

The background is a solid orange color with a white dashed line path that meanders across the center. The path consists of several white circular markers connected by a dashed line. The path starts on the left side, moves up and right, then down and right, then up and right, then down and right, and finally up and right. The path is roughly in the shape of a stylized 'S' or a winding road. The overall aesthetic is modern and graphic.

## URBAN EXHIBITION

*Spike Friedman, Zizi Li, Rayne Laborde*

# ARCHAEOLOGIES OF URBAN POSSIBILITY

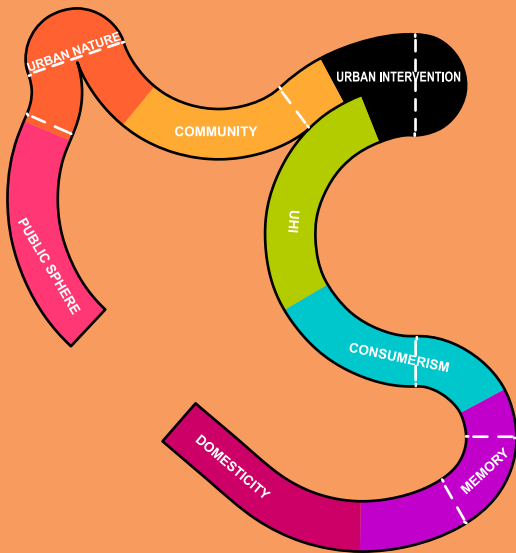


DIAGRAM OF TABLETOP EXHIBITION IN PLAN VIEW

## INTRODUCTION

As the curators of *Los Angeles: Archaeologies of Urban Possibility*, we take this “book” as an opportunity to present our research on urban exhibition. Specifically, we are committed to investigating (and instigating) exhibition in the city, rather than of the city. This choice is based on our exhibition’s siting: not in the city proper, but on the UCLA campus. Theoretically floating somewhere between a white-cube-gallery and an on-the-streets, publicly-accessible venture, this exhibition is a test site for our colleagues to report back on their experimentations to an audience consisting of scholar-practitioners, theorists, designers, and curious passers-by. Our “installation” within the larger exhibit, a bicycle gallery, introduces a vehicle for expansion and extension of this exhibition to take place both iteratively within the city and elsewhere. In this vein, our book goes beyond a singular exhibition to present our vision for contributing to the future and possibilities of urban exhibition.

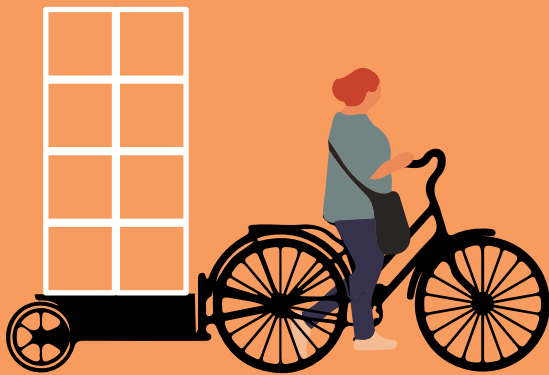


ILLUSTRATION OF BICYCLE INSTALLATION

Urban exhibition is at once a means of dissemination and a critical framework. That is, the curatorial not only (un)folds critical creative urban praxis to the audience but also provides them the vehicle whereby they can find, access, engage with, and add value to exhibited information and intellectual-creative knowledge<sup>1</sup>. In our case, to curate an exhibition consisting of seven creative critical projects exploring various social, political, environmental, cultural, and ethical dimensions of different sites in Los Angeles is to make sense of where futures lie. Collectively, we consider “what is/can be the city?” and “who has/could have rights to the city?” against the historical and contemporary backdrop of spatial injustice, both thematically and formally.

The question then becomes: How do we approach the future? How can we propose the possible, the plausible, the probable, and the preferable?<sup>2</sup> The urban humanistic training offers speculative thinking and design as a research method through which we unlearn and destabilize normalized knowledge and situations to open up new possibilities via both theories and praxis.<sup>3</sup> To put it differently, speculative thinking and design calls for futures of urban exhibition to be realized through doing. The Urban Humanist does not only conduct urban critique as urban analysis, but projects speculation and futurity, sketching out imaginative urban possibilities. An urban humanistic model of urban exhibition, thus, is a form of creative critical practice that goes beyond critique-analysis and involves critique-speculation: it examines the past and



DICKSON COURT NORTH: SITE OF TABLETOP EXHIBITION

the present to propose an imaginative alternative and it takes risks to experiment both creatively and critically for a speculative future.<sup>4</sup> Urban exhibition is, therefore, essentially the “terrain of struggle, thought and experimentation” to collaboratively and dialogically think through the city and urban life in institutional, relational, cultural, temporal, speculative, and everyday terms.<sup>5</sup> It inherently exists within the city.

Within the context of Los Angeles in 2018 and our privilege as full-time higher-education students, it is crucial for us as curators of urban exhibitions to be cautious of whether the curatorial and creative dissemination is complicit in the practice of artwashing, i.e. the use of art as a forerunner for neoliberal corporate and/or state agendas.<sup>6</sup> The practice of artwashing enables the priming of a neighborhood for gentrification via the development of cultural spaces that bring with them a population whom would eschew an area. In other words, artwashing, as it embodies and carries the normative and neoliberal ideals of urban renewal and community development, is an early step to redevelopment of property that becomes a powerful weapon for displacement of the area’s original residents and marginalized communities. The Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles, for instance, has been a prominent battlefield for the (anti-)artwashing and (anti-)gentrification: The Boyle Height Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (BHAAAD), comprised of several organizations and artist groups, accuses the influx of

art galleries of social cleansing, artwashing “the realities of racial and economic violence,” and furthering gentrification.<sup>7</sup>

As the seven installations each attempt to intervene in situations of spatial injustice and urban precarity via investigating and reimagining a specific site, we hold that the exhibit itself should also join forces. Being self-reflexive of the spaces we take and aware of the affordances of our curatorial choices with regard to forms and sites is key to folding the desire for an equitable futurity into exhibition form. In other words, curators should be more conscious of the limitations that come with the choices we make, and the set of compromises we are yielding to as we make those decisions. In the case of this exhibition, we aim to contest the artwashing reality of gallery spaces and the neoliberal mindset permeated in creative practice and creative industry with a temporal, spatial architecture (the tabletop) as the main site at which everyone gathers. A rapid-prototyped mobile structure (the glow bike) functions as a transportable side site that attracts, informs, and engages people from various sites, guiding them to our main site of exhibition. What are the affordances of these formal choices? What does a temporal-spatial tabletop in combination with a mobile display allow us? What shortcomings and compromises are we accepting in exchange?



The temporality and mobility of our exhibit forms allow for “the possibility to test and question relations of power” as situated in the exhibition and case-study sites [emphasis added].<sup>8</sup> These aspects also enable flexibility, affordability, and possibility for misuses, contingent uses, and imaginative iterations.<sup>9</sup> The affordances given by experimental, speculative design, as manifested by rapid prototyping, give our temporal and mobile exhibition the power of being disobedient, iterative, speculative, and future-forward. These virtues, however, are at the expense of leaving enduring presence in a place that could benefit from an established platform, whereby long-term agency and impact can be mobilized and cultivated. Considering the objective behind our choices of a mobile structure, it is more a tool for spreading words and knowledge to engage audiences otherwise difficult to reach. That is, it has a different kind of agency and impact than a permanent exhibition space: its power lies in its effectiveness and capability in bringing knowledge to different places, which allows for the potential to create agitation, “agonistic” relationship, and polyvocal dialogues.<sup>10</sup> It creates the possibility to instigate readings, (re)imaginings, and (re)anticipation of what the future of the urban might be, and what forms it might take, as conceived by unexpected audience and passersby.



Transient, Kean O'Brien (2014)

## **CASE-STUDIES: MOBILE GALLERIES**

The mobile gallery is a means of directly confronting the use of space for exhibition of artwork. Rather than occupying the built environment, examples of gallery spaces that live inside of automobiles or trains skirt the line between urban fabric and social fabric, much in the ways that food carts do. Within Los Angeles, the iconic omnipresence of the car ensures that forms of automobile curation find added depth in exhibiting art about specific subjects in relation to the city. In theory, these gallery spaces increase access to work, without aiding the forces of gentrification that leverage art to displace communities. In practice, results have varied; some mobile exhibitions have been incredibly successful, while others create new forms of artistic colonialism.

The history of galleries embedded into automobiles can be traced to Buster Cleveland and Gracie Mansion's Limo Show in 1981, in which they rented a limousine and invited people into the back to view Cleveland's work.<sup>11</sup> These were designed less for political disruption, and more to bring art to specific dealers who were not trading in marginalized work. The "curators" predominately used their limo gallery to stake out a single art dealer, seeking his patronage.

A local example of this work is that of Kean O'Brien, who created galleries in U-Hauls as part of their project, Transient. They then curated work centered around trans



GAS Gallery, Cici Moss (2017)

rights. From their artist statement, “the U-Haul trucks, being an ever-flowing-and-changing space, lend to the idea of transition – creating a temporary space of movement and dialogue around trans (in)visibility.” In this case, the gallery space is not just avoiding occupying space, but saying something essential about the oppression of its subject in doing so.<sup>12</sup>

Less successfully, Doug Aitken’s Station to Station was a mobile, cross-country art event that appropriated a train as both gallery and studio space. It rolled into both big cities and out-of-the-way towns to show new work. From a retrospective vantage point, this functioned as a colonizing force; bringing “trendy” art to places like Barstow without engaging with the local culture. In many ways, Station to Station dismissed the idea that a place like Barstow could have a local culture.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Los Angeles’ GAS Gallery is a mobile multi-media gallery built into the back of an ice-cream truck. Run by Ceci Moss, GAS Gallery travels across Los Angeles, using its mobility to provide access to the work. The question in her curatorial work becomes how to fit work in the space – both literally and figuratively. Notably, this mobile gallery frequently parks outside of more traditional gallery spaces. Is merely putting an annex to a gallery on wheels a subversion of the occupation of the built environment?<sup>14</sup>

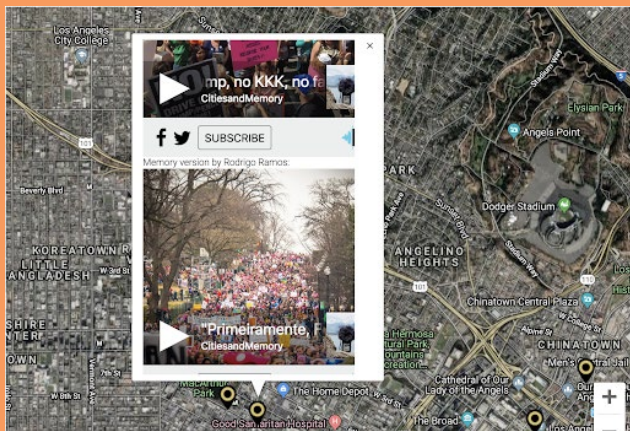


“LISTENING TO THE CITY” INSTILLATION  
MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning (2017)

## **CASE-STUDIES: SONIC INSTALLATION**

Often overlooked, but never absent, in the site in which any exhibition sits is the unique spatial-sonic experience. Sonic atmosphere (i.e. ambience) refers to the background sounds that exist in a space, as a backdrop against which activities take place. The sonic atmosphere of a site is unfixed, temporal, emergent, and always in formation. Considering the sonic experience of a given site in an urban exhibition is as critical a lens as urban form analysis to understand the multiple social influences that meet in situ. Layering auditory experiences allows audiences to engage with site-specific everyday ambience, social music, and neighboring and diffused sounds. The sonic component is also capable of inviting audiences to investigate the invisible via the audible; imagine and reflect on historical sounds that are no longer audible on site, but that can still be present in memory; experience the sounds of non-humans; and more. These acts of critical and communal listening aim to foster sonic awareness among citizens, planners, and policy makers. By paying attention to the sonic effects of sociopolitical issues, we can collectively question the hierarchical social spaces underlying auditory marginalization, which is an ever-present form of spatial injustice.

LA Listens is a collaboration between a sound ethnographer, acoustic ecologist, and a composer/music technologist.<sup>15</sup> Their project takes an analytic-praxis approach to listening



**SOUND INSTALLATION:** a field recording (top) and subsequent remix (bottom) of an anti-Trump march through Los Angeles. Cities and Memory, an ongoing sound map (2016)



as a way to analyze interrelationships between the sensory, social, and ecological aspects of streets in Los Angeles. They engage with the experiential and data dimensions of place-based sensory traits to analyze the permeable layers of LA's public acoustic territory. The team collected field recordings of Los Angeles neighborhoods in 2014. Some of these recordings were captured during soundwalks, an ambulatory exercise with the intention to listen to the sonic textures of a place. In conducting soundwalks with community members and organizers, their interviews uncover neighborhood dynamics and oral histories in-situ.

Because of the nature of sound, creation and exhibition can happen in the same location, without permanently occupying space. The sonic form lends itself to being consumed through curated paths and experiences, whether on headphones or in stereo. This bends the exhibition of the city towards the theatrical, where the audience becomes implicated in the performance of the city by being amidst it. Crucially, this does not require a permanent space; an exhibition can be permanent or semi-permanent without occupying space. There have been critiques of temporary installations turning areas of the city that are lived in into destinations for tourists. While there is a relationship between tourism and gentrification, insofar as it involves making portions of the city accessible to those with capital, it is certainly different by degree to occupying space in a contested area.

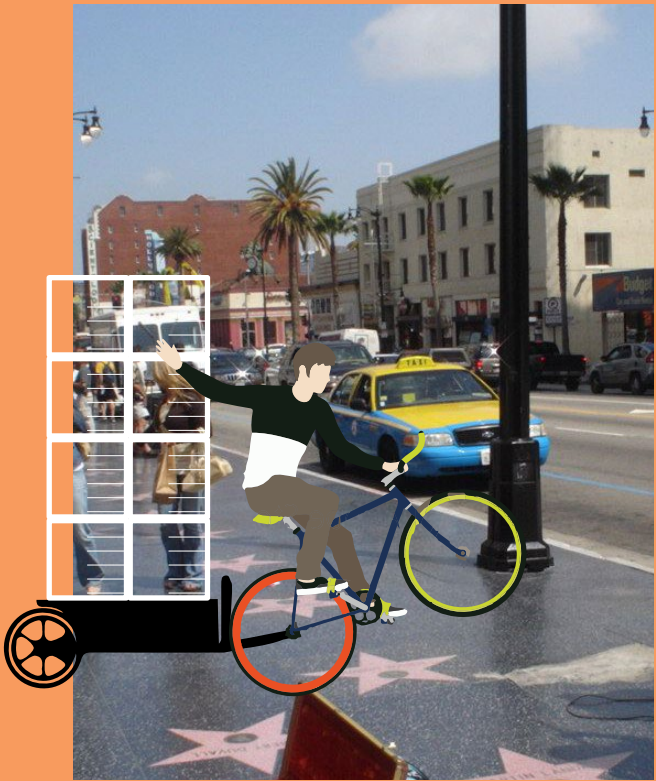


ILLUSTRATION OF MOBILE INSTALLATION  
ON HOLLYWOOD WALK OF FAME

## URBAN SPECULATION

In addition to our primary exhibition space for the Archaeologies of Urban Possibilities exhibition put on by the 2018-2019 UCLA Urban Humanities' Institute, "the tabletop," we also created a mobile installation to spur our theorizing into practice. Our goal was to be able to present our cadre's work, which itself speculated on the nature of the future of Los Angeles, in a way that was harmonious with our vision of how art can fit into our envisioned future of the city. Specifically, we designed a mobile gallery space that mounts onto the back of a bike. It is a fully realized trailer apparatus, therefore, anyone capable of riding a bike can move the gallery space around. The gallery is lit from all sides by battery-powered LED lighting built into the structure; making the structure a glowing beacon for potential patrons, day or night. We envision this as a model for bringing art to spaces like night markets, pop-ups, or food trucks. The mobile installation is nimble; it can move around the city by being pedaled, and can be set up on a sidewalk, in a park, or inside of a more traditional gallery space.

We sought to cite our humanistic work in the gray area between "ville" and "cite" as conceived by Richard Sennett[xvi]. The intersection of this dichotomy - between the built environment and the social space - is a vital in a city that moves like Los Angeles does. There are few central gathering - or even passing - places: instead, if you make



Alexandra Georgescu and Jimi Chen  
MADE IN CHINA: A Mobile Exhibition of  
Beautiful Chinese Items (2013)

work, you must to be willing to bring it around the vast metropolitan area in order to reach more than a small subsection of the residents of the city. The scale of the city works against interaction between diverse groups on purpose; it is in the spaces between places where people come together. These include spaces like a taco truck parked on the side of the street, a parking lot that turns into a farmers market once a week, or a cemetery used for movie screenings.

In addition to the cited examples of mobile exhibition spaces, our rapid-prototype installation was inspired by “MADE IN CHINA: A mobile exhibition of beautiful Chinese items”, an installation curated by Alexandra Georgescu in collaboration with Jimi Chen during the Beijing Design Week in 2013 [xvii]. This installation took the exhibition form, married to the commonly used mode of transit for the area (the bicycle) and then presented mundane objects as art objects, theoretically heightening the awareness of the craft used to create them.

Here, the question of using a bicycle in Los Angeles came into play. Whereas this is a more used mode of transportation in Shanghai (or would be more directly applicable to other cities such as Portland or Amsterdam), using a bike in Los Angeles is, at best, aspirational. The infrastructure to navigate a bike and cargo trailer from one side of the city to the other is lacking; there are simply not enough grade-separate paths for cycling in this city for this to effectively, equitably replace the



ILLUSTRATION OF MOBILE INSTALLATION  
AT AN URBAN FARM

built environment as a model for exhibition. Yet, transforming a truck or car into a gallery space is more expensive and far less nimble for the purpose of installation. We have been able to place our mobile gallery space right in the middle of UCLA's campus without raising an eyebrow- however, attempting to park even a small car in the intersection of a crosswalk at UCLA would have drawn a great deal of ire. Additionally, the city at bike scale is far more legible than at automotive scale. Someone biking by with an art installation is instantly visible and performative; installing a similar exhibition into a box truck would, ironically, not be visible while in transit. In its mutually uncomfortable disruption of the stereotyped Los Angeles urban environment as single-modal and car-centric, our installation projects our own speculative futurity. An aspirational, multi-modal future for Los Angeles is a scale that is more economically and socially accessible, accommodating greater levels of human connection - perhaps around an urban exhibition.



ILLUSTRATION OF MOBILE INSTALLATION  
AT THE CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY



- 1 Cara Courage and Anita McKeown, "Curating research, theory and practice," in Cara Courage and Anita McKeown, eds., *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1.
- 2 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2013), 3-6.
- 3 Ibid, 2.
- 4 Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinksa, "Creative Media Manifesto," in *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2012), 201-205.
- 5 AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse, "Experimentations," in *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times* (Cambridge and New York: Polity, 2017), 159.
- 6 Stephen Pritchard, "Place guarding: Activist art against gentrification," in Cara Courage and Anita McKeown, eds., *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2018), 140.
- 7 Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement, "Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement: The Short History of a Long Struggle."
- 8 Torange Khonsari, "Temporary spatial object/architecture as a typology for placemaking," in Cara Courage and Anita McKeown, eds., *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2018), 129.
- 9 Ibid.

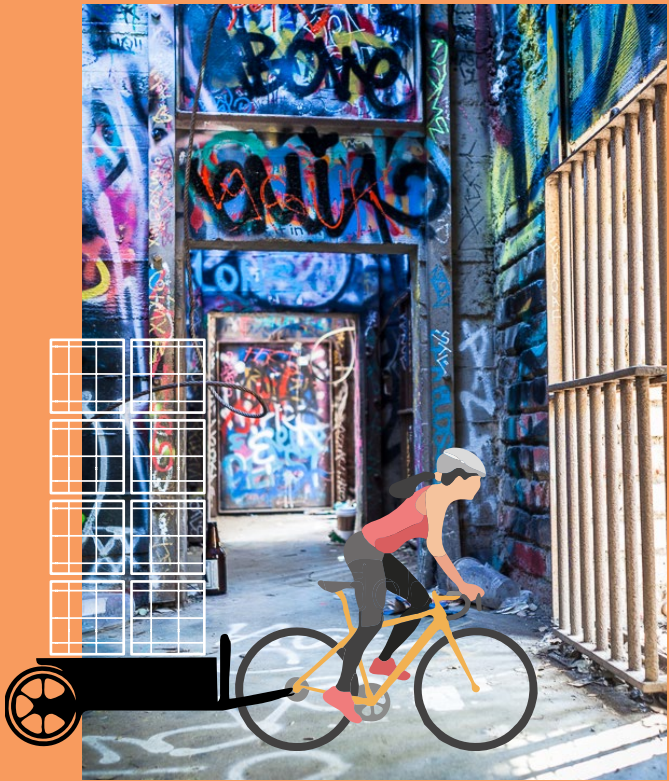


ILLUSTRATION OF MOBILE INSTALLATION  
AT THE OLD LOS ANGELES ZOO

- 10 Ibid, 132; Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” in *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745-758.
- 11 Cotter Holland, “Buster Cleveland, 55, Dada Artist Known for Collages and Mail Art,” *The New York Times*, 1998, May 25
- 12 Kean O’Brien, *Transient*, 2014, <https://www.keanobrien.com/transient>.
- 13 Melena Ryzik, “Like a Rolling Revue, the Art Is Coming to Town,” *The New York Times*, 2013, September 27 <http://www.nytimes.com>
- 14 Matt Stromberg, “Gas, a New Gallery Inside a Truck, Parks Itself in LA,” *Hyperallergic*, 2017, September 05 <http://www.hyperallergic.com>
- 15 LA Listens, <http://www.lalistens.org>.
- 16 Richard Sennett, “Unstable Foundations,” in *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2018).
- 17 Alexandra Georgescu and Jimi Chen, *MADE IN CHINA: A Mobile Exhibition of Beautiful Chinese Items*, 2013

