

Wilfried Raussert

Off the Grid

Art Practices and Public Space

INTER-AMERICAN STUDIES
Cultures – Societies – History

ESTUDIOS INTERAMERICANOS
Culturas – Sociedades – Historia

Volume 35

Series Editors:

Giselle Liza Anatol (Kansas)

Anja Bandau (Hannover)

Olaf Kaltmeier (Bielefeld)

Wilfried Raussert (Bielefeld)

Editorial Board:

Luzelena Gutiérrez de Velasco (Colegio de México)

María Herrera-Sobek (University of California at Santa Barbara)

Djelal Kadir (Pennsylvania State University)

Gary Francisco Keller (Arizona State University)

Carmen Martínez Novo (University of Kentucky)

Olga Ries (Universidad Alberto Hurtado)

Stefan Rinke (Free University of Berlin)

Wilfried Raussert

Off the Grid

Art Practices and Public Space

 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier**

Copublished by

UNO University of New Orleans Press

Off the Grid:

Art Practices and Public Space /

Wilfried Raussert. –

(Inter-American Studies | Estudios Interamericanos; 35)

Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2021

ISBN 978-3-86821-835-0

New Orleans, LA: University of New Orleans Press, 2021

ISBN 978-1-60801-213-8



The project, on which this book is based, has been funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF). The responsibility for the content of this publication lies with the author.

Cover Image: Public Reading (copyright Wilfried Raussert)

Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Raussert, Wilfried, author.

Title: Off the grid : art practices and public space / Wilfried Raussert.

Description: Trier : Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier ; New Orleans, LA :

copublished by University of New Orleans Press, [2021] | Series:

Inter-American studies = Estudios interamericanos ; volume 35 | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020044535 | ISBN 9781608012138 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Social practice (Art)--America. | Art and

society--America--History--20th century. | Art and

society--America--History--20th century.

Classification: LCC N7433.915 .R38 2021 | DDC 701/.03--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020044535>

© WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2021

No part of this book, covered by the copyright hereon, may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means without prior permission of the publisher.

Publisher: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, Postfach 4005, D-54230 Trier, Bergstraße 27, D-54295 Trier, Tel. 0049 651 41503, Fax 41504, www.wvttrier.de, wvt@wvttrier.de

Copublisher: University of New Orleans Press, 2000 Lakeshore Drive, Earl K. Long Library, Room 221, New Orleans, LA 70148, United States, 504-280-7457, unopress.org

This book is dedicated to all artists
making public space a site of belonging.

Contents

Introduction	
Public Space, Art Practice, and the Social	1
 Chapter I	
Parading and Performing in the Streets: Cultural and Artistic Practices in Garveyism and the Harlem Renaissance	29
 Chapter II	
Mexican Avant-Gardes and InterAmerican Flows: Redefining the Relation between Art Practice and Public Space in the 1920s and 1930s	63
 Chapter III	
The Body as Public Sphere: Taking Theatre, Performance, and Music to the Streets in the Turbulent 1960s and 1970s	103
 Chapter IV	
Off the Grid: Art Practices and Public Space in the Contemporary Period	159
 Epilogue	211

Introduction

Public Space, Art Practice, and the Social

Contested public space

Protest and revolution tend to begin in the street. On October 28th, 2016 *The Guardian* announced the following news:

Law enforcement officials arrested 141 people in North Dakota after police surrounded protesters, deploying pepper spray and armored vehicles in order to clear hundreds of Native American activists and supporters from land owned by an oil pipeline company. (*The Guardian* 2016, n. pag.)

This was the most violent day in the three-month long standoff between police and hundreds of members of more than ninety Native American tribes, who were attempting to block the construction of the Dakota Access pipeline. Operated by Texas-based Energy Transfer Partners and intended to transport fracked crude from the Bakken oil field in North Dakota to a refinery near Chicago, the \$3.7 billion pipeline was seen by tribes as a threat to their water supplies and numerous sacred sites. As the demonstrations of the Standing Rock tribe and supporting groups of Native American activists show, the rethinking of public space remains central to public conceptions of the common good in the twenty-first century. Many Native American community movements defend sacred and community space in opposition to extractivist capitalist intrusion from hegemonic national and multinational companies. As with other contemporary grassroots movements, art practices in the Dakota movement – such as chant, performance, poster art, and on-the-spot sculpture – were primary vehicles for expressing dissidence and resistance. Not simply creative responses to moments of crisis, these practices serve as community-building forces, promoting sociability through helping people reimagine the social. Practices like these that engage with and in public space highlight art's central role for

social creativity. In the first place they produce and receive a high degree of visibility. They also intensify the potential for dialogue between art and a larger public. The artist becomes a creator and activist. Walter Benjamin famously labeled the author a “producer” and equipped him with an “organizing function” (1986, 221–223). Benjamin’s creative agent has become an inspirational image for socially and politically minded artists who create imaginaries of the social embedded in dissident, democratic, utopian, and egalitarian thinking. Such linkage in art between the creative and the social has roots in the utopian ideals that were part of the colonial foundations of South and North America.

The Dakota events are just one instance of a new wave of social protest across the global. The Occupy movement, the Arab Spring movement, the Dreamer’s movement, the Resist movement, the student movement in Chile, the “Ni Una Más” [Not One More (Woman)] in Latin America, and the Black Lives Matter movement have been among the most mediatized examples of current socio-cultural practices of (re)claiming, (re)interpreting, (re)constructing public space. At the same time, we are witnessing privatizations of public space in the sales of land to private companies, and in the sales of streets, squares, and plazas to private developers. In cities like Quito, Toronto, and New York people are increasingly vulnerable to displacement by gentrification. In the wake of these developments, street art projects, communal gardening, and housing projects in urban centers that promote a grassroots approach to the use of public space. Public space outs itself as the very testing ground for rethinking history and heritage, reflecting on and installing power relations, performing culture wars, and staging new communal visions.

While grassroots movements led by artist-activists frequently struggle to regain public space for communal get-togethers, recreation, and alternative forms of urban mobility, an increasing technological surveillance of public squares by governmental agents facilitates the hegemonic control of everyday life in contemporary cities. Massacres and terrorist attacks rationalized as part of a culture