

The Highlights - Interview with Michelle Grabner

MIEKE MARPLE: As stated in the history of The Suburban you and your husband, Brad Killam, were supremely dissatisfied with the stagnant state of the Chicago art scene and so, with some precedents in mind, you started an exhibition space, The Suburban, in the garage of your suburban home in Oak Park, Illinois. The unusual scale and domestic location of this space frustrate conventional notions of what a gallery should be physically (i.e., what it should look like) and professionally (i.e., how it should be run). I think that many people view the gallery as this virginal ground zero with white walls that have the ability to efface the politics of a space. However, when you enter a family's home to view an exhibition in their garage the illusion of exhibition space as neutral territory is disturbed if not totally dismantled. This is only one of the many aspects of The Suburban that I greatly admire and it is one of the aspects that I value most about my artist-run space, The Studio, which is located in a warehouse with dozens of other studios. Do you think you could you expand on this point and perhaps talk about some of the other ways that The Suburban challenges and critiques conventional exhibition practice.



The Suburban, Winter 2008. Photo Courtesy of Michelle Grabner.

MICHELLE GRABNER: True. The Suburban offers very little in real estate but it looms large as a site that believes in artists and their ideas. Ideally I hope The Suburban is comparable to the proverbial sketchbook. And I would frame projects at The Suburban as a logical extension of artist's studio practices—a site where artists negotiate every raw aspect of an idea. No curator, no preparator, no dealer, no money. The Suburban offers a small audience of intelligent and articulate viewers. It also comes with safety features such as its proximity to my home complete with kids and a dog. And of course it is located in the unfashionable suburbs. Most simply, The Suburban is an argument that favors artists and their thinking, and not their careers.

The Suburban is certainly a child of institutional critique. Unlike many 'alternative' or 'independent' spaces today that are based in careerist pursuits, we here at the Suburban are old (schooled in the '80s) and are gratefully imprinted with the virtues of critique. Yet pragmatics also plays a large part in The Suburban. It is built into the economics and daily life of a working household. Beginning our 10th year, we have hosted over 125 projects.

I am currently embarking on a book that will commemorate The Suburban's first ten years. I am not interested in fetishizing The Suburban as a place but instead organizing a text that underscores its same values. I am inviting the artists that have done projects here to contribute writing, theories, and documents that I will reproduce in print. I am honored to be dedicating my sabbatical year to this project. I was inspired by Susan Morgan and Thomas Lawson's *Real Life Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects 1979-1994* and of course Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz's exemplar *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*. Needless to say the bar is set high.

MM: I think that modeling an exhibition space after the artist's studio rather than the museum is a great way to highlight and question practices related to the display of art, practices that are often taken for granted. One of the beliefs that I think is ingrained in the exhibition of art is that the exhibition space (museum, gallery, etc.) functions as a receptacle for art that has reached a state of completion (as opposed to art in a studio that remains in flux), and this belief implies two main conceptions, or misconceptions, that people have of art. The first is that a work of art has the potential to reach a final, unchanging state, and the second is that the definitive place of the finished work is the work itself, that is, that the work does not change in meaning when it gets bought or loaned and shown in other exhibition spaces.

It also often expected for art to be portable because, obviously, art created in a studio must

enter the outside world in order to participate in a discourse. However, by having an exhibition space that is closer to a sketchbook or, perhaps, a rotating artist's studio, it is not the art that becomes portable (and hence finished) but the context. Although the actual Suburban is stationary, the space, as you said, invites artists to fill it with their ideas, ideas that are allowed to remain in flux instead of being fixed. This, ultimately, gives the space a kind of new identity with every new artist, so it can even be said that the space itself is constantly changing, resembling more of a dialogue than a statement. I think that having The Suburban inside a residence helps achieve this since it is the nature of a home, especially one with a growing family, to be very dynamic. But I am curious, not only as to how you choose the artists you show but also as to how comfortable the artists feel embodying a space like The Suburban and allowing permutations of an idea to be relocated from, say their studio, to an exhibition space for public display? I'm sure that the experience has been different with every artist, but maybe you could share some of your experiences.

MG: Yesterday we opened a project by David Reed and one by Rochelle Feinstein. David took the opportunity to show a selection of drawings in the smaller of our two spaces. These drawings are pages of complex notes that he generates before he makes his paintings. This is the first time that he exhibited the drawings without the resulting paintings, and he was curious to assess the outcome. Rochelle on the other hand simply mounted a terrific exhibition of her new work. Rochelle also happens to be my champion. She is an inspiring teacher and she has always navigated the art world on her own terms. So to have her near is always heartening.

Last spring Katharina Grosse spent a week here with her air compressor. The end result was new to Katharina who typically works in large volumes of space. The Suburban's two small spaces resulted in a new and compressed vocabulary of color, gesture, and space for her abstract lexicon. Her painting dissolved the orientation of the negligible interior architecture, presenting the viewer with vertigo. So Mieke you are right in noting that every artist that takes on a project here engages it uniquely. At times we even get artists who ask to employ the yard, the house, or the roof of The Suburban instead of the 'proper' project spaces. We do our best to be accommodating.

To answer your question regarding selecting artists I would say that we modestly invite artists who naturally enter our lives. I do a lot of traveling and teaching outside of Chicago, and that seems to be the most common way in which we come to know and thus invite artists. We have never invited an artist who we haven't first met. And everyone who takes on a project here understands its proximity to a home and family life. But it is the generosity of the artists that make The Suburban special. The Suburban is simply a momentary custodian of an artist's postulate.

A few years ago we stopped inviting or accepting proposals from Chicago-based artists

simply because this city has many good alternative and independently run artist spaces. We thought that it would be best to contextualize Chicago with artists from outside of the city. That has meant hosting artists from Milwaukee to St Louis, Melbourne to Lisbon.



Opening for Dusadee Huntrakul, Dec 2007. Photo Courtesy of The Studio.

MM: The Suburban is a site that is 'pro-artist and anti-curator' in an effort, I gather, to allow the artist greater control in the display of their work so that it is, ultimately, less compromised by institutional curation. Do you view your exhibitions as collaborations between yourself, since you are also an artist, and the artists you invite to show or are they the singular efforts of the artists? And back to the beginning quote, how do you view the relationship between curator and artist as different from an artistic collaboration? Is the former a synthesis of ideas, which again implies a kind of finality, and the latter closer to a dialogue, something more continuous? To put more blatantly, what is so wrong with curators?

MG: I don't see projects here as a collaborative endeavor. Nor do I see it as an extension of my own studio practice. I must admit that sometimes I try the entire project on as 'sculpture.' Not sculpture as art activism or social art practice, but as formal, static, and discrete. I think I can get away with this because the spaces are intimate and vitrine-like and the architecture of the small gallery is object like. Anyway, this type of thinking is purely hypothetical, and it helps me consider the complexities and pitfalls of contemporary object making.

So 'yes,' the projects are the sole responsibility of the artists. For example, we never ask an artist to show a particular work or body of work. As a result, we are often surprised by artist's projects, but we never intervene. Instead we do our best to facilitate even the most unusual proposals. Typically artists have a very good idea about what they want to do and which of the two spaces they want to engage. Yet sometimes it takes several years to settle on a project and a time. Rochelle Feinstein and David Reed have been talking about doing a project here for the last three years.

In regards to curators, let's face it, they are a drag. There are so few curators who are true stewards of art and ideas. Most negotiate in artists and personalities. It all looks very sexy, and it probably is given the rise in curatorial programs popping up in the academies. But my measure of a true curator is when you don't see their faces or names plastered in the press, but instead you are presented with art and the thesis they are championing. I appreciate Lane Relyea's Rolodex scenario. In *Artforum* he reviewed Francesco Bonami's *Universal Experience* show at the MCA, stating, 'International curators like Bonami have achieved dominance because of their power to set the artworld's master checklist, the seemingly exhaustive inventory from which we each download our supposedly 'personal' artscapes. In our age of deregulated, free-market global capitalism, the canon may have collapsed, but in its place has risen only the curator's Rolodex, the artworld's iPod writ large.' Emerging artists today have it rough on many fronts. But having to secure their way into a curator's pocket must be a grand distraction, albeit a prerequisite to the big game. I say 'off with their heads.' With very few exceptions curators are predictable and boring. Artists (and even dealers these days) are much more interesting. The Suburban just doesn't make curators a part of the equation.

MM: I'd like to return to the role of alternative spaces, starting with the attention given by *Artforum* to Pauline, a gallery opened by the UCLA graduate student Mateo Tannatt in the living room of his Hollywood apartment, which was included in the magazine's Best of 2007 for the city of Los Angeles. What I found interesting about its mention in the *Artforum* article was how the author introduced the space as one of positive consequences of the art market boon. I guess that the question that I am leading up to is this: how do you view the role of the alternative space, and specifically The Suburban, in relationship to the larger art market? How much influence do you think is exerted by these establishments that lie more on the periphery of the mainstream art world? Have you noticed any sort of change in the behavior of institutions or otherwise in response to The Suburban? Or, in a related question, can you think of any precedents established by alternative spaces that then became common conduct for larger institutions?



The Suburban. Photo Courtesy of Michelle Grabner

MG: Before I launch into your question regarding the relationship between alternative spaces and the market I just want to take a moment to appreciate *Artforum* for printing Robert Storr's response (January 2008 issue) to the criticism aimed at him and his 2007 Venice Biennale by fellow curators Bonami, Okwui Enwezor, and Jessica Morgan (September 2007). It was especially welcoming to read Storr's pro-artist rebuttal, pinning his classical curatorial position against the newer curatorial breed of agenda-driven provocateurs and 'fun-fest' originators.

But that soap opera aside, I see the market-bullish or bearish-as a nonfactor when I contemplate the virtues of *The Suburban*. Realistically I understand and accept that the market impacts and shapes the entire art landscape right now but I also believe *The Suburban* stands outside of its frame. *The Suburban* is literally too small and too far off the map to merit the attention of artworld players. To be honest it is only artists who pay

attention to what we do here. Ten years and nearly 150 artist projects later many Chicago-based curators have yet to find their way to us. I am not serving up a plate of sour grapes here. Those who come to see projects at The Suburban and those who don't bother are a good measure of who really cares about artists and their projects and those who don't.

I think the influence that independent or alternative spaces have on the market or on institutions is null. In Chicago we have no shortage of these types of spaces. They provide the city with youthful energy and are perfect testing sites to square off against other recent MFAs from other schools. But rarely do these type of spaces yield quality work or mature ideas. However, the Museum of Contemporary Art started a program of one-month exhibitions with local emerging artists called 12x12. It was the museum's way of keeping pace with the city's numerous independents. So I need to amend my position of 'null.' I guess it all depends on critical mass.

Precedents for these new spaces are most likely the varied non-profit spaces of the past. And a handful of these important archetypal non-profit spaces have become institutions in their own right: spaces such as White Columns, Apex Art, Artists Space, and LACE, to name a few. While many others have long since disappeared: Chicago's Randolph Street Gallery and NAME. I think the increasing number of alternative and independent spaces corresponds with the growing numbers of visual artists today. Annual bumper crops of MFAs and a perversely flush art market give these spaces and the artists affiliated with them career currency, community, and if they are lucky, a mention in *Artforum*. Yet many of these spaces are short-lived, because they don't think through the freedom inherent in the nature of independent spaces. Most often they cling to the same criteria of success that commercial galleries employ: attention from the press, from international curators, and from collectors. Personally I think more mid-career artists should open these types of spaces. Now that would really shake things up.

MM: I'm not sure if what you wrote is entirely depressing or liberating, but I find your motivation for running a space like The Suburban fascinating, since you are not driven by visions of transforming the art world. I was recently discussing with some friends Bennett's 'Exhibitionary Complex,' an idea based on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* that basically sites the museum as a disciplinary space. Positions in power design the museum (which is often connected to other systems of power) to reinforce good behavior in its visitors by establishing an internalized regulator (i.e., how one knows not to touch the work or walls without ever been told by the museum), in addition to employing a system of rewards (i.e., feeling cultured or affirmed when one feels accepted by the museum and feeling alienated or stupid otherwise). Furthermore, the theory proposes that power structures allow their subjects the illusion of just enough freedom and subjective individuality to remain complacent. Now this is depressing! Not to mention how it can affect one's view of

institutional critique and the roles of artists such as Andrea Fraser and Michael Asher, and when you think about all of the non-profit or alternative spaces that you mentioned that have now become as institutional as MoMA or LACMA, some of these theories seem to ring true. I guess what I admire so much about The Suburban is that you do not propose the space as an institutional critique; your intentions are not to redefine or reform the roles and behavior of artists or curators in the mainstream art market. However, while clearly sales, press, or institutional idealism does not drive The Suburban, it must be driven by something and to me that something seems to be a sense of community. The formation of a community, however small, around art, and hence one that is comprised mostly of artists and family members, seems to be one of the central motivations behind The Suburban. But what I love about that (and perhaps I am still just a student with too much idealism) is that in fact the only time change seems to occur from the bottom up is when it occurs at an everyday level in very localized communities, at least this is the argument put forth by Michel de Certeau in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Anyway, I would love to hear about the community that has formed around The Suburban as well as any advice that you would give to someone like myself who has similar goals for my own alternative space, The Studio.

MG: Community is a fair question. But I am not sure if I know the answer because even after ten years I am not convinced that a proper community has announced itself (which might not be a bad thing.) Or conversely, its community is always being refigured, and I just can't put a finger on it. What is certain and why I don't dwell on the question of community is that I am an unyielding supporter and enthusiastic viewer of every single project. So with Brad and the kids we have a solid community of five. That is really enough. Yet to further flush out your question I would speculate that there are probably two distinct communities. First is the amorphous, far-reaching group of artists who know of The Suburban and laud its artist-centered core: those who have shared values or a shared experience of the yellow house in Oak Park. This is a wildly diverse group of artists with little in common besides The Suburban. Unlike say Orchard or Reena Spaulings, and endless other spaces that have a cliquish, narrow demographic, The Suburban is breathier in this sense of community. The second supporting group is comprised of students. The Suburban automatically operates as a type of practicum for many of my graduate students.

Finally, I am not interested in the alternative or in counterculture activities, and I do not see The Suburban as such. I believe in artists and I believe in the imagination. I also happen to delight in and value my mid-western, middle class, middle-age life with a mortgage and three kids. Voila: The Suburban. So when it comes to advice for The Studio or other independent space it comes down to the constant negotiation of belief, resources, and a curious imagination. Just don't let a current issue of *Artforum* or promises from an international curator confine your imagination.

