

# ARTFORUM

**Diary: Counter Culture**

**Rahel Aima on Counterpublic 2019**

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"IT'S AN INTERESTING MOMENT FOR REGIONALISM," writer-curator Leah Triplett Harrington remarked one night at dinner. We were catching a breather after Nic Kay's moving, sinuous concluding procession through the predominantly black and Latinx neighborhood that hosted the inaugural edition of St. Louis's Counterpublic triennial. **A ravey closing party followed in the stained-glassed, former-church-turned-punk-club that housed Cauleen Smith's *Sky Will Learn Sky*, a stunning video and banner installation.** Harrington was referring to the spate of new biennials in American cities like Cleveland, Atlanta, and Santa Fe, and while the event, organized by nonprofit The Luminary, certainly fits this phenomenon, it feels entirely more local than those other efforts. The triennial closed on July 13—just a month shy of the fifth anniversary of nearby Ferguson's unrest. It describes itself as an expansive "public art platform scaled to a neighborhood, a community-oriented revision of the triennial form that builds bottom-up from the complexities, conflicts, energy, and opportunities within a single place to imagine new ways of living and working together."

Big if true, but there I was, casually parachuting in as if this were Sharjah, Yinchuan, or Kochi. Part of the problem, I learned in a wide-ranging, context-rich conversation over tacos with Luminary director James McAnally, was the relative dearth of local art journalists who weren't already associated with the initiative. A quick tour of some of the twenty-four sites followed: a discount store, two panaderías, a Buddhist temple, a western wear store, phone and muffler repair shops, a craft beer joint, and a bakery run by people transitioning out of homelessness, all within a twelve-block radius along commercial strip Cherokee Street.

In Yowshien Kuo's compelling installation at Carrillo Western Wear, I found the sign I had been looking for. The back of a dress shirt was printed with "Requirement" on the collar and, below an embroidered yoke, "WORLD RESTART." Another of his shirts featured the Boy Scout maxim "IMAGINE YOURSELF IN THE PLACE OF AN ANIMAL." On one wall, subtly altered cowboy hats bulged like exaggerated ostrich skin or were blinged up with crosses on chains. Like Ohad Meromi's modular bedlike sculpture almost camouflaged in the furniture section of a thrift store, the strength of the piece lay in the subtlety of its integration into the fabric of the store. It was particularly well-matched with Kuo's practice, in which cowboys stand in for an archetypal American masculinity denied to Asian-American men—his small paintings were a highlight of a side trip to the remarkable Granite City Arts and Design District in a nearby Trump tariff-rejuvenated steel town.

How to restart the world, though? I think of German anarchist Gustav Landauer, who wrote in 1910, "The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another." The triennial takes these prefigurative politics seriously: Its catalogue features a land acknowledgement, and the thirty-nine participating artists are largely BIPOC. And a good number of commissions engage the community in an admirably BUFU way, from Azikwe Mohammed's *Armor Photo Studio*, for which the artist makes portraits of and for locals, to Latinx and Global South-focused libraries housed in a bakery and specialty teashop respectively, and a robust schedule of talks, screenings, performances, potlucks, and other

curricula, including a session with the local alderperson. These programs happened on a near-weekly basis, an anti-parachuting strategy which meant that you really had to be a resident to experience much of the triennial. In a reversal of convention for the majority of biennial exhibitions, Counterpublic kept the focus of the event on that city's actual residents.

Instead of champagne toasts, there were \$2 beers at dive bars, or John Riepenhoff's *The Luminary Counterlager*, brewed with local hops and masa from a Cherokee Street grocer. Kahlil Robert Irving provided the only large public sculpture, although the street provided its own in the form of a twenty-foot indigenous man, replete with headdress—a landmark commissioned by the street's business association circa 1985. Instead, works were overwhelmingly sited in retail establishments, an aspect that made explicit the transactional nature of this kind of event. In addition to Riepenhoff's beer, you could buy Rodolfo Marron III's cookies iced with phrases like *estamos aqui* (proceeds went to a local immigrant advocacy group). Thomas Kong's commission, *Be Happy*, took the form of a lagniappe: visitors needed to purchase something from the discount store to receive a bag embellished with one of his collages, which covered every available surface of the establishment in a parallel of his own store outside Chicago. By the time I and other nonresidents flew in for the closing, the bags and beer were already finished. And even though the triennial wasn't city-sponsored or engineered, organizers encouraged visitors to support the businesses, to "thank them for their generosity and honor the place that they hold for the communities."

If anything, the triennial provided a model for what the coexistence of art and community looked like, warts and all, even if weaker works sometimes felt subsumed into the curatorial gesture. Often, there was a sense that the shop proprietors really couldn't care less about the art. But they trusted longtime neighbors The Luminary and triennial curators McAnally and Katherine Simóne Reynolds—both of whom live in the area—enough to go along with it, with the casual proviso that they would be allowed to renegotiate the piece down the line. One of two locations housing a pair of thoughtful Sky Hopinka films, a phone repair shop, grew so irritated with the buzzing of the CRT monitor that they took to only turning it on for visitors who asked. Marron's cookies, meanwhile, were supposed to accompany his altarpiece installation featuring photos of the panadería owner's family, but was nixed at the last minute when the owner changed their mind upon seeing the work. How often do local residents, whose lives and community histories provide the inspiration and material for so many biennial commissions the world over, have this kind of agency?

"This used to be where people from Western states would come for culture," my Lyft driver told me on the way to STL. And indeed a number of side trips to artist-run galleries—CAM St. Louis, which featured strong Lawrence Abu Hamdan and Paul Mpagi Sepuya shows, the Pulitzer foundation, the aforementioned G-CADD, and the stunning Cahokia mounds inland across the Mississippi River—helped contextualize the triennial against a broader city that boasts a surprisingly extensive arts ecology for its size. It became clear that this was not a St. Louis triennial, but a Cherokee Street triennial. I unfortunately didn't make it to several sculpture parks and city museums, the latter of which are notably free, funded by a unique provision in the tax code. And the dregs of hurricane Barry squashed a trip to the Botanical Gardens' rather dubiously funded Monsanto Research Center. Art is not the only sphere with a patronage problem, but Counterpublic not only claims but demonstrates that another art world is possible.