

## Picture the Homeless Tent City

On July 23rd 2009, Picture the Homeless, Reclaim NYC and Not An Alternative, occupied an abandoned lot in East Harlem, building an impromptu Tent City to protest the lack of affordable housing in New York. Scapegoat spoke with Not An Alternative about their collaboration.

**SCAPEGOAT SAYS:** How did you come to work with Picture the Homeless? It seems that the alliance between an artist collective and a group of marginalized yet self-organized urban residents appears to be unusual in most histories of art and activism.

**NOT AN ALTERNATIVE:** Although we've partnered many times with groups that have issue-oriented campaign goals, our interest in the partnership is not (at least first and foremost) derived from a desire to "win" a campaign we're involved in. In fact, our practice has more to do with representation than politics. As an arts group our work is oriented around representing the impossible. Our partnerships with activists groups such as Picture the Homeless are an example of this.

We engage campaigns to point to what is invisible in a given situation. By this, I don't mean working to represent content that can be made visible by providing an alternative perspective. I'm talking about pointing to what can't be symbolized, or what is actively repressed from being symbolized in a given situation. If our work appears to be political it's because representation is inherently exclusionary. The act of pointing out what is missing in a situation reveals the structure of exclusion and makes visible the politics of that situation.

Typically, but not always, our work aligns well with the activist groups we work with. In the case of Picture the Homeless the alliance worked particularly well. After all, the concept behind their name deals with picturing or making visible the homeless, which they understand very well to be the repressed excess around which the city is built.

**SS:** What was NAA's strategy for the occupation? How does this strategy relate to other activist and artistic strategies?

**NAA:** One of Not An Alternative's projects is to operate as a production company wherein, aside from the choice of who we work with and what we are aiming to do, we perform exactly as would any other production company. In the case of the tent city occupation we did with Picture the Homeless our role was limited to creating the stage from which the PTH could communicate their message. In this particular case however because it involved an illegal takeover and was planned on short notice we had no choice but to stage the role we actually played undercover, costumed as a production crew installing and shooting a low budget music video. For the project we built props, sets, printed signage, fabricated a stage, coordinated a crew of 30 volunteers for on site installation including a model and two videographers. We were also involved in coordinating the social media strategy for the event.

One thing that makes our work as a production company different than the work of other activist groups is that our function is oriented around providing infrastructural support rather than driving any particular issue. We work with groups who share our aim to build continuity between struggles and a movement. Another thing that makes us different than many activists is that we embrace strategies employed in industries associated with public relations. Surprisingly (at least for us) most activist groups reject marketing strategies, they charge them with being inherently corrupt as a result of being associated with the production of "the spectacle," and instead favor "ethical" forms of communication such as media analysis, deconstruction, and a reliance on the representation of data.

We see our work to be connected to a few different artistic institutions. For example those associated with artists working in the genre of "Institutional Critique," made famous in the United States by artists such

as Hans Haacke, Jenny Holtzer, Mark Dion, Fred Wilson, Andrea Fraser, and Alfredo Jarr. However, where these artists engage for the most part only from within the confines of traditional institutions (museums, art galleries etc) we understand institutions as bio-political apparatuses, structuring every interaction of contemporary life.

**SS:** You have stated in other contexts that you embrace a status of exteriority. You position yourselves "not as an alternative," as exterior to the system, but rather in relation to a hole, or lack, within the capitalist system itself, that is somehow constitutive of it. How does the strategy you used for this occupation with Picture the Homeless relate to your larger objectives as an organization, especially to your ideas about collaboration and solidarity more generally?

**NAA:** The Picture the Homeless occupation case study above unfortunately isn't really a good example to explain this concept so I'll use the name Not An Alternative to do the same.

Capitalism's power is sustained by a process that perpetually feeds itself alternatives. It grows as long as there are alternatives that it can subsume and transform into fuel. Anarchism becomes T-shirt decoration, disaster becomes justification for war, protests become proof that freedom of speech is alive and well. Every attempt to constitute, name, or make visible antagonism or otherwise escape is immediately processed in order to drive the machine forward. Margaret Thatcher's famous quote, "There is no alternative," originally made in the 1980's, has become emblematic of the idea that there is no exterior to the Capitalist system. For years since, the quote has been emblematic of our era from which it is very difficult to imagine any real alternative to the system she described. Some of the questions our group seeks to answer through our work are how can a real alternative to capitalism be constituted? How can we represent a counter-power? How can that which exists outside of capitalism be made visible without being Capitalism?

In the case of our name, Not An Alternative, a slightly twisted misreading inverts Thatcher's words, orienting their meaning towards describing the opposite of what she had originally intended. "There is no alternative" becomes "there is such a thing as no-alternative" (or not an alternative)." The name exploits a slippage in language. Where the words on the one hand describe a condition of the contemporary world in the negative they at the same time serve to positively account for an inherent contradiction that her original words ironically invoke. Embedded in the same words, but this time adopted as a name, we read the quote as an expression describing an unsymbolized excess; an alternative inherent to and at the same time beyond the system itself. In this action nothing new is invented for Capital to use as fuel and yet a transformation has taken place. "Something in the negative" becomes "no-thing in the positive." In this instance where the meaning of her words slip, the power of the famous quote is vacated and a new power is localized in the shift.

For us at this point Thatcher's words represent a way of making visible that which she likely wanted to disappear. No longer do we look for "another world (that we believe) is possible" because we understand that this world is already its own alternative, present as the impossibility of the system itself.

Beyond this example, as far as the larger objectives of our organization goes, our work is essentially a mapping project where we aim to provide a kind of interface between material resistance movements on the spectacle through which they are made impossible and possible.

Not An Alternative is a non-profit organization with a mission to affect popular understandings of events, symbols, and history. We curate and produce work that questions and leverages the tools of advertising, architecture, exhibit design, branding, and public relations. Programs are hosted at a variety of venues, including our Brooklyn-based gallery No-Space (formerly known as The Change You Want To See Gallery).

Photographs by Not An Alternative

