



THE LANGUAGE OF SEEDS AND TENTS

Gaye Chan and Michael Arcega's makeshift architecture and critical dialogues of public space.
Writer **Weston Teruya**

IT BEGAN WITH papaya seedlings covertly planted on a narrow strip of grass between a roadway and a chain-link fence.

Gaye Chan and her partner, Nandita Sharma, deliberately placed the plants on public land without permission or regret. For a few months in late 2003, the young plants flourished there in the shadow of green, creased cliffs on the windward side of Oahu, HI. A small hand-painted placard declared them for public benefit and use.

A few months later, the sign became the site of a written exchange between the planters and the public works employee sent to remove the intruding plants. The worker's apologetic, "Sorry, I've been instructed to remove papaya plants ... please transplant," was countered with, "Thanks for the notice but we can't think of any other place better than here where everyone has easy access to the free papayas." Shortly afterward, the government worker uprooted the plants, leaving only

a note recommending the services of a mediator.

"Where is the public in public land?" Chan and Sharma asked. "Who decides how space is used?" These are some questions posed in their decade-long artistic project, *Eating in Public*, a loose web of projects ranging from unpermitted gardens to strident agitprop publications.

Considerations of public space and the ability of everyday citizens to engage with or provide for one another are issues that have echoed throughout history, resounding most recently in the tense dialogues between civic leaders and defiant 2011 Occupy protests across the United States. The goals of the Occupy movement have been economic equality, but the visual language of tents and other activist vernacular created in the public squares, parks and streets has been where these demands have been articulated, or forcibly squashed.

Even elected officials acknowledge the importance of this connection between the visual language and interventions into public space in both their support and resistance: The City Council of Irvine, CA, declared tents an extension of protected free speech while New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg dismissed the same as preposterous. Thousands of marching bodies filling avenues and the hodgepodge, utilitarian mix of makeshift homes and gathering spaces inserted into public space have reset the terms for understanding and discussing unwieldy and broad concepts like civics, government and corporations.

As *Eating in Public* demonstrates, the ideas that the Occupy movement raises are long familiar to artists. Chan reimagines public space and the built environment, and helps further refine the ways in which political struggles are articulated.

The political intentions of *Eating in Public's* actions often take shape as stripped-down moments of generosity where physical materials act as a means of fueling social interaction. In the past, Chan and Sharma's *Free Store* project offered passers-by a neatly arranged stack of cinder blocks accompanied by a sign declaring them to be "Free!" A no-cost farmers market presented boxes full of backyard garden harvests of fruits, vegetables and potted plants. In a front yard, neat rows of yard sale odds and ends sat next to a small payment box labeled "\$0.00." Like the disobedient planting of papaya at the side of the road, the impact of these acts does not lay in the specifics of the shared bounty. Instead, like many Occupy encampments, *Eating in Public* seeks to build a shared community as an alternative to the insularity of profit motives or governmental mandates.

Chan's work resonates because of its location on Oahu, where the land has been at the heart of longstanding struggles between indigenous sovereignty groups, large-scale corporate agriculture, tourist fantasy, the United States military, Pacific Rim trade agreements and international real estate speculation. In Hawaii, even a narrow strip of grass between a road and chain-link fence has many invisible hands grasping at it. In this context, there is nothing simple about the easily overlooked act of reoccupying public space to plant a fruit tree to

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provide free food. The converse action of uprooting the intruding seedlings and the scribbled exhortations to move them elsewhere has its own messy motivations, some arising from the politics of access to land and others rising from things as mundane as the polite social mores of a tight-knit island community.

In Chan's 2011 project *Free Grindz*, exhibited at Southern Exposure in San Francisco, she shipped a tightly packed crate from Hawaii that transformed into a makeshift – but carefully assembled – edible weed seed sharing station. On the backside, an array of photographs represented the dandelion, amaranth and purslane in full growth. Other snapshots next to an instructive text in pidgin reading "where fo' get" depicted where the weeds could be found in the wild, on street corners and backyards.

The stand demonstrated Chan's matter-of-fact, but clever approach to reappropriating available building materials. She pieced her station together from old bookshelves, wood planks stamped with the traces of past use and travel and pragmatic details like the packs of fluorescent adhesive notes acting as spacers between two clamped-together boards. Chan repurposed old business envelopes to form seed packets. On the desk, a line of text ("how fo' cook") held directions on making a scrappy recipe book for cooking the weeds. Through generosity and creative reuse, Chan and *Eating in Public* staked a claim for free exchanges rooted in public spaces.



In Los Angeles, Michael Arcega created his own interpretation of the public landscape for his 2010 exhibition at Steve Turner Contemporary gallery. Arcega re-created a series of light posts, telephone poles, trash cans, fireplugs and mailboxes made with the fundamentals of a campsite, tarps and pop-up tent posts. The installations, *Suburban Blight* and *OMG*, displayed these tent-like doppelgangers strung askew in midair by a web of climbing ropes. The effect suggested a floating but crumbling urban street.

The familiarity of the objects was reassuring, but the indelible wrinkles on their tarp surface served as a constant reminder of their collapsible design. Arcega reinforced the portability of his streetscape in a corresponding gallery display where a line of neatly packed bundles, drawstrings tightly pulled, demonstrated the compacted versions of each of those sculptures. Unlike the objects he referenced, this is a mobile city, ready for travel.

The pieces offered the comforting outlines of the city filtered through outdoor adventuring. In fact, Arcega installed earlier versions of some of the smaller objects, fire hydrants and trash cans, in Marin Headlands, a quiet pastoral area overlooking the Pacific Ocean, just north of San Francisco. The utter mundanity of their situation would typically make them easily overlooked except for the oddly bold blue, brown and silver coloration of their tarp surface and the hint of their soft, collapsible edges. They were simultaneously of the place and out

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of place. By creating this perceptual loop, Arcega challenges us to become freshly aware of our built environment.

While created in 2009–10, Arcega's series has added urgency in light of the Occupy Wall Street protests, where tents have come to stand for a broader struggle. His pieces now read as the emergency architecture of a city in crisis. The objects enact the outlines of infrastructure for the messy utopianism of a plaza occupied by protesters. The deliberate selection of structures, each covering fundamental civic provisions — communications, sanitation, water and electricity — describe the base of a mobile city.

TO SEE more work by these artists, visit their websites: Mike Arcega at arcega.us and Gaye Chan at gayechan.com.

Bound and tied in midair, Arcega creates a frozen moment of simultaneous upheaval and physi-

cal encumbrance — a contradictory tumble of immobility. The city has been arrested in a tan-

gle of the very climbing ropes usually meant to protect and provide safety, an apt metaphor for the inability of politicians to balance the rights of protesters and the interests of both large and small businesses. Through the temporary form of tents, both Arcega and Occupy ask viewers to look deeper into the easily overlooked mechanisms of civic space — whether physically or politically.



Despite the distinctly different approaches in Chan's and Arcega's practices, they converge in the makeshift architecture and critical dialogues of public space. Chan's work presents ways of thinking shaped by both a deep care for humanity and a fierce interrogation of the boundaries that make it near-impossible to build communities. Arcega's interventions into our daily surroundings necessitate a re-examination of mundane everyday objects and their role in shaping place. Both offer useful tools for engaging in conversations about public space at a historical and political moment when the stakes have never been higher. The terms of social change are being written in the objects we see every day. Political fluency lies in the language of roadside papaya and tents in the shape of light posts. **H**

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