Public Spaces and Agonistic Pluralism in Political Design:

by veronica uribe a.

The Case of *Conflict Kitchen*

In "Design Democracy and Agonistic Pluralism," Carl DiSalvo presents an alternative approach to the consensual ideal of democracy. According to him, agonistic pluralism is a model of democracy grounded in conflict. This "productive contest" takes place through all forms of social practices. Drawing from political theorist Chantal Mouffe's ideas, he addresses the design community: "One of the tasks of those wishing to support and further democracy is, then creating and enabling these spaces of contest. In such spaces difference and dissensus are brought forward and the assumptions and actions that shape power relations and influences are revealed and challenged."[1] Along the same lines, Maria Hellström Reimer contends that liberal democracy needs spaces for public assembly, deliberation, or even confrontation. These spaces have to be different from others where power relations are institutionalized and are not questioned, such as the state and the market.[2]

Further in his analysis, DiSalvo presents a distinction between politics and the political, which could be useful when designing such spaces. He states:

In the discourses of agonistic pluralism, politics are the means by which a state, organization or other social order is held together, politics are the structure and mechanism that enable governing... Different from these means, the political is a condition of society. It is a condition of ongoing opposition and contest.[3]

On the one hand, *politics* range from codified laws and procedures to unspoken but observed habits of interpersonal interaction and performances of beliefs and values. In that sense, designs embody politics. On the other hand, *political* is a condition experienced and presented in many ways, from debate to acts of provocation, protest and resistance. If, as Hellström points out, "that something is materialized means that it has an established configuration,"[4] how can designers enact multiple reconfigurations within it? In other words, how design can provide these open spaces for agonistic pluralism?

FIGURE 1 *Information about the country is displayed on everyday objects. Image courtesy of Conflict Kitchen*

CONFLICT KITCHEN: POLITICS THAT ALLOW THE POLITICAL

Conflict Kitchen, a project by designer and artist Jon Rubin and architect Dawn Weleski, aims to use the social relationship of food and economic exchange to engage the general public in discussions about countries, cultures, and the polarizing rhetoric of governmental politics. Located in Pittsburgh, it seeks to challenge the narrowness of the media's approach to these issues and instigate questioning, conversation, and debate among customers.[5] In reflection of geopolitical events, the project is constantly changing the conflict addressed.[6] What interests me

about this project is the way in which this established configuration enacts multiple and coexisting reconfigurations.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel De Certeau presents the dialectic between tactics and strategies. By *strategies* he refers to practices used by subjects holding power (cities, institutions and businesses) to control spaces and practices. By *tactics* the author refers to practices that those who don't hold power use to subvert the established order. Tactics are not intended to last for an extended period of time, because their subversive nature relies on their temporality. Through them, subjects take advantage of any moment of freedom within strategies in order to momentarily change them. As Jamer Hunt states, "Tactics are therefore performative. They are enactments of a given situation to produce a different end."[7]

The relevance of *Conflict Kitchen* for "political design" lies in its capacity to create an everyday space that provides a space for confrontation. In that sense, *Conflict Kitchen* reframes an everyday action and place with specific politics and materialization (a take-out restaurant), and transforms it into

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a public sphere where notions of countries, culture, and foreign affairs are questioned (the political). Customers and workers address America's international affairs and related subjects in an agonistic and productive way. This is accomplished by subverting the strategy (the restaurant) with three different sets of tactics.

The menu and the façade, often in the language of the country addressed, provides a first encounter with "the other." What should be a harmless meal, suddenly engages the customer in a discussion: What does it mean? What language is that? Why is it not in English? Moreover, the wrapper contains opinions of members of the community on different political issues. By reading it, customers discover the inherent contradictions of this specific culture. "The goal is to show the complexity of cultures and not reduce them to one coherent narrative" creator Jon Rubin points out.[8]

Often, interested customers approach the workers for further information. Otherwise, the workers themselves are instructed to engage customers in conversations. This second set of tactics—hidden in everyday interactions—implies discussions about the country, its culture, and the conflict. They also include conversations about the project its the current iteration—the taste of the food or the relevance of the menu. It should be noted that all of the people involved in the project traveled to the chosen country and conducted research on the ongoing conflict and its current status.

Finally, special events provide a third tactic to ensure plurality of narratives and the emergence of the political. One of the

most successful events is the "Lunch Hour," which is a meal shared by customers and members of the communities addressed (living in Pittsburgh or elsewhere in the country), through Skype.

Conflict Kitchen establishes a strategy, i.e. a predetermined space that holds specific politics and configuration. This is materialized in the restaurant—the wrapper, the food, the service, the graphics and the brand. Within this strategy, it also uses tactics to generate the political. These are enacted by three scripts[9] in its design: 1) the menu, the wrapper and the façade of the restaurant; 2) the everyday interactions between customers and workers, inside and outside the restaurant, and 3) the special events that take place on specific days of each iteration. The agonistic aspect of this project lies in the fact that tactics are not intended to show a specific point of view or critique; the narrative is left open and is often incoherent. The main purpose of these tactics is to generate a space for deliberation and contestation that does not need to be solved.

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FIGURE 2 *"Lunch Hours" taking place during Venezuela's Conflict Kitchen. Image courtesy of Conflict Kitchen.*