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THE EVENT LANDSCAPE

The Contemporary Encounter of Art and the City

Gavin Kroeber

Today, as arts industries venture ever more frequently out of their traditional architectures and into the streets, as urban spaces are converted into venues for art at a fever pitch, we are witnessing the mutual recomposition of art and the city. The ways we experience both art and the city, and the ways we conceive of them, are being transformed. If those of us charged with the care of art and the city (artists, curators, producers, and other art workers; architects, planners, policy makers, and other urbanists) want to engage this reciprocal shift, we will have to do more than simply join the mounting chorus celebrating the obvious facts that the city is being redesigned to accommodate the arts and that the arts are activating the city. There is a larger project in play, visible if we step back to take stock, first, of the particular ways art and the city are becoming intertwined today and, second, of the fact that this intertwining is not new, that art has long been entangled with the city. This essay attempts to trace the contours of the encounter now unfolding between art and the city, accounting for the specific ways it reinvigorates and complicates the historical affinities between the two, in hopes that we can harness the energy of their mutual recomposition to challenge and advance our own work as art makers and urbanists.

THE EVENT LANDSCAPE

Art and the city are blurring not so much because they have turned towards one another, but because each has turned towards *events*. Walking through New York City, the city in which I live, I always seem to be coming across the pop-up white tents of officially permitted street fairs and farmers' markets, the aluminum truss and stage lights that frame performances in plazas and parks, the white cocktail tables and black waiters' uniforms of galas and receptions and weddings. Box trucks rumble down the streets to unload flight cases of rented AV equipment and laundry carts full of festive drapery at hotel conference rooms and rental halls. All this speaks to the frenzied ubiquity of events in the most prosaic sense of the word: event production.

Each day the special events sector assembles events from dispersed networks of competing vendors, supply stores, and labor pools, delivering on-demand cultural experiences. Set-up starts early in the morning and by the end of the night these

spectacles are broken down into their component parts, the modular stages and decorations ferried back to the various warehouses on the city's periphery from which they came. Events in this sense represent an ascendant mode of cultural production characterized by flexible assembly, ephemerality, and the congregation of audiences. Our contemporary expectations about the city, about what the city is and what happens in it, have become bound up with this mode of production.

Twenty-five years ago the geographer and social critic David Harvey, describing what was then a relatively recent economic development, wrote that "the need to accelerate turnover time in consumption has led to a shift of emphasis from production of goods . . . to the production of events."¹ Since the 1970s, the global North has been steadily turning away from the diminishing returns of manufacturing and towards more ephemeral products and services. As Harvey and many others have pointed out, this trend is just one signature feature of contemporary global capitalism's defining upheavals. Others have included: the intentional reduction of product lifespans; an exponential increase of advertising budgets and other strategies to stimulate consumer demand; the migration of industry out of Western nations; and, crucially, a drive to increase productivity that has led to a reliance on flexible production methods—practices such as subcontracting (rather than full-time employment) and "just-in-time" materials provision by third parties (rather than older, all-under-one-roof, factory assembly). There is no clearer illustration of these shifts than the ascendance of events as a mode of cultural production.

The turn towards events has produced a corresponding *event landscape*: an urban fabric defined by its diverse venues, all of them mandated to host rapidly rotating programs that can organize a flow of attendees—*spending* attendees—through cities. American municipalities struggling to keep up in the face of our shifted economic reality have grudgingly abandoned their outdated "smokestack-chasing" strategies for growth, premised on the increasingly unlikely possibility of attracting manufacturers that have ready access to cheap labor offshore. Spurred on by lobbyists and developer-driven promotional campaigns, cities have instead engaged in an inter-urban competition to build newer and ever more alluring event venues that might attract affluent businesspeople and tourists. In its grandest moments this effort has produced flagship convention centers, stadia, and festive megablock shopping-entertainment developments. Recently the desire to attract visiting audiences of vacationers and conventioners has been complemented by mounting attempts to seduce the coveted "creative class" into relocating permanently. A corresponding mode of development has focused on cultivating hip cultural districts that feature (among other amenities) a periphery of event venues, from small rental facilities and alternative arts spaces to programmed plazas and parks. For the past forty years, the frontiers of urban revitalization have again and again been populated with events.

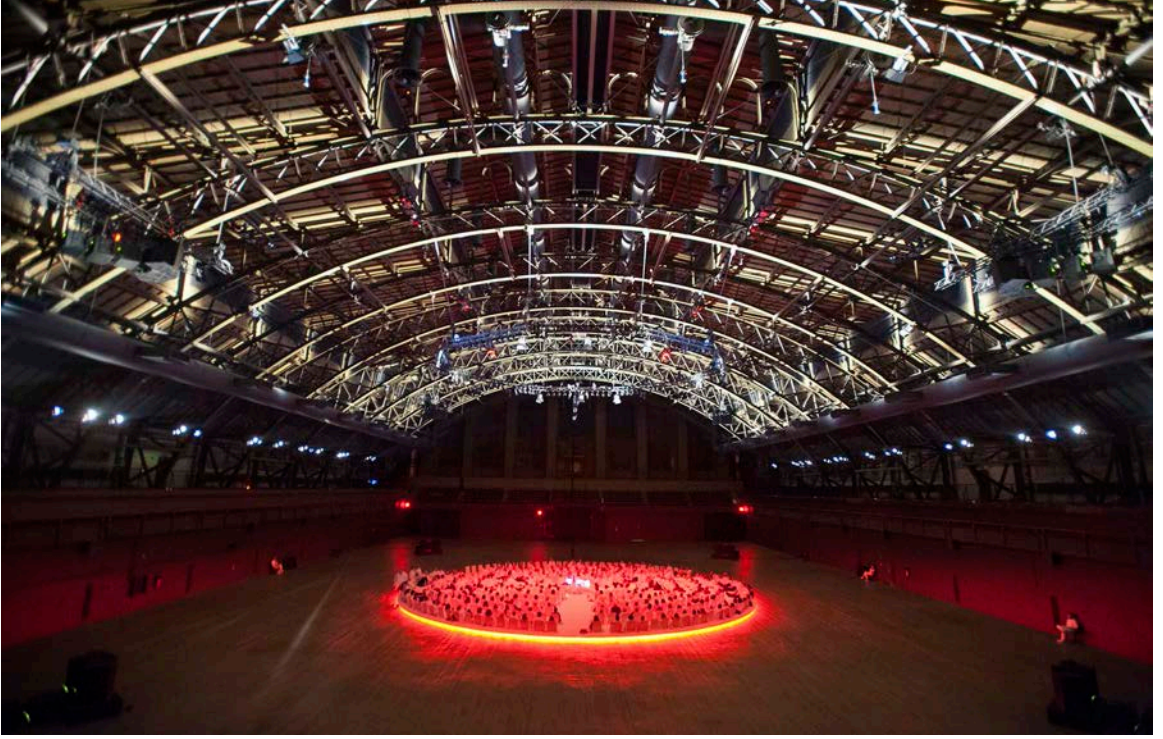
NEW VENUES, NYC

If cities have become bound up with event production, so has art. New York City's event landscape has recently been marked by the emergence of a new breed of urban art venues, taking their place in the family tree alongside the convention

centers, entertainment districts, and other older cousins. A refinement of these earlier architectures, they have a similarly monumental scale but their texture is less overtly commercial. The paradigmatic examples are arguably Governors Island, the 172-acre former military base being converted into a massive park in the middle of New York Harbor (with space reserved for real estate development), and the Park Avenue Armory, built in the nineteenth century as a hybrid social club and training facility for the National Guard, now hosting operations of a more cultured nature. We might say that Governors Island is an event landscape in the most literal sense: it is effectively a convention center with grass, where two to six events are assembled each week by an array of independent presenting agencies and the subcontractors they hire. The Park Avenue Armory serves even more plainly as a convention center, hosting antique and jewelry shows when its fifty-five thousand square foot drill hall is not dedicated to its signature art projects—spectacular works that bear a closer resemblance to stadium rock shows than conventional theatre productions or museum exhibitions. These two sites are near-perfect emblems for the evolution of urban event venues. Vast spaces in the city left empty as their original purposes fade into history, converted into civic playgrounds of rapidly rotating programs, they update the rather blunt revitalization strategy of the convention center with an embrace of the arts. Playing host to projects across arts disciplines, they endow their spaces with the cachet of a cultural destination even as the works presented there are forced to adapt to these venues' protocols—the protocols of event production.

The impact of event production on the arts is perhaps most apparent at new sites like these that are dedicated to it, but its mounting influence is also visible inside legacy institutions. For evidence one can take a short subway ride from the Armory or Governors Island to an architectural space opened at roughly the same time: the Museum of Modern Art's atrium. A crown jewel in a museum redesigned to better host profitable special events during off hours, the atrium has increasingly featured congregational art projects as part of the official program, cornerstones of an effort to embrace performance and installation works that often rely on all the hallmarks of event production. Where this new space reveals an institution trying to loosen its traditional mission and infrastructures in order to present emergent forms of work (thus ultimately mirroring and even merging into the wider event landscape), other institutions' parallel impulses away from conventional architectures have drawn them even farther into the space of the city. The BMW Guggenheim Lab, the New Museum's Ideas City Festival, and the temporary geodesic dome MoMA PS1 erected in the city's hurricane-devastated Rockaway Peninsula as a part of its *EXPO 1* initiative all used short-term, event-based, curatorial strategies to experiment affordably with modes of presentation excluded or sidelined in these museums' primary architectures—and, just as importantly, they try to capture the charged authenticity of the street.

These are just a few notable, close-at-hand examples of new arts venues on the frontiers of the expanding event landscape, but there are myriad parallels that we might invoke—local, national, and international. The appearance and multiplication of such venues and platforms speaks to the rising importance of the arts within the



Top: Karlheinz Stockhausen's *OKTOPHONIE*, performed in a lunar environment created by Rirkrit Tiravanija. Photo: Stephanie Berger. Courtesy Park Avenue Armory. Bottom: BMW Guggenheim Lab, New York City. Design architect: Atelier Bow-wow. Exterior view from First Street at dusk. Photo: David Heald © 2011 Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.

event landscape, but the range of cultural events offered by each goes far beyond the arts as traditionally conceived. These forums regularly play host to dance, theatre, music, sculpture, installation, and performance art, but as part of a broader mix that includes hip-hop shows, athletic events, design competitions, films, parties, markets, and more. Despite this promiscuity, these cultural sites are expressive of major shifts in the arts: through them, we can see clearly that the arts represent just one cut of a much larger cultural field caught up in event production, adopting its hallmark ephemerality, flexible assembly, and dizzying cycle of audience congregation.

ART, EVENT, AND URBANISM

The event landscape should not be mistaken for its most prominent landmarks, however. It is composed not only of physical places but also practices, rhetorics, and beliefs. A landscape's physical dimensions are always built or managed in the name of specific ideologies and for certain activities. The less tangible cultural, political, and economic landscapes in which we find ourselves situated have physical manifestations and sources. Understood this way, the event landscape is "built" from concepts, habits, and symbols just as much as it is concretely built from brick, mortar, soil, or stone. Understanding art's forays into new urban venues and into the city as engagements with the event landscape—with its sites, protocols, and the favored ideas that circulate in it—we can think more richly and critically about new art and our role in making or seeing it. If, in doing so, we flirt with collapsing different arts disciplines and their histories into the broad category of events, we can also cast some important issues into relief.

First, keeping the wider ubiquity of event production in mind can help us resist the seduction of being too specific about site-specificity. It is easy to discuss artworks in the urban fabric only in terms of the narrowest particulars—like the ways in which the physical backdrop complements the work's themes—without considering that, regardless of what the specific physical place may look like, the site is so often also the event landscape and the political, economic, and cultural forces that it stands for. Approaching cultural production in this way can help us stay vigilant when we encounter claims of disciplinary liberation, reminding us that art forms are not necessarily reinvigorating themselves through some wild encounter with the city, embracing new sites and ways of making, so much as trading one set of protocols for the increasingly familiar ones of the event landscape. To think this way is to challenge what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has described as a field's ability to produce "its ignorance of its own social conditions of possibility,"² for it is *only* from the narrow perspective of a discipline that art's movement into the event landscape can seem to represent some form of disruption. Viewed from any other vantage point, it is clear just how much these ostensibly unorthodox projects in fact conform to prevalent trends in a wider political economy that loudly celebrates and depends upon the consumption of ephemeral experiences.

In the visual arts, the event landscape speaks to the triumph of "project work," a strain of unconventional artworks that resemble service provision more than the

manufacture of objects. The artist Andrea Fraser, who coined the term, once observed that art institutions' demand for project work "did not appear to be conditioned simply by the supply offered by a distinct artistic group . . . [but] to be based rather on something like a need for what it is that projects provide."³ While artists may be producing events of their own volition, events are equally being mandated by institutions, hungry to be perceived as cutting-edge and seen working in the city's prestigious new destinations.

In the performing arts, the novelty of the event landscape has less to do with an incursion by a foreign form than with an amplification and an escape: the field's hallowed techniques of flexible production are being deployed in new and seductive ways in other arenas. One could fruitfully interpret the rise of event production as an affirmation of the performing arts as a model for culture in general, analyzing visual art's turn towards project work as the theatricalization of the museum and the event landscape as the theatricalization of the city. If it can seem, however, that the theatre has gone triumphantly viral in the expanded field of event production, this situation hints in equal measure that theatre's traditional institutions, genres, and architectures have become obsolete and been superseded.

Finally, considering art in relation to the event landscape, we are better able to trouble the boundaries between disciplines—both artistic and urban. Insulated worlds of art practice are drawn together in the event landscape by their sympathetic orientations towards common sites and production methods. Moreover, the urban valences of the arts (and the artistic valences of urban disciplines) become amplified. Embracing event production, the arts are not simply activating urban spaces but providing the model for their redesign. Architecture and planning are not simply producing cultural spaces but reinforcing a paradigm for the culture that will inhabit them. It is often said that we should build bridges between art and urbanism, but these worlds hardly need to "come together" when they share the common condition of being surrounded by the event landscape. Through it, they are already deeply entwined. Those of us working in the fields of art or urbanism can acknowledge the existence of this event landscape or not, we can build it up further (consciously or unwittingly), and we can even attempt to remake it, but the event landscape is a reality our work must now contend with. Art and the city are figures in the event landscape.

THE CITY: OTHER EVENTS, ANOTHER LANDSCAPE

Locating art and the city in the wider event landscape, we can better consider the implications of their contemporary blurring, but art and the city were intertwined long before the rise of event production, and we must attend to the ways the emergent event landscape amplifies and complicates their old affinities. Art's great modern institutions have often been urban and played important roles in the emergence of the bourgeois urban ruling class. Our strongest images of the artistic life are urban, modeled on mythologized bohemian enclaves in Paris or New York. Most importantly, the emergence of art as a modern idea, as an activity that can be undertaken apart from the cultural conventions that integrated it into religious or clan life, is dependent

upon the division of labor that is synonymous with the growth of Europe's cities. The same forms of power that have produced the city and been made visible in it have produced and left their traces in art.

These two categories have, however, been defined equally by their resonant capacities for *resisting* power. This aspect of their affinity is apparent in the historical idea of the city—specifically in the ways it has been understood as a landscape of events in a very different sense. Applauded and decried as a breeding ground for political and social change, the city has long represented a place of encounter where the urban pile-up of diverse people, cultures, classes, places, and technologies foments a latent potential for transformative events—events that are not experiential products but breaks with old orders. The earliest observers of the industrial revolution's explosive urbanization understood the city this way—as a site of brave new social relations, condemned for dissolving communitarian village life and ushering in increased personal detachment even as it was celebrated for a contravening promise of individual liberation and political revolution. This sense of a radical urban potential persisted well after the industrial city gave way to newer forms of urbanism—particularly in Paris, where figures like Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin famously rhapsodized about that city's streets and the charged sociality that flourished in them. It was also in Paris, in the 1950s and 60s, that the sociologist-philosopher Henri Lefebvre and his interlocutor-rivals in the Situationist International, fascinated by the city and its paradoxical performance as a site of both oppression and transformative possibility, would forge some of the most influential theories of this kind of radical urban potential.

Both the concept of “constructed situations,” which gave the SI its name, and Lefebvre's overlapping theory of “moments” celebrated the ability of what we might call events to tap into or catalyze this latent quality of the city. “Moments” and “situations” (while not identical concepts) were fleeting structures of exceptional experience that would momentarily exceed or escape the everyday, which was seen as a kind of impoverished capitalist wasteland. They were festivals prefiguring a possible new order more favorable to the desires of their participants. We can see in these ideas the seeds of a festive-Marxist discourse that has survived into the present day, valorizing temporary ludic experience as a means of contestation and the city as an experiential hotbed and therefore site of political possibility. It has resurfaced cyclically, manifesting (to name just a few influential instances) in the oracular anarchist Hakim Bey's 1991 manifesto “The Temporary Autonomous Zone,” the British activist group Reclaim the Streets' 1999 “Global Carnival Against Capitalism” event, and the Occupy movement of 2011. Across these various examples, a hopeful theory of resistance has been picked up in both written texts and the street-level language of protest movements, migrating into a radical vernacular in which a concept of liberatory urban events has become a driving model for a genre of politicized cultural production.

This tradition of thought and action presents us with an event landscape of a different sort. Its symbolic sites are not the convention centers and rental halls already

touched upon, designed for event production, but rather plazas, streets, markets, cafes, and gathering places—places that may not have been engineered to support events in this second, explicitly radical sense, but which have nonetheless served as their sites and been celebrated by the thinkers dedicated to them.

THE IMPASSE OF EXPERIENCE

The two event landscapes I have described—two sets of places organized around event in two senses; a landscape of *event production* and a landscape of *event as radical break*—can seem quite distinct. In the city, the place where these landscapes are rendered most visible, it can seem as if they overlap but don't quite touch. Circulating in both these landscapes, however, fundamental to both, is the concept of experience. An event—whether we mean the industrial delivery of a planned wedding or the sudden eruption of a Lefebvrian festival—is an experience. It is an experience in the sense of *Erlebnis*—one of the two distinct German terms generally translated into English as “experience,” standing for intense, discreet and exceptional experience rather than the more extended and accrued sense of experience conveyed by *Erfahrung*. In the tradition of thought that connects Lefebvre and the Situationists to Occupy Wall Street, it is precisely this kind of extraordinary experience that is turned to as confirmation of the radical slogan that “another world is possible.” But of course the event production industry, which trades in experiences, also claims to make the extraordinary possible.

Around the turn of the millennium, experience emerged as a buzzword across the interrelated spheres of business, sociology, and urban planning, triumphantly celebrated in several influential discourses as a harbinger of a new economy. Whether notions of *Erlebnis* were placed at this economy's very center (as in the so-called “experience economy”) or simply privileged by its elites (as we are told experience is by the so-called “creative class”), experience was wedded to economic prosperity. Used in this way, “experience” maps out a particular set of ideas, values and practices. The body of the consumer, subject to specific regimes of activity, becomes a means of experience production, and the imperative leveled at businesses and cities alike is to build or control the particular spaces that a desirable experience can unfold in—whether that's the unapologetic artifice of an entertainment complex or the seemingly organic, street-level texture of a creative neighborhood. Invoked by branding consultants, developers, lobbyists, and arts administrators alike, experience has become a cipher for some of the most fundamental qualities of contemporary capitalism. The hungry collection of experiences speeds up the turnover of consumption; the demand for “creative” experiences produces a demand for the customization and novelty that new flexible production techniques enable; the discourse of experience designates certain spaces as desirable, using taste as a logistics tool to guide the movement of people and their money. Gathering these phenomena together under a shorthand label, “experience” serves as a loose but normative model for their proliferation—for an approach to cultural production that accommodates it to a dominant political economy that has turned, as Harvey noted, towards events.



Top: Aerial view of Governors Island with Lower Manhattan in background, 2014. Courtesy The Trust for Governors Island. Left: Performance of Sarah Michelson's *Devotion Study #3* (2012) at The Museum of Modern Art, November 2012. Part of *Some sweet day* (October 15–November 4, 2012). © 2012 Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Paula Court.

Today's celebration of experience implicitly critiques the everyday, quietly paralleling Lefebvre and the Situationists' embrace of radical anti-quotidian *Erlebnis*. The flow of occurrences that lie outside of the experience economy's prized product are, by definition, insufficient; it is the perceived poverty of the everyday that drives the consumer to acquire experiences that transcend it. The shadow of experience's celebration is an indictment of the everyday, and there is tension here. Those that would celebrate the place of experiences in the new economic order are faced with the troubling reality that experiences are valuable only so long as they are scarce, that the prerequisite for experiences lucrative enough to prop up an economy is a world rendered undesirable. For those sympathetic to the more skeptical, radical-Marxist position, the sense of tension is more glaring and more severe: radical *Erlebnis*—experience as an overt critique of a capitalist everyday, ostensibly in excess of the rationalization and calculation of the capitalist organization of life—is ironically opposed to a capitalist economy that is thriving precisely under the banner of experience, quietly indicting the everyday on nearly identical terms. Are the two landscapes I have attempted to map opposed, or indistinguishable?

We should not rush to answer this question. Rather, I want to draw attention to the felt presence of this tension and its fundamental importance for the contemporary city. If nineteenth-century thought about the city was characterized by a sense of ambivalence about the play of opposites embodied by it, this tension is its contemporary iteration. Historical observers saw a stark, nearly black-and-white opposition between anomie and freedom, oppression and class consciousness, but today the poles of metropolitan contradiction, staked out by two forms of event—an ascendant mode of cultural production and a concept of cultural-political rupture—are blurred by parallel valorizations of experience and critiques of the everyday that echo one another. In cities, we are presented with a multitude of spaces transformed into event venues for sanctioned experiences. Whether we desire the experiences as offered, are repulsed by them, or consume them on our own terms, our engagement with those experiences is a kind of negotiation with the forces of authority that have produced or endorsed them. In cities, whether or not we subscribe to the festive-Marxist tradition, its targets and tactics, we can feel the deep-rooted sense of urban possibility that it taps into, the complex social fabric of a place conjuring premonitions of other events that might erupt if the conditions are right. Today, when we are in a city worthy of the name we feel all these things and the tension between them, a dynamic of control and possibility given a historically specific manifestation in the event landscape.

ART AND THE CITY

If we think of the city in terms of this tension, we must also acknowledge that it is a defining condition of art, a figure almost always caught between its grounds (the social, political and economic conditions that make the production of an artwork possible, most controversially the patronage of the powerful) and the possibility of their transcendence, transformation, or tactical misuse. This rhyme between art and the city in the event landscape is an amplification of the two categories' old affinities.

The event landscape represents a contemporary tightening of the historical braid of art and the city, making their interdependent imbrication with power all the more legible . . . but likewise their resonant promises of resistance.

This braid is in fact so tightened that today we can rethink the city as a kind of art venue. It does not feel like much of an exaggeration to assert that the city—not just individual sites within the city but the broader built environment that the word signals—has become an architecture with an attendant mode of spectatorship that provides as important a paradigm for cultural experience today as the theatre or the museum ever have. Black box, white cube, city. The first two architectural-institutional spaces in this triptych have been understood as important sites of authority where particular social rituals have served to consolidate class power and where cultural literacy was cultivated in an attempt to regulate the masses. Today, when cities are intentionally being constructed and celebrated as cultural pleasure gardens, entire districts spanning multiple blocks designed specifically as spectatorial architectures to structure cultural participation, it does not require any great leap to speak of cities in similar terms.

Using this image of the city as art venue to read the urban through the lens of art does more, however, than underline the city's capacity to police society through culture. It also reinforces and amplifies the most provocative point of convergence between art and the city: their shared sense of radical potential, a tension between the defining constraints of our world and the possibility of breaking out of them. To rethink either category through the other reminds those of us who work to make art or cities to ask ourselves whether our work serves this vital, shared, and often sidelined dimension of those two categories.

THE CITY IN THE EVENT LANDSCAPE

It often feels as if our work does not. Certainly, in my experience, New York City's new event production venues—points of confluence between art and city where we might expect the tension between control and possibility that defines them to be most palpable—for the most part simply feel planned, manicured, and managed. For all their very real charms and pleasures, they are more suggestive of the resources and control required to produce the events presented at them than the possibility those events promise. More often than not, life in the event landscape does not feel like life in the city.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of the city (as I have described it) and the event landscape as distinct, opposed territories. They are better thought of as chiral twins or mirror images. They are intended as frameworks, counterbalanced starting points, offering different inflections and emphases to address a single constellation of complex issues we are confronted with today. Discussing the event landscape, we emphasize its titular mode of production and, in doing so, the ways an event-driven economy affects so much of our daily lives. However, the concepts of experience that circulate in the event landscape temper this emphasis, acting as a connective tissue to the historical image of the radical city, suggesting the possibility of that

image's appropriation—but also of its persistent potency. Discussing the city, we emphasize the tradition of radical urban thought I've invoked, but also underscore the condition of tension that characterizes it in the contemporary event landscape. The event landscape is in the city; the city is in the event landscape.

Working in the event landscape we find ourselves within, the question becomes: what position shall we take up in it? By inclining the practice of art towards its often ignored urban dimensions, by inclining the practice of urbanism towards its artistic ones, by cultivating their points of convergence, can we cultivate the city within the event landscape?

NOTES

1. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, England; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), 157.

2. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 188–89.

3. Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 48–49.

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