

Robby Herbst: On Art, Kinship, and Compassion

An interview with Elana Mann

Elana Mann: Robby, we met years ago, but I really started to get to know you and your work in 2011 during Occupy LA. You and I were part of a very loose association of artists working in and around the encampment called AAAAAA. We met and argued, collaborated and played. I will always remember how much fun I had with you during that time. The human pyramids and acrobatics you staged at City Hall were epic. I know Occupy was not your first embodied encounter with protest spaces. Can you tell me more about how spaces of resistance have played a part in your work and your life?

Robby Herbst: I never thought of them as “spaces of resistance” as a child, but I grew up inculcated in pleasant spaces of implicit otherness. I’m a twin. My parents loved folk music, and took us to outdoors folk festivals all the time - grass, public nudity, banjos. My parents, both basically atheists, co-founded a reform Jewish temple. At that time we lived in a part of New York state, which had no community for culturally oriented middle-class Jews. My family skipped a year of school, and we lived on a socialist commune in Israel for eight months then vagabonded through Europe for a couple more. The public schools I went to had very progressive structures. I enjoyed mixed grade levels and interdisciplinarity. My middle school retained an echo of Deweyesque/Bahaus workshops for the students to create with-in. My parents were proud members of the NYC teacher’s union. My mom was an active Feminist organizer. My grandfather, and many of my other elder relatives, identified as Communists or Socialists in the first half of the twentieth century. My dad could have very easily been a beatnik but choose not to be - my mom wanted to be a hippie, but my father wouldn’t let her. The Village Voice was mailed weekly to our home an hour north of New York City.

As a young man in the 1990s I was driven to explore and experience forms of 1960s political and counter culture that still existed; for example I worked with the San Francisco Mime Troupe and lived in Jonah House for a summer. Jonah House was the name of the community that Catholic Radicals Phillip Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister founded so as to live together with others and do as Christ did. We performed works of mercy and struggled to eradicate nuclear weapons by manifesting our beliefs in radical non-violence. For those who were more than just passing through (as I was), this meant something like holding communion at arms factory or a military base. There Plowshares Activists pray as they hammer the swords into plowshare and spill blood of the innocent on the weapons of death. Plowshare activists literalize the biblical commandment to transform weapons by performing a kind of radical eucharis at places where weapons of mass destruction are built or housed. They are arrested and then continue their witness

from prison. For the radical Catholic there is no “resistance,” there is only living life as Christ taught.

I’ve always been interested in the architectures that supports this alteriority – be they religion, a theater company, passionate music scenes, or strong ideology. I use the word alteriority, rather than resistance- because when you’re in these spaces you don’t necessarily think you’re fighting with something- you’re just doing your thing. And only when you look at it from the outside, do you realize that the structure has “resistance” to mainstream thoughts, beliefs, values or activities.

As such I’ve been involved with “resistance” movements throughout my adult life- starting with the structures of my education. I’ve always chosen schools with agendas that can be seen as radical. After getting my MFA from CalArts (whose radical agenda then was to sleep amidst a late ‘90s “whatever” mindset), I picked up my anarcho-routes and invested in the Indymedia Movement, the Global Justice Movement, and the Anti-war Movement that quickly followed. While I wasn’t always at the forefront of street-demos, I invested myself deeply in building counter-media infrastructures; particularly the *Journal Of Aesthetics and Protest*. As such I invested in conceptualizing and building infrastructures of resistance here in Los Angeles and internationally amongst my peers.

EM: Your passion to support radical thinking/making has taken many forms. From 2014-5, you and I organized a series of grass-roots conversations about art and social change called "Chats about Change." This was around the time when the writing was on the wall in Los Angeles: small experimental arts organizations were closing and funding for socially engaged works was drying up-- meanwhile, the commercial art world was rapidly expanding and local real estate was skyrocketing. Since then, you have started a backyard gallery in your garage called "Reading Ours" with your partner, designer Kimberly Varella, and also a newsletter called "Critical Practice" that you photocopy and send out every so often via snail mail. Is the gallery and newsletter in response to the commercialization of the Los Angeles artworld? What were the ideas and desires at play in both of these projects?

RH: Yes.

I started writing Critical Practice Notes (CPN) in the autumn of 2016 for personal and political reasons. I’d just finished a very long project that took several years to develop, New New Games. New New Games was an investigation of the Seventies era New Games Movement, which broadly succeeded in moving Alan Kaprow-esque scoring techniques into the field of public game play, and popularized social, cultural, and political ‘flexibility.’ The project was multi-faceted—it involved the first reunion (in thirty years) of the New Games Foundation, a publication, a drawing exhibition, events, and two distinct public games festivals. Among many things, with that project I was aiming to investigate a route of social practice artwork by diving deep into a popular source of

its cultural basis. I'd also just finished up a several year stint as a contributor for KCET TV's Artbound, which covers art and culture in Southern California. There I was given license to pitch stories about whatever I wanted, and was pretty much responsible for two monthly art stories. I focused on LA's grassroots art scene. By the time I started to write the CPN, I didn't know what to pitch or write for KCET anymore. The stories I'd sell them were a kind of advocacy arts journalism in my mind, like: "look at this cool project here," or "look at artists working with climate change there." With CPN I was responding to the fact that I wanted to get into writing for a smaller audience than a public television station, and I wanted to write critically about the evolution of the art scene in LA. I wanted to push back against "institutionalism" itself. Pushing against this institutionalism was something that drove my interest in our Chats about Change. With the first issue of CPN I had a report back from an exploratory collective I was a part of examining LACMA's complicity with mega polluter British Petroleum. There was also a long essay penned by Dont Rhine on the complicity of art institutions with developers in context of the housing rights movement.

After developing CPN for 4 mailings, developing a nice mailing list, and covering really interesting topics, I became interested in manifesting a space that was as intimate as the Critical Practice Notes. That was "Reading Ours," as you put it, a gallery in the garage. Kimberly, my partner, and Juniper, my now 11 year old daughter, and I decided to open it in the winter of 2018. We decided to focus on the intimate medium of the printed object. As you suggest the reason for doing these things was to foster the exchange of ideas at a time when I was feeling that this intimacy was being superseded by an investment model of art distribution.

EM: Although you have a focused and deep individual studio practice, you are also a habitual collaborator. Even your domestic life incorporates collaboration now, with Reading Ours. What does working collectively/collaboratively look like to you and why are you drawn to it?

RH: Humans exist socially, we're social creatures. Even writing for me, though solitary, is frequently a conspiracy of a kind with preceding thinkers, literature, other artists, artworks, and the engineers who invented the technology I write on. That's what it looks like. Working with others is just fun and expansive (though it can be challenging). Finally, it innately troubles the model of art as commerce, which drives most of the American fine arts conversation.

To be honest I find working as an individual artist to be alienating. I make art to share ideas and activity with people. The whole idea of the individual artist is, to me, a sham. Creativity is a social condition. Even the most self-directed studio-oriented artists, folks I know, are creating in a social condition that they feel intrinsically tied to. What I mean is that they are either invested in a biological relationship to community, or swayed by an abiding understanding of their work as it exists in a tradition beyond themselves. Let's consider Picasso as a model of the myth of the studio genius here- his work would mean

nothing if it didn't exist in: A) a market B) a community of other artists whom his work represents a break from C) a collective of artists and writers whose artworks in-mutual-aesthetic-movement (Cubism for instance) magnify meaning and value collectively. Otherwise, you have a hobbyist who no one notices and talks about. A B and C are collective creations. To ignore that is silly, nor does it detract from Picasso's individual creative vigor.

Did I mention that my father was a painter invested deeply in the belief of individual Modernist artistic expression? In many ways, as an artist I've been working against his Clement Greenberg-oriented aesthetics my whole life; notions that a paired down artwork, relying on abstract formal elements alone, should communicate everything in its entirety, without explanation or context, just from the experience of viewing it.

When I work in the studio I can enjoy it. But it's very hard for me to get into the studio without feeling the need to solve the problems of the world. In a way I have inherited a belief in the sublime aesthetic experience that my father painted, though in reverse. I'm always trying to make an artwork that can explain "everything," but without the limitations on representation and context that he put on himself.

An easy way for me to accomplish this has been working with others. This goes back to my first solo exhibition in 2009, at LA's David Patton Gallery, called "Blockades With Collaborators." For that project I worked with individuals to have them blockade, with their bodies, public spaces in the city – spaces that they would literally put their bodies on the line to transform. Sights they picked were military recruitment centers, arms manufacturers, and public thoroughfares. I took photos of these actions and turned them into drawings to memorialize and dramatize their activity. This "with collaborators" aspect of the project was enough to get me to spend the hours alone in the studio to draw and redraw these actions. I need that kind of hook- an intrinsic understanding that there is a social world beyond myself and my paper and my pencil.

EM: I didn't know your father was a formalist painter—and as you mentioned, you have an identical twin, the artist and theorist Marc Herbst. I want to talk more with you about being a twin in relation to your work and your life. I have heard you talk about how being a twin has brought on a different relationship to empathy, to individuality and to collectivity. Can you elaborate on this?

RH: As I said at the top- my experience of being a twin was a kind of otherness. As a twin, in public, you're never seen as an individual – you're a multiple. While my parents consciously never dressed us the same, we were always a "we", Marc and Robby. I was a somewhat introverted kid and I found my identity as twin comforting and easier to fall back upon than my identity as an individual. What's more, as a twin, other people were always dictating back to me my uniqueness as a twin, never my identity as my own person. My uniqueness was that I was a twin. If someone was gonna address me as an individual, unless they were a real close friend, they would frequently address me as

“Marc/Robby” or “wait which one are you?”. I got used to the idea that at some point someone might be talking to me thinking I was my brother, or projecting on me experiences they’d had with him, but not me. So, from the outside there was this constant pressure to disidentify with myself – or conversely- just expand the idea of who I was; that I was more than one subject.

That could be useful to me. There were certain attributes that I saw in my brother (which may as well have been in me, too) that I admired. And I would easily assume that personality trait I ascribed to my brother, as my own. That is, I’d act as him, to myself, and know that no one would be the wiser. And then I’d ask myself: “is this me?”. So, in this regard I was frequently embodying another subjectivity, much more so than emulation, because externally no one saw the difference between us anyways. I was unsure what was me or what was not. I understand now that the process of coming to know who you are is a standard feature of adolescents. But coming to understand that I was an “I,” this was a feature of my life that I only had to confront when I was 18 years old, when I went off to college separate from my twin brother.

I suspect this plural subjectivity isn’t unique to twins, because I’m fairly certain that the other collective identities that came easily with my own self-hood growing up, like being a “jew” or a “gymnast” or a part of “a family”, reinforced the idea that everyone was always more than themselves anyways. Yet the concept of individuality, of selfhood, that most American children grow into wasn’t ready for me. And that there were other notions of selfhood that contained multitudes. This underlined to me the distant nature of a singular individuality that some folks seemed to implicitly know. So selfhood seemed to me like an actor acting as a character on TV, something inauthentic that you would put on. For me, in some ways, the more authentic self was a multiple self. That was way more real to me than the abstract and difficult idea that I was an individual.

Anecdotally, as a kid I was a fairly successful team captain, or at least I judge myself that way. When given the opportunity to lead a group, I was very aware of the ways individual psyches play into a thing like collective achievement, and I was good operating in that terrain. But then again, I see this trait in my daughter, so who knows where that comes from? Yet the concept of not being able to empathize with someone was completely foreign to me as a young man. I don’t want to paint the picture that I was a saint, and never cruel to anyone, cause that’s not true. But I do remember at a certain part in my life struggling with the question, “have I ever hated anyone?” and “could I hate someone?”. My answer was an emphatic “No.” I just wouldn’t know how to do that. Again, I don’t know if this is me being the son of a self-described “Polyanna,” my twinness, or any number of possible things; yet the idea of being unable to see a commonness with another human is a largely alien idea to me. I can only hypothesize that this has something to do with being a twin. When you’re a twin, seeing yourself in an other is not a metaphor, it’s a fact.

EM: Can you tell me more about how being a twin has impacted your artwork? Especially given that you and your brother are both artists--- I am so curious how your subjectivity of a twin has effected/affected the artwork you make.

RH: Much of my artwork for the past ten years has been about interpersonal relationships. In part, this developed out of my leaving the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, a project I'd found with my twin brother. Leaving the Journal, I was interested in exploring relationships – how they can be effective, and how they can be challenging. I am interested, politically and conceptually, in the ways that information, knowledge, and feelings can pass between people to make change happen. I imagine that in some ways my subjectivity as a twin informs this interest.

EM: So much of your work deals with social engagement-- your "New New Games" project at Southern Exposure, or your project "I and We" at Human Resources, or "New Pyramids for the Capitalist System" to name a few. These projects invited bodies to play, cooperate or compete. As someone who started working this way over a decade ago, how has your thinking about socially engaged work changed over the years? Is your thinking around this way of working being impacted by the Covid-19 crisis?

RH: I'll start with the easy part. Covid-19 has made doing this kind of work challenging at this moment. The isolation of quarantine has cut me off from the city I enjoy investigating actively. Literally. I'm reticent to do field work because of the pandemic and my desire to avoid contracting Covid. Secondly, collaborators that I've had are having a difficult time with the pandemic. Finally, the project LAPD and I had aimed to do has had to change because of the crisis. I was originally planning on conducting movement workshops to explore active states of empathy.

My thoughts on socially engaged art haven't changed that much. It's a fun, meaningful way to make art. What has changed is the field itself and my understanding of how the institutional art world functions. When I conceived of becoming an artist, I had little idea of what I wanted to do professionally except share ideas. When I graduated and went into publishing, I conceived this as a part of art practice. It was curious to me to hear that individuals didn't think that this was an "art practice." At the time I thought this was notable, but didn't care much. For me it was what I was doing. I was working through creative ideas, methods to share ideas, and means to build a community around those ideas. For me this was clearly a form of activism, art, and writing- praxis. As the publishing practice developed the field of social practice art developed; and it made sense on some levels to put the publishing work into that basket as it tactically engaged publics. Our events and distribution exemplified methods of socially engaged art. Contiguous to the development of the practice as a distinct discursive field, more powerful institutions came to support and sponsor it. At the time I was aware that these institutions had agendas that didn't always sit well with the end goal of activist oriented art. This skepticism of the field of practice has stuck with me. I recognize that socially

engaged art may just be another form of “art,” distinct from the anarchist politics that have inspired me throughout my life. My understanding that the worlds of art and politics don’t always align, or necessarily need to align, the way I’d expect it to, has evolved.

EM: I want to end with a discussion of your current project. You recently received a Mike Kelley Foundation grant with the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) to create an emotional map of the city of LA. This follows many other maps you have made of Los Angeles. I am curious to know what draws you to map making. Also, I know you started volunteering downtown as part of your research to prepare for your project. How is this project developing and what are you learning?

RH: Llano Del Rio is the conceptual collective I work with to do these “maps” you’re referring to. A broader term we use for them is “guides.” The collective frames Los Angeles, the town where I’ve lived now for over twenty years, through these guides. The frames we make are based off of particular concepts (philosophic, historic, ideological) we’d like to imagine cast over the city. I’m drawn to this kind of practice because it’s a lively and embodied way of making theory. It’s not abstract, but implicitly sited in experiences of the city.

So, for example, the project I’m developing with the LAPD is based on exploring reactions we have to homelessness; compassion, repulsion and all the moods in between. This project has gone in a lot of different directions and the research I’ve been doing has been defined by the Covid crisis; most of it has been book learning, though I’ve spent some time talking with religious thinkers, politicians, and organizers. So, after say reading every story in the *LA Times* about toilets + skid row published between 1990 and today, I’ve learned that my original assumptions are true. There’s a lot of compassion in this town, but those with the desire to frame the homeless crisis as repulsive have far greater juice and know how to work the machines. My volunteer work in Skid Row was preparatory and human.

I’m not exactly set on what the guides for this project will look like, but I’m thinking there’ll be three. One will be a chart to the active moral universe of LA’s Skid Row. It puts at the center the homeless and their advocates – people who are representing the right to feed, house, and care for every human being as a just commandment. It goes out from there to those who have interest in this community, those who regulate this community, and those who actively plot against this community.

Another will be a guide to housing justice actions that “go beyond” the good versus evil binary of morality. In this one, I’m citing places of action: historic things like handmaking and installing DIY toilets where they’re needed and contemporary things like coordinated takeovers of empty government-owned homes by houseless folks. And the third will be a two-sided poster meant to evoke communities of care and communities of repulsion.

EM: What impact are you hoping for this new artwork? For example, I remember meeting with a Los Angeles city bureaucrat and one of Llano Del Rio's guides to Los Angeles was hanging on their wall. How do you want to support the communities of care and compassion and what do you think would give these groups more "juice"?

RH: The thing I really love about Llano's guides is what you're pointing to – the way that I'll go around town (even out of town) and see them posted up. I think about all of the guides honestly as scores, sets of instructions (even if they don't appear like that – but sometimes they do) to be followed out.

With this guide I hope to be able to help people see through the BS that is standard for LA City government when it comes to doing what is morally and ethically right for those of us with the least. My intention for all Llano projects is to share a more compassionate, more engaged, world-view.