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Increasing Public Space with Ice Cream, Karaoke and Magic

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Increasingly, the experience of an activated public space, a space full of political vitriol and community participation, is a rarity. We could point toward moments of political protest or rallies, but whatever happened to the spaces of regular activity? The place where folks are not forced into political positions but instead can participate in forms more convivial: BBQ-ing, lounging, strolling, making out. We can point toward the growth of discussion on the internet as a sign of an emerging virtual public space, and certainly there is some validity to this. But these online moments nonetheless leave us feeling empty. They leave us with a hankering for tangible physical proximity. As the internet's primacy as public space expands, we find a concomitant shrinkage of public geography. After protesters at the DNC and RNC were arrested preemptively as they considered using public space for protest, and as the privatization of cities across the country limits what can be done in terms of expression, we find the idealized "town square" more theoretic than actual. This tendency to minimize the right to be political in physical space is very serious, and has deeply political implications.

In thinking through this dilemma, we get closer to the value of artistic practices that engage the public sphere. We get closer to why certain seductive strategies of pleasure, curiosity, and emotion can assist in crossing the boundaries that we often take for granted: race, class, gender, sexuality. This past weekend, I watched a public sphere come to life in New York City's boroughs that catalyzed the languorous atmosphere of two public parks. With the assistance of ice cream, karaoke, anarchist propaganda, costumes, and a stage, art/activist collective Center for Tactical Magic and artistic duo Valerie Tevere and Angel Nevarez called a political/social space into existence. Their two projects traveled to Prospect Park in Brooklyn and Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens to produce a spontaneous politicized space that was both family-friendly and content-driven.

Center for Tactical Magic is a collective dedicated to the convergence of art, magic, and activism. Alongside a predilection for political tarot readings and the conjuring of out-of-body experiences to enter sites like the Pentagon, they also travel to protests and parks with their subversive anarchist ice cream truck Increasing Public Space with Ice Cream, Karaoke and Magic. Dubbed the Tactical Ice Cream Unit, this roving vehicle is an amalgamation of military hummer, kid-friendly ice cream truck, and activist recon unit. Visitors to the truck can choose between a flavor of free ice cream and a flavor of activist information (Halliburton, facts on McDonald's, Know Your Rights, and the Black Panther Ten Point Plan are some). The Tactical Ice Cream Unit rolled into the parks, and immediately the sugary draw of ice cream was felt by children and parents alike.

Artists Valerie Tevere and Angel Nevarez deployed their "protest karaoke," which offered visitors to the park the opportunity to sing songs that, given the current political climate, could be interpreted as resistant. Black Sabbath's "War Pigs" and Edwin Starr's anti-Vietnam classic "War" certainly protested the wars in the Middle East. But also songs like Hall and Oat's "Out of Touch" and Usher's "Burn" offered a more nuanced approach to our sense of political protest music.

These two public projects dramatically transformed the atmosphere as a social dynamic emerged that both politicized and engaged this park-going community. Kids dragged their parents to the ice cream truck. The trapped parents then began to watch the karaoke. As they read about the flavors of information available in the truck, they began to realize the political inspirations underlying the projects. Equally, they got the opportunity to see their neighbors (and both parks are home to a vast range of ethnicities) participate in an ad-hoc political experiment. Songs by Bruce Springsteen, Beyonce, and George Michael reverberated throughout the park and for a day: these corners of the park were alive with the sound of politics.

In case you missed it this weekend, Center for Tactical Magic and Nevarez + Tevere's projects will be featured with 40 other artists in Democracy in America: The National Campaign, at Park Avenue Armory from September 21 to 27. This exhibition and event series was produced by Creative Time in association with Park Avenue Armory.

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