IMPROVISING SPACES:
PLACES, SPACES AND DO-IT-YOURSELF PERFORMANCE IN VANCOUVER BC

by

Heather Jean McDermid
B.Hum., Carleton University, 2002
B.A., Ryerson University, 2005

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Cross-Faculty Inquiry in Education)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

August 2010

Abstract

This thesis examines and documents the performance and arts culture emerging from underground and off-the-grid arts spaces in Vancouver, BC. This study examines a small cross-section of the city's underground performance culture, and places it in the context of its time and place to inquire into why and how it is developing, and the impact that it is having on the individuals and communities who shape it. This study makes use of both arts-based and qualitative research methods to collect and analyze information about the practical, social and political influences that are contributing to the emergence of this section of underground culture. This study has roots in my own work as an artist and participant in underground cultural activities, and has required that I consider my role as both an insider (artist) and outsider (researcher). The written portion of this thesis examines three interconnected aspects: what kind of art is being developed in these spaces? How might it be understood as a product of its 'environment'? And what sort of impact is this form of art-making having on the individuals who take part and on the wider community? The analysis suggests that artists', organizers' and participants' experiences with and perceptions of regulations and enforcement agencies, their material limitations, and social/political values and intentions play significant roles in defining the character of underground spaces, what kinds of artistic activity takes place and how it is organized. The artist book that accompanies this thesis aims to document the creative practices that are taking place, and to reflect them back to the people who are contributing to creating this cultural landscape. With this study and artist book I hope to both capture a snapshot of what is currently taking place in a section of the underground art scene, as well as produce a work that serves as an example of research-as-art.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. George Belliveau for his encouragement and invaluable guidance throughout the research process, Keith Langergraber for his help and support, and my parents for their continued support. I would like to thanks Dr. Karen Henry and Dr. Kedrick James for their patience and feedback in the final stages of this process. I would also like to thank Eldo Enns, Ashley Doiron and the Klondike Institute of Arts and Culture/School of Visual Arts in Dawson City, Yukon for giving me a place to work and access to their library while I was there.

I would especially like to thank everyone who shared their time and thoughts with me, and everyone who puts so much work into providing a home for alternative arts and culture in Vancouver.

I would like to acknowledge the support of the British Columbia Council for the Arts.

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Artists often find themselves in the position of having more ideas than resources. In response, some may choose to stage events in places and spaces that are not intended to be used for art showings or public performances – at least, not intended to be used as such in an 'official' or sanctioned sort of way. In Vancouver, performance spaces are expensive to rent and maintain, and are highly regulated, controlled in part through city bylaws and provincial liquor laws. Many people avoid 'legitimate' performance spaces out of necessity, in order to create an artistic response to a space, or as a way of politicizing their art – using performance in alternate or improvised locations as a way of claiming space and asserting their own way of doing things. They choose instead to create (semi-)public events in less or differently regulated spaces in the city, including warehouse spaces, studios, galleries, homes, shops and outdoor spaces like parks, parking garages and even abandoned buildings or barges. It is general knowledge that an 'off-the-grid' performance and art culture exists in Vancouver, even if one is not sure of the specifics of where it is happening, or exactly what kinds of performances are taking shape. In recent years a number of newspaper and magazine articles, blog posts and even a feature length documentary titled *No Fun City* have made news of Vancouver's 'underground' culture. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the social, political and financial realities of showcasing art in this city, many artists have found alternate channels for disseminating live music and performances, bypassing the kinds of venues made inaccessible to them due to their lack of money, cachet, or otherwise.

Within this thesis I intend to look closely at the art culture that is emerging from Vancouver's improvised and alternative spaces. The intention of this study is to place what is happening in a segment of this particular underground performance culture in the context of its time and place, and to inquire into what is being produced beyond art for the individuals and communities who take part. Within the scope of this thesis I wish to begin to document what is happening and convey my understanding of it in a way that is meaningful for the people who create this culture. For this I have chosen to create an artist book using photo documentation and the words of the people who participated in this study.

My research has been premised on the notion that there is something to be learned from examining an underground arts and culture movement as it is taking place in a specific place and time. By trying to understand what is emerging from the context of its 'environment' and circumstances of time, place, politics and materials, one can get a clearer picture of that environment and how it is interconnected with what happens in it – in this case, a certain kind of arts culture. I am interested in looking at three aspects of this that are all connected: what kind of art is being developed in these spaces? How might it be understood as a product of its 'environment'? And what sort of impact is this form of art-making having on the individuals who take part and on the wider community?

Finally I want to consider ways of documenting the creative practices that are taking place and reflect them back to the people who are contributing to creating this cultural landscape. In doing this I hope to both capture a snapshot of what is currently taking place in a section of the underground art scene, as well as produce a work that serves as an example of research-as-art. I have produced as part of this thesis a piece of

research-based art that documents the segment of underground performance culture I have chosen to investigate, while also serving as an artistic (re)presentation of the research that I conducted for this study. This study has used arts-based research, in combination with more traditional qualitative methods such as interviewing and participant observation. I wanted to produce something that would acknowledge and reflect the contiguity of my identity in this work as both researcher and artist-participant, and use a method of exploring and presenting the research that makes use of the particular ways of knowing, and ways of communicating knowledge that are part of artistic work.

As a complement to this artistic work I have also produced the written account that follows, which considers some aspects of my research topic. The first question is concerned with what kind of arts culture is being produced. What does it look like? What are some common characteristics of the individual events that make up 'underground performance culture'? How does the physical space it takes place in, and organizational process associated with the particular space inform the artistic product? What informs the organization? In sum, I am interested in tying the aesthetics, content and form of the cross-section of culture that I am focusing on to material realities and circumstances that are specific to the time and place in which it is being created.

The second section focuses on the 'products' of these performances and other activities associated with the performance spaces. What sort of potentials are artists and producers of off-the-grid events realizing in terms of social and political ways of being and knowing? How is this seen in the way that performances are produced and knowledge is shared? This chapter will take a closer look at what community-building,

activism, and art as politics in the context of this particular manifestation of 'art as social practice'.

1.2   Background

The focus of this study has its roots in my own experience as an artist, an organizer of performance events, and a member of a collective that maintains an 'underground' art studio and performance space. I have spent a number of years performing and producing in varying capacities both on- and off-the-grid art and performance. Having put a lot of energy into acting and doing within this realm of cultural activity, and being variously excited and frustrated with Vancouver's less visible art and performance scene I came to a point where I was interested to understand the course of art as it was developing in these underground spaces and at these events, what was informing them, and what kind of impacts they may be having in both the short- and long-term.

Despite my close connections to the community that informs this study, throughout both the thesis and artist book I have made a conscious decision not to write from an autobiographical perspective, but rather have attempted to take a step back from my involvement and listen to what others had to say about their experiences, work and practices. I have not entirely excluded insights and observations taken from my own experiences, however I have not made direct or anecdotal reference to them, preferring instead to let my background knowledge and experience inform the perspective from which I approach the subject, and the way in which I engaged with the participants during my conversations with them. Autobiographical and auto-ethnographic inquiry are

effective methods of inquiring into an area of study that is close to oneself, however for me choosing to work in this way provided a method of inquiry that encouraged fresh information to surface and new insights to take shape in such a way that would not necessarily be merely a reaffirmation of what I already knew, or thought I knew. Although I do not make direct reference to it, my experience was valuable in informing the threads of conversation and the ideas that I picked up on both in the moment of an interview or performance experience, as well as after compiling all of the data. As well, my familiarity with the milieu allowed me to fill in some informational gaps, to more thoroughly pick up on and follow specific directions within any given conversation, and to flush out specific bits of information related to events and processes.

My close involvement with my subject matter produced both benefits and potential pitfalls in undertaking the study. I was fortunate to have been able to engage in extremely open and candid conversations with a number of artists and arts organizers, as having been able to well identify and visit venues without problem. Negotiating the work as both an insider (as artist and community member) and an outsider (as researcher) has meant that I have had to be keenly and constantly aware of my responsibilities to both roles. In response to this I have taken care throughout the research process to cultivate and maintain relationships that are respectful and reciprocal, while employing research methods that ensure the work is fair and thorough. This can be tricky ground to navigate, however I found within arts-based research methods that allowed me to build on my own knowledge, experience, and conversations that I had had with others as a starting point, and to develop an approach to collecting data and presenting the research in a way that is potentially meaningful to those who contributed to it. A further

discussion of these methods and approaches appears in chapter two of this thesis.

1.3   Literature Review

Vancouver's 'underground' cultural happenings have also been the focus of a number of non-scholarly works, from a recent documentary (James & Kroll, 2010) to newspaper and magazine articles (i.e., Hughes, 2008; MacInnis; 2008; Charlesworth, 2010), as well as at least one scholarly inquiry focusing on Vancouver's rave culture of the 1990s (van Veen, 2002). My intention is to take a scholarly, research-based approach to a similar topic as it exists currently, and to document it in a way that reflects to some degree the kinds of art practices it has come from. To this end I have made extensive use of improvisation, repurposing, and free-association. This project touches on a number of overlapping research areas related to art-making: site-specificity, community-based art, do-it-yourself (DIY) culture, and art-making as social practice. By extension it is useful to also consider the vast amount of work that has been done on art and ethnography, especially that which has followed Hal Foster's essay "Artist as Ethnographer" (1996), and other literature focused on research-based art.

It is hardly possible to talk about the interconnection between space and culture without beginning with a mention of Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the social production of space. His understanding of the spatialization of culture is used as a starting point for many in the field of human geography, as well as a host of others who incorporate his ideas into disciplines as diverse as cultural, art, and political theory and sociology among others. Doreen Massey notes that "Lefebvre, among others, insisted on the importance of considering not only what might be called 'the geometry' of space but also its lived

practices and the symbolic meaning and significance of particular spaces and spatializations" (1993, p.67). Massey goes on to argue that the way in which we conceptualize space provides the base for the way we politicize it, noting that "the issue of the conceptualization of space is of more than technical interest; it is one of the axes along which we experience and conceptualize the world" (1993, p.67). This argument creates an important link between cultural and 'geographic' space, cultural activity and identity formation. The construction of space may be intertwined with, for example, notions of gender, gendered space and the construction of gender identities (Bondi 2002, Watson, 2002, Grosz 2002 and 1995, Gregson and Rose 2000, Blunt and Rose 1994, Massey 1994). Space is not universally experienced or accessible, and is closely connected to identity and power relations.

The connection between space and the creation or affirmation of identity provides one way of approaching the idea of 'safe space.' Safe space is complex territory, but in its various incarnations generally implies a positive and often creative (in the widest sense of the term) physical and cultural 'place' to be for individuals and communities. Its use usually implies that the individuals and communities who are creating and using it are not part of 'dominant culture', and may be identified or self-identifed as marginalized, where 'dominant culture' occupies the centre and subject position. The concept of marginalization itself has been problematized as reinforcing the dominant/marginal dichotomy. In response, some scholars have implied that notions of 'the Other' may be radicalized by shifting or doing away with the 'centre' and understanding that the margins are not so in essence, but rather are so in relation to maintaining the dominant as the centre by which the margins are defined (Bhabha, 1994; Bondi, 1990; Rutherford,

1990). Notions of fluidity, and located or place-based understandings of identity have also been taken up within the fields of human geography, and 'spatialized' cultural practice.

Rosalyn Deutsche develops an idea of "social-cultural" discourse that emerges when the importance of the 'spatial' in the realm of cultural politics is acknowledged (as quoted in Rose, 1997, p. 1). In *Evictions: Art and spatial politics,* Deutsche combines critical aesthetics theory related to the social production of art with critical urban theory about the social production of space in order to criticize urban redevelopment programs that foster 'hidden' universalizing agendas in public art projects (1998). This provides an interesting framework for looking at activities that claim to be rooted in a desire for active self-representation by defining or claiming cultural and physical space as a self-identified community.

In the past fifteen years or so much attention has been paid to the social dimensions of art movements. Although art has long been tied in various ways to politics and social movements, some have argued that contemporary art is turning to the social in a new way. With *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud has written what has quickly become a foundational text in understanding this turn to the social. Relational art is defined by Bourriaud as "an art [that takes] as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space" (1998, p. 3). Relational art redirects the focus of an artwork from the relationship between viewer and the art object that produces a subjective understanding, to art that produces intersubjective social relations and the collective meaning.

As Grant Kester describes it, "these artists also sought to reorient artistic practice

away from technical expertise or object production and towards processes of inter–subjective exchange" (Kester, 2006, p.14). However, from Kester's perspective the notion of relational art is highly problematic in terms of the extent to which it can be truly socially engaged. He sees relational art as too often emerging from shallow understandings of social relations, and still relying too heavily on aesthetic validation from the 'expert' valuation of critics. Relational art fetishizes the social and opens the door for artists to create artwork wherein they take the position of 'community facilitators' and creators of "micro-communities" or "micro-utopias." Taking on pedagogy and social interventionism in contemporary art, artist Anton Vidokle notes that:

> [j]ust looking at the titles of some recent large-scale international art exhibitions —'The Production of Cultural Difference', 'The Challenge of Colonisation', 'Critical Confrontation With the Present', 'Urban Conditions', etc.—one quickly realises that there is an increasing desire, on the part of the organisers and participants of these shows, to see their work as concrete social projects or active interventions. Such language and positioning has become the norm, and it now seems that artistic practice is automatically expected to play an active part in society. (2006, p.1)

There is an assumption that these discreet 'art projects' have the capacity to play a significant part in the course of social development, in line with, and even originating from, the needs of the communities they claim to serve. Claire Bishop has criticized the character and quality of the relationships produced in relational art as poorly thought out and utopian (Bishop, 2004). Kester takes this criticism further and accuses Bishop of not going far enough to radicalize the role of 'community' as agents of creation and interpretation in socially grounded art practices. Art that is really "socially engaged" must 'de-privilege' the art critic's role in judging its aesthetic (and social) value (Kester, 2004, 2006; Wilson, 2007). His seemingly populist position is criticized in turn by

Bishop (2006) who "argues that the direct ameliorative outcome and the collaboration in the work come to outweigh the aesthetic outcome, dragging art off course into both activism and the arms of the state" (Helliwell, 2007). Bishop accuses Kester of essentially privileging the collaborative process at the expense of aesthetic quality. In response, Kester argues that this criticism actually reinforces his point. Despite posturing otherwise, Bishop's position does nothing to challenge the privilege of the critic or art-expert as the arbiter of aesthetic worth, and reinforces the hierarchy that his concept of socially-engaged art attempts to challenge. He views his position as making room to put activist-art in the same arena as 'artist activism.' I am inclined towards Kester's approach as a way of increasing the plurality of valuation, and adding rather than subtracting to the possibilities of art as it intersects with the social.

Miwon Kwon also explores how contemporary artists have turned their attention from 'object-making' to assuming socially oriented roles as "facilitators, educators, coordinators and bureaucrats" (Kwon, 1997, p. 103). In *One place after another: Site-specific art and locational identity* (Kwon, 2004), a work that is quickly becoming a foundational work on site-specificity and community- and collaborative-art, Kwon elaborates on Foster's (1996) and Kester's (2004) critiques of community artists, both of which focus on the kind of engagement of community these projects foster, and the power relations that are reinforced or played-out. Kwon complicates these critiques by commenting on the role that institutions, such as galleries, planning agencies or funding bodies, often play in collaborative artist-community projects, serving to delimit identities and determine the nature of collaborative relationship (2004, pp. 141-142). She further critiques what she terms Kester's "aesthetic evangelism," accusing his approach of being

in danger of fostering a kind of community-based art that "reproduces a reformist

ideology that...envisions personal inner transformation and growth as the key to the

amelioration of social problems such as poverty, crime, homelessness, unemployment,

and violence" (Kwon, 2004, p. 142). She argues further that such approaches to

community-based art actually reinforce neo-liberal and capitalist ideological agendas,

noting that

> [t]he community artist may legitimate the presumption that the cause of
> social problems rests with the spiritually and culturally deprived
> individuals rather than with the systemic or structural conditions of
> capitalist labor markets, stratified social hierarchy, and uneven distribution
> of wealth and resources. In this way, community-based art can easily
> obscure the effects of the broader socioeconomic, political and cultural
> forces, including art initiatives themselves, that render certain individuals
> and communities marginal, poor, and disempowered in the first place
> (2004, p.143).

This is an important point to make, and provides a valid critique of a number of

community-based arts projects, however I am not sure that this is a fair reading of Kester.

At points Kester clearly gives the impression that his conception of community art does

leave room for activities that work at the level of social, political and structural

transformation:

> we encounter, in the emerging canon of relational aesthetics, an emphatic
> desire to establish clear divisions between activist cultural practices and
> art. I would contend, however, that some of the most challenging new
> collaborative art projects are located on a continuum with forms of
> cultural activism, rather than being defined in hard and fast opposition to
> them...For my part, I believe the decisive locus for political and cultural
> transformation will be precisely at the level of collectives, unions, activist
> groups, and progressive NGOs working in conjunction with social
> struggles and political movements ranging from the local to the
> transnational (Kester, 2006, pp.16-19).

It is useful to also consider this conception of community-based art in the context of

critical theorist Nancy Fraser's arguments that social justice cannot only be personal,

transformative, and identity based, but must also include redistribution of material wealth and actual power (Fraser, 1998, 2000).

In combination with (e)valuation of the didactic and interventionist or socially constructive possibilities of contemporary arts practice, a number of writers have explored ideas around community-based or collaborative art in combination with site-specificity and notions of locality. In *One place after another: Site-specific art and locational identity* (2004), Kwon provides a thorough account of the development of site-specific work from the 1960's onwards, and develops a critical framework for understanding its various permutations. She takes up Deutsche's notion of "spatial-cultural" discourse, which combines "ideas about art, architecture, and urban design, on the one hand, with theories of the city, social space, and public space, on the other" (Kwon, 2004, pp.2-3).

Returning to ideas about redefining 'the centre' as a cultural and political strategy, and to place it in the context of art-making, it is important to make note of Lucy Lippard's book *The lure of the local: Senses of place in a multicentered society* (1997). Lippard's book intertwines art with landscape, senses of place and cultural identity. Taking the idea of the 'production of space' into a different realm she looks at the 'production of landscape', the reciprocity between culture and place, and how contemporary movements have contributed to the development of the local as the site of both "permanence and rootedness" as it is played off "against restlessness and a constructed 'multicenteredness'" (Lippard, 1997, p.5). Considering her work in the context of human geography, Don Mitchell notes that "[t]he goal for Lippard, like the goal for the activists in Seattle, is to find a way to create a *multicentered* society, in which

control over the places in which we live our lives is likewise *multicentered* and *democratic"* (2001, p. 272). Although this idea of creating an effectively multicentered society does not necessarily have the same political implications as notions of 'de-centering' mentioned above, it is interesting to consider the shifting role of 'centre', as well as notions of 'inside' and 'outside', and the possible disintegration or reconfiguration of that distinction through art and social practices that are concerned with art-making.

Some of the socially oriented roles that artists have taken on in recent years include artists as educators, interventionists, and activists. Much attention has been paid also to what has been termed the 'ethnographic turn' in contemporary art after Hal Foster's seminal essay *The artist as ethnographer* (1996) wherein he acknowledges contemporary arts shift to the production of 'the social' and offers a critique that is echoed and elaborated upon in part by Kester (2004, 2006), Bishop (2004), Kwon (2004) and others. In an earlier version of the essay he argues:

> [t]he object of contestation remains, at least in part, the bourgeois institution of autonomous art, its exclusionary definitions of art, audience, identity. But the subject of association has changed: it is now the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the artist often struggles. And yet, despite this shift, basic assumptions with the old productivist model persist in the new quasi-anthropological paradigm (Foster, 1995, p. 302).

In not abandoning "productivist" models the art that is produced has a tendency to reinforce the dynamics of 'Othering'. He contrasts the "artist-envy" of ethnographers, (i.e., Clifford, 1981) in which the anthropologist assumes the role of "collagist, serniologist, avant-gardist" (Foster, 1995, p. 304), with its reverse – ethnographer-envy of artists and critical theorists as they take up the tools of ethnography and anthropology (Foster, 1995, p. 305). His essay focuses on describing and problematizing artists'

adoption of ethnographic approaches that insufficiently investigate power relationships and dynamics that are inherently part of taking up a role as anthropologist or ethnographer. For Foster, artists' self-fashioning as ethnographers places them in a position where they need, like ethnographers, to engage in constant reflexivity.

Dipti Desai takes up the problematization of the artist/researcher's self-positioning in roles as pseudo-ethnographers (2002). She notes that "[n]either the artists nor art educators using ethnography can overlook this relationality of experience in terms of history and power if their artworks and teaching are to stimulate engaged dialogue with an eye to transforming the forms of domination" (Desai, 2002, p.321). She argues that many forms of ethnographic methodology are "inherently structured by unequal power dynamics between artist/researcher and participants" (Desai, 2002, p. 317) and calls for an art-educational practice that effectively "situate[s] experience within socio-economic and political analysis, at both the local and global level" (p. 312) and seeks to understand and express "people's experience and interpretation of it in terms of power and history" (p. 317). In so doing she sees great potential in the intertwining of art, ethnography, and education. Taking up the possibilities in performance and ethnography, Norman Denzin also offers a framework for producing and evaluating representations of human experience (Denzin, 2000b, 2003a, 2003b). Denzin proposes a performed ethnography and auto-ethnography that 'centres' the subject by linking arts practice to critical pedagogy.

Although art theory provides a number of points to consider in terms of my own relationship within the study – as an 'artist' trying to reflect a community back to itself and to others – it has been less useful in formulating an analysis. The fact that it is

generally rooted in the realm of professional art poses some recurring problems. As critical art writing tends to focus on projects that are artist-initiated or orchestrated from the 'top-down' there is a tendency to maintain a relatively traditional distinction between 'artist' and 'community', along with fetishizing the position of the artist and privileging the artist's role as interpreter, overseer and otherwise being 'the glue that holds a project together'. As noted above, Kester (2004, 2006) suggests alternative practices, and Kwon (2004) does a very good job of problematizing some so-called 'grassroots' community art projects that are driven by artists or institutions that parachute into a community. Even in cases where the artist is a member of the community that they are working with, the power dynamics that are set up between their role as artist and their community can complicate matters. To some degree I have found that compartmentalizing artistic activities into 'projects' – describing a 'community art project' or 'site-specific work' – presents a somewhat problematic approach for this study, as it denies what I see as a contiguous flow of creative activity, and one that is not entirely separated from everyday life. In centring this study on a community that is responding to their own cultural and creative needs, I have found works that focus on grassroots social movements and their intersection with arts practices more reflective of my approach. Though critical art theory poses one way of understanding the intersection of art, culture, and place, another approach is to begin from the social and follow it as it extends into art practice.

Amongst those I spoke with, engaging in creative practice, staging performance events and even often dealing with the practicalities of building upkeep were guided almost universally in varying degrees by a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic. DIY culture has often been explored in the context of significant social movements that challenge

dominant or mainstream modes of production and representation – often in response to elitist or capitalist structures (Holtzman, Hughes and Van Meter, 2007). DIY art has also been considered an important part of an anti-consumerist social movement that offers an alternative to 'market produced' art (Spencer, 2005). By being sites where alternate economies, modes of production and ways of knowing materialize, art can become an actual site of social change. Steve Kurtz suggests, after Guy Debord, that

> [t]hose elements of society that were once considered superstructural abstractions of the economy that didn't matter, actually *do* matter. They have causal impact in determining how we live, how we behave, and what the structure of society will be in general. So culture becomes an additional major battlefront (Becker & Fleming, 2010, p. 25).

Art that emerges from DIY or anarchistic modes of being and doing things may be understood as positing (and perhaps in part realizing) an alternate social structure (Harper, 2010; Milstein, 2007; Wilson, 2007; Russell, 2009). However, its incarnation may be only temporary or localized – a "micro-utopia" or "micro-community" as above, but with origins that might be understood as differently rooted in 'society' or 'community'.

Another approach that confronts the dominant structure of epistemological authority – that then informs political decision making along with a whole host of other social ramifications, is the idea of a 'public amateur.' Claire Pentecost identifies a public amateur as an

> artist [who] serves as conduit between specialized knowledge fields and other members of the public sphere...In such a practice the artist becomes a person who consents to learn in public. It is a proposition of active social participation in which any nonspecialist is empowered to take the initiative to question something within a given discipline, acquire knowledge in a noninstitutionally sanctioned way, and assume the authority to interpret that knowledge, especially in regard to decisions that affect our lives (Pentecost, n.d).

The idea of 'public amateur' proposes, in a way, a form of arts-based DIY learning with social intervention as its end. This is a way for artists, who have been given "license to attack the ugliest contradictions between the symbolic order and real conditions of existence" (Pentecost, n.d.) but rarely use it, to actually use that license in a way that potentially impacts the social order.

I am interested to take that concept even further to stretch the understanding of fields of expertise to include artists among the experts that she identifies. A number of current practices and theories around art attempt to break down the idea of 'the artist' as holding a privileged position in art making practices. Engaging in 'public amateurism' as a way of reconfiguring the outside/inside division of who has a right to knowledge might allow the concept to be placed on this continuum. As Pentecost describes it, the public amateur "approaches and ultimately appropriates the object of knowledge out of enthusiasm, curiosity or perhaps a personal need. She learns outside the circuits of professional normalization and reward" (Pentecost, n.d.). Though Pentecost does not intend for this approach to be co-opted in this way I find it an interesting position from which to consider the creative practices of artists who create and perform work outside of usual institutions and venues, and without seeking the usual channels so that it may be validated. This provides another potential avenue for reconsidering the position of a non-professional artist, without having to rely on terms like 'outsider artist' that do not seem entirely appropriate in this case, as 'outsider artist' has a tendency to imply critical reception and validation.

Taken together, recent discussions in art theory and social theory provide a useful background for considering art-making that, through its production process and

dissemination, sets itself apart from the dominant cultural production in fundamental

ways.

2 Methods

Synopsis: This chapter outlines the general approach and methodology of the study, and its roots in arts-based research. It details both the arts-based and qualitative methods that were used, and expands on the place of the related artistic component of the thesis.

2.1 General Approach of the Study

In undertaking this study I was concerned to find an appropriate way to conduct research that began from my position as a practitioner within my chosen field of study. Drawing on my own knowledge and experience, and conversations that I had had with others seemed to be an obvious starting point for my inquiry. And, since the study is concerned with social spaces and the production of knowledge as these relate to underground arts practices, it seemed appropriate that I incorporate art as a method of inquiry. Examples of arts-based inquiry can be found in diverse fields of scholarship, including health (Rossiter, et al., 2008), architecture and urban space (Mounajjed, Peng & Walker, 2007), social-justice education (Belliveau, 2005), social-justice politics (Dorfman, 2004), and in ethnographic and auto-ethnographic research (Denzin, 2000a, 2000b, 2003). Situating arts-based inquiry in the practices of art, research and teaching, a/r/tography "uses those practices to create, interpret, and portray understandings" (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1228).

As an arts-based research strategy, a/r/tography, encourages the practitioner to take up ways of being and doing that not only move between these multiple identities but are also ways of "seek[ing] to know through art" (Pourchier, 2010, p.740). A/r/tographic inquiry emphasizes the contiguity of roles, practicing "living inquiry" through rigourous self-reflexivity, metaphoric or metonymic modes of representation and expression,

creating openings for dialogue among practitioners (Pourchier, 2010). Although my

approach bears closer resemblance to arts-based research (and research-based art), I was

interested in how when taking on an a/r/tographic approach "[t]heory is no longer an

abstract concept but rather an embodied living inquiry, an interstitial relational space for

creating, teaching, learning, and researching in a constant state of becoming" (Irwin, et

al., 2006, p. 71). Arts-based inquiry appealed to me as a "a practitioner-based

methodology that emphasizes living inquiry, and reflective practice" (Winters, Belliveau

& Sherritt-Fleming, 2009) as well as opening the door to multiple paths of inquiry. As an

artist and researcher interested in both documenting local, underground performance

practices in a meaningful way, as well as exploring their implications, arts-based inquiry

seemed to me the most appropriate way to approach the project. It provided a framework

that allowed me to acknowledge and move between my roles as artist, researcher, arts-

organizer and facilitator[1].

I have made use of arts practices, along with qualitative methods, in gathering,

interpreting and presenting my research. Anita Sinner and others explain the

terminological shift from the use of "methods" to "practices" when speaking of arts-

based research as a way of opening the door to less traditional, rigid and sequential ways

of collecting and interpreting data. They note that in performing arts-based inquiry

> the arts-based practices of artists and educators and their forms of inquiry
> inform the process of doing research. *Practices* may involve a range of

---

[1] I have chosen to identify as a facilitator rather than 'teacher' in this case as learning in the milieu of an 'underground' arts community depends on spaces – physical and social – that are created in time. In these spaces an exchange or development of ideas or knowledge takes place. These exchanges or developments are often not explicitly directed by a person or group of people, and they may not be directly involved in orchestrating or overseeing the proceedings. For clarity, I prefer to use the term 'facilitator' to refer to a person who contributes to the creation of these space- and time-based opportunities for exchange, but may not directly co-ordinate or guide what happens in these spaces.

activities at the centre of research, such as customary approaches to art-making, creative rituals, original performances, as well as a subjective position of intuitiveness and responsiveness. (Sinner, et al., 2006, p. 1229)

My approach has incorporated collecting sounds and images, and putting them together in non-textual relationships. The goal was to produce something that in its process and 'product' was not entirely separate from its object of study, but has been situated within, and perhaps adds to it.

I have used a combination of arts-based inquiry and more traditional ethnographic methods, such as interviewing and participant observation. I came into this study in part with a desire to reflect on my own practices and involvement in community and art-making in a way that situated them in a larger context. I attempted to structure the research in such a way that the process of collecting qualitative data through interviews and conversations would provide an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their own practice in a way that they might not usually do. The hope for this was that participating in the research process might contribute to furthering their own understanding of what they do as artist and organizer.

The qualitative data that I collected has been used to produce a written account of my research findings, which make up the following chapters of this thesis. It has also been integrated into the artist book that I have produced. Conversely, the written portion is one way that I have reflected upon the arts-based 'field notes' and artistic practices that have contributed to the research process.

It is worth noting also that my starting point for this study was also influenced to a small degree by the institutional ethnographic practices, in that the research problematic was developed primarily from the subjects' accounts of their everyday experiences and

activities (D. Smith, 2005). Institutional ethnography has been effectively taken up by researchers who are simultaneously engaged in activism around their areas of interest (Campbell, 2006b; Smith, Mykhalovskiy & Weatherbee, 2006; Thompson, 2006). As both a participant and a researcher I feel strongly about the "need to approach a problem informed by the everyday/night experiences of the people on whose behalf [I am] working" (Campbell, 2006a). Although this study is not an institutional ethnography, I did find these premises to provide useful starting points from which to think.

2.2   The People and the Spaces

This thesis focuses on a snapshot of Vancouver's off-the-grid performance culture as taking a narrow focus is a useful and manageable way to explore issues around alternative and improvised spaces and the artists who use them. For this project I have focused on ten artists, five 'permanent' spaces and a handful of temporary or public spaces that provide a view to a particular cross-section of underground performance culture.

The spaces and people who contributed to this thesis are not all part of a homogenous group, however they were asked to take part because of their ongoing involvement in underground performances in varying capacities, or as points of continuity within the trajectory of one space or across multiple spaces. In this version of artist-run-culture, artists at various times often occupy the position of organizers and vice versa. With two exceptions, all of the people I spoke to contribute to the creation of 'underground' arts culture through their work as both an artist and as someone who contributes in a 'non-artistic' capacity to maintain a performance space. Many were also

experienced in making use of public, outdoor, or temporary spaces for performance activities. One person was a practicing artist who has been involved in organizing events in various spaces. The one 'non-artist' who has been included in this study is someone who is primarily responsible for maintaining a multi-use space with a history of use as an arts space. They have continued it with a stated mandate to preserve this aspect of its use. Though not an artist, they are a user of that space themselves for non-performance-based practices. As such they engage in relationship with the space that is similar to many of the other artist/organizers who were included in the study.

Although the spaces that I have chosen to focus on are related in the sense that they may be defined as 'alternative' or underground performance spaces, the (permanent) venues that have been included in this study differ from each other in varying degrees such as size, location, structure, kinds of governance, zoning and other status (i.e., some are zoned as commercial galleries, some as art studios, some as light industrial use; some have business licenses associated with them, or society status). They also differ somewhat in the genre of performance or art they tend toward, and other details, though there is some cross-over between a number of them. They have all tended to cater towards music and performance that is interdisciplinary and falls within the categories of experimental, improv, indie, punk, noise, art-rock or sound-art, although because of their focus on cross-genre pollination this is by no means an exclusive or exhaustive list. The subjects I spoke to all consider their work and the existence of the performance venue to be related to community-building in various ways, and many individuals and groups that I focus on operated with overtly political intentions (i.e., feminist, queer, anarchist, anti-capitalist). These intentions manifest in the way the space is run, and the kinds of work

for which they provide a platform.

2.3   Methods

2.3.1 Research Strategies.

My study primarily made use of an arts-based research approach combined with aspects of more traditional qualitative methods such as interviews and informal conversations, and participant observation. During the course of the study I continued to participate in the community as a performer, and audience member, and remained somewhat involved as a member of a collective responsible for one of the spaces included in this study. My experiences in these roles, in conjunction with the experiences I had conducting informal interviews with other artists, and subsequently reviewing and analyzing these conversations has formed the basis for my analysis.

My aim was to produce a written analysis in conjunction with an artistic product that could stand alone as an art work (artist book) become a component of the overall study. The artist book serves as a work of research-based art, and also a form of documentation. The intent of this was to create a work in a form that would "evoke or provoke understandings that traditional research formats cannot provide" (Irwin, et al., 2006, p. 1225). Although I have been responsible for crafting the final piece, much of the content – the locations, words, sounds – reflects the contributions of many.

Rather than having a pre-determined set of questions, the interviews proceeded as open-ended conversations centred around the interview subjects' account of their artistic practice and what they observe is taking place in their encounters with 'underground' performance, their roles as artist, organizer and community member, the mechanics of

running and using particular spaces, how they shared knowledge, skills and ideas, and the perceptions of the impact of their work, both on themselves and within their community. Using these as starting points, the interviews became a way for the study participants to think through and articulate their own practices and experiences, and the loose structure allowed them room to expand on issues or ideas that were important to them within the context of their experience as artists and organizers.

2.3.2 Interviews.

Initially, I identified contacts from my work as an artist and member of a collective that is responsible for maintaining a studio and performance space. A number of these contacts suggested further participants, to whom I was subsequently introduced. Those who represented a line of continuity related to a particular space or who had multi-perspectival experiences were included in the study. This casual networking method of interviewing and selecting subjects somewhat paralleled the workings of artistic networking. This allowed me to reach out beyond my immediate knowledge base, but also served to limit the study to a specific local community that was somewhat rhizomatically connected.

I inquired into artists' and organizers' perceptions of the general state of underground and off-the-grid arts in the city, while taking an account of what they actually do and what actually happens before, during and after specific performances. I took note of where and when perceptions govern participants' action, where these perceptions were reinforced by actual happenings, and how the knowledge gained by

these experiences is shared or communicated.

Because all of the venues that are mentioned in this study are still active, and many are engaging in activities that are outside the bounds of their sanctioned use, upon request I have used pseudonyms to identify a number of the artists, as well as some spaces. I have taken care to omit details that might indicate their exact locations, as I do not feel that these details add to the analysis, and that their omission in no way compromises the study. Further details regarding the specific venues and artists will be presented throughout the following chapters as they become relevant.

As noted above, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way that allowed the respondent room to elaborate on or introduce issues she or he felt were important. The data were transcribed and sorted into categories using common themes that emerged from the interviews, rather than ones that were anticipated prior to them. These categories included governance, learning and knowledge transfer, money, process and planning, zoning/licensing/building codes and safety, loudness, size, police and authorities, relationships (i.e., with neighbours, landlords, 'supporters'), kinds of events, precautions, underground economies, improvised use of space, activism, intention/mandates, community, personal investments, and business aspects. From this I identified two major questions that were distinct, but also related. First, how are the physical and legal realities of where these performances are taking place shaping what is created, and how they come to be. Second, what are the social, political and personal results of these 'happenings.'

Additionally, I was interested in representing all of this in such a way that the process of documenting and the work produced itself reflected in some way the culture

that it was documenting.

2.3.3 Documentation.

The visual documentation that is part of this study has made use of photographic field notes, text taken from participant interviews, text-based documents and visual arts processes that include collage and photo-transfer. Although I have presently chosen this form to represent the data that I have collected, it represents only one possible way of doing so. Field recordings and taped interviews could provide excellent source material to produce a 'research-based' or audio-documentary or audio-ethnography in the from of a soundscape, sonic mapping project, audio essay or any other number of sound-based forms (Levack Drever, 2002; Makagon & Neumann, 2009). In my own arts practice I work primarily with sound and music, have produced a number of soundscape pieces, and appreciate the potential that this art form offers. I have chosen to produce a work of visual art using an approach that may be understood as a visual equivalent to the way that I often work with sound – documenting original material, then processing and layering it to produce a collage. I have arranged the elements of this work in such a way as to draw non-textual lines between them.

This is perhaps less apparent 'social' form of art as described in the previous chapter, as it represents a form of object-making. As well, its meaning (at least initially) is tied to the subjectivity of whoever takes it up. However, as an artistic rendering of research the methods by which the pieces were initially gathered represent exchanges through conversation, knowledge sharing, and artistic production and dissemination. It is my hope that this process is somewhat apparent in the content of the artwork, even

though the work itself does not so apparently 'exist' as a process. The process of exchange and social relations that it represents are largely tied to the individual contributors, and perhaps those whose memories and thoughts of personal associations are triggered by the contents. If the archive can be said to act as a "shorthand for memory" (Entwezor, 2008, p. 35) then engaging with the specifics of this 'archival document' may be limited to those who have been connected at some time to the places and people therein. In other instances, the knowledge produced by this document will likely have a different character – perhaps historical and theoretical, conveying aesthetics as they are tied to material realities, and providing a shorthand for goings-on within a small slice of Vancouver's art community as it existed at one point, from the perspective of one person.

3   Art Happenings "Off-the-Grid" and "Under-the-Radar"

Synopsis: This chapter looks at the reasons why many artists in Vancouver are working in 'underground' or illegitimate spaces. Drawing on firsthand accounts from artists, event organizers and those responsible for underground venues, as well as municipal documents, this chapter focuses on issues of cultural representation, regulations and enforcement. It connects these with the ways that artists and organizers are operate their venues, co-ordinate events, and 'produce' arts sub-culture.

3.1 (In)forming an Underground Arts Culture

> In my experience with this city's nightlife, the most bizarre and glorious nights I've had happen at places that have cyclical, ever-morphing names. They're located in condemned buildings where you sometimes fall through the wooden floor if you try to lean against the wall because it's decaying from wear, and where the smoke is so thick you worry you'll smell for weeks afterward. They're often held in shady warehouse-style buildings along the docks or outside at Jericho Beach until the sunrise. (Braybrooke, 2010)

It could be an acoustic show with music and burlesque on an abandoned barge, a noise show powered by a generator in a parking garage, a party in a decrepit warehouse, or an arts salon in a cinder block studio, a full theatre production or indie band in a gallery back room, live improvised music in a private apartment. What ties these events together is that they are not happening in places that you might expect – like a bar or theatre. Their occurrence transforms the places in which they take place into (semi)public performance spaces and ties each of the venues together in that the identity that they have taken on has not been officially sanctioned by the city's and province's regulatory bodies.

The kinds of underground art and performance activities that are taking place in Vancouver are not entirely unique or singular – DIY culture has a long history and wide geographical span, as do warehouse parties, guerrilla art and performance, artist-run culture and other related activities.[2] However, Vancouver's 'underground' performance scene taken as a whole, without singling out one particular 'genre' or 'scene' – is often a focal point when talking about the city's arts and culture.

It might be useful to take some time to unpack what is meant here by 'unsanctioned' or 'underground' venue. The venues that are included in this study vary in terms of how involved in official 'regulatory' channels they choose to be, however all are involved in staging events and activities that are not entirely legally sanctioned. This could involve holding performance events that stretch the limits of their business license, or perhaps not holding a license at all. Each of the spaces puts varying limits on their public visibility through their 'internally' determined policies and practices around publicity, event production and the expected behaviours of audiences and artists.

The intent of this chapter is to give a brief account of what kind of arts culture is being produced in these places, and what conditions contribute to the shape that it does take. What does it look like? What are some common characteristics of the individual events that make up 'underground performance culture'? How does the physical space it takes place in and organizational process associated with the particular space inform the artistic product? What informs this organization? The artist book that I have created recounts stories and descriptions of specific events that have taken place in recent years

---

[2] Most of these movements are well documented. See for example, Brett Bloom's (2007) contribution to *Realizing the Impossible*, which recounts off-the-grid arts and activist activities in Denmark or Amy Spencer's account of 'zines, independent record labels and 'guerrilla gigs' in London, England (2005, pp.328-331). Also, tobias c. van veen (2002) provides a scholarly look at Vancouver's rave culture of the 1990s.

and why they have been memorable to the people that I spoke with. This chapter aims to describe the content and form of the cross-section of culture that I am focusing on in terms of the material realities and circumstances that are specific to the time and place in which they are being created. As previously noted, this chapter does not aim to present a comprehensive account of everything that might be considered part of the city's 'underground' arts culture, but rather presents a snap-shot of a small cross-section of Vancouver's performance spaces and what comes out of (or rather, happens in) them.

The first question to ask might be why do such spaces exist? The overarching feeling of the artists and organizers that I spoke with is that their interests are not being supported by legitimate or mainstream cultural platforms. Their answer is to take matters into their own hands. As Amy Spencer writes in her account of the origins of recent lo-fi and Do-it-yourself (DIY) zine and music culture, "[s]ince the 90s hundreds of zines, records and cds have been produced by individuals in reaction to the shortcomings of the mainstream media. The central message [is]: if you can't find the cultural experience you are looking for, create your own alternative" (Spencer, 2005, back cover). By extension, if you do not see yourself, your interests or values being represented in the culture that is available, and you do not find the opportunities to change this, then you need to create a space for that to happen.

The establishment and continued survival of these alternative spaces is governed by a mixture of perception, and first and second-hand experiences of what can and can not be done without interference from the authorities. The establishment of 'illegitimate' venues is a response to both perceived and real, well-documented obstacles faced by those who feel their community's or individual interests and perspectives are not being

represented. One artist who has performed a number of times in such spaces and has also been involved in staging the first two 'Pancake Noise Breakfasts'[3] in Vancouver, reflected in an interview:

> You know I think the spaces themselves have a certain aesthetic appeal and it's part of the caché, it's cool, it's interesting, it's part of what attracts people, it's part of the draw, but I think part of it really is out of necessity as well because there are limited venues for people to play. I think there's far more creativity and people that want to do things than there are opportunities to do them legitimately. (Dan Kibke, personal interview, April 1, 2010)

His statement highlights a hole that some artists are trying to fill on their own terms, and within their own capacities.

"The City" is often named by frustrated artists and organizers as a primary obstacle to establishing sustainable homes for the creation and dissemination of art by artists who do not have widespread (i.e., commercial) appeal, or who have not organized or established themselves to the point that they receive stable funding. The latter requires people to undertake significant amounts of administrative work, as well as conforming to mandates, guidelines and regulations set by funding bodies, in order to compete for limited funds. As a result it is generally the domain of professional artists, or those who aim to become so, and is an environment that by its own mechanisms does not easily support spontaneous, under-(human)resourced or amateur artistic activity.

Not unlike a number of other cities around the world, a significant portion of Vancouver's culture and 'community building' activities emerge from temporary spaces,

---

[3] These were a series of noise music events held during the daytime that offered up live performance and affordable pancakes. One was held at Blim, a small gallery and art workshop space that at the time was located in Vancouver's Mount Pleasant neighbourhood. Another was held at The Red Gate space, a warehouse/commercial style building that has been transformed into artist studio space and has occasionally been used as a performance venue. The most recent Pancake Noise Breakfast was staged as part of the Fake Jazz Festival, a festival of experimental and noise music that grew out of the weekly events of the same name. It was held at Casa del Artista, a music rehearsal space that sometimes hosts life performance events.

whose existence depends on the intentions and actions of the landlord and tenant, and

their interactions with city officials whose task it is to enforce zoning, licensing, building

codes and other bureaucratic regulations. Much of Vancouver's 'visible' arts and culture

has gained this visibility thorough cultural workers' and entrepreneurs' adherence to the

bureaucratic demands of cultural and urban planning strategies and policies. This

includes compliance of those who run venues to applicable zoning bylaws, building

codes and permit allowances and restrictions as mentioned above. These regulate

everything from how many people can be in a space or on stage (i.e., many cafés or

restaurants are restricted to allowing a maximum of two performers on stage at any given

time), what patrons and performers may or may not do in the space (i.e., there are bylaws

related to business licenses that prohibit dancing from happening in certain spaces such

as some restaurants), whether or not alcohol can be served, in what circumstances (i.e., in

some cases patrons may also need to order food with their drinks), and how late a

performance can run, among other things. Speaking broadly about public space in

Vancouver, Purple Thistle founder Matt Hern argues that Vancouver's predilection for

planning, regulation and control stifles grassroots, bottom up responses to the needs of its

population (2010, pp. 39-62), and is a significant contributing factor to what he sees as

the city's sterile urban culture. Michael Red, a sound artist, DJ and co-founder of

Lighta!, a dub-step artist collective, also turns an eye to Vancouver's laws and

regulations:

> the laws and licensing need changing, foremost. this [sic] is well
> documented. i [sic] recognize that police need to do their job and enforce
> the law. it's [sic] the law that needs to change to accommodate and allow
> for more venues existing and surviving in a reasonable and safe and
> supported way. (personal communication, May 12, 2010)

Many artists and those who would establish venues feel like a diversity of needs are being shut out by high costs and policies that place the city in the position of cultural gate-keeper.

The reality is that many of the regulations and requirements to run a sanctioned performance venue are prohibitive and financially untenable for many individuals or groups, who often struggle just to afford monthly rent payments in a city where rental rates are prohibitively high. Currently, the processing fee alone to apply for permanent liquor license is currently $4212[4] and can take many months of waiting and wading through 'red tape' to come through[5]. Obtaining an appropriate business license can cost over $2000 per year[6], and making an appeal to the city's Board of Variance for rezoning if necessary requires another $380[7]. On top of that, making any needed renovations or building upgrades, and related expenses such as hiring architects to prepare site plans required by the Board of Variance can run start-up costs for some would-be venues into the tens of thousands of dollars at minimum. This essentially excludes any individuals or groups who cannot afford the costs that have been imposed on establishing and maintaining a venue. Although they are not intended to exclude certain voices, the reality is that these mechanisms and regulations do result in doing just that.

Vancouver City Council has recently come around to acknowledging and addressing these and other longstanding problems. A report presented to the city's Standing Committee on Planning and Environment included as part of a proposal to

---

[4] According to information retrieved from
http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/licandinsp/licences/liquor/newapps.htm on June 18, 2010.
[5] See Wong, 2010 for one cultural entrepreneur's account of trying to license his lounge
[6] City of Vancouver, License By-law No. 4450, Schedule A
[7] http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/bov/index.htm#fee; galleries, for example, are generally not zoned so as to allow them to hold permanent liquor licenses.

review the regulations around live performance venues identified a number of barriers,

acknowledging among other things that:

> - application processes take too long and are unpredictable and subject to unannounced change and to too wide a range of interpretation.
>
> - clear, consistent and coordinated information regarding regulations for use, permitting and licensing is not available.
>
> - too many City departments are involved with use, permits and licenses.
>
> - City staff do not appear to have an understanding of or experience with the "realities" of creating and operating live performance venues.
>
> - City staff appear to have a "gate keeper" mindset rather than an enabling one.
>
> - performance venues are expensive due to expensive real estate, too few options, increasing ownership of venues by corporate groups with profit motivation.
>
> - *associated secondary costs of creation and operation of live performance venues are prohibitive, particularly for newer or younger events (e.g. zoning variance costs, rental costs during renovation, architect's fees, engineers fees, noise reduction costs, security costs, costs related to completing multiple applications and reports)* (emphasis added)
>
> - a single resident complaint appears to be able to "shut down" or prevent an event without consideration of benefit of the event to the larger community, larger community support or the costs to the event organizers and participants.
>
> - there is an increasing lack of space in the City where it is possible to hold a public gathering and "make noise".
>
> - Regulations are contributing to a trend toward "homogenization" of the arts in the City that is driving new, innovative performances out of the City. (City of Vancouver, 2010, Appendix D, p.4)

This review acknowledges in part a situation that currently leaves many people feeling

alienated by the unavoidable 'business' of arts and culture, and results in extreme

difficulties for many cultural entrepreneurs and non-profit arts organizations. If changes

to the related regulations are made it would undoubtedly ease the process of legitimization for many, however, it is unclear at this point how much these changes would impact the activities of non-commercial or un-funded artists.

It is clear however that this group is currently faced with the choice of finding the resources and 'buying in' to the business, giving up before even starting, or finding an alternate way of staging their events. This final option results in people establishing illegal or semi-legal venues and learning how to negotiate 'the system' in order that they may successfully (if temporarily) disregard or side-step the order that it seeks to impose. Some artists might choose to remain as distant from institutions as possible while accepting the risks of those actions, as well as the rewards, if 'buying into the system' would compromise their values or way of doing things, or would be significantly more troublesome than continuing on illegitimately.

3.2 Responding to Needs, and Staying Off-the-Radar

As condos go up and old warehouses turn into trendy residential loft spaces in 'mixed use' and former industrial and commercial neighbourhoods, venue owners and tenants may be pressured into responding to noise concerns, may decide to shift their priorities in order to respond to the changing character of the neighbourhood, or may suddenly find that they can no longer afford their rent.[8] While Vancouverites see many of these 'legitimate' venues either adapt or disappear according to their ability and

---

[8] One recent example of this includes the closing of The Cobalt and its subsequent rebranding as 917 Main. This change left the city's punk and metal scene, as well as Fake Jazz Wednesdays (a weekly showcase of experimental, improv and noise music) left them virtually without 'legitimate' homes (see Khan, 2009; Braybrooke, 2010, Langille, 2010 and Mendelson, 2009), leaving them to look for new ones or pursue their activities out of the public eye. At this point in time they have since found 'legitimate' places to carry on shows.

willingness to adhere to the demands of building codes, bylaws and changing markets, there are many that quietly come into being and thrive or fold under the radar, and out of the public eye. Their methods of adapting involve tailoring their activities to the varying degrees in which they operate a step or more removed from planning, policy and regulation. Taken together, the venues included in this study have varying kinds of official status – commercial galleries, art studios, light industrial use, and others. In order to use a space in ways that may not be explicitly permitted by its official status, the people involved in operating and programming at such spaces may develop a variety of specific internal policies or protocol for engaging in uses that may violate what they are legally allowed to do. Artists' and producers' perceptions of, and experience with what they need to do (or not do) in order to proceed without interference often directly informs the art and performance. Almost ironically, the kinds of artistic and production activities that take place in this realm of cultural creation are in part a response to material realities, official regulatory and legal texts, and the authorities whose job it is to enforce them.

3.3 Sustaining a Space

Often it seems that the regulations and laws that are used against an underground venue are not triggered by what puts them on the radar for police or other enforcement agencies. For example a noise complaint might trigger the enforcement of seemingly unrelated laws associated with building codes or licensing. Activist and scholar A.K. Thompson suggests looking at the text-based relations that come into play at points of conflict in order to shift the discussion from abstract notions of ideology to real regulatory points that, if altered, will affect social change. He describes how during a

political action that involved occupying university administrative offices, authorities

threatened to invoke fire code violations to remove the protestors. He notes that:

> [s]ince then, I have noticed how common it is for authorities to cite fire
> code violations when evicting activists from squatted buildings or centres.
> Zoning laws, fire codes, property titles: these are the texts that make it
> possible for ruling relations to be conducted in, and occupy, actual spaces
> in the actual world. And because these texts prompt standardized and
> universal courses of action to address ideologically construed local
> 'situations', they can be mobilized to regulate a multitude of experientially.
> different moments. (2006, p. 106)

Although this study does not take Thompson's institutional ethnographic approach to

unraveling points of conflict in Vancouver's artistic underground, I was interested in how

this statement suggests how non-ideologically based or 'value' laden regulations can be

used as tools to sidestep larger, complicated, localized situations that are often at their

roots: conflicts of class, privilege, and access to power. Hearkening back to Michael

Red's comment above, the regulations that are regularly invoked contribute to a lack of

affordable, accessible space for artists in Vancouver. This observation is somewhat

echoed in the sentiments of one person I spoke to who felt that:

> all it takes is for…one person to get pissed off and to…trigger all of those
> "oh, what's this space? We'd better go check that it's all up to code". Of
> course these spaces are not up to code, if the city ever showed up I'd be
> totally screwed. Not to say that I haven't done all sorts of things to make it
> safer…But it's still, you know it's never going to be up to code, and quite
> frankly the other thing is, and I'm very clear about this, and the landlord
> wanted this and [I] just have skirted this issue, I don't have insurance on
> that space, forget it. People, starving artists could not use that space for ten
> dollars an hour if I had to cover the insurance for all the activities that go
> on in that space, it's just unbelievable. (Z, personal interview, 1 April
> 2010)

Having the police visit on an unrelated complaint or tip could trigger a need for

renovations and other costly building improvements or licenses. As getting 'busted' can

bring on more complicated, long-term considerations for venues, perceptions about this

risk affects decisions that are made about the size of show, loudness, lateness, policies around promotions, and influences expected audience behaviours and other precautions. And of course these risk factors all depend on the neighbourhood in which the venue is situated. Residential neighbourhoods necessitate different precautions than industrial ones, making industrial or non-residential, out of the way neighbourhoods a good location for shows that might run late or loud. This has the effect of tying aesthetics of these industrial, un(residentially) populated neighbourhoods to certain kinds of events.

However, not all conflicts are the result of discretionary invocations of the law, or decisions to become legitimate. One person I spoke with recounted that

> it was that the city came through to do some inspections…and realized that it was being used for an art studio space so they gave the landlord the option of either evicting the current tenants or upgrading it to an art studio. And that included bringing it up to fire code and doing some structural renovations…So at that point the landlord decided to sink some money into it which is smart. The fire code stuff I thought was pretty important too because there's tons of electronics running all the time, and people smoking, and just drunk people in general, so in a way I'm happy that it happened. (WH1, personal interview, April 19, 2010)

In instances like this, if those responsible for the venue (either the landlord or tenant) are unable or unwilling to fulfil those requirements, the venue would no longer be able to function as such. One tactic to avoid this situation is to lower the visibility of the space and try to create conditions that minimize encounters with authorities that might lead to the venue being shut down. This is often done by internally regulating the kinds of activities that take place, when they happen, how late and how often. The individuals and groups I spoke with all have internally developed policies and protocol that they followed (more or less consistently) in order to minimize such risks.

These policies and procedures are sometimes communicated directly to the users

of the space (artists and audience) either verbally or through signs directing people to 'stay out of the alley' or 'smoke upstairs' or to not go in and out. A number of people I spoke with indicated that generally the people or guests who frequent the space understand and respect the need for their personal actions to not attract attention to the venue, and self-regulate their behaviour. In cases where they might not, the responsibility to monitor the activities of the guests, and often to be the first point of contact with police if necessary, falls to the people working the door – usually volunteers. One of the people I spoke with described her experience with this, saying:

> I would be working [crowd control] in the alley and [the police would] just show up. They'd roll by and be like "who's in charge?" and I'd be like "well me kind of" and they'd be like "what's going on?" and I'd be like "oh, it's a benefit show" or whatever or "we're just having a party". And then you just have to…it was like a system. I would tell someone to go inside and hide the money and then tell that person to tell the person at the back to hide the beer sales so it looks like we're not selling or making any money, and then just like try and talk the cops down, and they usually never came inside. (WH2, personal interview, April 19, 2010)

Others reported few or inconsequential encounters with the police, such as one person who stated that he had never interacted with the cops, and noted further:

> [t]he only time that its been reported to me, well there's two events, one recently where the cops showed up and [C] was throwing an event…and he was like 'yeah the cops showed up and we turned the music down and that was it', you know that's all they wanted. They didn't even come in. The thing is the cops go by there all the time just cause of the nature of the neighbourhood right, so they see stuff happening, but if they're not called specifically for [it] then it's much less likely. And if there's not something there every weekend where it becomes a target…[T]he other interesting thing, [the other time] when the police did show up…there was a dance class going on and they wanted to set up a surveillance through the window on the house down the street…so they wanted our help. (Z, personal interview, April 1, 2010)

There was a general perception amongst everyone I spoke with that the police and other authorities are aware of these spaces, even to such a degree that they know their exact

locations. The perception of many is that police visits are primarily linked to neighbour complaints, or more serious violations that were visible and/or regularly occurring (i.e., liquor being consumed outside of the premises, an unlicensed after hours event happening in a busy entertainment district). Despite, or perhaps because of, this inconsistency in police response – the same activities that were ignored one week might trigger a police visit the next – it is a common tactic to take measures to ensure events remain low-profile, and to have a plan in place to deal with potential encounters with the authorities. These are consistently in place prior to event happenings and might include establishing protocols that are followed by the people working at the event.

Another tactic might be to follow a semi-legitimate route, such as acquiring a business licence that provides some immediate credibility and leeway in any conflict situation. One person told me:

> I knew that it's a lot easier to shut somebody down if they didn't have a business license, so I went and got a business license. But I got a business license that fits the zoning of the place, and I sort of weasel worded [it] into what I do. So my business license officially is 'research and testing of wireless equipment in a variety of live event settings'… I've got the business license proudly posted on the wall there. If the police ever come in and are like "what's this space?" they can see the name on the business license, it's got that air of, you know – "oh". (Z, personal interview, April 1, 2010)

DIY spaces and events often have much more thorough foresight and organization behind them than it might appear on the surface or at individual events. In the cases of the spaces that were part of this study, they have all survived (or had survived) for relatively long periods within the common timeline of Vancouver's ever appearing and disappearing venues. They all also have detailed and well thought out procedures that have been developed and implemented within the means and resources of the users and

coordinators of the space.

Sometimes taking certain overly-cautious measures also serves other ends, as was expressed by a member of a collective that coordinates a warehouse space that has been converted into art studios and rehearsal space, which regularly hosts live performance events. They comment that:

> I kind of have this other version of the reality of that space. But I make sure at parties I'm like, "keep that alley tight, we're gonna get busted, we're gonna get shut down" and like for many reasons...chasing the sex trade workers away and making it more unsafe for them.…[they're] not [being] hassled but if there's a bunch of drunks in the alley their business sucks…so they just get pushed to the unsafer neighbourhoods, where there's no…big whoopin' party in the alley. So I don't know; but some people probably don't even care about that so I just say…"you guys are heating us out and we're going to get busted by the cops, and everyone loses their space." (WH1, personal interview, April 2010)

As a self-identified anarcho-feminist collective co-coordinating a space that exists in a neighbourhood with a high number of sex-workers, the members have recognized within their mandate that they are sharing the neighbourhood with these workers. Their use of property in the area places them in both a position of privilege and responsibility. This awareness is something that they hope becomes understood through the kinds of events that are hosted, and the protocol that they have developed (see chapter four for further discussion), but in this case the common tactic of keeping a low profile serves a dual purpose – it further minimized what might be an already minimal risk of police intervention (however, as the space has succeeded in keeping a generally low profile for events they have hosted, it could be argued that this has contributed to the relatively few police visits that have occurred), as well as providing a mechanism by which the actual local effects of the space do not violate the system of values that govern it.

Another common measure aimed at keeping a low visibility is to develop restrictions around public mentions of the venue's whereabouts. With one exception, all of the people I spoke to required users of their space not to publicize its address or exact location. Instead, artists and event organizers must rely on (and expect their guests to rely on) a network of word-of-mouth publicity and system of direct contact. Often one can find posters, flyers, MySpace event listings, or Facebook postings that inform when an event is happening, what is happening or who is performing, and a cryptic name that may or may not refer to the venue, but always is without an exact address. If the place is unfamiliar to the potential audience member, it becomes up to them to find out the details of the event through friends or contacts who might know where the show is happening. This practice has a longstanding history in rave communities, and other scenes worldwide that have a history of making use of squatted buildings, temporary outdoor spaces or other places with high 'bust' factors. Although a tactical precaution, in scenes that tend to draw smaller audiences anyway, it has the effect of giving underground events the illusion – if not reality – that everyone who is there has a direct connection to the event – though perhaps at a remove of or two or three – and a connection to the community from which it originates, or which it represents. As such, underground venues tend to host smaller (or small feeling) community-oriented events, where the community has been brought together by an interest in a similar art form, music genre, activist cause or identification with a social, cultural or other identity-based group.

Though a number of the events might attract small audiences anyway, the very nature of underground or temporary venues tends to encourage 'smallness', and be well suited to fostering niche or non-mainstream artistic interests and tight-knit communities.

Once the activities extend beyond this scale they become inappropriate for the space.

One person I spoke with is an artist who has been involved in running a small gallery.

The gallery also hosts performance events that stretch their "art retail" business license

designation. He said that he "feel[s] that not a lot of people know about the space but

also that [with] the amount of shows happening it's only a matter of time that maybe [we]

will outgrow that space" (personal interview, March, 2010). A change of scale might

necessitate reconsidering the space's official designation as a commercial gallery and

studio, and perhaps a new location. After running into trouble on a number of occasions,

ultimately closing down in previous years, then reopening under a different name, three

key members of the group decided to acquire a business license, then continued doing,

for the most part, what they had been doing in the space previously – that is using it as

studio space, gallery space, and a live performance venue for small events. When I asked

what the new license allowed them to do he responded, "[n]ot very much but we kind of

just continued with the same policy of trying to have public gatherings and cultural

events there, even though it's not zoned for it. We haven't let that stop us". Although they

do allow their address to be advertised, they also take precautions that affect the kinds of

shows that can take place there, and how they are presented. They acknowledged that:

> [t]he only issues are when…it gets to be something that pours out of your
> building, whether it's sound or people. As soon as people are outside and
> being too loud too late, or the volume is too high inside that's really been
> the only issue...recently we have at least four shows a week that so if
> anything we're doing more shows than ever, but we have a stronger grasp
> on when to end them, who's playing, people's behaviours outside the
> space. (personal interview, March, 2010)

So scale tends to be an important consideration that becomes a defining feature of many

underground events. As Dan Kibke observed:

you have to take a look at the nature of a lot of these things going on…they're all quite small and so they can exist that way…you end up with these small pockets, these microcosms where stuff can happen, and it's just, it's not big enough to draw attention or for people to care about.…you can do that to a certain scale or to a certain level of proficiency, and if you want to go beyond that then you have to make it legit. And if you don't want to do that then you have to make it work at that other (smaller) level and just be really on top of it…and make sure that you cover all those bases, otherwise you're going to lose those spaces and it won't exist. (personal interview, April 1, 2010)

Low rents and minimal involvement with regulatory bodies and institutions makes for a relatively low overhead. A subsistence approach – covering rent, bills, basic building upgrades or repairs when needed – keeps the spaces affordable to their users and encourages a wide range of events and experimentation. The cost and flexibility of the spaces also make them good locations to hold fundraisers without having to give most of your profits back over to production costs. Of the people I spoke with it was common to have sliding scale rental fees or offer space donations, and to have minimal other required costs associated with using the venue for fundraising purposes. 'Causes' might range from the personal (surgery for someone's cat) to the social or political (legal defence funds, social service organizations). Events are often held to raise funds to pay rent on the space, and it may not be completely out of line to compare them with "Harlem rent-parties" of the 1920's, in which people would host parties in their apartments with live entertainment and bootlegged liquor in order to raise rent monies. Rent parties were generally held in impoverished neighbourhoods (and were, in fact, a result of widespread poverty as well as exclusionary cultural practices), advertised via word-or-mouth or small calling card invitations, and running late into the night, until they were shut down by the police or everyone went home. Despite some significant differences, on the surface, the 'rent parties' of today retain a number of parallel characteristics with those of the 20's.

Harlem rent parties are also widely credited as being a major contributor to shaping the development of jazz and blues music. And today's 'rent parties' in the underground arts scene? Music that has its roots in underground scenes regularly gains influence in mainstream popular culture, so it remains to be seen what sort of influence the arts and music that take shape within these current marginal venues might have.

It is fair to say that the performance events that take place in underground venues can not be put into a single category and range from music, to theatre, dance, performance and video art as well as uses that include spiritual retreats, activist education centres, art exhibits, meeting places, and rehearsals and studio space. Even with the few spaces I have focused on for this study the kinds of performances and uses are almost too numerous to list. Users adapt to the space – scaling their performance to fit the size of the space, using lighting and sound equipment that is available or bringing in their own, or making use of the architecture in creative ways.

Often the artists and guests have to adapt to the conditions presented by spaces that are zoned for industrial use, have had little investment in their upkeep (this is often put up with by tenants in exchange for low rent). Everyone I spoke with had improved their spaces to varying degrees – rewiring, and construction in some cases, or just improving the heating control system or bringing in extra space heaters, purchasing extra fire extinguishers and alarm systems to improve the safety and comfort of the users. Although the alarm system, construction and rewiring in one space had been reluctantly paid for by the landlord, in many cases this is a personal investment on the part of the tenants, paid for out of pocket or through fundraising events, and so improvements are rather limited and made on an as needed or as-can-be-afforded basis.

Aside from the 'minimal investment for minimal rent' understanding, neglect or indifference on the part of the landlord allows tenants to continually reconfigure the space as desired (if only superficially) and to self-regulate the kinds of performances that happen. Two people involved with a warehouse space/studio/performance space commented: "with venues where you want to be able to do whatever you can or have the flexibility you totally lower your standards for quality of environment" (WH, personal interview, April 19, 2010).

The freedom to physically configure a space can provide a great opportunity to take creative control over more aspects of a performance than might be afforded in a bar, and with fewer resources than might be required in a theatre. As Michael Red commented, "with underground spaces, it can really be a 'start from scratch' type scenario. which provides so much more possibility of what kind of event you can do, and thus can be that much more rewarding" (personal communication, May 12, 2010).

Of course not all landlords are content to engage in non-interference to the point of neglect. In those cases there was a tendency to seek out similar freedoms through alternate means. As one person reflected:

> I've managed to maintain a really good relationship with the landlord. And quite frankly what landlords want is to not have the police calling them, and to not have the neighbours calling them, and to receive a rent cheque every month, and I've guaranteed all of those things. (Z, personal interview, April 1, 2010)

The configuration and use of the space is then left largely open to the whims and desires of the tenant.

Building and maintaining good relationships is another important part of sustaining a space. Good relationships with artists, performers and users of the space encourage a respectful adherence to precautionary policies and respect for the political, social and/or artistic intentions behind the space. Maintaining constant communication and good relationships with the neighbours engenders a better chance of engaging in to face-to-face communication when issues arise, rather than having to deal with unexpected calls to police or authorities.

Nothing is for certain or forever though, and in addition to external pressures, 'natural' or common cycles occur in which people 'move on' in their lives and artistic careers, or become exhausted with the amount of work and personal resources that they may need to continually put into running a space. New spaces often quickly open to fill the void of ones that close, accustoming those who use or frequent them to a certain kind of localized nomadism that requires audience and community members to be continually engaged with the community. Some semi-legal or illegal spaces do manage to stick around for a number of years or evolve only slightly as they change hands. Despite the City of Vancouver's proposed "Regulatory Review of Live Performance Venues" that may address a number of the most significant barriers to establishing arts venues, at this point the cost in money and human resources needed to set up legitimate venues (and their accompanying businesses or non-profit organizations) means that many people continue to skirt regulations to ensure the continued existence of affordable and accessible spaces. And, those who wish to work outside of the frameworks of "non-profit organization" or "creative commercial enterprise" will continue working in 'minimally-institutionalized', alternative ways to create arts spaces that embody their own ideals and

identities, and are characterized by spontaneity, flexibility, invisibility, and intimacy in a variety of makeshift spaces.

4 Spaces for Sharing Knowledge and Counter-Cultural Organization

Synopsis: This chapter looks at the forms of learning, knowledge sharing and political and social organization that happens in underground arts spaces. It argues that engagement in non-hierarchical practices informed by non-dominant modes of knowing and doing things create concrete, if somewhat limited, counter-cultural spaces of resistance.

4.1 Some Important 'Non-Artistic' Aspects of Intentional Art Spaces

In this final chapter I shift the focus from how and why some underground venues function, to the ways they impact the communities they serve. They obviously produce art and performance events that reflect common artist/audience or audience-participant relationships. However they also create other distinctive relationships. The process of creating and presenting in an underground venue, and the non-artistic components of staging performances affects knowledge sharing practices, social/political organizational spaces and the notions of 'community-building'. The way the venue functions and the ways that events are hosted or staged are directed by both the material realities of running the space (as discussed in the previous chapter), and also by the mandate or vision of those who are involved in running it. Taken together, these elements encourage, support and sometimes require a form of experiential learning and non-hierarchical knowledge sharing practices. The network of relationships that is established around and within the space creates an actual place for sharing ideas and putting skills and values into practice. In creating such a place these venues also form semi-autonomous micro-communities that may provide places to develop alternate forms of representation and value norms,

and 'safe spaces' for groups that are marginalized in more mainstream spaces. They also provide spaces to experiment with alternate forms of political, social and economic organization.

All of the venues that I have focused on have an articulated vision to provide affordable and accessible space to emerging artists, resource-poor artists, and/or artists working outside of the mainstream.   In nearly all cases, knowledge of the space, its events, and activities are primarily shared through word-of-mouth. The one possible exception to this is the gallery space, which does allow users to publicly reveal the venue's address. However, even in their case because of the niche and small-scale events that usually take place there, word-of-mouth plays a major role in disseminating information about the venue's events and intentions. In this sense all are spaces in which a certain amount of alternative, informal forms of learning and knowledge sharing take place. Two of them are run with specific social and political mandates that make their informal pedagogical and social/political dimensions more apparent, and they are the ones that most overtly display the characteristics described in the following sections.

One of these spaces, which I will here call The Warehouse, is run collectively, and with an explicit anarcho-feminist mandate. The collective operates the venue/studio with a focus on cultivating a woman-friendly, queer-friendly space, and is for all intents and purposes governed by consensus decision-making. This practice happens more or less consistently, although there are, as with all collectives, some who contribute more or less according to their ability and interest level. Differing levels of personal investment and contributions mean that the consensus model can fluctuate between being more or less effective. However, an agreed upon mechanism for consensus decision-making is

firmly in place, and the collective's mandate and many of its policies have been written down, providing a way of recourse for when conflict arises. As conflicts arise and are resolved the overall outcome has been a continual reaffirmation of the consensus model, and of the collective's stated mandate.

The other space, which I will here call the 'Studiospace', is overseen by a single person, 'Z', who takes on the material responsibilities for the space, and opens it up to renters and users who come in through a "network of trust". Users can book time in the space through a semi-private online system, and once they are accepted as a member of this system can invite others. Z has the final word on what happens in the space, but feels strongly about not being a "figurehead", but rather standing back, and handing over some responsibility to the person or collective to maintain the space (which could be as simple as not getting it shut down). The network-style booking system provides a way to trace who has come into the space through whom and provides a mechanism for accountability. Z has also developed other internal policies and arrangements that encourage users to feel at least a moral, if not actual ownership over the space. Because users have generally come into the space through a semi-closed network they tend to have a line of direct or indirect connection to it, and because of the route that has brought them to an awareness of the space, also tend to bring with them values that generally align with Z's intentions. Users of the space tend to have a predominantly leftist or anarcho-socialist, "libertarian", anti-authoritarian or similar leanings, and may be involved in alternative arts and culture, social activism and social justice issues (Z, personal interview, 1 April 2010). Z has organized the space up in a way that allows them to practice arts or other activities in a way that supports these values.

This chapter is framed in part by a comment made by Japan-based DJ, artist and writer Terre Thaemlitz in a lecture delivered to an audience of mostly fashion design students, titled "Out of order: A matter of principle". In his lecture Thaemlitz argues that avant-garde fashion's trend-setting rebelliousness is inherently complicit in reinforcing dominant power relations under the guise of resisting the mainstream (Thaemlitz, 2010). The sum of Thaemlitz's talk makes a number of interesting and complex points about the limits of market-driven cultural resistance, and norms around gender and sexuality. One argument in particular struck as relevant across the realm of art production in general, and activist-oriented art in particular. Thaemlitz argues that reducing personal intentions and principles to an expected performance creates a trap for would be 'radicals'. It is easy for critical content that exploits the dominant mechanism or framework that it is criticizing to inadvertently (or not) reinforce the openness or "graciousness" of the oppressor. Such a performance of deviance and radical values does not at all endanger the status quo power dynamic. Thaemlitz criticizes "out of order" fashion's "attempts to conflate runway attacks on taste with political resistance, as its metaphors of struggle become reified and mistaken for struggle itself" (2010). I have used this final statement, taken somewhat out of context, as a jumping off point for the discussion that follows. 'Radical' art and performance is similarly in danger of overvaluing the effectiveness of its 'metaphors of struggle' (or more likely having them co-opted) in place of engaging in actual social change or deviance from dominant culture, thereby subverting its actual intentions. In a similar vein anarchist activist and writer Cindy Milstein argues that anarchist and anti-capitalist artists must take care not to reproduce value systems that anarchists oppose – she notes that piling Do-it-yourself (DIY) quantity on top of DIY

quantity does not create a new society (Milstein, 2007, p. 301). With this in mind I would argue that there are a number of aspects of intentionally run or 'activist' underground arts spaces that do move beyond churning out 'metaphors of struggle' to creating tangible, counter-cultural spaces of resistance.

4.2 Learning and Knowledge Sharing Practices

The first non-explicitly-artistic aspect of counter-culture relates to learning and knowledge sharing. Organizing as a collective or with a mandate that disrupts the usual relationships of owner/user of a space affects how knowledge is shared or passed on. In the spaces that I focused on there is a tendency to reinforce a non-hierarchical power relationship between learners and teachers (and often many would be in the position of being both simultaneously). As well there was a general prevalence of unstructured learning situations, in which the intention of the group, individual or event coming together with the actual needs of the venue facilitated or acted as a catalyst for learning in the context of a place.

There is a tendency for skills to be pooled, as well as opportunities for them to be shared. The prevalence of taking a DIY approach to maintaining a space (either as a way to stay off-the-grid or to save money) leads to the need to engage in self-directed, peer-to-peer and experiential learning. The people who run the spaces are generally do not consider themselves business people, especially in regards to running a venue, a task that they likely have undertaken more as a service than a business opportunity. However, they have learned along the way how to fulfill the business and administrative tasks that need to be done in order for the space to operate, as liminal as it may be. Some people

involved in underground venues also offer up their labour and occupational skills such as construction, carpentry, electrical work or expertise in other useful areas related to the nuts and bolts of maintaining a venue. Getting jobs often done requires learning or pooling skills, and taking them as far as possible before calling in experts. In these cases the spaces are at least adequately maintained and also provide the users who contributed to the maintenance with a greater sense of ownership and responsibility. In underground spaces the act of learning and sharing knowledge is an integral part of actively distancing as much as possible from a culture that relies to an arguably unnecessarily heavy degree on service commodities.

Spaces such as these also provide opportunities for artists to develop professionally if they wish to do so, and to create within a different set of resource and space restrictions than they might have in legitimate spaces or an established art career practice. Mirae Rosner, a dancer, artist and former co-organizer/maintainer of an arts space called the Memelab offered up this reflection on her experience running an underground studio and performance space:

> a few years ago, i [sic] may have said it was all about combining necessity and empowerment. DIY culture, etc. now i [sic] see how making a start up space is also linked to the stage of my 'career' at the time. i [sic] really needed to experiment with doing things in a 'new way', creating rhizomatic cultural assemblages (personal communication, April 7, 2010).

She also comments that she does have a sense of "'been there, done that' now" in acknowledging how much work, and what a steep learning curve it was to maintain, what by all accounts was a successful arts space. Off-the-grid venues, with their 'start from scratch' characteristics, offer up a space and community within which to develop artistic skills, experiment with practices, and network with other likeminded artists. Active

participation creating in such spaces provides valuable perspective as artists move into other kinds of career activity, and in a few cases may provide a sufficient working base to achieve ongoing artistic goals.

Another form of learning engendered by these spaces is a kind of cultural and social learning, which users and maintainers of the space engage in through actively engaging decision making, conflict resolution, event management, creative production and other activities that affirm ways of governing and social organization that reflect the values of the participants. These might include, for example, consensus decision making, bartering, engaging in collaborative practices and maintaining 'safe space'. It is common for the people involved to learn about these ideas through their use of the space, either by helping to maintain it or interfacing with the person or people who maintain it, and other users of the space. Cultural and political knowledges are shared not so much in an informational way, although events that are intended to raise awareness about specific issues might accomplish this to some degree, rather learning happens through one's role as an artist or audience member. The intentions of the space and ideas that govern them are shared by word-of-mouth, through implementation of internal policies.

For some, an experience in an underground venue or participating in an event that is run differently than a regular bar or theatre space may have a personally transformational effect; giving them new perspective or introducing them to new ideas and ways of thinking and doing. A number of interviewees recalled their own experiences at similar spaces where they 'discovered' what feminism, anarchism, etc. looked like in practice, after they had only been vaguely aware of these concepts, if they had been aware of them at all. Within intentional spaces there is definitely a degree of

preaching to the converted. The people who come to such spaces are generally doing so because of a dissatisfaction with, or barrier to accessing other kinds of spaces. They may be more or less aware of the governing principles of the space they have come to, but by actively being in the space (or involved in maintaining it) the opportunity is there for the person to develop a clearer, deeper and contextualized understanding of (non-dominant) values and principles. There is a hope that values and alternative principles can be made apparent in a non-didactic sort of way. A number of interview subjects commented on the "vibe" of a place imparting a real sense of departure from the usual bar- or theatre-going experience; as one Warehouse collective member commented, "(e)ven though maybe [the different 'ground rules' are] not written on the wall or it's like an institutionalized thing, you hope that people can kind of sense it in a way" (personal interview, April 19, 2010).

Beyond the 'vibe' or general experience of being in a space, learning about it and its values may come from more direct ways of knowing. As the venues often provide a place for micro-communities to emerge and congregate, there is often a connection that already exists between users of the space who come to it through a form of networking. A lot of the knowledge sharing practice relies on informal interactions between users to communicate both the values and intention of the space, as well as the practicalities of specific behaviours. Dub producer and artist Michael Red has produced many events at established venues and festivals, such as New Forms Festival, and as well has produced numerous shows at the Warehouse and other underground spaces, which for him regularly take on a different character than the more legitimate shows. He notes that avoiding negative situations at underground venues such as police encounters,

inappropriate behaviour by patrons and I would also suggest compromising the integrity

of the space, relies to some degree on:

> friendly and informed door staff and security and, i'd [sic] like to think, a
> certain level of friendly and informed, audience members who help to
> educate each other on the how's and why's of related elements (such as
> being quiet and "invisible" when coming/going from an underground
> venue). (Michael Red, personal communication, May 12, 2010)

The level of success in developing an informed and educated audience base may be

variable, but the form of the events and the nature of the spaces in which they occur

create the conditions for this kind of informal peer-to-peer knowledge sharing to happen.

And to some degree they actually require that it happen. As Z reflects:

> I really view myself as a facilitator. As a facilitator and a maintainer so
> that I can structure something so that freedom can take place, and
> expression can take place, and it can be one [a freedom] that really is only
> informed by responsibility to the other users of the space and a
> continuation of the space, and that's [sic] really the only limits. (Z,
> personal interview, April 1, 2010)

An active acknowledgement of one's responsibility, and a knowledge of the nature of a

space are necessary on the part of the users, who through their actions also are directly

responsible for its continued existence.

The connection of learning to activity and interaction suggests also that it is not a

passive form of learning. Harnessing the knowledge that comes from being part of an

intentional space requires continuous work and (re)enactment. As one Warehouse

collective member said, commenting on the venue's establishment as an inclusive, queer

and woman friendly space:

> lately I feel like people are sort of brushing that [initial work] aside and
> being like "whatever, we're fine now. We all know about respect and
> boundaries and calling people on their shit. We're fine now so we can just
> go out", whatever. But actually it has to be a constant thing. You can't just
> be like "oh well I read this 'zine three years ago so I'm alright about it

now." (WH1, personal interview, April 19, 2010)

The values that inform the space need to be constantly reaffirmed through its activities, organization and a vigilant (self)reflection on the practices that govern it. This resonates with a statement made by Grant Kester about the potential of 'social' art, in which he posits that:

> The decisive point is not to simply acknowledge the "truth" of our decentered selves in some single, epiphanic moment engineered by the artist, but rather, to develop the skills necessary to mitigate violence and objectification in our ongoing encounters with difference. This form of ethical and aesthetic insight can't be generated through the surrogate of an art object or through an ontological dislocation that simply reflects the experience of instrumentalization back onto the viewer. It requires instead a reciprocal, durationally extended process of exchange. (Kester, 2006, p. 30)

I see art, music and performance as it occurs in underground spaces as engaging in a kind of durational, social practice as Kester describes. Outside of its role as 'consumable' art, art practice in underground spaces serves as, and is inseparable from, its role as a medium for informal knowledge sharing that is achieved through word-of-mouth, and engagement in intentional social and organizational practices.

4.3 Reclaiming Space, Representation, and Creating Safe-Space

A complicated aspect of underground spaces is the alternate forms of social and political organization that emerge within systems that run parallel to, or in contrast to what may be termed the dominant-culture. These are by no means homogenous, and vary in detail with every micro-community that emerges. They are complicated insofar as some members participate in multiple micro-communities that engage in multiple forms of organization, and have varying degrees to which they interact with the larger

community. To some degree artists working in these spaces are in danger of being seen as 'frolicking on built environments' rather than shaping them (Milstein, 2007, p. 299). None of these spaces are entirely outside the system – that is wider society with its capitalist structures, authorities, and dominant worldviews that are connected to how things are done. These micro-communities have to exist to some degree 'within the system', and have developed varying ways of navigating within the bigger picture. In attempting to figure out a way of inhabiting a system that they see as alienating and non-representative, those who engage in some forms of underground arts and culture enact in micro-utopic ways actual possible alternate systems of organization, governing principles and alternate methods of participating in economy.

It is in this context that I see the potential of activist art-making (activist by virtue of its process if not also its content), as engaging to some degree in actual struggle rather than just reproducing metaphors of it. The self-reflexive process of creation and identification of important values provide a way to avoid the 'trap' of performance mentioned above. In a generalized sense, the framework of representation no longer serves the dominant culture that it rebels against.

Spaces like the Warehouse and XSpace interact only as much as they deem necessary with the rules and regulations of the dominant system. Beyond this the space is governed by principles and ways of doing things that, to a great degree, run parallel or counter to dominant culture. In their functioning these spaces resemble Hakim Bey's concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) as outlined in what has become a foundational, utopian-anarchist text, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Drawing on accounts of historical pirate utopias

and key concepts from the Situationist International, Bey draws a picture of areas that fall outside formal and State structures. A TAZ is a "liminal space, both off the map of cop culture and the mediasphere on the one hand, and high-art performance on the other" (van Veen, 2002, p. 8). This liminal space is one that encourages people to break away from dominant social structures and expectations in more than just a conceptual way. As suggested in the section above, the continued existence of a TAZ is dependent on reaffirming non-hierarchical practices and values through continued practice. Bey describes the TAZ as "an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves to reform itself elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it" (Bey, 2003, p. 99), thereby spatializing and temporalizing resistant or counter-dominant modes of being and thinking.

This establishes, if only in a localized way, a new and different set of norms. It is possible to read this goal as coming from a place that believes you can reclaim power over self-representation by 'de-centering' a community through action, and active creation. That is, adopting an understanding that the 'centre' and the 'margins' that define what is dominant and what is marginal are not pre-determined, necessary or essential and can be shifted through persistence of action. In not actively seeking acknowledgement from the dominant culture for legitimacy, they are resisting power structures that suggest that those on the margin gain legitimacy through recognition by those in the centre, and instead look to a form of internal affirmation of values and identity. This reflects a conception of community that suggests a kind of "critical anti-essentializing" (Rose 1997). That is, it stands in opposition to an essentialized

understanding of community characterized by "a spatiality structured as transparently three-dimensional and territorialized by power into a centre and a margin" (Rose 1997; also Deutsche 1998; Bhabha 1994, Hall 1990; Lefebvre 1974). Admittedly some complications and contentious points may arise when, in confronting an essentialized centre/margin, you identify yourself or group as 'marginal'.

Being able to exercise control over representation and ways of doing things within the space is an important issue. Through the mechanisms described in chapter three, people create micro-communities wherein elements of representation and use of space can be controlled. There is an actual creation of safe space for those who do not feel they find it in other places – not only are they surrounded by likeminded people, in that particular space they have control over their own representation and self-representation, and there is a physical location and material resources with which to create, act and practice art. As one member of the Warehouse reflected, "with an underground venue you can decide what kind of venue you want to represent, what kind of shows you want to put on and you actually have control over that small piece of your culture, or that small piece of your life, or the way that you represent what you stand for or parts of what you exist for" (WH2, personal interview, April 19, 2010).

As organizers and users of an underground space, interacting with the wider world is obviously necessary, but aligning oneself to its norms and values is not an obligatory part of meeting the needs that arise at this interface. Enacting counter-dominant norms in the arena of a micro-community brings to mind Nancy Fraser's description of a subaltern counter public. In *Rethinking the Public Sphere* she notes that:

> members of subordinated social groups-women, workers, peoples of color,
> and gays and lesbians-have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute

alternative publics. [Subaltern counter publics] are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. (Fraser 1993, p. 123)

These micro-communities provide opportunities to enact and embody counter-dominant ways of being and doing things, rather than just being representations of them.

4.4 Not Business as Usual: Alternative Economic Practices

Another aspect of alternative governing practices is the development of a kind of alternative economic practice that considers financial, material, labour exchange along with moral contributions. All of these work together, and the only objective bottom line is that the venue not cease to exist; the value of exchange and contribution is not fixed and might not have its own line item on a budget sheet.

All of the people involved in the spaces I spoke with iterated a desire to run the venues essentially as non-profit enterprises; most also acknowledge that it is often a struggle to get the venue to pay for itself, much less turn a profit. Any profits made are generally put into maintaining the space, and paying rent and bills. The people responsible for maintaining the venues generally do so on a volunteer basis or for less than adequate financial compensation. For the most part their goal is to put as little of their personal money into the space as possible while still retaining the integrity of their mandate or principles. They organize financial exchanges in such a way as to provide space that is accessible and affordable, and able to subsidize events or activities that are deemed to be worthy causes or actively furthering the governing mandate of the space. In fact, a number of people I spoke with suggested that running an underground space so

that it turns a large profit is a sure way to get it shut down, as it likely implies hosting

attention-getting, money-making events with larger crowds and significant (illegal) liquor

sales for which the spaces are often not suited.

The spaces that I focused on all served largely as havens for resource-poor local

or traveling, artists, or incubators for events and activities until they might at some point

outgrow the venue as they become more established, and run into problems with

restrictions placed on them by underground spaces. As Z commented in regards to the 'X

Space':

> I want the space used for those kinds of missions where its clearly an
> activist initiative, it's doing something important, it's promoting a value,
> and the sooner it can outgrow that space the happier I am, because I've
> played that all important sort of seeding, supporting role, and now it's
> gone out and blossomed. (Z, personal interview, April 1, 2010)

The mandate of accessibility supports a particular scale and niche of art and performance

work, and recognizing this, those responsible for the venues modify their mode of

exchange to accommodate sliding scale payments, and other exchange or barter, with

more financially successful events supporting those that are less profitable (or profit-

driven). By using a myriad of measures to value a work or event, rather than reducing it

to its money-making potential, the approach of intentionally affordable and accessible

venues succeeds in creating a system that diminishes neither the value of the work or the

value of the space. It may, however, help to reinforce to some degree a false dichotomy

between profitable events as 'morally bankrupt', and 'socially just' events as financial

drains. However, as long as 'profitable' events fall within the moral parameters of an

intentional space (i.e., they adhere to the processes and mandate that has been agreed

upon and put in place by those who are responsible for the space), and smaller or cause-

based events contribute to sustaining the venue, the overall effect is one of enabling and revaluing; looking at the bottom line in a more holistic way rather than compartmentalizing activities and contributions. Ultimately the goal of the exchange economy of underground arts spaces is about getting the needs of the venue met; the end result is a fuller spectrum of happenings.

4.5 The Ripple Effect of Small-scale Art Happenings

One of the most complicated questions comes in evaluating the wider impact of intentionally operating parallel to dominant culture. Are intentionally run underground venues engaging in a struggle with dominant culture by providing an alternative, or are they just isolationist ventures with little impact on the larger discourse? This question is too large to answer here, and complicated by the many points where the micro-counter-cultural-communities overlap with, and must adopt the practices of dominant-culture. It is also difficult to evaluate the consistency of counter-communities. It is fair to say that most have not entirely escaped the traps of formal, dominant cultural practices. However the subjective experiences related by community members, and the formalized internal procedures of intentionally run venues suggest that these spaces are significantly unlike dominant-cultural spaces to the extent that they are identified as safe spaces and places of openness by those who do not have similar experiences elsewhere.

I asked people what they thought of their personal role, and the role of underground spaces in the larger picture of Vancouver's cultural scene, and beyond. Most answers referred in some way to notions of community-building, producing a social and ideological 'ripple effect' and ways that such activity directly addresses local

manifestations of larger struggles. In speaking of an interventionist art performance that

took place in a Strathcona neighbourhood park, one person noted that:

> for me it's been really effective just to address what I see happening within
> [my] community; like gentrification…that sort of cliché of think globally
> act locally – well you might be thinking about the widening gap between
> rich and poor which is a global phenomenon, [but] on a local level that
> might look like gentrification, and people being forced out of
> neighbourhoods because they're no longer affordable. (Spark, personal
> interview, March 30, 2010)

Small actions and small 'spaces' of action do not develop or function in a vacuum.

Describing an American food cooperative experimenting with food production in a small

space, artist Claire Pentecost comments that"[w]hat we found was that these sorts of

efforts are starting to create new scales of existence: people are involved in this type of

local activity, not as isolationist retreat, but with a sophisticated understanding of how

their local activity fits into a set of global pressures and complications" (2010, p.43). The

politics and intentions of many underground arts spaces resonate in a similar way, taking

up the old but necessary cliché of 'think globally, act locally' to affect change and

address in a small and manageable way imbalances of material resources and the power-

dynamics of representation. They create networks and seed relationships through a sort

of ripple-effect. Mirae Rosner reflected that in co-running the aptly named Memelab,

inherited from Vancouver artist Olo J. Milkman, "[Jesse Scott and I] were part of creating

a small underground pocket of artists - a kind of small stone in the pond of the art scene -

ripples spreading out via connections made between people at the space (personal

communication, April 7, 2010). And further comments that these ripples still

"reverberate", and can be seen, for example, in the continued existence of collectives that

emerged from the space. Another artist related his experience of performing on a

temporarily hijacked, abandoned barge in Burrard Inlet, Burnaby, BC:

> I'm sure some people would say, "well aren't some of these things super-
> transient?" Depending on what it is – [for example] the McBarge is only
> happening for the people on the McBarge…but recently I went to see a
> show by an artist...and we ended up talking about the [East Vancouver]
> Culture Crawl…[H]e was talking about how expensive it's become, and
> how he can't open up his space during the Culture Crawl without
> paying…and I mentioned that I'd done this performance with my
> friend…selling…artist space [in McLean park] as estate agents, and…he
> remembered it right away and [had] obviously talked about it with his
> friends…I guess that's the first time I've actually come across somebody
> that, kind of, in a way confirms how I think these things work, which is by
> word-of-mouth, by storytelling, by memes. (Spark, personal interview,
> March 30, 2010)

In this way, apparently transient events retain their social momentum.

There was also a general agreement amongst interview participants that

transformative or significant experiences do not have to happen on a large scale to be

effective. Someone may take away from a personal exchange (either with another person

or a group) a new connection, relationship or perspective. Individual, or even small-scale

collective transformations might not change the world, but that does not diminish their

significant impacts. As Hakim Bey writes, "[l]et us admit that we have attended parties

where for one brief night a republic of gratified desires was attained. Shall we not confess

that the politics of that night have more reality and force for us than those of, say, the

entire U.S. government? Some of these "parties"…lasted for two or three *years*" (2003,

p. 132). Underground venues tend to directly or indirectly set up the conditions for

intense and potentially transformative personal exchanges and experiences. These

opportunities are unstructured, but intentionally created by those who facilitate the

particular environments needed to enable them to happen. As Michael Red observes:

certain vibes vital to creating positive change and movements away from
non-positive societal norms simply CAN'T happen at non-underground
venues. unregulated atmosphere breeds unregulated experience…you
simply CAN'T have that amazingly life-changing conversation with
someone at 5am in the morning at any legit venue in vancouver [sic],
simply because they're not open that late. These kinds of human interaction
are pivotal to positive change and experience and respite and just "fun."
(personal communication, May 12, 2010)

Underground arts spaces may serve and affect small pockets of people, but taken

together they touch significant portions of Vancouver's cultural community. One

Warehouse member mused about how surprising it is to think about how "hundreds of

people know where the Warehouse is" (WH2, personal interview, April 19, 2010). Little

Mountain Gallery, recently placed under threat of closure due to zoning regulation

violations, in a little over a week received over 200 letters of support from artists,

musicians and others connected to the space (email press release, August 6, 2010).

Although not presenting a large and homogenous 'unified front', underground spaces

function as physical links, rhizomatically connecting micro-communities through the

various networks and personal connections that they engender.

When the two aspects discussed above are combined – alternative learning and

knowledge sharing practices, and actively embodied counter-cultural social and

organizational processes – it produces an impact that is at least as effective, if not more

so, than the content or message of radical or alternative art. It is radical not because of

what it says but what it does. There are obvious limitations to this as a strategy for

change, as most people will not be able to enact these modes of being and doing in all

parts of their life. Taking a cue from Henri Lefebvre, Cindy Milstein comments that for

radical art to be effective and not merely a parody of itself it "must be a critique of the

'real by the possible" (2007, p. 302). Intentional, underground spaces create time- and

place-based opportunities in which to enact alternate possible ways of being, knowing and doing.

5 Conclusion

Despite the "No Fun City" moniker there is a lot going on 'underground' in Vancouver's arts scene, with the amount of alternative activities going on contributing greatly to the overall character of the city. As a result, underground arts venues are a frequent focus in accounts of the city's arts and cultural activities. Although they are a significant locus of artistic activity, the spaces from which alternative culture emerges can be hard to find. Their precarious legal status keeps them off-the-radar and creates a cultural scene where much takes place on a micro-community level.

Throughout the course of this thesis I have identified over-regulation and under-representation in dominant arts and culture as primary factors that influence the desire among some artists to create spaces that are affordable, flexible and accessible. In endeavouring to offer this to their users, underground arts spaces have developed social, political and economic organizational aspects that meet this end, often in ways that run counter to established ways of organizing. Emerging artists and those looking for a space to define their own representation outside of the influence of dominant norms. Often the aim of providing a space wherein marginalized artistic voices can be heard.

The artwork and performance that takes place sometimes experiments with artistic norms, but often is not entirely radical, although it does tend to appeal to a niche audience. They could be noise, metal, punk, indie, dub, folk or improv shows that are not going to revolutionize the art form, but for one reason or another out of a genuine need, or desire to work outside of the usual channels are best suited for underground venues. The art that takes place in these spaces does often have more freedom to experiment within unusual sets of restrictions, and definitely has the potential to develop in a way

that it hybridizes or significantly impacts the trajectories of contemporary artistic movements. This is not to deny that there is much that presents clever and informed comments on political, social and artistic norms, however, the overt messages of much art and performance that thrives in underground spaces are often less radical than the way that it has come about. It is the context of the art that provides much of the political and social substance that actually challenges the status quo. While much of the content of the art works and performances are obviously outside of the mainstream, their counter-cultural potential is enacted in many of their non-artistic aspects. As micro-communities that often enact alternate value and organizational systems that run parallel to mainstream discourses or expectations, intersecting with them only where necessary, they become places in which the thread of their own counter-dominant discourses may be identified and followed. Hearkening back to the idea of 'think globally, act locally', micro-communities of underground artists create actual physical and social spaces for counter-cultural discourses to play out, addressing larger issues of representation, distribution of resources and alternate ways of knowing and doing on a small-scale, local way. The spaces that I have focused on commonly enact horizontal learning structures, non-hierarchical decision making practices, and alternate economic structures in which the bottom-line is the survival of the space as an accessible, affordable place that supports marginalized communities. In this way underground arts venues have the potential to create art that does not hollowly depict struggle and alternative culture, but engages with it in a meaningful way.

Underground venues are one response to a real and perceived lack of accessible art space. Vancouver has a strong history of artist-run culture, and is home to some of the

first artist-run-centres in Canada. As this historical artist-run-culture has become more institutionalized and subject to its own set of financial and political pressures, underground spaces have, in a sense, stepped in to fill a void that has been left. Although they often bear a number of similar characteristics, they present an alternative to being part of (and ultimately dependent on) 'the system'. Underground arts organizers do not need to rely on having the structures and administrative staff necessary to secure funding, they are not restricted by their designation, and generally do not have to jump through hoops that they are not prepared or interested to jump through. Artist-run centres definitely provide a valuable and more accessible alternative to commercial or other for-profit cultural spaces. The trade off for legitimacy, however is to accept a different set of restrictions and regulations. Underground venues may be such because they either do not have the human or financial resources to become legitimate – either as a business or an artist-run or non-profit arts centre. Often times however, the people involved are also not interested in the organizational modes and expectations that come with such institutionalization, preferring to accept the risks of illegitimacy in order to experiment with different kinds of organizational and economic models, that they see as providing a greater degree of openness, accessibility and flexibility. With these considerations, it is unclear what impact new civic rules and regulations that make it easier for underground spaces to become legal will have. It could be that they will be embraced entirely by some, but followed by others only to the extent that doing so does not undermine their alternate (counter-dominant) modes of organization and knowledge relationships.

What happens, however, remains to be seen, and in the meantime it is possible that any one of the spaces included in this study will have to close its doors in the near

future. During the course of writing this thesis one space was visited by city officials following a complaint from a residential neighbour, and following an outcry of support is working with city councilor Heather Deal, and is currently being considered to be a 'pilot project' for a "new kind of mixed use space" (Little Mountain Gallery, email press release, August 6, 2010).

Although many of the research findings may be generalized across a spectrum of off the grid and underground venues, this study was limited to a small cross-section of Vancouver's current underground arts activity and venues, a number of which do engage in explicitly 'intentional' social and political practices. By narrowing my focus on a cross-section of current underground art spaces this written thesis and accompanying artist book does not aim to provide a comprehensive account everything that is taking place off-the-grid in Vancouver. Rather, it presents a small-scale archive that through its development has given people a deeper understanding of their own practices. Taken together, both the carefully crafted documentation and the accompanying analysis provide context to a snapshot of Vancouver's underground arts landscape, and an account of the kinds of alternative political and cultural organization and counter-cultural discourses that are possible through off-the-grid arts culture.

References

Belliveau, George. (2005) An arts-based approach to teach social justice: Drama as a way to address bullying in schools. *International Journal of Arts Education* 3(3), 136-65.

Becker, K. & Fleming, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Critical strategies in art and media*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

Bey, H. (2003). *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism,* 2nd edition. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Bishop, C. (2004). Antagonism and relational aesthetics. *October*, 110, Fall 2004, 51-79.

Bishop, C. (2006). The social turn: Collaboration and its discontents. *ArtForum,* February, 44(6), 178-194.

Bloom, B. (2007). A magical land of roving Santa Claus armies, pirated energy drinks and a giant squatted urban village: Political art activities in Denmark. In J. MacPhee & E. Reuland (Eds.), *Realizing the impossible: Art against authority,* (pp. 130-151). Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Blunt, A. & Rose, G. (Eds.) (1994). *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Post-Colonial Geographies*. New York: Guilford Press.

Bondi, L., Avis, H., Bankey, R., Bingley, A., Davidson, J., Einagel, V.I., et al. (2002). *Subjectivities, Knowledge and Feminist Geographies: the subjects and ethics of social research*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Braybrook, K. (2010). Fact: Vancouver's defiant, innovative underground music scene is anything but "no fun". *Beyond Robson*, March 4, 2010. Retrieved July 8, 2010 at http://www.beyondrobson.com/city/2010/03/fact_vancouvers_defiant_innovative_underground_music_scene_is_anything_but_no_fun/

Campbell, M. L. (2006a). Institutional ethnography and experience as data. In D. E. Smith (Ed.) *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 91-108). Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Campbell, M. L. (2006b). Research for activism: Understanding social organization from inside it. In C. Frampton, G. Kinsman, A. K. Thompson & K. Tilleczek (Eds.) *Sociology for changing the world* (pp. 87-98). Fernwood Publishing: Halifax.

Charlesworth, J. (2010, May). Global ear: Vancouver. *The Wire Magazine*, 315, 20.

City of Vancouver (2010). *Supports item no. 2, P&E Committee Agenda, January 21, 2010* (RTS No. 8398, VanRIMS No. 08-2000-20). Vancouver, BC. Retrieved July 4, 2010 at vancouver.ca/ctyclerk/cclerk/20100121/documents/penv2.pdf

Clifford, J. (1981). On ethnographic surrealism. *Comparative studies in society and history*, 23 (4), 539-564.

Coles, A. (Ed.) (2000). *De-, dis-, ex-, volume 4: Site-specificity - the ethnographic turn*. London: Black Dog Publishing.

Deutsche, R. (1995). 'Surprising geography, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers,* 85(1), pp. 168-75.

Deutsche, R. (1998). *Evictions: Art and spatial politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Denzin, N. K. (2000a). Interpretive ethnography. *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft,* 3(3): 401-409. DOI: 10.1007/s11618-000-0040-5

Denzin, N. K. (2000b). Aesthetics and practices of qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2): 256-265.

Denzin, N.K. (2003a). Performing [auto]ethnography politically. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 25, 257-278.

Denzin, N. (2003b). Reading and Writing Performance. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3, 243-268.

Desai, D. (2002). The ethnographic move in contemporary art: What does it mean for art education? *Studies in Art Education,* 43(4), 307-323.

Deutsche, R. (1998). *Evictions: Art and spatial politics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Enwezor, O. (2008). *Archive fever: Uses of the document in contemporary art*. New York: International Center of Photography, New York.

Foster, H. (1995). *The artist as ethnographer*. In G. E. Marcus & F. R. Myers (Eds.) *The traffic in culture: Refiguring art and anthropology* (pp. 302-309). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Foster, H. (1996). *The return of the real*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Fraser, N. (1993). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Haberrmas and the Public Sphere* (pp. 109-142). Cambridge and London: MIT Press.

Fraser, N. (1998). Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition and participation. In G. B. Peterson (Ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (pp. 1-67), 19. Salt Lake City.

Fraser, N. (2000). Rethinking recognition. *The New Left Review*, 3, May-June 2000. Retrieved November 12, 2009 at http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2248

Gregson, N. & Rose, G. (2000) Taking Butler elsewhere: performativities, spatialities and subjectivities, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 18, 433-452.

Grosz, E. (2002) Bodies-Cities. In G. Bridge & S. Watson (Eds.) *The Blackwell City Reader*, Bridge, Gary and Watson, Sophie (pp. 297-303). Oxford: Blackwell.

Grosz, E. (1995) *Space, Time and Perversion*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Gruenewald, D.A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher* 32(4), 3-12.

Harper, A. (2010, March 17). The musical revolution will not be released on CD: Towards a utopian music (Talk at the Oxford Radical Forum 2010). Retrieved March 20, 2010 from http://rougesfoam.blogspot.com/2010/03/musical-revolution-will-not-be-released.html

Helliwell, P. (2007). Exodus. *Mute*. Posted July 11, 2007 on http://www.metamute.org/en/exodus

Hern, M. (2010). *Common ground in a liquid city: Essays in defense of an urban future*. AK Press: Oakland, CA.

Hope Cruikshanks, N. (2007). *Tales of transformation through children's global arts*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Victoria, 2007). Retrieved from http://dspace.library.uvic.ca:8080/bitstream/1828/295/1/UVic%20Thesis%20Template-Final.pdf

Holtzman, B., Hughes, C. & Van Meter, K. (2007). Do it yourself…and the movement beyond capitalism. In S. Shukaitis, D. Graeber and E. Biddle (Eds.), *Constituent imagination: militant investigations//collective theorization* (pp. 44-61). Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Hughes, J. (2008). Strange Brew. *Exclaim*, September. Retrieved February 25, 2010 at http://exclaim.ca/articles/research.aspx?csid1=125

Irwin, R.L., Beer, R., Springgay, S., Grauer, K., Xiong, G., & Bickel, B. (2006). The rhizomatic relations of A/r/tography. *Studies in Art Education*, 48 (1), 70-88.

James, M. (Director/Co-producer) & Kroll, K. (Director/Co-producer). (2010). *No fun city* [Motion picture]. Canada: Make Believe Media.

Kester, G. H. (2006). Collaboration, art and subcultures. *Caderno Videobrasil*, 2, 10-35.

Kester, G. H. (2004). Conversation pieces: The role of dialogue in socially engaged art. In Z. Kucor & S. Leung (Eds.), *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985* (pp. 76-88). Oxford: Blackwell.

Khan, F. Z. (2009). The Cobalt struggles through. *Now Public*. June 4, 2009. Retrieved from http://www.nowpublic.com/culture/cobalt-vancouver-struggles-through

Kwon, M. (1997). One place after another: Notes on site specificity. *October*, 80, 85-110.

Kwon, M. (2004). *One place after another: Site-specific art and locational identity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Langille, J. (2010). Fake Jazz resurrects itself. *Discorder*. March 2010. Retrieved from http://discorder.ca/discorder-magazine/index.php/2010/03/03/fake-jazz-resurrects-itself/

Lefebvre, H.(1991). The Production of Space, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Levack Drever, J. (2002). Soundscape composition: the convergence of ethnography and acousmatic music. *Organised Sound* **7**(1), 21-27. DOI:10.1017/S1355771802001048

Lippard, L. (1997). *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society*. New York: The New Press.

MacInnis, A. (2008, May). Global Ear: Vancouver – off the grid and under the radar. *The Wire Magazine* 291, 16.

Makagon, D., & Neumann, M. (2009). *Recording culture: Audio documentary and the ethnographic experience*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

Massey, D. (1994). *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Massey, D. (1993). Politics and Space/Time. In M. Keith & S. Pile (Eds.) *Place and the Politics of Identity* (pp. 141-161). London: Routledge.

Mendelson, R. (2009). Keeping a lid on fun in Vancouver. *McLean's*, August 27, 2009. Retrieved from http://www2.macleans.ca/2009/08/27/keeping-a-lid-on-fun-in-vancouver/

Milstein, C. (2007). Reappropriate the imagination. In J. MacPhee & E. Reuland (Eds.), *Realizing the impossible: Art against authority,* (pp. 296-307). Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Mitchell, D. (2001). The lure of the local: Landscape studies at the end of a troubled century. *Progress in Human Geography*, 25(2), 269-281. DOI: 10.1191/030913201678580520

Mounajjed, N., Peng, C., &Walker, S. (2007). Ethnographic interventions: A strategy and experiments in mapping sociospatial practices. *Human Technology,* 3(1), 68-97.

Pentecost, C. (n.d.). Oh! The public amateur is not afraid to let on that she just figured it out. About section posted to http://publicamateur.wordpress.com/about/

Pourchier, N.M. (2010). Art as inquiry: A book review of Being with A/r/tography. *The Qualitative Report,* 15(3), 740-745. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-3/springgay.pdf

Rose, G. (1997). Spatialities of 'community', power and change: The imagined geographies of community arts projects, *Cultural Studies*, 11(1), 1-16.

Rossiter, K., Contos, P., Colantino, A., Gilbert, J., Grey, J., & Keightly, M. (2008). Staging data: Theatre as a tool for analysis and knowledge transfer in health research. *Social Science & Medicine*, 66 (2008), 130-146.

Russell, B. (2009). Towards a social ontology of improvised music. In Mattin (Ed.), *Noise and capitalism* (pp. 72-95). San Sebastián, Spain: Arteleku Audiolab. Retrieved February 5, 2009 from http://www.arteleku.net/audiolab/noise_capitalism.pdf

Rutherford, J. (1990). The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha. In J. Rutherford (Ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 207-211). London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Shukaitis, S. Graeber, D., & Biddle, E. (Eds.), *Constituent imagination: militant investigations//collective theorization*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

Sinner, A., Leggo, C., Irwin, R., Gouzouasis, P. & Grauer, K. (2006). Arts based educational dissertations: Reviewing the practices of new scholars. *Canadian Journal of Education* 29 (4), 1223-1270.

Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. Toronto: Altamira Press.

Smith, G. W., Mykhalovskiy, E. & Weatherbee, D. (2006). A research proposal. In D. E. Smith (Ed.) *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 165-180). Toronto: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Spencer, A. (2005). *DIY: The rise of lo-fi culture*. London: Marion Boyars.

Thaemlitz, T. (2010, January). *All's in order: 'Out of order' fashion's inability to divest of power*. Paper presented at Out of order: A matter of principle, Bremen, Germany. Retrieved February 14, 2010 from http://www.comatonse.com/writings/allsinorder.html

Thompson, A. K. (2006). Direct action: Pedagogy of the oppressed. In C. Frampton, G. Kinsman, A. K. Thompson & K. Tilleczek (Eds.) *Sociology for changing the world* (pp. 99-118). Fernwood Publishing: Halifax.

van Veen, tobias c. (2002). It's Not A Rave, Officer, It's Performance Art: Art as Defense from the Law and as Offense to Society in the Break-In Era of Rave Culture. *Conference Manuscript*. U of Calgary: University Art Association of Canada, 10.31.02.

Vidokle, A. (2006). Exhibition as School in a Divided City in Notes for an Art School. Amsterdam and Nicosla: Manifesta 6 School Books. Retrieved from http://www.manifesta.org/manifesta6/index.htm

Wilson, M. (2007). Autonomy, agonism, and activist art: An interview with Grant Kester. *Art Journal*, Fall, 108 – 118.

Winters, K.L., Belliveau, G, & Sherrit-Fleming, L. (2009). Shifting identities, literacy, and a/r/tography: Exploring an educational theatre company. *Language & Literacy*, Spring 2009. Retrieved June 18, 2010 from http://www.langandlit.ualberta.ca/Spring2009/Winters.htm

Wong, J. (2010). 'No-fun' city no more? *Westender*, January 28, 2010, p.7.

Appendix A: BREB Certificate

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: George Belliveau	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Education/Language and Literacy Education	UBC BREB NUMBER: H09-03514

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:	
Institution	Site
N/A	N/A

Other locations where the research will be conducted:
Research for this project will be conducted at artist run centres, artist studios, in the field (public and private performance and art events), cafés or similar sites.

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):
Heather J. McDermid

SPONSORING AGENCIES:
N/A

PROJECT TITLE:
Improvising Spaces: places and spaces and Do-It-Yourself performance in Vancouver, BC

CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: February 15, 2011

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:	DATE APPROVED: February 15, 2010	
Document Name	Version	Date
Protocol:		
Research Proposal - Improvising Spaces	N/A	January 29, 2010
Consent Forms:		
Interview Consent Form	N/A	January 29, 2010
Documentation Consent Form	N/A	February 8, 2010
Advertisements:		
Recruitment email - sample	N/A	February 8, 2010

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board
and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair