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SYSTEMS OF BELIEF

MICHAEL NED HOLTE ON PUBLIC FICTION

Public Fiction’s storefront sign, Los Angeles, 2014.

THIS STORY BEGINS somewhere other than the beginning.

It’s a hot summer night in Los Angeles, and the artist D’Elle Nogle is onstage accompanied by two big, restless dogs. Nogle is recounting the plot of Dawn of the Planet of the Apes, a barely obscure movie that has been playing in theaters all over the world for the past month. Her narration, or “shaggy-dog story” (as she describes it), is exciting—almost brutally so, with the blow-by-blow continuing for some forty minutes. Nogle’s abundant energy never wanes, but the audience crammed into the stuffy storefront space starts to get visibly nervous and grows swifter every minute the story continues. The rows of folding chairs were filled a long time ago, and the swelling crowd fills in the empty space behind the stage, sitting on the floor. Said stage is situated in the middle of the space, framed by an incongruously lavish red velvet curtain, and embellished by a dangling inflatable globe.

The audience is not only physically split in two but is also divided in another sense: Roughly half of it is here for a fierce comedy lineup including Maria Bamford and Byron Bowers; the rest, including many faces familiar to your narrator, are there mostly owing to their allegiance to the banner of Public Fiction. In humor-industry terms, Nogle was dying, whereas Bamford, who will eventually get her moment in the spotlight, kills. But this isn’t exactly the Laugh Factory. It’s a storefront in Highland Park, what Nogle is doing is in all likelihood art, and the inflatable globe (which gets knocked out of orbit during comic James Adomian’s set) is actually a sculpture by Amanda Ross-Ho (Untitled Sketch [BLUE MARBLE], 2014).

Public Fiction, an exhibition platform devised and directed by curator and designer Lauren Mackler, is hard to explain, but one thing you should know about it is that it is never just one thing. It’s a shape-shifter, having served as a museum—as in the Museum of Public Fiction—and a publisher, as well as a church, a secret restaurant, and, on this particular occasion, a comedy club. “Public Fiction takes form in print and space,” Mackler notes by way of introduction to The Church Issue, a publication accompanying the 2011 exhibition “The Free Church.” For this show, which she describes as “inspired by a rich history of cults and new religions in Los Angeles,” Mackler organized installations, rituals, musical performances, and “cult dinners,” all punctuated by Jason Manley’s room-filling sculpture spelling out the word BELIEVE, a dare in glowing red neon. A compendium of texts and images related to this elaborate program, The Church Issue is visually delectable, eclectic, and kind of elusive, like most of Public Fiction’s endeavors. Reflecting on the unassumingly headquarters that Manley’s work barely squeezed itself into, Mackler muses:

The physical space, a storefront in Highland Park, gives a site to experiment with the topic at hand in real-time. It also allows the city of Los Angeles to become the platform, the place where all this is happening or where it could be. LA is hardly a neutral environment. As a fantasy and as a real place, it exerts a powerful pull on the imagination. It’s the promised “land of dreams,” the unclaimed west. It is decaying glamour, mysterious, magical, strange, artificial, and beautiful. It’s failed and it’s temporary. Everything here seems on the verge of ending (earthquakes, raptures, a failed economy) or beginning.

Speaking of which: Mackler founded Public Fiction in 2010, soon after her arrival in Los Angeles from the East Coast—she has previously called Paris and New York home—and following her MFA studies in graphic design at RISD. In the subsequent five years, Public Fiction has served as a surprisingly expansive stage for the Los Angeles art world and has arguably been an actual center in a notoriously sprawling
social geography supposedly without one. While Public Fiction is irrefutably Mackler’s project, exemplifying the auteur theory borrowed from 1960s cineastes and repurposed more recently in curatorial studies, her platform in many ways resembles a movie’s production, in that it’s an inherently collaborative, low-budget affair with a large and surprisingly star-studded cast—from artists fresh out of grad school to elder statesman Allen Ruppersberg, who in 2014 handed over the keys to his legendary installation A’s Grand Hotel, 1971, for a Public Fiction reboot. Mackler has wrangled into her projects writers like Claudia Rankine and Benjamin Weissman, bands like Lucky Dragons, and curator peers like Andrew Berardini and Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, all significant figures in the Southern California art ecology. And the credit scroll often transcends local boundaries, gathering Matthew Brannon, Anne Carson, Leslie Hewitt, and Japandroid, among dozens worth name-checking. Yet while broadly participatory, Public Fiction has been remarkably consistent in its evocation of a singular sensibility, which is to say, Mackler’s.

Following a string of early Happening-like events—including an iteration of Dave Muller’s occasional Three Day Weekend project, an important Los Angeles precedent, in 2012—Mackler has repeatedly asked her claim on the exhibition format as a site of inquiry, favoring a yawning three months as a standard length. At times her attraction to narrative is more readily found in its props than its plots, though she is particularly drawn to episodic sequencing. A 2013 exhibition organized with curator Alexandra Gaty, “The Stand In (or A Glass of Milk),” resituated its trove of objects—by an assembly of artists including Trisha Baga, Scott Benzel, Marieta Chirulescu, and Barbara Kasten—in three distinct arrangements or “phases,” one per month. In the first phase, all of the work faced in the same direction, oriented toward the viewer entering the space—a potentially flat-footed approach to display that was in fact sculptural and pictorial at once, subtly layered and decidedly disarming. (Moving through the gallery, one also had the rare pleasure of seeing the backs of many of the paintings, which here were placed on freestanding displays.)

In her exhibitions, Mackler tends to embrace the kind of work that Michael Fried, writing for Artforum nearly fifty years ago, derided as “theatrical.” She is also interested in actual theater, of the “break a leg” variety, and the word stage is never far removed from her approach—neither is whatever’s backstage, for that matter. Her exhibitions often incorporate performance and are sometimes built around it. Despite her insistence on maintaining a casual tone, Mackler’s projects are not necessarily easy to digest. They make demands on time and attention at a moment when one can scroll through an exhibition (or rather, its online surrogate) with the swipe of a finger. Some, Mackler and fellow travelers included, might evidently welcome the “extended situation[s]” Fried bemoaned in “Art and Objecthood,” in light of the collective attention deficiency that characterizes the current paradigm. If that sounds like a naive antidote to life in the digital age, predicated on an antiquated attentiveness to “reality” over the virtual, it helps to remember the name Public Fiction. Mackler’s enterprise assumes the coexistence of the real and the virtual, the way a street in Los Angeles can also serve as a location for a car commercial, and embraces the slippage between these states. Likewise, the Museum of Public Fiction is at once a localized store of the whole city (whether real or imagined), a doubling that “allows the city of Los Angeles to become the platform, the place where all this is happening or where it could be.” For her as for the artists who created the endlessly extended situations that dismayed Fried, space is already textual, already permeated by “decaying glamour, mysterious, magical, strange, artificial, and beautiful”—and like any text, it’s “hardly a neutral environment.”

Public Fiction, the journal, started alongside the Museum of Public Fiction—as pretext, rather than aftermath. The publication that accompanies (or, more typically, follows) the exhibition is just as important as the exhibition itself. “Originally I was thinking the space was a way to manifest content for the publication, and now I see that the research for the publication creates the exhibition, the exhibition creates the content for the journal, this interplay of experimenting and producing,” notes Mackler. This sense of reciprocity finds its lineage in 1960s Conceptual art impresario Seth Siegelbaum, whose early shepherding of artists such as Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, and Carl Andre helped muddle the easy distinctions between the visual and verbal, art and its documentation in the so-called Xerox Book of 1968, and elsewhere. Public Fiction’s contribution to Made in L.A. 2014 contextualized works by Becket Flannery and other artists within an homage to Siegelbaum—an office desk and Eames chair that recalled his first exhibition. The journal also featured a letter from New York office, Mackler also pointed to Wallace Berman’s Zenner as a significant influence, and indeed that occasional publication commingling art and literature was distributed in an expansive circle in and beyond Berman’s Los Angeles scene at the loose intersection of the Ferus Gallery and Beat aesthetics. Among other inherited histories, Public Fiction draws an updated version of this social-aesthetic Venn diagram.

MACKLER’S ARRIVAL in Los Angeles and the quick rise of the Museum of Public Fiction coincided with the apparent free fall of the Museum of Contemporary Art, which had served as the nucleus of the city’s contemporary art community for more than three decades: In many ways, smaller spaces like Mackler’s storefront museum filled important gaps in exhibition making and event programming as the bigger institution staggered and stumbled. Public Fiction’s fellow microinstitutions—similarly inhabiting storefronts and other shabby environs, and sharing an economy and ethos—include the Los Angeles Museum of Art (not to be confused with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art), founded by artist Alice Könitz in 2012; the Underground Museum, founded by artist Noah Davis the same year; and the influential Machine Project, founded by Mark Allen in 2004. Given the relatively low overhead and lowered stakes, not to mention a refreshing absence of administrative bureaucracies and status-conscious boards, these enterprises tend to be far more nimble than the bigger museums. (Historically, LA MoCA has identified itself as “The Artist’s Museum,” but Public Fiction has worked with nearly as many artists in a given year.) Inevitably, and for all
the same reasons, these tiny institutions serve a much smaller constituency than established ones; in many cases, the people behind an endeavor such as Public Fiction know much of their audience personally. In fact, the artists participating in many of these upstart projects are much of the audience, producing a sense of genuinely vital collaborative energy, a centripetal force pulling things together.

That these spaces are mushrooming should be no surprise given the overwhelming number of artists and adjacent players who have been marginalized by the larger museums and commercial gallery system. The past five years has seen significant developments in Los Angeles’s art scene. From cocooning at LA MoCA—not exactly a wake-up of the city’s entire cultural landscape (which is too polyvalent and diversified to be completely shaken), but a palpable ramping up, with a steady influx of artists young and not so young, curators, and satellites of big-wheel international galleries, as well as the opening of a gleaming new museum filled with treasures by familiar blue-chip names. Like any allegory of progress (which is to say, the allegory you have probably read in the New York Times or elsewhere), this one benefits some and harms others; inevitably, it’s those already closest to the ground who find themselves on the downside. The guy who paid for and put his own name on that new museum made his fortune in real estate, and not coincidentally, the long-standing narrative of cheap, abundant space for Los Angeles artists is quickly becoming mythology rather than fact.

But the micro- and macroinstitutions cannot really be diagrammed in terms of margin and center—their worlds are thoroughly imbricated, even if antagonistic in some respects. Public Fiction participated in a rather contentious exhibition at the Geffen Contemporary at MoCA, titled “Transmission LA: AV Club” (organized by Beastie Boy Mike D), and received support and encouragement from Jeffrey Deitch, who presided over LA MoCA during said self-fall. Mackler’s project was also included in the biennial Made in L.A. 2014 (curated by Connie Butler and me) at the Hammer Museum, and in that context presented an ambitious show-within-the-show in six episodes, each pairing an artist and writer in a kind of blind collaboration, with a parallel exhibition program (including the aforementioned night of stand-up comedy) in the Museum of Public Fiction storefront. In March, Public Fiction will make a return appearance at LA MoCA, as the second installment in a “storefront” series organized by chief curator Helen Molesworth. Such endeavors beam a spotlight on another kind of reciprocal relationship, this one existing between institutions that are, I’d argue, different in degree rather than in kind. The nesting of a smaller museum within a bigger one reflects the significance of scraper microinstitutions like Public Fiction as important forums for emerging artists and unruly ideas—particularly ones that might not flourish in the more carefully plotted pageantry of commercial galleries and art-fair booths. At the same time, the upstarts often have agendas that are not so distinct from the ever-expansive platforms of accredited museums, which for years have extended far beyond the exhibition format to include dance, stand-up comedy, dinners (secret or not), and so on.

“The institution is inside of us,” Andrea Fraser succinctly noted in this magazine. It’s well beyond the scope of this essay to reconsider the history of institutional critique and how it’s become a mode fully assimilated into—and, in many cases, eagerly welcomed by—the museum. But it does seem necessary to ask how or in what sense Public Fiction is a critical enterprise, since it is so obviously and emphatically an institutional one. Mackler suggests we should understand Public Fiction not merely as an institution but as a specifically Los Angeles institution. The city is her site; it is the context in which she landed in 2010, and the context for her audience, too. Any city’s economy is driven by a complex network of links between civic improvement, real estate speculation, global finance, and cultural activity—the economy is, of course, also an institution. All of these things become intertwined in the name of progress, and progress manifests as upheaval in the built environment: incessant construction, noise, dust, the future promises of starchitecture and “artist lofts”—all the hallmarks of “development.” That far-from-neutral territory is the space that Public Fiction reflexively inhabits.

But there is another register: Los Angeles as a “land of dreams”—the ongoing fever dream of boundless opportunity Norman M. Klein describes in his potent allegory _The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory_—a seductive predevelopment ruin, a place of “decaying glamor” where artists, curators, critics, and, yes, even museum builders can thrive, where an art community can resist hermetic provincialism with ever more audacious gambits. Los Angeles might in fact be a place where artists and their communities can thrive, if only for about fifteen minutes more. The new Los Angeles you keep reading about—the postindustrial metropolis as hotbed of unfettered artistic activity and ancillary diversions, accessible to those who possess neither trust funds nor day jobs—is, in some fundamental way, already history, a ruin in its own right. It is this history that Mackler’s situations collectively conjure, not as something we can return to, but as an allegory of sorts—episodic, participatory, and fun but also haunting and fragmented, which is to say, as a public fiction. It’s a script that includes alternative endings. Public Fiction doesn’t ask us to BELIEVE in the possibility of returning to a prelapsarian age, but rather in a future that is not yet foreclosed. It asks us, perhaps, to believe in the very possibility of public fiction, a creative enterprise that is networked but not wholly privatized, capitalized, developed. Whatever such an institution might look like in the future, it surely will not resemble the bohemias of the past.

To say Public Fiction is in and of Los Angeles, I should point out, is not to say that it’s local. Like any successful contemporary institution, Public Fiction may be rooted in one place, but its sensibility is global. The platform has already revealed itself as remarkably adept at working peripatetically, with exhibitions staged or scheduled in Turin, Rome, and New York, as well as subcontracted curatorial work at Los Angeles museums. Within the past year or so, Mackler has transposed Ruppberg’s hotel from Sunset Boulevard to the Frieze Art Fair, staged “This Sentence,” an exhibition that gradually accumulated over the three months of summer at China Art Objects Galleries; and presented the photographs of Anthony Lepore at a bikini factory owned by the artist’s father. Unlike so many global cultural brands as the Guggenheim and the Louvre, however, Mackler’s is currently lacking a mother ship. In 2015, she ended her lease on the storefront in Highland Park, a neighborhood better known for its canals than its cultural capital, but gentrifying quickly. As of this writing, the Museum of Public Fiction is history, yet Mackler is still operating under the banner of Public Fiction, an institutional entity as open as any script not yet written in this particular land of dreams.

_Michael Ned Holte is an independent curator and codirector of the art program at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles._