Welcome to No-Place

by Benjamin Evans

Imagine a vast expanse of warehouses and industrial debris, tens of thousands of square feet of loftable live-work space available for pennies a foot. Imagine the intoxicating sense of being a pioneer, the first into the virgin terrain of a newly desolated industrial landscape. Imagine unlimited space to make vast paintings, build improbably large sculptures, project ninety-foot videos, and throw the sickest, slickest, hippest parties the world has ever seen, complete with indoor half-pipes and cardboard hot-tubs. And then imagine, if the thought doesn't reduce you to a fainting fit, all this AND the ability to obtain a decent cup of coffee and/or beer any time of day or night, and you have discovered the notional Shangri-La that is the idea of contemporary Bushwick. Drool, right?

Wrong. Naturally, this description of so utopian a space is the description of an idea, not an actual place. It is in the very nature of utopias that they be perpetually only ideas. The word "utopia" as used in Thomas Moore's seminal work of the same name, was literally defined as "no place" – "*οὐ – τόπος*" (u-topos), rather than its homophonic relative "*εὖ - τόπος*" (eu-topos), which would have instead meant "good place". In Moore's famous book, he describes an island of peace and prosperity, a society of balance and order, a perfect world. And yet this perfect world also contained strict social classes, warfare, and numerous other customs that seem to go against standards of justice not only of contemporary generic liberalism, but also of Moore's 1516. Thus one of the beguiling features of this text is simply the question of whether or not he meant it—whether or not the world he described was meant as a picture of paradise or a warning about the perils of a certain brand of reasoning. Events of the decades following the Enlightenment suggest that the second interpretation is the most favorable to a generous reading of Moore. The secular utopian schemes of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao have been as catastrophic as the religious fantasies of the Heaven's Gate, Branch Davidians, or People's Temple. Decades of critical theory have taught us, if nothing else, to be deeply suspicious about the very idea of utopian thinking.

And yet in smaller, more subtle ways, grains of a milder utopianism remain entrenched. Indeed, the very general desire to "make the world a better place" bears within it the seeds of the desire to make the world the best place; the act of picking up some litter is a

claim to a world in which litter doesn't exist. In spite of all the cynical maneuvers in the its recent history, the roots of utopian thinking run deep in the arts, both in how works are produced and in the imaginations of the people doing the producing. Art is naturally a kind of fundamentalist activity, prone to extremisms of all varieties.

Appropriate, then, to exhibit the work of some of these emerging visionaries at a gallery that has always maintained a utopian streak. Acting to counter the nepotism accepted as standard practice in the "commercial" art world, NURTUREart was established to connect emerging artists to curators, to bypass slogging it out in the New York Shmooze Cycle. Indeed, all of the artists selected for the NURTUREart component of the biennial were chosen entirely from the Artist Registry, in many cases with no prior awareness of the artist's work. This reflects the strategy of encouraging curators to look at new work and produce exhibitions based not on who they knew, but on the power of the work itself. Add to this method of gallery programming a monthly professional development event and a unique arts and curatorial program in area high schools and you have the components of an optimistic, even utopian approach to institutionalizing the anarchic cultural sphere.

Yet this approach is not without its considerable challenges and internal tensions. From perhaps a more cynical point of view, the artworld is a vastly overpopulated cultural industry, and the role of the various gatekeepers is mainly to ensure that there are gates to be kept. Unless there are exclusive, elite, blue-chip art-zones (be they galleries, collectors, reviewers or what have you) to dictate the standards of success, there is nothing to strive for. The structure of the artworld just IS, as a matter of brute fact, based on exclusivity, with success measured by one's position on a pyramid-shaped graph. If one (be they artist, curator, or organization) strives for a better place on this graph the structure itself is validated and justified. If, however, one strives for a place on a different graph, or on no graph at all, one is generally relegated to a space at the bottom of the graph that demands to be acknowledged in spite of our attempts to ignore it. Creating a gallery based on INclusivity is thus in some sense creating a space that is already doomed to fail according to a certain set of standards. The underlying paradoxical, democracy-negating idea is that if a space lets everybody in nobody will want to be there.

So the question becomes, what ARE the standards by which we judge the success of a gallery? Or an artist? Or a curator? Or a non-profit organization? Or a neighborhood? Are we (implicitly or explicitly) seeking the kinds of accolade and reward established by the standard-setting powers that be? Are we consciously posing a viable alternative to that scale? Is such a thing possible? It seems to me that all these players are caught in a complex set of contradictions that belie the overarching utopian, or at least world-bettering visions that may have lead to their inception. If we measure our success in terms of column-inches of reviews by key critics, profits made from sales, numbers of exhibitions we've either been in, hosted or curated, grants from the philanthropic industry, slickness of the publications we produce, or other mainstream standards of institutional and professional growth, we are implicitly tying ourselves to those very vectors that measure, quantify and rank every other aspect of our social lives, and giving validity to a pyramid graph which has never done much for us in return. We become participants in the very economic and social edifices we might have initially sought to oppose, and the distinction between culture and business vanishes. Unless we are able to control the standards by which our own goals are selected and measured, we are forever caught reinforcing (even exemplifying) all the other powers that be, in spite of the elegance of our rhetoric to the contrary.

Hence the contradiction that lies at the heart both of the "cultural community" and the Bushwick Biennial itself. As Jenny Walty's essay in this volume so effectively points out, the very things that mark an organization's success (i.e. quantity of Manhattanite visitors, etc.) are precisely those things that can lead to its ultimate demise. So, as both a curator and cultural administrative official, I too am caught between opposing desires: I want on the one hand to call attention to my organization and the genuinely overwhelming talent to be found in this neighborhood. But on the other, I want to undermine the values that make the production and reception of art just another quantified, administered, vectored sector on an urban planner's pie-chart. I want to offer some model of cultural production that resists, however tenuously, the inexorable power of marketing forces, which the hyping of a neighborhood through appropriation of the currently rampant "Biennialism" will clearly not achieve! Following this logic, any "Bushwick Biennial" is always already a failure; its possibility of success is undermined by the dialectical tension (or hypocrisy) at its core.

Thankfully, this necessary failure is mitigated by the power of the art itself. "Dialectical tension" is, after all, mere philosophy, and while this kind of tension's extraordinary impact is visible all around us every day it is not the primary reason for going to an art gallery. The artists selected for the NURTUREart portion of the biennial all in their own ways bring out similar underlying paradoxes, and all speak to the possibility of utopian thinking in the heart of Bushwick. These fourteen artists involve both optimism and melancholy, and reflect the tensions between doomed worlds, better places and personal mythologies. Themes of transformation and strategies of transformative experience run through the work and link it to the neighborhood that is transforming all around, (and partly because of) them. I will explore each artists' connection to these themes on the individual pages devoted to them.

Finally, a word about the organization of the entire project. Perhaps in the above paragraphs I have been guilty of treating the "artworld" as a hegemonic monolith, paying no attention to the incredible diversity in this complex ecosystem. I personally hate it when people do that, when they fail to recognize that art happens even in Nebraska (not Nebraska!?). The galleries and curators that collaborated on this project reflect some of the diversity of the artworld itself. NURTUREart aims to be a democratic visual arts cultural community center; Pocket Utopia sought (in its existence as a two-year project) to explore the seemingly inviolable gap between artist and gallery by creating a gallery-as-artwork; English Kills maintains the tradition of the happening DIY venue and Grace Exhibition Space provides a kind of institutional home for the institutionalization-defying world of performative arts practice. Each in varying ways does its best to establish its own goals that don't quite square with the pyramid-graph described above. It is this diversity, not just in the production of art, but the purposes of its presentation that make Bushwick such an interesting place to be.

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