

imPERFECT CITY: A Utopian Process

Title of proposed project: Radical Reading Room

Names of people involved:

Maeve Coudrelle: primary proposer and facilitator with Maiza Hixson

Chris Golas: performance artist (and creator of the “coffee table”)

DCCA staff and guides: facilitators and regular users of the space

Availability of primary facilitator between 2/9/2013 – 6/16/2013:

I am available two weekdays per week for the duration of the exhibition. Mondays and Thursdays are preferred.

The reading room will be up from 2/9/2013 – 6/16/2013, assuming that the space it occupies is not in demand by other projects.

Is this a:

Workshop___Activity_x_Performance_x_Experience_x_Other_____

Will it involve a physical component in the gallery? Will wall space be necessary?

If physical component is involved, please describe in as much detail as possible:

The room will require a medium-sized amount of space on the gallery floor, but not on the wall. The structure itself is 12-14 feet high (adjustable) and 4 feet in diameter. It will be supplemented by a seating area around the base and (if possible) a scrim encircling the whole area— these elements necessitate extra space and will increase the diameter and height.

Proposed location (in DCCA Gallery or elsewhere):

The room can be placed anywhere in Bieber Ham or DuPont II, at the discretion of the preparator and curator. DuPont II would seem a more practical choice, as not many other projects have requested space there yet.

List of necessary materials and supplies (include associated costs):

3-5 floor cushions, 3 small lounge chairs, 3 ottomans, small rugs to cover the floor area around the base, a scrim (approx. 10-15 ft. width, 20-25 ft. length), small crates/organizational elements to house books

10-20 books from the *imPERFECT CITY* reading list and from staff recommendations of ‘radical’ readings (number can be cut down based on available funds)

Non-essential: a tabletop indoor fountain, an iPad (so that citizens can use LibraryThing to browse the collection & view videos by Nina Simon, Claire Bishop, etc.—this will allow for a multimedia element to draw in more visitors)

Description or narrative of proposed project (1-2 paragraphs):

The Radical Reading Room is intended as a space of introspection, where citizens can rest and enjoy a respite from the outside while meditating on their intellectual experience in the exhibition. A lounge and dedicated reading space, the room uses warm lighting and comfortable seating to simulate a serene, convivial atmosphere.

Based on both the idea that “reading is radical” and my own wish for citizens to be exposed to the theoretical underpinnings of the exhibition, the room will contain a number of books culled from the *imPERFECT CITY* reading list (<http://imperfectcitydcca.wordpress.com/related-content/>). In addition, citizens will be encouraged to deposit books (or suggestions for books) in the room to share with their peers and shape the content of the room. Because the space is intended to spark an interest in reading as an activist activity, emphasis will be placed on reading material relating to concepts that could be considered ‘radical’— anything that citizens feel is unjustly restricted or stifled in their daily lives (due to societal, political, monetary or time restraints, etc.), or that challenges preconceived notions and norms. These can include current or former banned books (as in Finishing School’s Patriot Library), political satire, how-to manuals, ‘underground’ literature, and any number of illicit or taboo publications. In conjunction with the DCCA staff, limits can be set for acceptable material based on age and institutional restrictions.

Please answer the following questions regarding the conceptualization of your *imPERFECT CITY* project (include as much detail as possible):

1. How is your proposal intended to be interactive? Who is the audience?

My proposal is geared towards all *imPERFECT CITY* citizens. It is intended to be interactive in a number of ways.

First, the room itself will be carefully designed to promote an easy communal ambiance, in which citizens can feel comfortable sharing space and engaging in relaxed conversation.

Second, citizens’ book contributions will involve them in the creation of the project and give them an arena to share their personal interests with others. Each donation will be accompanied by a brief justification by its owner (e.g. a form: “_____ is radical,” favorite quote/passage, others should read it because..., others can contact me to discuss it: Y/N).

Third, in order to engage all incoming visitors to the exhibition with the Radical Reading Room, they will be given the chance to take a survey, ‘What radical are you?’ (staged either at the entrance of the room or at the Orientation Station). Including no more than 3 brief questions, the survey will pair each person with a theorist related to utopia, participatory exhibitions, activist art, and more (top prospects are Nina Simon, Thomas More, Robert Owen, Claire Bishop and Grant Kester). Based on their responses, citizens will receive the appropriate name tag (color-coded for easy identification), including key facts about their radical, a motto or quote and suggestions for activities in the galleries that they might enjoy. Also listed will be activities, videos, books and articles in the reading room to learn more about their radical’s views and goals.

This activity immediately engages citizens by drawing upon their personal interests. It can also lead to communication with others in the gallery based upon identical (or differing) name tags. The hope is that, once they feel included in the theoretical premise of the exhibition, visitors will take the initiative to learn more about their specific, narrow topic, and perhaps expand their engagement to other informational material. Also, citizens may return to see if they are assigned the same radical twice, and to discover what new books have been placed in the room.

In addition to the various participatory activities intended to spark interest and involvement, the space will host a number of performances. Notably, Philadelphia-based artist Chris Golas will use the room’s built-in pole for a series of erotic dances. Visitors will most likely initially view these performances as jarring and strange, a reaction intended to keep them thinking and not become too passive in the comfortable lounge area. Artists will be encouraged to include the literature in their performances, perhaps reading aloud, including audio or manipulating the books or iPad. Golas’ contribution will not only make reading appear ‘sexy,’ but it will also connect it to the taboo, drawing a clear parallel between literature and radical activity.

Other programming in the space could include interviews/panel discussions with some of the ‘radicals’ assigned to citizens, workshops by local zine publishers (Philadelphia Soapbox), and a talk by Tyler professor, Gerald Silk, who researches censorship in contemporary art.

2. How is your proposal geared toward or related to the particular space/locale where the activity is to be held (e.g. Bieber Ham and DuPont II galleries at the DCCA and/or offsite locations in the city of Wilmington)?

If held in DuPont II, the Radical Reading Room will share space with the DCCA Athletic Club. This is ideal in two ways— first, because it provides a more secluded, less centrally located space for inward contemplation. Second, the pairing of reading with athleticism invites interesting parallels between endurance sports and the act of reading. Possibilities for collaboration include relay races (each team member speed reads a page for comprehension), memory contests, and any number of games that challenge the brain to ‘exercise.’ Participants could dress in workout gear to emphasize the competitive, physical aspect of reading.

3. How does your proposal acknowledge particular art historical and cultural precedents?

The Radical Reading Room looks to a number of past projects, including Fritz Haeg’s *Sundown Salon*, which hosted numerous performances, readings and communal events in a geodesic dome in Los Angeles. Haeg likewise designed a circular, uniquely lit, warm space in order to foster a sense of togetherness and creative inspiration.

Finishing School’s *Patriot Library* is an example of a project designed to give the public access to reading materials that would otherwise be ‘banned’ or tracked by the government through the Patriot Act. Intended to provide free, unhindered and open-minded lending, *Patriot Library* views reading as an empowering activity, as does the Radical Reading Room.

The idea for the room also stems from Slavs and Tatars’ *Beyonsense* installation at MoMA (August-December 2012), which included a darkened reading room, set apart from the rest of the museum by a thick curtain. Featuring neon blue lighting and a large fountain, the space invited silent reflection.

4. How does your proposal critically and creatively initiate a dialogue with the premise of utopia as a collaborative process and intentional community?

The Radical Reading Room attempts to rise to the challenge offered by NYU professor, Stephen Duncombe, who states that merely revealing controversial truths is no longer radical; it is utopian thinking that truly sparks change, by encouraging the public to confront what they dislike about their present and to find their own unique, creative solutions.

Merely exposing *imPERFECT CITY* citizens to radical material would remain in the realm of ‘truth revealing.’ By asking citizens to contribute to the content and engage with the concept of activism, I hope to inspire critical utopian thought in a communal setting.

5. How does your proposal favor a collective or social approach to artistic expression (i.e. does it involve multiple “artists ” or “assistants ” who help realize the work)?

The proposal involves the public in the creation of the material included in the room, empowering them to become curators of the space. Chris Golas, who will be performing, donated the “coffee

table” structure to the project. Other performance artists, academics, theorists and local artists will also be involved in the programming.

6. Is your project both educational and pleasurable for the viewer? How so?

The Radical Reading Room will involve an academic element, represented by the theoretical literature relating to the exhibition, as well as a fun, intriguing element, present in the erotic, eccentric performances, the participatory activities, and the possibility for unique interactions with other citizens.

7. Does your proposal include a realistic assessment of your ability to complete the activities you are proposing? Please consider: staff, time, gallery space, materials, and visitor attendance.

I can realistically provide for the activities and performances, but will need help dealing with the logistics of putting the structure in the space and hanging the scrim.