

Looking Back - and Forth

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ABC No Rio Dinero is in large measure a conventional victory story. A militant polemic and direct action are rewarded with an accommodation by power, then the fun begins. In truth, ABC No Rio was an accident, an infamous fortuity born of a combination of autonomous artistic enterprise and the political calculations of municipal administration. It is certainly a classic American instance of the dynamic of resistance and negotiation which marks the evolution of left social centers in Europe, as described by the analysts of Universidad Nómada. ((See the May, 2008 issue of the online zine transform.eipcp.net, "Monster Institutions" edited by Universidad Nómada.))

ABC was a project emanating from a group of New York artists who by 1979 were already being called "punks" in the press. The group was Colab (aka Collaborative Projects), specialists in "guerrilla art exhibitions," i.e., shows in non-commercial, non-institutional venues.

Some in our crowd were much given to conspiracy theories, and dark intimations about the Machiavellian motions of power. Reports of the Trilateral Commission were standard references. My own conspiracy theory about the "accident" of ABC is that when Joseph Beuys visited our exhibition during the street demonstration phase, ((Beuys came during his U.S. lecture tour, brought to the site by the art dealer Ronald Feldman, and also likely informed by John Halpern who was making a film of Beuys and had launched a similar abortive artist occupation some weeks earlier)) it became clear to the city government - (it was mayor Edward Koch's, a gay-friendly Greenwich Village pol, and very savvy about the uses of culture) - that the potential for an aggressive, internationally networked cultural political movement in New York City was present. Beuys had already been a catalyst in the formation of the German Green party, which, unlike the U.S. Greens has substantial electoral support. Throughout the 1970s he had propagandized a nomadic Free International University, and helped to establish several branches. The U.S. tour of the most famous politicized artist in the world was closely attended and much discussed.

These facts being known, then, clearly it would be only political common sense to make an immediate accommodation with those who were stepping militantly in this direction, ((The other most obvious consideration for city officials was that the site of the occupation on Delancey Street was a property which had been condemned for Robert Moses' crosstown expressway project. This was never built, the properties remained vacant, and the political wounds of this disaster continued to fester in 1979.)) that is, in the time-honored manner of NYC politics, to buy off the activists with city jobs. Before they had the notion to link up with German Autonomes, Dutch Kraak, etc,...

That's my explanation of a move by the city administration that has always puzzled me. We were rather abruptly given the opportunity to do what we only said we wanted to - to run a gallery, a salon of expositions, a proto-social center in vacant city-owned property.

Of course it was too much work! As artists, we were flighty creatures (i.e., really concerned primarily with our art, not administration), and quickly became exhausted by the many demands of running the space. So we handed it off to another bunch, the Pool collective of dancers, performers, and artists.

This turns out to have been a key decision... Many other Lower East Side cultural

institutions are deeply reliant upon single committed individuals for their long-term survival. With the handover, a tradition of collective administration was established, a bureaucratic ethic which has continuously informed ABC.

The leaders of the Pool group persevered in the face of right-wing culture war funding cuts, and waged an unceasing campaign against eviction. While the city higher-ups had ceded ABC use of the building, the agency responsible remained reflexively resolute in their intention to evict and move the building towards sale into private hands. Only a meticulous dossier of the city's mishandled responsibilities - their cumulative illegal doings - forestalled the municipal lawyers from succeeding with eviction.

The next administration after Pool's was a collective of anarchist punk rockers who had been booking matinee shows for young people into the space for years. In the later 1980s and into the '90s, ABC in a sense fulfilled its destiny - the place became an organizing center for the Lower East Side squatting movement. ((The best recent texts on this movement are in the anthology Clayton Patterson, et al. eds., *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (Seven Stories Press, NY, 2007). Seth Tobocman's *War in the Neighborhood* (Autonomedia, NY, 1999) is a rich, militant, thoughtful graphic novel by a leading artist of the squatter movement.)) This movement militantly resisted the city-abetted gentrification of the East Village. Mayor Rudolph Guiliani's police pulled out nearly all the stops - short of shooting people. They stormed occupied houses and sent a tank into the streets. Beatings of activists were common. ((More lawsuits for police brutality were settled with cash payments than activists convicted of any crimes. Like many big cities, New York police beat, shoot and intern first, and answer questions in court later.))

All this was of a piece with a nascent international movement. Militant urban squatting initiatives had arisen and cohered in Berlin, Amsterdam, London and many other cities besides New York. ((Most of this information is scattered online. The group SqEK (Squatting Europe Kollektive) has recently published *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles* (Minor Compositions/Autonomedia, 2013), and more are coming fast.)) ABC was a center, and a significant node for organizing this movement. This is why, at one point when the city moved (again) to evict ABC, demonstrators appeared at the door of the U.S. embassy in Prague.

Finally, at the height of this struggle, the city again made a deal. Only a quiescent resistance could set the stage for the next phase of hyper-gentrification, so the squeaky wheel of the Lower East Side got greased. Many of the remaining squatters gained their buildings as cooperative housing. ABC was given control of the 156 Rivington Street building, and began the long process of renovating it as a community cultural facility. ((The film *156 Rivington*, by Andrea Meller (Greenhouse Pictures, 2002) tells this story.))

In the last few years, ABC has entered into an extended phase of fundraising, an exhausting process. Still, the place has evolved into an international style left social center in the era after state socialism. ABC includes producing collectives in silkscreening and photography and a library of radical culture journals and zines. ABC has hosted Books Through Bars, Food Not Bombs and Critical Mass, the viral international projects in information, food, and cycling respectively. ABC was an organizing and convergence center for the large demonstrations that marked the global justice movement of the early 2000s. All this while maintaining a full public program of art, music and poetry.

ABC No Rio today is both an outcome and a promise. It is the result of a fecund moment when cultural and social modes of being mingled, when art could make a new political space even as older visions of social justice died. In 1980 ABC was a candle flickering just beyond the walls. Today it is one of many bonfires burning brightly, signals of an age we

have yet to know.

- Madrid, August 2008

This is the afterword to the ABC No Rio catalogue excerpts posted online at:
98bowery.com