



Molly Dilworth

Lightly Illegal: A Letter from the Most Elegant Public Bathroom in Southeast Portland

Suddenly: Where We Live Now

Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Portland

26 August to 5 October 2008

The following are thoughts written in response to the conversations I had, both public and private, around *Suddenly: Where We Live Now*, a project by curator Stephanie Snyder and writer Matthew Stadler that exists as an exhibition, a series of texts, and a reader. In addition, the project included meals, screenings, readings, panels, and symposia organized by Snyder and Stadler, all inspired by the writings of German urban planner Thomas Sieverts. The exhibition opened at the Cooley Gallery at Reed College in September 2008, travelled to the Pomona College Museum of Art in January 2009, and will disperse and travel to locations around the world over the next several years. As an artist in the exhibition, I was present at many of the *Suddenly* events and met most of the participants.

After the *Suddenly* panel discussion, in Room 315 of Reed College's Elliot Hall, I wanted to talk to the participants involved, but I needed to get some of the ideas in my head down on paper. I ducked into the first bathroom I saw to make notes. I stood writing at a chest-high marble shelf next to a window overlooking elegant grounds surrounded by forest. The light rain made everything misty and the air smelled clean. I chose the bathroom for privacy, but what I got was something closer in spirit to a cabin at the MacDowell Colony. This formal bathroom—teal walls, oak paneling—was so unfamiliar that I felt out of context, and my senses seemed heightened. It occurred to me that the bathroom was a tiny model of the exhibition *Suddenly*, which addresses the world as it is and asks us to make sense of it all. Though clear in hindsight, the answer to “what is happening?” is slippery in real time. This disorientation is mirrored throughout the *Suddenly* exhibition, from the lack of wall labels to the poetic—rather than purely informative—curatorial statement. This sense of uncertainty seems apt, as it is the operating principle by which we live now.

Matthew Stadler invited about fifty guests for dinner and conversation between Thomas Sieverts and architectural historian Aaron Betsky about the new shape of cities in an abandoned parking lot in Beaverton, Oregon. The overgrown, oddly bucolic lot belongs to Goodwill Industries, which gave our group official permission to assemble, eat, and drink on their property that night. During the conversation following the meal, Sieverts

pointed out that if the event were held in a German suburb, it would be done without permit or permission, in a manner he defined as “lightly illegal.” Because permits or official sanction are unnecessary in Germany, gatherings like our dinner are legally ambiguous and unlikely to draw the attention of the police.

In hosting the dinner in the abandoned lot, Stadler suspended conventional civic and social rules. The guests at the dinner had to find the unmarked location and then gradually discover the proper way to behave in this unusual social setting. When there are no codes to follow, they must be invented. When at a dinner in an abandoned parking lot, does one follow the rules of a formal meal? If it begins to rain, as it did in Beaverton, should one be angry with the host, commiserate with one’s fellow diners, or leave altogether? Similarly, the viewers to the *Suddenly* exhibition were confronted with the question of how to behave in an exhibition that is open to the public but still obviously under construction. Should a viewer enter the space and speak to those at work, or ask the guard if the exhibition is even open? I overheard one viewer declare, “Something happened here.” However the visitor chooses to respond, the ambiguous conditions in the *Suddenly* exhibition break the conventional rules of the museum. The changeable, unclear circumstances we encounter in everyday life are modelled in the exhibition and surrounding events of *Suddenly*, forming a destabilizing and “lightly illegal” climate.

This state of not knowing, possibly risking chastisement or a fine, tangling with the unknown and relying on negotiation rather than known social codes prompts us to generate new information, making rules that work for each of us rather than following codes that may not serve us. Our modern relationship to the natural world is an example of how the civic body relates to the unknown. We want our homes and parks free of animal invaders without questioning the implications of eradication. In city parks, dead trees— or snags—are seen as waste and removed, but in biological terms, the snag is a vibrant, diverse habitat. Fritz Haeg, in his *Animal Estates, Regional Model Homes 5.0, Portland, Oregon* project (2008), works with local naturalists to understand the animal inhabitants of the city in which he lives. He uses that information to create habitats for the native animals, effectively inviting them back into the city. Haeg works with the public, from expert to novice, to build habitats for animal clients. What often goes unremarked, as Haeg articulated during the panel at Reed, is that his project is intentionally provocative and anarchic. By reverse anthropomorphizing the animals and their dwellings we, the human viewers, are forced to think of our domiciles as part of, rather than separate from, the natural world. Under the guise of architect and with the help of experts from the Audubon Society, public school students, and unaffiliated enthusiasts, Haeg attempts to upend the status quo of human-animal relations. His project, thus, becomes an argument for engaging the unknown to increase social responsibility.

Who are our social rules meant to protect? I find Slavoj Žižek’s argument that they protect the “unknown other” convincing. For example, if a woman chooses to be topless on a New York City beach (legal), she can expect to be lectured/ogled by park rangers (legal, but pathetic). The unstated rule— *keep your clothes on* —protects the topless from the ranger and the ranger from his desire and discomfort. Laws that negotiate the delicate territory between private and public spaces shape our psyches while controlling our civic and physical bodies. We have a clear understanding of what we are allowed to see officially (*American Idol*) and unofficially (state executions), but it is much less clear what to do about what we see but must pretend we didn’t see (Abu Ghraib). We temporarily protect our psyches by willfully ignoring taboos about violence to the body of our enemies, in war, for example, while strictly enforcing taboos around the body itself—at least our own bodies and those we consider friendly. How can we hold these two standards in our minds when we know threats and allies are ever-changing? It’s no wonder we confuse violence and desire. This is the strongest argument for becoming more familiar with that which is lightly illegal.

While admittedly having trespassed to get some of her photos, the photographer Zoe Crosher is involved with a riskier set of questions involving mythologies, manifest destiny, and the ways in which we collectively suspend disbelief. In her *Transgressing the Pacific* (2008) series, Crosher photographs sites in Los Angeles at the edge of the Pacific Ocean where people have gone beyond the physical border of the country, into the sea, and their death. These photographic depictions are drawn from the lives of fictional characters—such as the site where Roger Wade drowned in the 1973 film of Raymond Chandler’s novel *The Long Goodbye*—as well as the lives of real people—such as the site of Natalie Wood’s disappearance off Catalina Island. In these spaces, Crosher captures only the empty landscape where the disappearance occurred. These are not reenactments; the subjects are present only in their absence. Crosher’s photographs violate a fiction we become complicit in when we watch a movie or participate in pop culture. By looking at actors through a quotidian lens, Crosher introduces uncertainty into America’s collective fantasy, undermining the myth of the “Sunshine State.” The philosophy of America is historically tied to the land and the constant expansion of territory decreed, according to the founding fathers, by Providence and known as Manifest Destiny. Crosher’s photographs unravel the mythical structure of the American Dream by depicting the physical and psychological rift that occurs when endless expansion meets an uncrossable border.

In “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” (1975) Theodor Adorno wrote, “order, however, is not good in itself.” Order can, in fact, be deadly. Relying on rules generated in response to past problems instead of generating new rules in response to current problems can lead to incidents as singular as the Virginia Tech shootings and as global as the credit market collapse. In hindsight, many teachers knew that Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech shooter, had problems, but at the time they were uncertain about how to respond to a situation with which they had no experience. How many times over how many years have we known that outsourcing, the shrinking middle class, and disappearing post-industrial communities are changing the way we live? Yet, until recently, we all (despite our political, economic, and regional differences) continued, even fought, to live in a world that no longer existed, acting as if we could will it into existence.

Though the *Suddenly* project has no political aims, it literally asks us to consider *how we live now*, to look closely—even at the things we don’t

like, accept, or understand. *Suddenly* encourages a shift in how we experience the world by modelling a state of not-knowing, anti-order, or light illegality. We don't know what happens if we transport a conversation from the gallery to an abandoned parking lot in the suburbs, invite ground-dwelling bees into our homes, or transcend the physical border of our country.

By relocating temporarily to Poland and upending his assumptions about the consistency of the social contract, Michael Damm made a study of everyday public life. Damm recorded and reconstructed Katowice, Poland, in the videos *Island*, *waiting at the light*, and *bell* (all 2008) and the photographs *Port of Oakland*, *Curtain*, *Island*, and *Opole* (all 2008). While Damm was shooting in the streets of Katowice, the citizens would regularly offer him beer, food, or help by directing traffic. The permeability of public space in Katowice, even for a foreigner, is proof that spaces of quasi-legality are nothing new in Eastern Europe.

In contrast, Marc Joseph Berg printed four of his photographs in an advertising format and posted them around Portland (an action that required legal permits). Copies of these posters were available in the Cooley Gallery, and viewers were encouraged to take copies as well. Classes from local schools were invited to the exhibition and encouraged to disperse the posters throughout the city in whatever manner they chose. When a professor from the local art college brought her class on site-specificity to the Cooley Gallery, one of her students was upset because she thought she was being asked to perform an illegal act as an assignment. Berg's project was used in the class as an example of site-specific art, a participatory project in which the public was encouraged to take copies of his posters and do anything to them—including altering or destroying the work. The student was never asked to perform an illegal act, but her concerned reaction was likely generated by her own subjective ambiguity in the project.

A radical response to the social contract is to create a new country from whole cloth and invent the rules, as did the four-person collective The M.O.S.T. when they founded Mostlandia (2003–2008). Though they claim over two hundred citizens, on Monday, 11 August 2008, The M.O.S.T. disbanded Mostlandia leaving two former officials, now ordinary citizens known as “Lady O” and “Junior Ambassador,” to look for clues to the whereabouts of the country, questioning what the role is of a citizen in a country that no longer exists. The act of declaring a country into existence and then eliminating it is an act of play that points to the more serious question of what it means to be a citizen in the world.

In an offsite gallery at Milepost 5, Michael McManus created *Sense of Place* (2008), a sonic environment that employs a surveillance camera to map the path of viewers in the space. The viewers are not warned that the space is being recorded and do not know how the data is being used. As the viewers move through McManus' installation, they slowly understand that they control the audio output with the motion of their bodies. This progression from being watched to becoming an active participant makes us more responsive to the changing conditions of our environment.

Having wrangled some of the formless ideas in my head into something concrete, I remembered that I was hiding out in a bathroom. It was time to close the *Suddenly* show, Fritz's film crew was in the gallery, and the closing reception was in full swing. I thought about how difficult it was to find the parking lot for the dinner in Beaverton, how we weren't sure how long or hard it would rain or where we would go if it didn't stop. In the end it did rain, but we were able to sort out how to stay dry by improvising together (though I admit to going straight for a seat under the tarp when it began to rain). If our social rules are designed to protect some unknown other, how can we remake those rules to benefit ourselves? Crosher's photographs were in mind as I considered what it must feel like to walk into the waves at the end of the continent. Would it be transcendent or terrifying, and is there really any difference? I stayed for another minute to take in the darkening landscape outside the window. I could make out what might be trees, maybe a forest. My view was boundless and uncertain, and I thought, that's exactly it—where we live now. Suddenly, now and forever.

About this Article

Lightly Illegal: A Letter from the Most Elegant Public Bathroom in Southeast Portland was first published in *Fillip* 9 in Winter 2009.

Molly Dilworth is a painter and curator who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Her work was recently featured in the exhibition *Molly Dilworth: Dispersion* at the Feldman Gallery, Portland.

Notes

image: Fritz Haeg, *Animal Estates, Regional Model Home 5.0, Portland, Oregon*, 2008. Commissioned by The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery, Reed College. Photograph by Shawn Records. Courtesy of the artist.

The views expressed in *Fillip* are not necessarily those of the editorial board or the Projectile Publishing Society.

All content appearing on this website is copyright to the authors, artists, editors, and the Projectile Publishing Society, or is published with permission of the copyright holders. No part of this site may be reproduced, copied, or transmitted in any form or by any means without express written permission.