



Perspective, Opinion, and Commentary

City of Events

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Abstract: In this essay the editor of the special journal on the theme of Engagement Curating outlines some key observations that led to the creation of that publication. Those include public protests and cultural events taking place on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (USA).

Keywords: *Public Engagement, Event Organizing, Urban Planning*

New Wave: Fall 2021

Nature is an event that never stops—Merlin Sheldrake 2020

The nearby expressway was impassable because of the flooding river, getting as close as two blocks from the Parkway. My bike commute was on high ground, and I still saw workers on the Parkway setting up for the music festival. A colleague had to be taken from her apartment in a dingy boat; my work was canceled, but I had already arrived there early before knowing. My students could not get to school, but we still decided to meet with our guest speaker online anyway, as rescheduling is a hassle. We had been hearing about Hurricane Ida for days in the Gulf Coast, but nobody was prepared for the “post-tropical cyclone” that it devolved into to hit Center City Philadelphia. The response was a mess, an unrehearsed improvisation trying to adapt to the disruption of our everyday lives.

As the water inched toward the music festival arrangements and speculation grew about a cancellation for the second year in a row, it cast the Benjamin Franklin Parkway’s function in a new light. It is a curious corridor in the city of Philadelphia—at once a traffic corridor and also a park and connecting device between numerous major cultural institutions including libraries, museums, and schools. With the local government’s home in city hall on one terminus and the Philadelphia Museum of Art on the other, the Parkway itself also boasts a range of calm and hectic moments that capture a great deal of the complexity of the city (as much as a “centrally-located” area far from many neighborhoods can account for).

Rewind to 2018: The Parkway Library

The main branch of the city's library sits a bit further down the parkway from where the flood and music festival zone was. It is typically busy, but today in this room time slowed down. The curator, Yolanda, sat in every chair in the six rows of the semicircle to make sure it felt right. If they were not, then people could not see and then maybe they would leave the library and feel like they were not welcome.

For an hour the mics were tested, lighting tweaked, the projection color corrected, and the chairs rearranged. This is what it took to transform a bland library banquet hall into an Afro-Futurist celebration for one-night-only. This is increasingly what it is like to work at a library.

Discussion at the rehearsal ensued about who would welcome people to start or if they could just dive right into the music, films, and poetry they had planned. Was there a way that the band could lead the audience out onto the patio right at sundown so that DJ Moor Mother could catch them by surprise, connecting the art going on inside with the city outside and solar system above?

"Of all of our metrics last year, the only category that substantially increased was event attendance," reflected Free Library of Philadelphia event coordinator and librarian Adam. For Adam, this often looks like partnering with an outside organization, hosting author readings, or initiating their own programming that connects the library's resources to a current event or local community. As fewer books get checked out, there is a growing expectation that librarians will activate the building and the collection with programs in order to get people through the door.

What Is an Event?

Events are things that happen. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* identifies four commonly agreed-upon types of events: activities, accomplishments, achievements, and states. While this field of thought is not conclusive in any way, shape, or form, defining events and identifying ways to mark the passing of time is both our constant preoccupation and always out of our reach.

Philosophical debates about what constitutes events in history, from the highly personal to world-historic events, have preoccupied scholars grappling with the convergence of cause and effect on people and environments. How events are recognized on the scale of someone's life is a matter of perception. What does the child perceive to be significant as they grow, as compared with how the parent narrates their life in a baby book or social media, and what experiences do we look back on from our deathbeds and infuse with meaning?

These intimate daily examples and the events produced for cultural institutions both sit in contrast to the conceptions of philosopher Alain Badiou who insists that the "event" cannot be intentionally produced because it is an authentic expression of revolt or revolution.

While Badiou and other theorists of “events” do not account for the very literal role of the event organizer, it could be beneficial to do so. If our social history is narrated through a history of events (technological and political revolutions) and our personal lives are the same (births, weddings, graduations, deaths), do those events require some kind of facilitation? If so, what implications could this have for cultural producers who want to produce authentic experiences for the public within their art spaces, schools, parks, libraries, or institutions?

Schools make education, libraries make research, and parks make playing. Increasingly, they also make events, and by extension, the people that work, study, and play in those environments are increasingly asked to organize and attend events. Some of these events are as mundane as discovering a provocative book while wandering the library’s book stacks or kicking a ball in the park with school friends—all non-events until retold or captured by documentation and made into official events.

There is also a myriad of ways to go about event organizing, from intentionally casual to strategically spectacular. Many events involve an increasingly complex array of public and private entities and facilities in order to produce “events” for our consumption, participation, and engagement—with tickets, rental fences, and professional facilitation distinguishing the feel between inside and outside the event. Across scales and contexts, this range of activities has rendered cities into veritable event factories (while this “busyness” often runs counter to the more quiet and conventional uses of these spaces).

The Skill of Engagement

A casual online search for “event planning” sends one swirling through an entire universe of contrived and often expensive ways to produce events. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics tries to track the field, but they do not collect data on self-employed event producers, identifying a diverse range of activities from “Promoters of Performing Arts, Sports, and Similar Events” to “Traveler Accommodation” as belonging to the amorphous field. Increasingly cultural organizations ranging from theaters to poetry magazines and the individual artists they work with have shifted toward entrepreneurial models of “special” event production as the primary means of generating attention and engagement, raising revenue, and cultivating brand awareness.

Examples range from the self-organized exhibits and performances that have long been a feature of independent arts communities to the more codified roles outlined in a recent job posting for a Community Engagement and Programming Coordinator at an arts organization in Delaware. The posting required that the applicant work forty hours a week plus many nights and weekends for twenty dollars an hour to “manage on site all programming and events, including set up and break down, vendors and artists; assist in building collaborations and cultivating partnerships; facilitate community and partner interaction; identify potential community partners and build lasting and reciprocal relationships.”

This highly complex job advertisement and the scene described at the Free Library was not unusual. Down the Parkway, there are also three art museums and two science museums all grappling with the emerging field of public engagement.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art is known to many as the site for the fictional Rocky and now Creed characters to do their boxing training on the steps, known to art historians for the unmatched Duchamp collection, and known to others as a Temple on the Hill. In recent years the museum, like many, has been attempting change. As the chair of the board of directors of the museum recently wrote, “We increasingly have a diverse audience at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It is no longer the big edifice on the hill frequented by the elite. It is a people’s museum—and joyfully so” (Yaffe 2018). Ask anyone who has been on the inside, and they will tell you, this transformation from edifice to people’s museum is not a complete one despite the board member’s enthusiasm. The museum sector has struggled to diagnose this inaccessibility, at times variously theorizing admission prices, representational limits of the collection, lack of interpersonal connections and affinity with new audience members, and logistics like hours and transportation options (Dilenschneider 2016).

This process takes time, and in many cases calls for new skills and commitments not previously held by the institutions. It also looks diverse in its form and the path is dependent on the particularity of the institution. Sometimes it is a suite of inclusive public programs held at the museum that engage current discourses or historically excluded audiences; other times it exceeds the walls altogether.

One of the museum’s former curators, Amanda Sroka, recently took on the collaborative organizing of hundreds of events with over 150 collaborators in a city-wide project and exhibition led by artist Jeanne van Heeswijk. Sroka reflected that one of the biggest challenges for the museum was to accept the diversity of forms, sharing that “It means being able to hold a protest, a street-wide marketplace, and a shared meal with the same weight, the same value, the same worth, even though those events might manifest differently” (Tucker 2019, 63).

In her report “Becoming Civic Museums,” Almudena Caso (2019) outlines the rise of this kind of practice internationally: “In this context, if museums do not pay attention to the current conversations, they risk becoming irrelevant, not mattering to the people, become outdated in their representation of a society that was, but that no longer exists. Relevance is at stake.”

Teaching Events

In my encounters with institutions like those on the Parkway, staff have consistently remarked on the frantic pace of their event organizing practices. Unfortunately, hosting the really unique nighttime dance party engagement event does not relieve you from the workday hours of tracking a budget or writing a program description. As organizations struggle to produce high profile and urgent reasons for the public to put something on their calendars, this race toward programming frequently leads to questions about mission-drift and the tension between “back office” maintenance and spectacularly entertaining events.

In the classes I taught for many years down Parkway from the Philadelphia Museum of Art at Moore College of Art & Design (and now in my new role at University of the Arts just a few blocks away), training students with the skills to enter institutions at this moment has introduced questions about what kinds of training is required to be an “event worker.” Most of the people working in these places have fairly traditional training like art history or library science, which introduces generational tensions around someone who might be an administrator but not a good meeting facilitator or dance party organizer.

Of course, we want these students to have current skillsets required to get jobs upon graduation, but there is another layer of training that is harder to pinpoint. Is it possible to be the community engagement organizer while also instilling critical literacy in how events work for audiences? Could this help audiences become more self-aware that they are being “engaged” by professional event planners and lead them to seek more authentic experiences?

At art schools like the ones that I have worked at, internal events are characterized by both the necessity of extracurricular activities that expand an educational experience for students and the need to draw in members of the public to the galleries and lectures. At one town hall meeting at Moore College with students, administrators proposed a slew of special diversity and inclusion events to counter some recent racist incidents on campus. One student, Liz, stood up and pronounced:

We do not need more special events that only the people who care about fighting racism will attend. We need to meet the confused students where they are at and where they are required to be—the classroom. You can organize all the special events you want, but they will not get at the root cause until you make it a required conversation.

It was not that the student wanted fewer events, but she was making an argument about their assumed value in place of required activities that implicate everyone. Should not all organizations strive to be more thoughtful about strategic deployment—when and how they use certain forms—and when they focus their resources on their core functions?

Fast Forward to 2020: Encampment as Event

A friend from the local parks advocacy group who oversees the Parkway reflected that while they try to support some neighborhood parks to do more programs, they worry some of their parks are so over programmed with events that they are not able to “just be parks.” In a recent report reviewing the “appropriate uses” of the Parkway, the authors reflected that despite most uses being recurring annual programs that “the perception persists, however, that events have increased significantly, accompanied by a sense that the Parkway is overused” (Parkway Events 2018, 6).

In addition to those annual programs, the Parkway is also a stage for the city’s most iconic demonstrations. On May 30 and June 6 of 2020 the Parkway became the stage for what has become variously known as The George Floyd protests, uprisings, and riots. Following the

circulation of video documenting the terrorizing public murder of a Black man named George Floyd by a white Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020, longstanding organizing around police brutality merged with spontaneous protest and revolt. “I can’t breathe” was heard amongst the tens of millions demonstrating across the country, echoing the words of a struggling Eric Garner as he was choked to death by a police officer in New York in 2014.

Not to be outdone by a virus, activists in Philadelphia seized upon the moment of 2020 to launch an action on the Parkway that was both timely and a longtime coming. The Philly Socialists tweeted on June 10, 2020 that “The Workers Revolutionary Collective and Occupy PHA [Philadelphia Housing Authority] have begun an encampment at Von Colln Memorial Field (at the intersection of Spring Garden St and Pennsylvania Ave). They need bodies on the ground to hold it down. Please make it out if you can.”

The city was already struggling with large numbers of houseless residents and the economic fallout of the pandemic made it all worse. After uprisings activated longstanding campaigns advocating for Black life and against racism and police brutality, organizers used the energy as a chance to launch the occupation. The goals included access to permanent housing and support of current efforts to develop tiny house building (Philly Socialists 2020).

Over four months the infrastructure of the encampment grew to include a kitchen with running water and portable toilets, rows of tents for long term residents, meeting areas, and a wide network of solidarity workers who delivered donated food on a daily basis. A banner reading “Housing Now & Black Lives Matter” was unfurled across a major intersection, and the slogan “I WILL BREATHE” was painted on the street.

One of the recurring events that would typically take over the entire Parkway for a week, that fall’s Made in America festival, was canceled, with the organizers (who included Jay Z and Beyonce) writing that

2020 is a year like no other. We are in a pivotal time in this nation’s history. Collectively, we are fighting parallel pandemics, COVID-19, systematic racism and police brutality. Now is the time to protect the health of our artists, fans, partners and community as well as focus on our support for organizations and individuals fighting for social justice and equality in our country. (Fekadu 2020)

In such a prominent part of the city, it was an undeniable and powerful assertion of the dispossessed into the terrain of the cultural playground of the Parkway. By October the organizers reached a deal with the city and disbanded, though many parts of the deal have yet to play out years later. Still, the highly visible event seared the potential for such actions into the minds of local residents (Mollway 2020; File 2021).

Fast Forward to 2022: An Event A Minute

2022 was a busy time on the Parkway.

In April of that year, I hosted the Fifteenth International Conference on the Inclusive Museum, which included walking tours of three Parkway museums: the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Barnes Foundation, and the Academy of Natural Sciences (Inclusive Museum, n.d.). At each stop the staff highlighted the relationship between increased emphasis on public engagement and their historical orientations and missions regarding research, preservation, and exhibition. In a talking circle held after the tours, one commentator discussed the irony of the leadership prioritizing engagement while their internal culture was decaying due to labor disputes.

A few months later at a music festival celebrating the Independence Day of the USA in July, two Police officers on security detail were shot in what was originally mistaken for fireworks. Their injuries led to thousands of people panicking and the Parkway being evacuated; soon after, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the main daily newspaper in town, ran a headline “Crowd Concerns: Shootings Have Some Rethinking Big Events” (Gammage and Conde 2022). Several months later, the Made in America festival returned in full force but with added security, and by October, there was a new form of event rippling across the Parkway.

Starting September 26, the Philadelphia Museum of Art workers union went on strike, picketing at the entrances and iconic steps of both the Philadelphia Museum of Art and their sister museum the Rodin Museum (PMA Union 2022). For twenty days the museum staff held their picket lines and attracted an immense amount of support from local and national labor unions. They became icons for workplace organizing at museums across the country, who are recognizing the disconnection between their own working conditions and the rhetoric of institutions attempting to be more inclusive with their exhibits and programs. By October 16, they had a contract.

The next weekend a small group of us gathered, and after securing audio-pieces in our ears, we commenced on a walking tour of the Parkway led by Susan Weiler, the self-described “Queen of the Parkway” (Association for Public Art, n.d.). Weiler, a partner at the landscape architecture firm OLIN, has worked on master plans for the Parkway and developed numerous design and planting projects for institutions such as Rodin, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Barnes Foundation. Through the decentralized audio broadcasts, we walked amidst traffic, tourists, and joggers while Weiler shared her historical insights into our earpieces. She recalled that the 2006 master plan was really when the idea for a cultural campus was solidified, suggesting that one-hundred years after the creation of the Parkway it was still being planned because it is a dynamic place. When developing the master plan there was a concept of “An Event a Minute” that would punctuate the movement from city hall to the art museum.

As we walked to the Barnes, we passed an organization “Helping the Homeless” that distributes meals and clothing to houseless people living near the Parkway. Moving toward the

Barnes campus, there was discussion about how the site had formerly been The Youth Study Center, a juvenile detention facility for youth awaiting court hearings, and was open there from 1952 until 2008 when it was relocated to West Philadelphia (Friends of Matthias Baldwin Park, n.d.). Weiler shared that one of the design goals was to create an exterior entrance to the museum that lets you “drop your shoulders” and relax. As we looked at the fountain that OLIN had designed for the Barnes, Weiler celebrated the “reflexivity of the sky, and the dappled light” revealed in the water. A segway tour rolled past along the sidewalk. When asked about a chain-link fence that was added to the exterior of the building, clearly after the design process, she suggested that it was a response to “over-programming on the parkway and mega-events.”

A Conclusion: Current Events

In May 2023 I taught my final courses on Parkway, across the street from the Free Library and a few blocks from where the encampment took place and where the museums continue to rethink audience engagement. Both the pandemic and the protests completely altered the landscape of events in the city. The pandemic completely severed the event production at cultural institutions. After an interval of lockdown, an interval of online, and an interval of physically distanced outdoor experiments, there was a slow return to in-person arts programming concurrent with localized vaccination rates, and now it has returned to basically “back to normal.” All organizations today are compelled to foreground equity and racial justice as themes to represent, even if they do not have deep commitments to realizing them materially through redistributive means.

An institutional event calendar does not typically get rewritten or revised to respond to current events. Sometimes when a protest is threatened against them, they cancel for fear of embarrassment or instances of inclement weather lead to postponement; however, the general model remains. They set the calendar, and their audience are expected to fall in line. Artists in turn take these opportunities to collaborate with institutions in the production of engaging events. This role situates them (and I will say *us* because I have been a part of these contracted artists) within an intersection of the two poles of socially-engaged institutions: engagement workers stretching their roles to make institutions seem relevant and organized workers fighting for better working conditions.

My own political consciousness has been shaped by relationships, ideas, and events. Relationships draw my attention to a place or struggle. Ideas about how power really works are confirmed, complicated, and punctuated by disastrous events: 9/11, Katrina, Maria, COVID-19. These events were surprises, and as catalyzers, they have created their own microgenerations and eras. Every era shapes politics and is also shaped by politics.

Looking forward, practitioners and scholars alike can consider how to hold disruptive events like the flooding of the river or the pandemic alongside the event production that has come to define cities and spaces like the Parkway. How might the best-laid-plans of music

festivals or community engagement activities at cultural institutions be reconsidered in relation to social reality, unfolding in both quietly mundane and shockingly violent trajectories? How can art's ways of seeing be expanded to ways of living that are sensitive to the events we cannot predict but know to expect?

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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