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It's about Time

Creative placemaking and performance analytics

SARAH WILBUR

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INTRODUCTION
CREATIVE PLACEMAKING, ASCENDING

In 2010, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the lone arts philanthropic arm of the US Federal Government, published a report coining the term 'creative placemaking' and began to expand programmatic support for arts projects wherein 'partners from the public, private, non-profit, and community sectors shape the physical and social charter of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities' (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010: 3). Considered by arts policy critics as the crowning achievement of then NEA Chair Rocco Landesman and Deputy Chair Joan Shigekawa,[1] this rapidly ascending philanthropic discourse unites a historically unprecedented number of institutional investors in the instrumentalization of art and culture toward civic, social, economic and environmental goals. Since its inception in 2011, the NEA's Our Town grant programme has supported 256 'place-based' arts interventions in all fifty states with funds totalling more than $21 million).[2] Combined with millions of dollars granted through ten-year funding conglomerate ArtPlace,[3] this proliferation of public and private institutional investments constitutes an ever-expanding catalogue of opportunities for US artists, who are increasingly being called upon to cooperate with an army of institutional intermediaries differentially invested in the galvanizing rubric of 'place'.

The 'place' in 'creative placemaking' is a highly contested prospect. A glance at NEA funded projects reveals competing definitions that include projects organized around a geographical locus, a material edifice, a natural environment or an identitarian group. This rhetorical 'fuzziness' creates additional confusion around definitions of 'creativity' and the many uses to which art and artists may be put.[4] Grant programmes crowd together historically distinct cultural subfields under one giant philanthropic umbrella, forcing community-based art and public art to sit uncomfortably alongside market-driven efforts to hone 'creative cities', cultural tourism and workforce innovation. While there is no doubt that this institutionally constructed turn toward 'place' has significantly expanded resourcing to US artists and broadened the scope of federal investment in the arts beyond the non-profit 'fine' arts realm, 'creative placemaking' has fuelled major epistemological collisions between artists and institutional partners in practice.

CRITIQUING CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

'Placemaking' has its critics. Art, culture, and policy scholars have been quick to protest this paradigm as a discursive push by state and private philanthropic agencies to conflate US cultural interventions in ways that evaporate the political asymmetries that underpin multi-sector cooperation in the arts. These critiques are not unfounded, and they follow several threads.

For arts advocates with commitments to historically marginalized communities, 'placemaking' is nothing new. Artists aligned with US identitarian movements have been producing cultural interventions in local 'places' for decades, with minimal philanthropic or commercial recognition.[5] Anti-capitalist critics cite the collusion of 'place-based' arts projects with

[1] Landesman served as NEA Chair from 2009 to 2013 and Shigekawa as NEA Deputy/Interim Chair until the 2014 nomination of the current chair – Jane Chu – by President Barack Obama.

[2] For a list NEA Our Town funded projects, see Hutter (2014)

[3] ArtPlace is a ten-year placemaking' collaboration among fourteen foundations, eight federal agencies and six financial institutions. (See: references for website)

[4] For more on 'fuzzy' distinctions, see Gadwa (2013: 3).

[5] Arts activist Ruby Lerner challenged these neocolonialist assumptions earlier this year at the NEA's 'Beyond the Building' (NEA convening archive), 2015).

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neoliberal cultural development agendas wherein artists are invited to enter into infrastructurally decimated areas to 'clean up the mess that capitalism made.'[6] For these challengers, 'creative placemaking' functions as shorthand for economic development and casts participating artists as custodians of capitalist excess. Still other agnostics suggest that the urban planning underpinnings of 'place-based' programmes compound the already paternalistic relationship between philanthropic agents and artists-in-need. By agreeing to participate in development-oriented processes like 'visioning' and 'cultural asset mapping', artists accept false correlations between economic deficits and cultural ones in local communities.[7] Policy critics invested in counter-hegemonic cultural communities challenge the neocolonialist underpinnings of the discourse for reproducing assimilationist ideologies that underpin US exceptionalism writ large. This argument hinges on 'placemaking' as an institutionally-sanctioned form of "outreach", an effort to uncritically deploy outside artists into seemingly culturally bereft areas with zero concern for the classed and racialized politics of 'belonging' that have historically excluded certain residents from recognition as cultural producers in the public sphere.[8] Perhaps the most pervasive protest of 'creative placemaking' positions such interventions as philanthropic routes to gentrification, efforts by civic and economic developers to crowd out unwanted populations through 'comprehensive' community cultural development in the United States.[9] At their worst, 'place-based' arts projects dispossess socioeconomically disadvantaged populations and continue the hegemonic momentum of Euro-American cultural expansionism by outsourcing cultural production with a paternalistic, sometimes flagrant disregard for indigenous cultural circumstances.

OPTING IN, OPTING OUT FOR US ARTISTS

Wary of these risks, many artists simply opt *out* of participation in the 'placemaking' enterprise. But, given my larger preoccupation with policy and dance making as interdependent performances,[10] I want to consider how artists who choose to opt *in* negotiate the above-listed tensions by cooperating with multiple institutional and community liaisons, over time. In what follows, I challenge the a priori dismissal of 'creative placemaking' by practitioners and critics to demonstrate how these opportunities offer particular gains for socially engaged artists and targeted community participants. Keeping these instrumentalizing hazards foregrounded, I suggest an analytical redress that trades the funder-designated rubric of 'place' for *time* as a more potent index of political possibility within this budding US arts philanthropic discourse.

IT'S ABOUT TIME

'Creative placemaking' projects merit closer attention from performance critics on structural, material and temporal grounds. In contrast to the historic tendency among US philanthropists to channel funds directly to non-profit arts organizations, 'place-based' projects are municipally driven and co-administered through civic, non-profit and corporate institutions. This complex cross-sector coordination frequently expands project budgets well into six figures, which can correlate with increased economic supports for participating artists. Compared to the characteristic shortsightedness of project-based arts grantmaking in the US, many 'placemaking' residencies grant artists significantly elongated periods of engagement with local communities. These exceptional circumstances signal a crucial point of intervention for performance scholarship. Rather than study 'placemaking' residencies by way of the resultant product, I want to examine a local intervention as a cooperative cultural performance by tracking the temporally contingent interactions of artists, community members and institutional agents.[11] My performance analytic closely scrutinizes embodied interaction and duration across a year-long arts residency to uphold the axiomatic possibility that making 'place' takes *time*. This assumption challenges the future

[6] Lisa Solskolne (2015) co-founder of artist advocacy group Working Artists for a Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) is one of many anticapitalist critics espousing this view.

[7] For more on the 'creative continuum' approach and culturally sensitive understandings of 'creativity' among low and moderate income populations, see Jackson (2008).

[8] This point against placemaking as gentrification is forcefully argued in: Bedoya, Roberto (2013) Placemaking and the politics of belonging and dis-belonging. Grantmakers in the Arts Reader, 24, 20-21.

[9] Policy critic Roberto Bedoya has argued this repeatedly in print (2013) and in this 2013 Creative Time Summit presentation. www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvmG4D9ntpI. Accessed 10 May 2015.

[10] Just as this essay targets critical cooperation between artists, policymakers, elected officials, funders, commercial developers, non-profit organizers, community members and institutional liaisons, my dissertation (Wilbur, forthcoming) analyses dance 'making' as an interdependent exercise fuelled by differentially invested cultural agents and agencies.

[11] Dwight Conquergood's (2002) seminal ethnographic work on community cultural performances and Judith Butler's (2007) extended theorization of iterability as a repetitive and constitutive dimension of embodied action – capable of breaking social norms – inform these analytical manoeuvres.

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and product-oriented dimensions of both arts philanthropy and performance scholarship.

I am not the first performance researcher to study the embodied dynamics of 'place-based' arts interventions or the institutional investors that set such projects in motion. Paul Bonin-Rodriguez's (2015) recent study of 'placemaking' scenarios (pace Taylor 2003) casts artists as institutional *strategists* in a de Certeauian effort to avow the heightened leadership roles that artists perform within these complex partnerships. While I appreciate Bonin-Rodriguez's effort to cast artists as key players within the hegemonic exercise of US arts policy, I find the directionality of de Certeau's strategies–tactics binary too limited to capture the multi-faceted circulation of power that accompanies 'place-based' projects. To directly attend to the complex risks that artists face when translating the structural impositions of urban planners and economic developers, I align my approach with art historian Grant Kester's (2011) effort to show the dialogic and processual manoeuvring of artist collaboratives within neoliberal global cultural development discourse. Kester's argument for collaborative art making as a dialogic praxis trades autonomist neo-Marxist preoccupations with institutional 'exodus' for a Foucauldian understanding of collaborative art making as a governmental process, one shaped and reshaped by discursive interactions and relations. Germane to my concern with critiques of 'creative placemaking', Kester's work underscores the neocolonial roots of global planning and 'structural adjustment' policies while upholding artists' capacity to re-tool these co-optative dimensions in practice. Rather than approaching cultural development residences from an a priori assumption of imminent exploitation of artists or participants, Kester challenges critics to slow down and consider embodied interaction *over time* as a force shaping artists' capacity to manoeuvre within large bureaucratic systems. By studying cooperative time spent over the course of one federally funded 'creative placemaking' project on US domestic turf, I hope to shift foundational understandings about how artists and project participants challenge the mechanisms of capitalism through practical and direct cooperation with institutional agents (Kester 2011: 123). This cooperation is temporally contingent. It is about time.

By invoking analytic vocabulary focused on time and inter-subjective interaction, my goal is to spotlight how cultural agents dodge a priori institutional assumptions through deliberate and sustained cultural encounters. I now turn to Project Willowbrook, an NEA-funded 'creative placemaking' project, to demonstrate the political potential of time and embodied experience as a posteriori domains of knowledge production. Drawing upon project documentation and interviews with lead artists, community members and county administrators, I highlight three temporal registers by which the Willowbrook team (hereafter the team)[12] circumvented some of the deficit-based and future-oriented assumptions that underpin 'place-based' planning and philanthropy. I suggest that by collaboratively *stalling, spending* and *subcontracting* time, the team's iterative approach exposed and failed to faithfully reproduce institutional norms guarding 'creativity' and 'place'. By studying 'creative placemaking' as a cultural performance undergoing constant adjustment, I suggest the anti-choreographic possibility that collectively embodied solutions to institutional problems cannot be planned in advance.

[12] Team members include: Woo, photographer Alyse Emdur, translators Jesus Hermosillo and Dolores Dorantes, graphic designer Tiffanie Tran, LACAC administrators Erin Harkey and Letitia Fernandez Ivins, Willowbrook community members Pastor Glass, staff at the Watts Willowbrook Boys and Girls Club, Friends of the Willowbrook and A. C. Bilbrew Libraries, Concerned Citizens of Willowbrook, The Fellowship Baptist Church, neighbours Randie Hughes, Mac and McKenzie from Master K-9, Lafayette, Rachelle, Joheather, Bernardo, Sandy, Harry, the Willowbrook Seniro Center staff and residents, members of Tomorrow's Aeronautical Museum, the Compton Jr Posse and Charles Dickson.

STUDYING PROJECT WILLOWBROOK

> The Los Angeles County Arts Commission asked me to produce a 'visioning tool' for residents of Willowbrook – an unincorporated stretch of Los Angeles County between Watts and Compton – to communicate their hopes and dreams to planners. Instead, I produced a series of publications, events, and installations designed to make visible what was already there. The project was funded through an NEA program designed to spur 'Creative Placemaking'. I interpreted this to mean the ways that people invest their neighborhoods with care and meaning. In Willowbrook, a largely residential neighborhood (on the cusp of receiving a 'transformative' amount of investment from the

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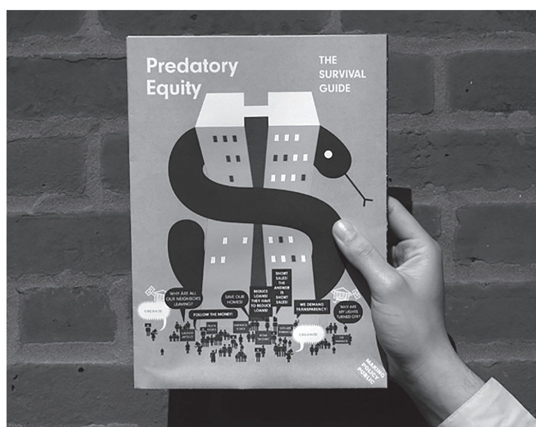
> County), a lot of this care and creativity was most visible in the backyards and driveways of people's private homes.
> Project Willowbrook lead artist/designer Rosten Woo (2015)

In 2011, Los Angeles-based artist Rosten Woo responded to a Call for Proposals issued by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission (LACAC) on behalf of their tripartite institutional partnership with non-profit organization LA Commons and the Office of Second District Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas. As Woo mentions in the above epigraph, his entrance into Project Willowbrook converged with a flood of infrastructural developments fuelled by the 2014 reopening of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Medical Campus, which closed under duress in 2007. A neighbourhood stereotypically portrayed by mass media as dis-invested, unsafe for travel and peppered with gang violence, Willowbrook is poised to receive commercial and private investments of more than $600 million in spending over the next ten years. As co-founder and former executive director for the New York-based non-profit Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), Woo's artistic practice deploys new urbanist visual communication strategies to expose the political implications of unjust laws and policy decisions (Woo, 2015). LACAC public art administrators chose Woo to lead the team due to his extensive experience retooling urban planning conventions toward politically progressive ends (fig. 1). Armed with a $100,000 NEA grant and a year-long timeline, county arts administrators enlisted Woo – whose formidable mediation skills seemed apt for the task – to design and implement an artistic interpretation of two institutionalized urban planning practices: 'visioning' and 'cultural asset mapping'.



■ Figure 1. Predatory Equity, an illustrated manual for surviving the NYC housing crisis, Center for Urban Pedagogy (2009). *Image courtesy of Rosten Woo*

CONVENTIONAL 'VISIONING', TRANSLATIONAL PRACTICES

Prior to the project launch, Woo's research into Willowbrook's city planning archives revealed the neighbourhood's vexed forty-year history of foiled 'visioning' exercises. Early discussions with community leaders, church ministers and longstanding residents exposed overwhelming local skepticism about these previous 'plans' and the capacity of institutional leaders to follow through on promised investments. Residents who spoke with the team expressed fears that proposed changes would result in significant displacement of residents via home demolitions and street resurfacing. At the start of Project Willowbrook, community members had just completed yet another conventional 'visioning' process led by civic leaders and planners from the internationally recognized urban design firm Gensler Design. This process yielded a list of proposed 'improvements' to Willowbrook's built environment, changes that were viewed by many residents as both ostentatious and unfeasible (undulating walkways were a notable highlight). Rather than reproduce another abstract prospectus through a series of 'top-down' public forums asking residents to imagine a future Willowbrook that did not exist, the team positioned the neighbourhood's history of failed 'visioning' as the conceptual launch point for their intervention. Over six months of face-to-face engagement, conversation, and participation in local cultural rituals, the team implemented a highly collaborative co-visioning process aimed at sharpening public awareness of the 'creative place' of Willowbrook, in the present tense.

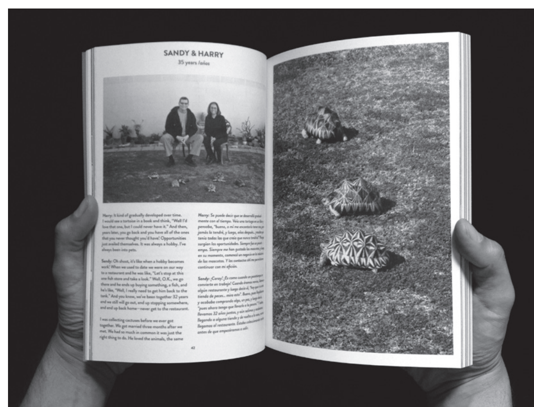
STALLING TIME

Wary of reproducing the culturally insensitive assumption that Willowbrook residents were somehow lacking 'creativity', the team traded

formal public meetings for direct participation in Willowbrook's everyday cultural life. As they walked and biked Willowbrook, block by block, the team took stock of everyday creative expression in gardens, classic cars and cultural collections spotted in the 'driveways and backyards' of local homeowners. They committed to an *experiential* understanding of Willowbrook's present-day cultural interactions – from the mundane to the spectacular – by participating in local festivals, church services and after-school programmes at the Boys and Girls Club. Their durational and participatory ethos introduced very few new cultural practices in the neighbourhood, effectively *stalling time* to expose the myopic vistas put in place by conventional 'visioning' exercises. Committed to deliberately failing to 'progress' toward Willowbrook's mythical 'future', the Project Willowbrook team instead challenged planners and elected officials to slow down and sharpen their *present* field of vision.

This iterative approach to community interaction built critical inroads between the team, county administrators and local residents. These relationships would prove integral to the design and curatorial strategies at play in Project Willowbrook. A second temporal hiccup worth studying is the team's response to LACAC's call to create an alternative 'cultural asset map' of the neighbourhood. Rather than fashion an abstract spatial grid of Willowbrook's static cultural objects, the team and residents *spent time* co-producing a series of alternative 'maps' – cultural events and texts – that spotlighted the creative contributions of Willowbrook's inhabitants (fig. 2).

■ Figure 2. Project Willowbrook invitation. Design Rosten Woo. *Photo Tiffanie Tran, (2013) Image courtesy of Rosten Woo/LA County Arts Commission.*



■ (right) Figure 3. The Willowbrook Book. *Photo Elyse Emdur, (2013) Image courtesy of Rosten Woo/LA County Arts Commission.*

SPENDING TIME

Institutionally constructed maps, as Susan Leigh Foster (2011) reminds us, have historically served to eradicate cultural and corporeal contingencies by objectifying spatial relations and promoting the cultivation of wealth for those in power.[13] In urban planning, conventional 'cultural asset mapping' processes reproduce this trend by staging a series of public meetings orchestrated by elected officials, economic developers, and planners. Cast as collaborators, local residents are invited to identify the cultural markets, fairgrounds, heritage sites and objects deemed valuable to community life. Planners ultimately harvest these ideas by producing a spatial representation, a 'map' to steer future economic development, generally by suggesting changes to the built environment.[14] As the commissioning body for Project Willowbrook, LACAC's call for an alternative vision invited the team to re-route this top-down process (fig. 3). How they spent their time doing so is significant.

Stepping out of county buildings and onto dozens of Willowbrook doorsteps, Woo and photographer-collaborator Alyse Emdur encountered residents face-to-face, inviting them to have their creative contributions documented in a cultural text aimed at changing the way that the public and county administrators perceived the neighbourhood. These domestic encounters established common ideological ground while recognizing the cultural authority of residents as project co-conspirators. Paper (fig. 3) and verbal invitations designed by Woo carefully conveyed the team's

[13] Foster's genealogical study of land mapping, instructional manuals and movement treatises from the sixteenth century onward implicates both chorographic and choreographic practices in the construction and evaporation of bodily politics. See Foster (2011: 76).

[14] For more on conventional 'asset mapping', see Voight (2011).

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investment in achieving community consent and the team's desire to use their design skills to document Willowbrook's indigenous creative practices and products. By spending time with long-term residents and by shrinking the scale of interaction, the team's approach engendered a multi-vocal response to this institutional call.

Ultimately, more than 100 residents answered the team's plural invitations and consented to join the project. Community members served as co-authors by agreeing to have their homes, cars and cultural groups photographed and by contributing first-person accounts of their neighbourhood experiences. The team consolidated these testimonies in the Willowbrook Book, a 128-page addendum to the area's conventional 'asset map'.(LACAC, 2013) The text features Emdur's photos and first-person narratives from residents that humanize and particularize the neighbourhood's under-acknowledged cultural vibrancy.

Using photographic and ethnographic methods, the Willowbrook book 'maps' a continuum of formal and informal cultural practices. Residents are shown engaging in conventional performances (e.g.church choirs and an all-female Banda group), posing with cultural objects (pictures of the local quilting club with textiles and a homeowner with his backyard sculpture made from remnants of 105 freeway are highlights). The book importantly depicts residents spending time tending to home gardens, interiors, collections and cars to challenge narrow perceptions about creativity in this unincorporated 'place' (figs 4 – 6).

In terms of the book's reception, project partners and participants overwhelmingly consider the process of 'co-mapping' an effective response to Willowbrook's longstanding history of foiled institutional 'plans'. Since its initial publication, the text has undergone multiple reprints; it continues to be distributed by the county, free of charge. Residents have hosted various book launch parties for the team, and Supervisor Ridley-Thomas was so inspired by the book that his office has since commissioned the creation of five new books by LA artists for other

Figures 4 – 6. The Willowbrook Book. Banda de Las Reinas, classic car, garden and homeowners. *Photos Elyse Emdur. (2013) Images courtesy of Rosten Woo/ LA County Arts Commission.*

unincorporated neighbourhoods in District 2.

But, despite these gains, Woo expressed concern during our interview that the institutional circulation of this alternative vista may, ultimately, work against the team's goal to highlight cultural expression in Willowbrook. While he conceded that their alternative 'mapping' process forged some important connections between residents and the county – the Barbeque chef who catered project events now serves as the go-to caterer for the District, for example – Woo also worried that the book's display of smiling homeowners posing alongside well-manicured homes risks reiterating the 'bootstraps' ideology that underpins US neoliberal capitalism. He expressed concern that the book's ongoing circulation may mask ongoing material losses to the area, as county

priorities continue to shift. He cited one example by mentioning how the Willowbrook Boys and Girls Club – featured in the book's photographs – was defunded shortly after the residency ended. I mention Woo's concerns about the power of cultural texts and their circulation to point to the institutional deployment of cultural symbols as a pervasive practice that can conceal faltering obligations between elected officials and local culture makers. These unstable contracts are worth turning toward, by way of conclusion.

Despite the elongated duration of the Project Willowbrook residency, time-sensitive contracts like Woo's install limited obligations between artists and institutional agents. Whereas county administrators are theoretically responsible to local taxpayers throughout their terms in office, Woo's comments suggest the possibility that time-stamped 'creative placemaking' contracts appeal to institutional leaders precisely because they expire. Woo's contract with LACAC has since expired, and the Willowbrook book continues to circulate and obfuscate disinvestments in local cultural infrastructure. I want to close by considering the contractual call-and-response between the team and county administrators as a particularly under-theorized dimension of infrastructural discourse with implications for future enquiry in performance scholarship.

SUBCONTRACTING TIME

> 'To really embed an artist in a community for cultural observation and relationship development, we realized partway through that we needed at least a year or more'. Letitia Fernandez Ivins, assistant director of Civic Art, LACAC (NEA Final Report 2013)

As a municipally driven, 'place-based' arts residency, the approach of the Project Willowbrook team did not fit neatly into LACAC's civic art contracts, which are designed to accommodate the production of public 'objects' – murals, sculptures and the like. To keep pace with the iterative process of co-visioning and co-mapping, the team frequently exceeded contractual limits around time and budget, causing a whirlwind of contract revisions involving county lawyers and administrators. These slow-moving institutional approvals were handled by Project Administrator Letitia Ivins, whose willingness to re-write Woo's contract *twelve times* was integral to the team's capacity to galvanize community interest and support. In my interview with Ivins, and in her final report narrative for the NEA (excerpted above), she framed time spent on the county's administrative revisions as key to sustaining the team's shared ethos of mutual listening and experimentation throughout the course of the project. In her words: 'The amount of time that the full NEA grant afforded allowed us to approach the project cautiously and also quite iteratively.'[15]

[15] Ivins interview with author, 26 January 2015.

Ivins's avowal here of the instrumentality of time – specifically the elongated time frame that NEA funds afforded – extends the team's overarching commitment to institutional revisionism significantly into the realm of administrative action. As a county employee well versed in navigating the dizzying array of forms, permissions and legal conjoinders involved in civic art projects, Ivins's capacity to roll back expectations at the county level challenges future 'placemaking' critics to consider the repetitive enactments of institutional liaisons as an under-theorized dimension of 'placemaking' discourse. Her deft handling of these constant adjustments escapes enquiry when institutions are studied as nameless, faceless, monoliths.

IT'S ABOUT TIME

Throughout this essay I have argued that the processual unfolding of local interactions in Project Willowbrook exposed the political futility of a priori urban planning methods and product-oriented performance analyses. As a budding philanthropic discourse, 'creative placemaking' matters as a topic of performance enquiry both for its material force and for these complex temporal and corporeal contingencies. In studying time and embodiment as constitutive dimensions of 'place-based' interventions, I hope to have signalled the potential of these multi-institutional projects as political battlegrounds, ripe for future enquiry

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through performance analytics.

By *stalling* time, *spending* time and *subcontracting* time, this particular 'place-making' team co-produced alternative 'plans' with local residents that challenged institutionally imposed narratives that assumed a cultural lack. By casting residents as 'creative place makers' in the production of the Willowbrook book and cultural events, the artistic team leveraged their privileged position as institutional mediators to improve historically tense relationships between Willowbrook cultural producers and county leaders. The county's publication of the book, hiring of local chefs and absorption of the project's excessive administrative burdens indicate new material returns on local investments. For artists who *opt in* to the vexed philanthropic discourse of 'creative placemaking', Woo's worries signal a need to stay cautious about the future-driven structure of institutionally imposed 'plans'. For performance researchers who *opt in* to these running debates, Ivins's administrative dexterities beg us to notice when our own a priori assumptions about institutional domination blind us to political contingencies that cannot be known in advance. Here is where Kester's a posteriori analytic installs an epistemological speed bump, a call to linger longer on the political potential of 'placemaking' as a gerund verb, a collectively embodied process. By moving together at this deliberate pace, we may see more clearly the analytical time stamps that are currently curbing our ways of knowing institutional belonging.

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