horizons for such discussions.

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1. Harold Sackman, “A Public Philosophy for Real Time Information Systems,” *AFIPS Conference Proceedings* 33, pt. 2 (1968): 1491–98.
2. Friedlind Riedel, “Atmosphere,” in *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, ed. Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), 85–95.
3. Derek P. McCormack, *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

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Meg Duguid, ed. *Where the Future Came From: A Collective Research Project on the Integral Role of Feminism in Chicago's Artist-Run Culture from the Late-Nineteenth Century to the Present*. Chicago: Sobercove Press, 2020. 272 pp.; 55 b/w illus. \$25 paper

In *Where the Future Came From*, contributor Joanna Gardner-Huggett (associate professor, DePaul University) describes taking her students to the Art Institute of Chicago's Modern Wing and asking them to count the number of works by women (155). Inspired by the Guerrilla Girls' similar counting projects, begun in 1985, the assignment's results show that not much has changed in the past thirty-five years. Depending on the hang, her students reported 20 to 30 percent of the works on view were made by women. This counting activity is one I have increasingly heard faculty describe using in their art and design history classes. For example, one colleague asks her students to page through their graphic design history textbook and count the number of Black designers included. This straightforward task is one way to begin thinking about equity and the way that institutions, whether in the form of a museum collection or a course textbook, hold power to shape knowledge and understandings of history. Creating a polyphonic record of “feminist artist-run events, programs, and projects that have been organized throughout Chicago's history” (7), *Where the Future Came From* is a conscientious intervention into institutional histories that marginalize women, Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ artists and collectives—an “act of visibility,” Jeffrey M. Hayes, contributor and director of the art space ThreeWalls, calls it (223). If one were to do the counting activity for this book's many contributors, it would be easier to count the white men. There are none.

As editor Meg Duguid, an artist and the director of exhibitions at Columbia College Chicago, explains in her brief introduction, *Where the Future Came From* is the official documentation of a research project of the same name that took place at the college's

Glass Curtain Gallery from November 2018 to February 2019. To record the project's participatory exhibition, symposium, and public programs, the book is divided into six sections. "Symposium" provides transcripts of presentations delivered by participants, including members of feminist collectives past (such as Estelle Carol of the Chicago Women's Graphics Collective, Carol Crandall of CARYATIDS, and Mary Ellen Croteau of SisterSerpents) and present (such as Gloria "Gloe" Talamantes of Mujeres Mutantes and Jory Drew and Amina Ross of Femme 4 Femme, or F4F). An image section features photographs of the spare exhibition installation—no art objects, just a communal table in the middle of the room, wall text chronicling feminist collectives from the Palette Club (1880–95) to the Overlook (2016–present), pens for visitors to add information right onto the walls, and accompanying binders full of ephemera related to each listed group. "Scholars in Residence" offers transcripts from the exhibition's public programs, including a conversation between multimedia artist Melissa Hilliard Potter and Jennifer Scott, director and chief curator of the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, on art and social reform at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as a presentation on the "rabbit holes and roadblocks and the ways that we stumble upon histories" (187) by Tempestt Hazel, founder and director of *Sixty Inches from Center*, a Chicago-based online arts publication and archiving initiative. An "Essays" section features three brief texts on topics like Afrofuturism and crowdsourced research. The final two sections, "Chronology" and "Biographies," offer additional information about the collectives included in the exhibition and the people whose contributions the book documents.

Questions of archives, history, and legacy are central to the project. The problem of knowledge—who knows what, how they know, and how much they know—recurs in nearly every contribution. (*Ways of Knowing* is even the title of a Honey Pot Performance work described by contributor Meida Teresa McNeal, the Afrofeminist collective's director.) A number of the participants are actively involved in archival projects. For instance, Kate Hadley Tofness, director of the Chicago Archives + Artists project, details her organization's mission to connect artists and designers with archives across Chicago and archive the work in the Chicago Artist Files

at the Harold Washington Library, and Nicole Marroquin (associate professor, School of the Art Institute of Chicago) explains her multifarious archival projects, including facilitating the placement of ninety-five boxes' worth of materials belonging to Dr. Angela Perez Miller, a bilingual educator and researcher,



in the archives at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Such archival intervention is also the crux of the project at large. *Where the Future Came From* produces what Lynne Warren (adjunct curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago) calls accessible "networks of knowledge" (17) about a wide variety of feminist, artist-run activities, from a Black women's embroidery group called Imperial Art Club (1907–32) to a performance trio called Somebody's Daughters (1980–88) that used humor to highlight the sexual, the spiritual, and the mundane. The project begins the work of collecting information about these groups that are overlooked by museums and rarely studied by art historians.

Given the emphasis on record-keeping, it is peculiar that, save for in the concluding three-page essay by multidisciplinary arts creator Rana Liu, the book includes no references. Nor is there an index. And participant transcripts frequently refer to images that were presumably included in the live presentations but are absent from the book's pages. Because tracking down image copyrights and permissions is a difficult and expensive endeavor, the absence of so many images is, if disappointing, also easy to forgive. But why is there no information on how to track them down or where to look for more information about the people

and organizations mentioned by the project participants? Thanks to project programming that, as writer and arts organizer Kate Sierzputowski explains in her essay, included two Art+Feminism Wikipedia edit-a-thons, during which attendees created pages for artists, administrators, and organizations included in the show, some information might now be found easily online. But the exhibition itself included meticulously gathered primary source material. How can that be found? Without citations, it is hard to know what books or collections to turn to for more information. Perhaps that is, in part, the point; it forces a form of research that foregrounds people over papers, facilitating new connections. For example, learning more about Sapphire and Crystals, a collective founded to give women artists of African descent opportunities to produce their own exhibitions, might involve contacting member Arlene Turner-Crawford. How might this approach to research add new layers to networks of knowledge?

Following the suggestion of Mujeres Mutantes's Talamantes, who expressed a wish "to see reviews talking about why this person's doing this" (214), I called Julia Klein, an artist who founded and runs Soberscove Press, the publisher of the book. (To do this, I relied on my existing network; Julia and I were Spertus Jewish Artists Fellows at the same time and are now part of a working group together.) I wanted to know more about the decision to publish the book with its bare-bones structure. Klein put me in touch with Duguid, who detailed the time and childcare pressures she confronted when working on the project, the type of constraints that make collective projects like those in the book necessary to begin with. Indeed, many of the participants echo the challenge of making work and maintaining a collective when there are so many other demands on women's time. Duguid also gave two reasons for the limited number of images. For one, this dearth highlights how records create holes at the same time that they produce documentation. But she also expressed concern that highlighting too many works made by individual artists would have elevated some artists in a given collective over others.

This emphasis on organizations over and above artworks is evident throughout the project, which foregrounds social practice in the most literal sense—as the act of organizing. Participants do mention specific works,

but they dwell primarily on practical matters of group formation and composition, money, and space. This, they make clear, is not peripheral to art making. Rethinking structures and systems of practice is foundational to the work of art.

Identity, representation, and recognition are a constant refrain. Daisy Yessenia Zamora Centeno and Luz Magdaleno Flores, both of Brown and Proud Press, explicitly name this as an organizational mission. Centeno explains, “We find it absolutely necessary to our survival to eradicate our invisibility in a society that cherishes white and detests dark” (90). Flores elaborates, “We are putting our struggles out there for people of color to grab onto when they’re barely feeling afloat” (90). This is not easy work. As Flores observes, “Everyone’s struggles are of different complexities, levels, and lived experiences” (90). That makes for challenging group formation, not least in regard to the very idea of what constitutes a feminist art collective. In her introduction, Duguid defines the term “feminist-artist” as “an artist who organizes activities on behalf of women’s rights and interests to amplify femme and women-identified voices” (7). But more than one participant frankly describes their own organization’s definition evolving over time. For example, Sharmili Majmudar and Lani Montreal, formerly of Mango Tribe, a multiethnic, multilingual, multidisciplinary, and genderqueer ensemble of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, say that the group initially identified as a “women’s performance” ensemble. Over time, that mission statement grew to include “folks who identified as women” and also “people who identified as trans” (57). Gardner-Huggett describes Woman Made Gallery’s efforts to rethink how the organization defined womanhood, and how it ultimately became more inclusive. This issue of inclusivity becomes particularly compelling when it intersects with foundational organizational principles. The members of Mango Tribe, for example, would perform each other’s pieces, raising questions around the fact that, as Majmudar explains, a piece might be performed by someone with a different ethnic identity, gender identity, or sexual orientation from the person who had created the piece. “What did it mean for people other than ourselves to be performing our work?” she asks. “And what felt like a very personal voice to us?” (58). These questions are not

answered in the book, but they put pressure on the clean lines between individual and collective that are often taken for granted.

Money presents another challenge, and not only because it is so often hard to come by. Describing funding structures, participants reflect on the advantages and challenges of different models. Organizing as a nonprofit, for example, means that funding comes from a board, freeing artists from financial responsibility. And yet many nonprofits rely on an overworked/underpaid model that “embraces a patriarchal structure of governance” (Gardner-Huggett, 141) potentially at odds with an organization’s very purpose. But there’s no answer as easy as just disposing of the nonprofit structure. Alternative systems come with their own stumbling blocks. Cooperative membership with dues may deliver a reliable source of income, but co-ops exclude artists who cannot afford to pay the fees. A patronage model allows for the bypassing of bureaucracy, but means that often one person decides whether or not to fund a project’s costs, like international flights for an artist and her kids, when the latter, as Neysa Page-Lieberman (director and curator of the Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces at Columbia College Chicago) observes, cannot simply be left behind. And while grants can supply large pots of money, they often require follow-up and prioritize individuals over groups. As one audience member points out, “If you go to apply for a Guggenheim, you have to do that as an individual; you can’t have a collective collaborative product or project” (201). These considerations point to how organizational logistics like funding structures reverberate through communal forms. In other words, they set boundaries on who can participate and in what way.

The same is true of space. Talamantes and the multidisciplinary artist Sam Kirk both make work in the street rather than the studio, and to ensure their physical safety, neither will paint alone. Tracey Jean Boisseau (associate professor, Purdue University) observes how a sense of safety was also central to the Woman’s Building, a structure built for the World’s Columbian Exhibition held in Chicago in 1893. In addition to protection, space can also allow growth and transformation. Describing a five-month experimental residency organized by F4F, an artist-led interdisciplinary project run out of an apartment, cofounder Jory Drew notes

the importance of giving people “free rein to create something that would then bring other people in to see them”; in the case of F4F, they “unfolded and blossomed,” he says (99). But holding spaces requires maintenance. More than one participant describes the tireless and thankless work required to keep an organization going. A photograph of three coveralls- and safety-mask-clad members of Artemisia, one of the first women’s art cooperatives in the Midwest, drives the point home. On the other hand, space can be hard to keep. Beate Minkovski, cofounder of Woman Made, narrates the gallery’s many moves around Chicago due to rising rents. Then there is the additional matter of gentrification. As one participant notes, artists moving into a neighborhood with cheap rents is the classic first sign that an area’s lower-income residents are about to be priced out of their homes. Itinerant organizations such as Sapphire and Crystals avoid this by sharing spaces temporarily, with institutions such as the South Side Community Art Center, Nicole Gallery, and Woman Made, rather than establishing a permanent location. Collectives are spaces of “care and generosity” (16), says Courtney Fink, executive director and cofounder of Common Field, a national network of experimental visual art organizations. And they are places where power is produced and embodied.

“What is an intersectional feminist space?” In the *Where the Future Came From* symposium, Jennifer Sova, founder of the Overlook, an ever-evolving creative platform for women artists, queer artists, and artists of color, posed this question to the audience. “What does it look like?” she probes. “What does it feel like? What does it sound like?” (84). Or, as Amina Ross of F4F asks, “How can I take these lessons that I’ve learned and treat people better?” (100). These are also questions for the reader that are essential to reframing contemporary discussions around diversity and inclusion. Rather than considering only how capital I “Institutions” can make space for the people and practices they have marginalized, erased, and disempowered, this book decenters those institutions and invites us to think creatively about what else might be possible.

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