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SOCIAL ART PRACTICE DELIVERS
THE OUTDOOR LIVING ROOMS OF MATTHEW MAZZOTTA

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I think about both the *Outdoor Living Rooms* and the final artworks that are developed from them as fruit. Many plants produce fruit, which is designed to be colourful, attractive, sweet-smelling, shiny, tasty, and accessible. However, plants do not produce fruit just to be attractive so that animals eat it. Fruit is designed in such a way that when an animal eats it, they also eat the seeds of the fruit. These seeds are where the information of the plant is stored, ready to be planted and grow in other areas of the world. By attracting an animal to eat the fruit, the plant is transferring and disseminating information and knowledge in a symbiotic process of outreach and renewal. I design my process with the same strategy as fruit. I try to create spaces as spectacles that are whimsical, colourful, wondrous, and accessible to create a situation that pulls people into the piece through their own curiosity and interest. A place where people start to make new stories and engage in new conversations that are just under the surface, but have not had the time or space to occur.¹

A sidewalk, park, plaza, even a parking lot can become a living room—a comfortable place filled with people who converse, discuss, or simply enjoy each other's company. This insight has led artist Matthew Mazzotta to conceive his *Outdoor Living Rooms* (2007–ongoing). For these temporary performative interventions, local residents interested in meeting and participating lend pieces of furniture, rugs, and accessories, which are then arranged at a central location. Like any good host, Matthew sets out refreshments and invites everyone who passes by to join him in conversation. His disarmingly simple premise is to engage deeply and without any preconceived notion of what the outcome might be. A visitor's initial entry into a dialogue happens without regard to impetus, whether the intent is meeting the artist, other residents, or to participate in the project.

Matthew describes his *Outdoor Living Rooms* approach as being central to his artistic process, which garners opportunities for direct engagement in shaping new forms of social interaction and neighbourhood transformation, that is, cultural, economic development at the grass-roots level. A large amount of research is necessary for this socio-environmental practice. Therefore, the artist initially visits with one goal only: to listen. To do so, the temporary *Outdoor Living Rooms* intervention has

1 Matthew Mazzotta, artist statement, 2017.



Matthew Mazotta, *Outdoor Living Rooms*, (FROM TOP) Albuquerque, 2014, Jeddah, 2017, and Singapore, 2015. Courtesy the artist and Cory Vinyard. *Outdoor Living Rooms* in Singapore was conducted as a series of listening sessions in a hawker centre (food court) in the Tiong Bahru neighbourhood during the artist's residency at NTU CCA Singapore.

become his trademark. He places his impromptu living rooms outside of the usual spaces for community meetings like civic or academic centres. Rather, he performs them in the public spaces that people traverse every day. Matthew specifically tries to attract the voices of people who don't have time to go to scheduled meetings or have never thought about being part of an art project.

This approach results in distinct opportunities for personal, essential, and meaningful exchanges—either as temporary interventions or permanent, site-specific meeting places. During the open exchange, participants usually quickly hone in on what truly matters: local affairs, opportunities, and challenges, followed by dreaming and wishful thinking. Remarkably, experience has proven that a common understanding of the central issues and deficiencies already exists. Once identified, potential remedies or solutions can be brainstormed. Gathering a large amount of information quickly, the artist in partnership with the residents can then take action. Mazzotta's mantra is: "The solution is already there. The artist just creates the story to inspire the local community to reorganise their resources."² Specifically, the successive phases consist of assessment, planning, and implementation.

More and more often, the resulting projects are becoming meeting places for the locals because this type of place is either altogether absent or has disappeared from their community. New, permanent gathering spots become important assets. Conceived by an artist, the outcomes are poetic, permanent design-build projects that integrate art with technology in a sustainable approach. Reused and repurposed materials and a dedication to getting the work done—by uniting local talent with specialised, applicable resources Matthew brings to the table—have led to deeply cherished communal venues: the people of York, Alabama, built *Open House* (2013), a house that transforms into a theatre by physically unfolding. Lyons, Nebraska, now houses *Storefront Theater* (2015), where a formerly vacant building's storefront folds down with the push of a button, adding a cinema to Main Street that contributes to revitalising downtown. At Farmers Park, Missouri, a rain-harvesting shelter, *Cloud House* (2016) surprises with the sound of rain on a tin roof when visitors sit down in a rocking chair. In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and in Singapore, Matthew is working on new projects, for which the research has been completed during on-site, informal conversations in early 2017.

MATTHEW MAZZOTTA

² Matthew Mazzotta, artist interview by Christina Lanzl, January 11, 2017.

³ Matthew Mazzotta has realised *Outdoor Living Rooms* in more than 20 locations by invitation. Urban and rural project sites in the United States include Albuquerque, New Mexico; Athens, Georgia (5); Haverhill, New Hampshire (2); Louisville, Kentucky; Lyons, Nebraska; Springfield, Missouri; and York, Alabama, as well as Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and Singapore.

⁴ Matthew Mazzotta, quoted in Scott Rodd, "From an abandoned house to a structure that unfolds into a community theater," in *The Renewal Project*, <http://www.therenewalproject.com/from-an-abandoned-house-to-a-structure-that-unfolds-into-a-community-theater/>, July 27, 2016.

Since the first application in 2007, Matthew has been invited to similar open-air settings no less than 20 times, and he plans to continue in this trajectory for the foreseeable future.³ *Outdoor Living Rooms* has become a highly successful planning tool in developing the vision for an actual outcome of his public art projects. What's truly remarkable is the high level of participation of people who usually do not partake in the process. This way, Matthew captures what he has termed "the authentic voice." Recently, in Athens, Georgia (United States), *Outdoor Living Rooms* became an innovative model for outreach during the development of a new, citywide public art plan—true to Matthew's premise of disallowing preconceived notions of outcome. Grass-roots research in a comfortable setting, where the time factor is irrelevant, lies at the heart of his methodology.

Matthew's practice is focused on the architecture of social space with the objective to assist communities in realising their dreams: "If people can sit together, they can dream together."⁴ This parameter offers the opportunity to ignite profound change using art as a catalyst for a new, compelling introduction of change in a locale. Some of the ideas garnered through the ideation process with communities have been realised as experiential "spaces of critique" or "third spaces."⁵ The artist understands these places as being devoid of overt political themes, which presents an opportunity for dialogue. He ensures that the invitation into an area surrounding an issue is not polarising, but becomes engaging from a maximum number of viewpoints. It is important that the chosen location does not provoke anger, or cause people to be fearful and instinctively protective of their cultural and personal histories. Rather, he intends to design places where people enter out of curiosity and childlike interest on their own terms. *Outdoor Living Rooms* offers a point of entry at the beginning, when Matthew partners with a community, a funding agency, or a city government following an invitation.

The intent of *Outdoor Living Rooms* is to create new local cultural settings through multidimensional collaborative experiences in an interdisciplinary planning process. Through the artist's temporary intervention as the locus for informal conversation (charrette), a community develops a vision, work plan, and goals that allow everyone to work together toward a transformative experience. To Matthew, meeting and working together collaboratively offers a win-win for all.

5 The mystical poet Rumi and his concept of the "third space" have influenced Matthew Mazzotta's theoretical foundations. Khalida Tanvir Syed poignantly reflects on sidewalks or "third spaces" as places of equitable community engagement: "Rumi's image of the street, and being the noise of the street, encouraged me to think of the third space as a street, with the sidewalks being binary boundaries. Rumi's imagery of sidewalks, which are public spaces, is an ancient wisdom that reminds us of the significance of joining a community of the spirit, of speaking in public spaces." See Khalida Tanvir Syed, *Through White Noise: Autonarrative Exploration of Racism, Discrimination, and the Doorways to Academic Citizenship in Canada* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012), 112.

Place.Labour.Capital. connects cultural production and artistic research to broader political and social concerns. Drawing on the curatorial narrative employed at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore in its first three years of activity, this publication examines the entanglement between labour and flows of capital at local, regional, and global levels. Unfolding across four sections—"The Making of an Institution," "The Geopolitical and the Biophysical," "Incidental Scripts," and "Incomplete Urbanism"—this extensive collection of essays, artworks, fiction, and poetry merges theory with practice and engages readers with contemporary debates in Southeast Asia and beyond. *Place.Labour.Capital.* serves equally as a rear-view mirror that enables an art institution to review the parameters of its own position in times of a globalised art world and knowledge-production economies.

How to perform institutionality? Cogently and delicately, *Place.Labour.Capital.*, speaks to the density and the elusiveness of its contemporary geopoetic material. This publication reflects on a range of sensible life—text, action, object, site, image—in a mix of registers—proposition, polemic, speculation, reverie—with an inclination to inflect the extensive, relational, and local with tangent, coordinate, and resonance.

—Patrick D. Flores
Professor
Department of Art Studies,
University of the Philippines, and
Curator, Vargas Museum, Manila

Drawing together stories, voices, and thinking by leading artists and academics, *Place.Labour.Capital.* traces the invention of a remarkable model of an institution. The publication is an inspiration and a valuable tool to anyone trying to find ways of building relevant arts institutions for the future.

—Sally Tallant
Director
Liverpool Biennial

This remarkable collection reminds us that institution building remains enormously significant as a means of opening up new spaces, claims, communities, dialogues, publics, and trajectories for critical artistic practice. *Place.Labour.Capital.* will be central reading for all those invested in understanding or instituting new trajectories for artistic and curatorial work, and for all those committed to opening up new social and political spaces through which to do so.

—Felicity D. Scott
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