TABLE OF CONTENTS

Diedrich Diederichsen
How Did Pop Music Become Ubiquitous?......................... 3
Molly Dillworth
Lightly Illegal: Letter from the Most Elegant Public Bathroom in Southeast Portland......................... 7
Ana Balona de Oliveira
Screens of Film, Video, Memory, and Smoke................... 16
Randy Lee Cutler
A Spectrum of Difference .................................. 5
Lea Feinstein with Christian L. Frock
If You Aren’t Mad as Hell, You Haven’t Been Paying Attention....................................................... 14
Boris Groys with Andrei Wekua
Wait to Wait ............................................... 8
Maegan Hill-Carrrol
From Yosemite to the Group of Seven, with Some Flatness in Between ................................................. 12
Steve Lambert with Fillip
Best Case Scenario ........................................ 6
Cliff Lauson with Dan Graham
Vancouver from the Outside In: Part Two ......................... 18
Joni Murphy
Althea Thunberg’s Carroll Street ................................ 11
Shepherd Steiner
Other Uses: Bodeian Searches in the Martha Rosler Library .............................................................. 4

ARTIST PROJECTS
Cranfield and Slade
Sunshine Daydream/Maenadyn Enthusiast
Marisa John
Fillip Index

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Lightly Illegal: A Letter from the Most Elegant Public Bathroom in Southeast Portland

MOLLY DILWORTH

Suddenly: Where We Live Now, Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Portland, 26 August to 5 October 2008

The following are thoughts written in response to the conversations I had, both public and private, around Suddenly: Where We Live Now, a project by curators Stephanie Snyder and writer Matthew Stadler that exists as an exhibition, a series of texts, and a reader. In addition, the project included meals, screenings, readings, panels, and symposia organized by Snyder and Stadler, all inspired by the writings of German urban planner Thomas Sieverts. The exhibition opened at the Cooley Gallery at Reed College in September 2008, travelled to the Pomona College Museum of Art in January 2009, and will disperse and travel to locations around the world over the next several years. As an artist in the exhibition, I was present at many of the Suddenly events and met most of the participants.

After the Suddenly panel discussion, in Room 315 of Reed College’s Elliott Hall, I wanted to talk to the participants involved, but I needed to get some of the ideas in my head down on paper. I ducked into the first bathroom I saw to make notes. I stood writing at a chest-high marble shelf next to a window overlooking elegant grounds surrounded by forest. The light rain made everything misty and the air smelled clean. I chose the bathroom for privacy, but what I got was something closer in spirit to a cabin at the MacDowell Colony. This formal bathroom—tiled walls, oak paneling—was so unfamiliar that I felt out of context, and my senses seemed heightened. It occurred to me that the bathroom was a tiny model of the exhibition Suddenly, which addresses the world as it is and asks us to make sense of it all. Though clear in hindsight, the answer to “what is happening?” is slippery in real time. This disorientation is mirrored throughout the Suddenly exhibition, from the lack of wall labels to the poetic—rather than purely informative—curatorial statement. This sense of uncertainty seems apt, as it is the operating principle by which we live now.

Matthew Stadler invited about fifty guests for dinner and conversation between Thomas Sieverts and architectural historian Aaron Betsky about the new shape of cities in an abandoned parking lot in Beaverton, Oregon. The overgrown, oddly bucolic lot belongs to Goodwill Industries, which gave our group official permission to assemble, eat, and drink on their property that night. During the conversation following the meal, Sieverts pointed out that if the event were held in a German suburb, it would be done without permit or permission, in a manner he defined as “lightly illegal.” Because permits or official sanction are unnecessary in Germany, gatherings like our dinner are legally ambiguous and unlikely to draw the attention of the police.

In hosting the dinner in the abandoned lot, Stadler suspended conventional civic and social rules. The guests at the dinner had to find the unmarked location and then gradually discover the proper way to behave in this unusual social setting. When there are no codes to follow, they must be invented. When at a dinner in an abandoned parking lot, does one follow the rules of a formal meal? If it begins to rain, as it did in Beaverton, should one be angry with the host, commiserate with one’s fellow diners, or leave altogether? Similarly, the viewers to the Suddenly exhibition were confronted with the question of how to behave in an exhibition that is open to the public but still obviously under construction. Should a viewer enter the space and speak to those at work, or ask the guard if the exhibition is even open? I overheard one viewer declare, “Something happened here.” However the visitor chooses to respond, the ambiguous conditions in the Suddenly exhibition break the conventional rules of the museum. The changeable, unclear circumstances we encounter in everyday life are modelled in the exhibition and surrounding events of Suddenly, forming a destabilizing and “lightly illegal” climate.

This state of not knowing, possibly risking chastisement or a fine, tangling with the unknown and relying on negotiation rather than known social codes prompts us to generate new information, making rules that work for each of us rather than following codings that may not serve us. Our modern relationship to the natural world is an example of how the civic body relates to the unknown. We want our homes and parks free of animal invaders without questioning the implications of eradication. In city parks, dead trees—or snags—are seen as waste and removed, but in biological terms, the snag is a vibrant, diverse habitat. Fritz Haeg, in his Animal Estates, Regional Model Homes 5.0, Portland, Oregon project (2008), works with local naturalists to understand the animal inhabitants of the city in which he lives. He uses that information to create habitats for the native animals, effectively inviting them back into the city. Haeg works with the public, from expert to novice, to build habitats for animal clients. What often goes unremarked, as Haeg articulated during the panel at Reed, is that his project is intentionally provocative and anarchic. By reverse anthropomorphizing the animals and their dwellings we, the human viewers, are forced to think of our domiciles as part of, rather than separate from, the natural world. Under the guise of architect and with the help of experts from the Audubon Society, public school students, and unaffiliated enthusiasts, Haeg attempts to upend the status quo of human-animal relations.

His project, thus, becomes an argument for engaging the unknown to increase social responsibility.

Continued on page 26
generated in response to past problems instead of generating new rules. In response to current problems, we are likely to respond to situations which we had no experience. How many times over how many years have we been used to outsourcing, the shrinking middle class, and disappearing post-industrial communities are changing the way we live? Yet, until recently, we all (despite our political, economic, and regional differences) continued, even fought, to live in a world that no longer existed, acting as if we could will it into existence.

Though the Suddenly project has no political aims, it literally asks us to consider how we live now, to look closely—even at the things we don’t like, accept, or understand. Suddenly encourages a shift in how we experience the world by modelling a state of not-knowing, anti-order, or light illegality. We don’t know what happens when we transport a conversation from the gallery to an abandoned parking lot in the suburbs, invite ground-dwelling bees into our homes, or transcend the physical border of our country.

By relocating temporarily to Poland and amending his assumptions about the consistency of the social contract, Michael Damm made a study of everyday public life. Damm recorded and reconstructed Katowice, Poland, in the videos Island, waiting at the light, and bed (all 2008) and the photographs Port of Oakland, Curtain, Island, and Opiate (all 2008). While Damm was shooting in the streets of Katowice, the citizens would regularly offer him beer, food, or help by directing traffic. The permeability of public space in Katowice, even for a foreigner, is proof that spaces of quasi-legality are nothing new in Eastern Europe.

In contrast, Marc Joseph Berg printed four of his photographs in an advertising format and posted them around Portland (an action that required legal permits). Copies of these posters were available in the Cooley Gallery, and viewers were encouraged to take copies as well. Copies from local schools were invited to help contribute to the project.

reaction was likely generated by her own subjective ambiguity in the project.

A radical response to the social contract is to create a new country from whole cloth and invent the rules, as did the four-person collective The M.O.S.T., when they founded Mostlandia (2005–2008). Though they claim over two hundred citizens, on Monday, 21 August 2008, The M.O.S.T. disbanded Mostlandia leaving two former officials, new citizens known as “Lady O” and “Junior Ambassador,” to look for clues to the whereabouts of the country, questioning what the role of a citizen in a country that no longer exists. The act of declaring a country into existence and then eliminating it is an act of play that points to the more serious question of what it means to be a citizen in the world.

In an offsite gallery at Milepost 5, Michael McManus created Sense of Place (2008), a sonic environment that employs a surveillance camera to map the path of viewers in the space. The viewers are not warned that the space is being recorded and do not know how the data is being used. As the viewers move through McManus’ installation, they slowly understand that they control the audio output with the motion of their bodies. This progression from being watched to becoming an active participant makes us more responsive to the changing conditions of our environment.

Having wrangled some of the formidable ideas in my head into something concrete, I remembered that I was hiding out in a bathroom. It was time to close the Suddenly show, Fritz’s film crew was in the gallery, and the closing reception was in full swing. I thought about how difficult it was to find the parking lot for the dinner in Beaverton, how we weren’t sure how long or hard it would rain or where we would go if it didn’t stop. In the end it did rain, but we were able to sort out how to stay dry by improvising together (though I admit to going straight for a seat under the tarp when it began to rain). If our social rules are designed to protect some unknown other, how can we remake those rules to benefit ourselves? Crosher’s photographs were in mind as I considered what it must feel like to walk into the news at the end of the day.
America is historically tied to the land and the ex-\stent expansion of territory decreed, according to the founding fathers, by Providence and known as Manifest Destiny. Crosby's photographs unravel the mythical structure of the American Dream by depicting the physical and psychological rift that occurs when endless expansion meets an uncrossable border.

In “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” (1975) Theodor Adorno wrote, “order, however, is not good in itself.” Order can, in fact, be deadly. Relying on rules one chose. When a professor from the local art college brought her class on site-specificity to the Cooley Gallery, one of her students was upset because she thought she was being asked to perform an illegal act as an assignment. Berg's project was used in the class as an example of site-specific art, a participatory project in which the public was encouraged to take copies of his posters and do anything to them—including altering or destroying the work. The student was never asked to perform an illegal act, but her concern to take in the darkening landscape outside the window. I could make out what might be trees, maybe a forest. My view was boundless and uncertain, and I thought, that's exactly it—where we live now. Suddenly, now and forever.

Molly Dilworth is a painter and curator who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Her work was recently featured in the exhibition Molly Dilworth: Dispersion at the Feldman Gallery, Portland.

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Image: Andrew Dadson, detail from Five Broadsides
22 x 34 inch newsprint posters in a letterpress-printed envelope