Chapter Fifteen

Encounter

PRACTICE
PATIENCE...

...AS YOU
PRESENT YOUR
PROJECT IN A
GALLERY.

DON'T
FORGET TO DO
AROMATHERAPY.

What if encounter were integral to your practice or project?

Encounter: the context where your finished project is presented.

Examples of encounter can include: you presenting your project at your house, your studio, a park in your neighborhood, a gallery, a museum, or in your wallet.

☼ We suggest that the following section be shared with the group as best suits your context, either read aloud—in whole or in part—or assigned to be discussed in your space of learning. Before you begin to read, we invite you to ground yourself in the space: notice the air on your skin and your feet on the ground. What are your feelings and sensations at this moment? What are you bringing to this text? Take a moment to become aware of this. We invite you to notice what comes up for you, as you are reading this chapter. We will ask you to reflect upon this at the end of this chapter.

CAPACITY

SOURCE

LABOR

DEPART

TRANSFER

ACQUIRE

TOOLS

SUPPORT

COPYRIGHT

NARRATE
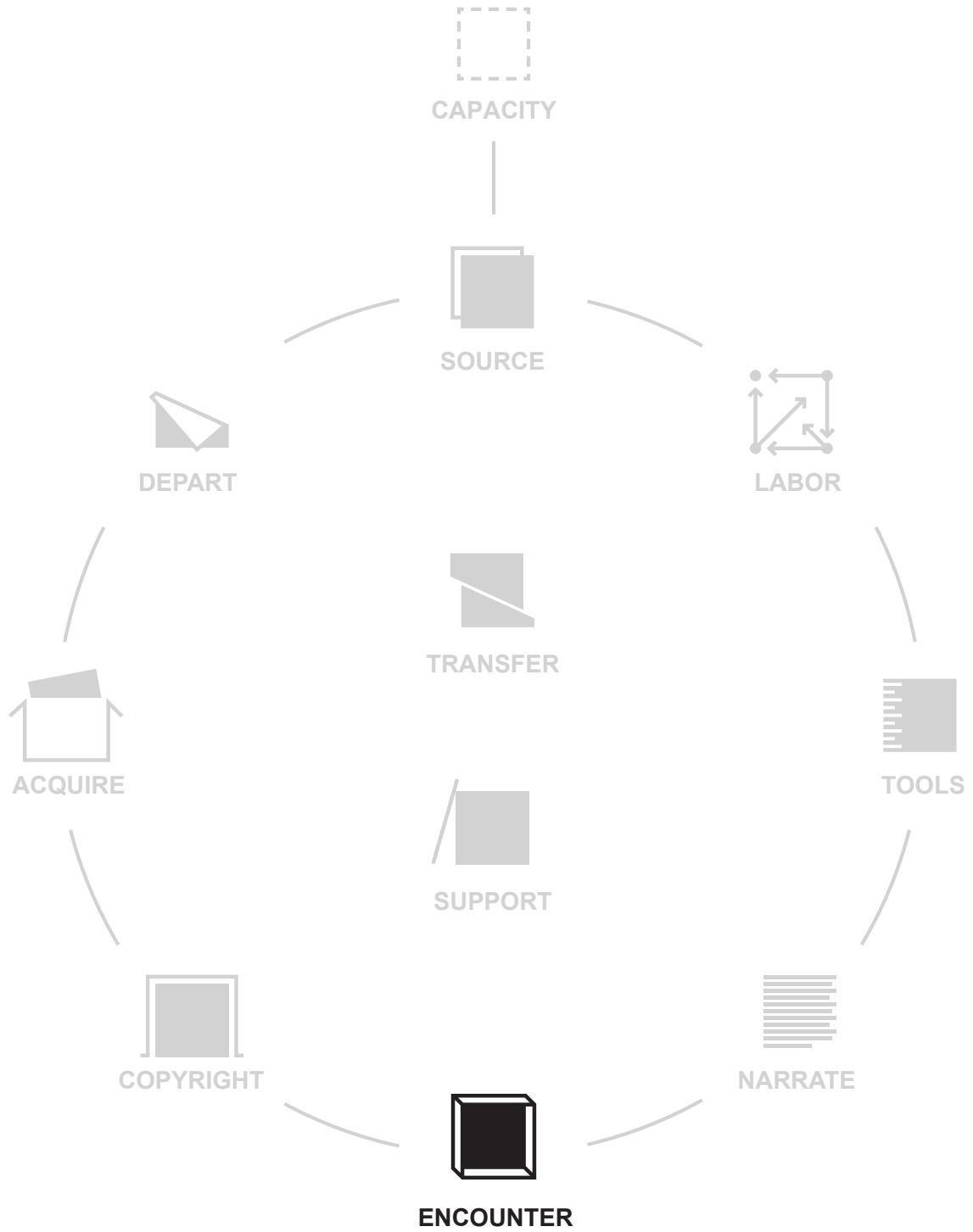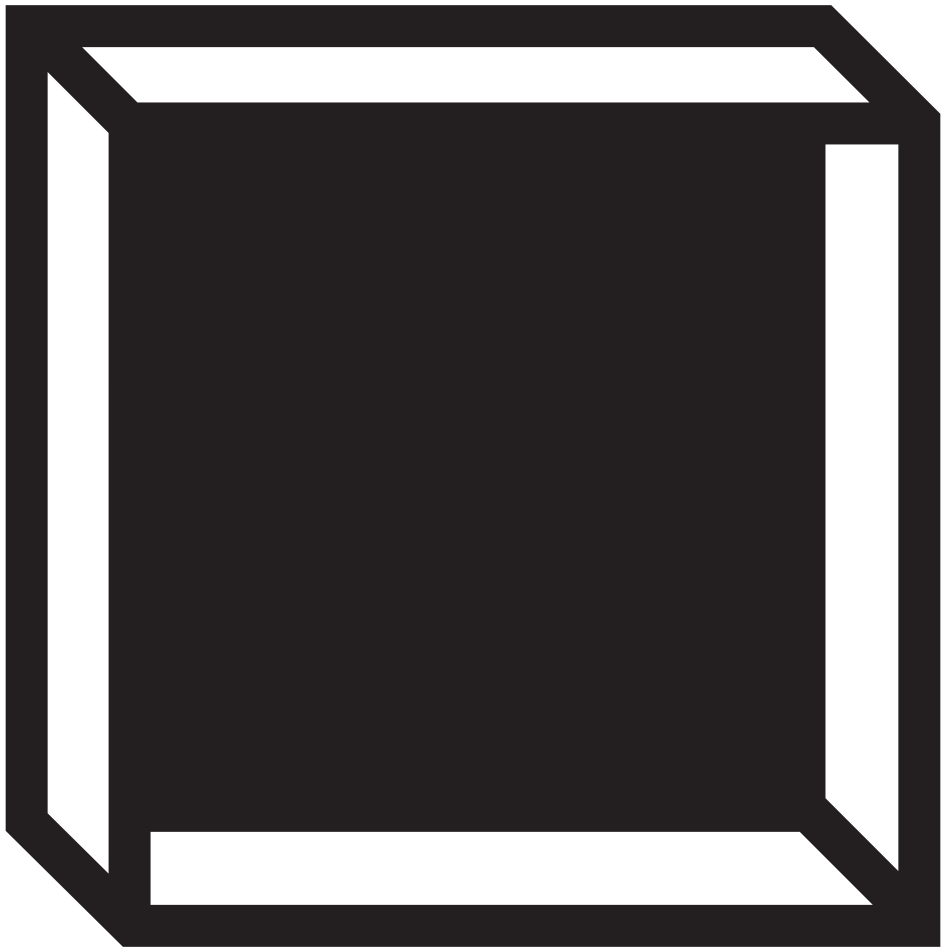
ENCOUNTER

Introduction

The phase of the lifecycle that we refer to as "encounter" is the context where a finished project is presented. Encounter occurs in person unless the work is a new media artwork intended to be experienced primarily on a digital device you have at home or in your pocket.

Story

Alice Sheppard is a dancer and choreographer who attends to the complex intersections of disability, gender, and race by exploring the societal and cultural significance of difference.[1] In an interview with us, Sheppard spoke about the importance of encounter in her projects:

> It's something I spend a lot of time working through, how [an audience] encounters the work. From the moment you enter the theater from the lobby we've already designed that encounter in terms of light, and sound … and the way you exit is also structured…. That matters to me.[2]

Sheppard continues by reflecting on the social norms and spatial arrangements that make encounter impossible for many people, demonstrating the ways that sites of encounter impact *who* can access projects.

> Wheelchair users have often noticed how ramps that give access to buildings are often around the back, or next to the dumpsters, and [are] often not designed aesthetically. They are seen as functional devices but are rarely integrated into the building. There's a way in which this is discriminatory. It's not enough to just get in the door. Separate is not equal; we know this from other contexts. It's a question of how we enter the aesthetics of architecture. What is the social and cultural meaning of making an entry?[3]

In her recent project *DESCENT,* Sheppard ensured that the space would be accessible to the disability dance community. In addition, the entire performance was made into an audio experience for people with a variety of impairments. Sheppard uses the capacity that we call "Understand (Art) Community," defined as the ability to "interact as an artist with other artists (i.e., in classrooms, in local art organizations, and across the art field) and within the broader society."[4] Sheppard understands the limits of the art community, which is often inaccessible to people with disabilities. Alice continually pushes the field of disability dance—and the field of art overall—to be equitable and innovative. *See Chapter 9: Support /■ for more.*↗

Discussion

You create projects with the intention that they will be seen by other people. The audience's encounter with your finished project might occur after you engage in weeks or months of preparation in hope that the communicative potential of your project is reached, inspiring people, sparking dialogue, and even transforming you and your community. The fantasy of encounter is wrapped up in the dream of many strangers seeing your finished project, which legitimizes your labor and value to other people. Encounter is the space where you can communicate your vision to the world. Where should someone encounter your project, and how is that aligned with your intentions?

      Each site where projects are encountered is mediated by institutions and social contexts and has norms and rules that govern the way the project is experienced and understood. *See Chapter 14: Narrate ▤ for more.↗* At MoMA, guards and posted signs tell visitors not to touch projects, to stay a certain distance away, and to be quiet. Simon Sheikh, in his article "Positively White Cube Revisited," reminds us of how museums and commercial galleries are described as neutral spaces, supporting a vision of projects as timeless and outside political or social context.[5] In contrast, the Laundromat Project assists artists in presenting site-sensitive projects in neighborhood laundromats where the art organization has developed relationships over years.[6]

As the Laundromat Project writes:

> We amplify the creativity that already exists within communities by using arts and culture to build community networks, solve problems, and enhance our sense of ownership in the places where we live, work, and grow. We envision a world in which artists are understood as valuable assets in every community and everyday people know the power of their own creative capacity to transform their lives, their relationships, and their surroundings.[7]

While some artists deny the importance of the site of encounter by suggesting that their work is uninformed by context, art historian Miwon Kwon reminds us in *One Place After Another: Notes on Site-Specificity* that material and conceptual references in projects could imply both a particular location and audience. Kwon writes that "the site [of encounter] is not simply a geographical location or architectural setting but a network of social relations, a community."[8] What spoken and unspoken rules do you notice in sites of encounter near you? Notice how you feel in different sites of encounter.

Negation

"I'm not a socially engaged artist."

Our focus on process may seem aligned with socially engaged art, or social practice, which became a recognizable genre of artmaking in the 2000s. Around this time, art institutions began to support art projects that engage the social as a medium and that prioritize political action, participation, collaboration, and dialogue over object-making. While the increased interest in a dialogical approach to artmaking excites us, we are concerned with the ways in which the institutions that support this work make a spectacle of these interactions. We feel that the majority of transformative social inter-actions develop organically, requiring collectivity, a slow space, and a low level of visibility. This sort of transformative action is antithetical to the expectations of most art institutions, which prioritize individuality, speed, and spectacle. As the Pedagogy Group has written, in this institutionalized approach to socially engaged art, "the 'artist' and 'art' stand apart from social practices created in everyday community and movement making. In this [institutional] vision, art is not seen as operating in a political world but as creating a place for politics within the world of art. From our perspective it seems nearly impossible to positively influence or reconfigure social relations from within these settings and other art institutions."[9]

Again, in this book, we ask you to reflect upon your production process, not on the content of your projects. The content and form of your projects may change as a result of this reflection on your production process, but that is not our goal.

Discussion

You might be interested in addressing the histories and politics of elite museum and gallery encounters. Linda Goode Bryant, speaking about racism in so-called "alternative" art spaces in New York City in the 1970s, reminds us that no universal viewer exists.[10] Artist-centric spaces in New York City like Just Above Midtown[11] (founded by Goode Bryant and run from 1974–1986), WOW Café Theater, and El Museo del Barrio[12] were founded precisely because the art histories represented in elite museums and galleries have predominantly excluded women and all artists of color.[13] Goode Bryant set up Just Above Midtown (JAM) "to support these artists being as free as possible in their expression … a hub of creative energy—artists hung out there, created things, got into debates and fights there."[14] Community spaces, homes, work spaces, and other convivial sites of encounter are often chosen by artists for their capacity to embrace or create dialogue with people who otherwise feel excluded from elite art spaces. Common Field,[15] a visual arts

organizing network for artist-run spaces, aims to shift this legacy by connecting spaces to one another nationally and by organizing the semi-annual Hand in Glove conference to gather people who run spaces with shared goals for cultural equity.[16]

The Manchester City Art Gallery in Manchester UK recently held an exhibition called *Exploring the Relationship Between Art and Mindfulness.* The exhibition drew from works in their collection that were co-curated with various local mental health groups and provided comfortable seating in front of each project that allowed people to "slow down, connect with art and themselves to enhance their wellbeing."[17] You might be interested in thinking about *how* someone will encounter your project. For example: Will a visitor have to pay to enter the space? Will the space be open at night? Will they have to fill out a form or be greeted by a guard? Will the signs about your project be in multiple languages? Will someone in a wheelchair be able to access your project? We are asking you to consider the social norms that already exist in sites of encounter, as you determine which sites are appropriate to each project you create. You do not need to create your own rules for encounter, or your own artist-run space, unless encounter is one of the phases that is your primary point of entry in the lifecycle of your project.

Artists exploring the boundaries between art and life often shift the terms of encounter through participatory and dialogical practices that take place in "non" art designated sites.[18] As the Public Science Project say, 'we agree to collaboratively decide appropriate research products.' *See Chapter 3: Who Do You Honor? for more.*↗ How should someone encounter your project?

Quotations

"I can't for the life of me figure out how we could have today the same structures with the same premises doing the same types of programs to engage people with art that existed hundreds of years ago. And art has changed so much, time has changed so much, technology has changed so much. I do not understand how art institutions are not questioning the very notion that [encounter] should be about four white walls and a ceiling and a floor in a square and rectangle. I don't get it."
—Linda Goode Bryant, 2016[19]

"You make the work for a year or so, and the people—even at this awesome opening when all your friends are having a good time—the people looking at the work are giving it a second or two of their attention. That felt like not enough. I started a long series of experiments in trying to figure out how to prolong that, how to make that deeper, how to see it happen better…. How is [the artwork] going to find its people? It's a puzzle. Its home is not a museum. Its home is not a gallery. How

is it going to find its people? The solution I have right now is to start making these pieces for individual people and to send them to them."
—Sal Randolph, 2015[20]

"If I am trying to alter the system of distribution of an idea through an art practice it seems imperative to me to go all the way with a piece and investigate new notions of placement, production, and originality. In terms of different contexts, well, that's a very complex issue that needs to be nailed down to a more specific example. As we know, context gives meaning. The language of these pieces depends, to a large degree, on the fact that they get seen and read in art contexts: museums, galleries, art magazines." —Felix Gonzalez-Torres, 1993[21]

Here are more artists, groups, and projects that come to mind when we think about encounter: Navjot Altaf / Sonia Boyce / Michael Corris / The Dallas Pavillion / DIS / Estar(SER) / Andrea Fraser / Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña / Jochen Gerz / Gorilla Girls / Hans Haake / Helen and Newton Harrison / Porpentine Charity Heartscape / The Illuminator / Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle / Mieko Shiomi / Paul Ramírez Jonas / Rafaël Rozendaal / Dread Scott / Michael Swaine / Ultra-red / Daniel Simpkins and Penny Whitehead / Stephen Willats / Fred Wilson / Women on Waves. What artists, groups, and projects come to mind for you?

Reflection

1. What spoken and unspoken rules do you notice in sites of encounter near you?
2. ☀ What feelings and sensations came up for you while you were reading this chapter? For example, did you feel surprise, frustration, or excitement? How did you hold these in your body? For example, did you sense these emotions in your shoulders, neck, and back while reading this chapter? *See the Social-Emotional Intelligence Project Reflection activity in Chapter 4: Teacher/Facilitator Guides.*↗
3. What would it mean to understand artmaking as a site of interdependence, both locally and globally, rather than as a site of individual use and exchange? Remember, art is a system of relationships. We understand from the long history of economically oriented critical theory that behind any object exists a system of extraction, of production, and of circulation whose very histories are hidden at the moment in which the object appears as free-standing, as individual, as a thing, often a commodity. For us, in this book, that "thing" is the art object.

1. For more, see Alice Sheppard, "About," http://alicesheppard.com/about/.

2. Alice Sheppard, interview by Susan Jahoda and Caroline Woolard, BFAMFAPhD, 2016.

3. Alice Sheppard, "Exploring Intersectionality Through Dance: An Interview with Alice Sheppard," by Emmaly Wiederholt, *Stance on Dance*, February 16, 2017, http://stanceondance.com/2017/02/16/exploring-intersectionality-through-dance/.

4. Capacity adapted from Ellen Winner, Lois Hetland, Shirley Veenema, and Kimberly Sheridan, *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2013). See also Harvard Project Zero, "How Do Artists Use The Studio Habits of Mind?" Artcore, 2015. http://www.artcorelearning.org/studio-habits-of-mind; *See Chapter 5: Capacities for more.*

5. Simon Sheikh, "Positively White Cube Revisited," *e-flux*, no. 3 (February 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/03/68545/positively-white-cube-revisited/.

6. Laundromat Project, "About," http://laundromat-project.org/.

7. Ibid.

8. See Miwon Kwon,in "Introduction,'" *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 6.

9. The Pedagogy Group,"Toward a Social Practice Pedagogy. The Pedagogy Group, New York City," in *Art As Social Action*, eds. Gregory Sholette, Chloë Bass, and Social Practice Queens (New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2018), 76.

10. Linda Goode Bryant, "Controversial Exhibitions," May 24, 2011, video, 5:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsi-RTTLFFY.

11. For further information, see Mimi Poser in discussion with Linda Goode Bryant and David Hammons, "Just Above Midtown Gallery, 1975," Guggenheim Museum, 2015, audio, 23:55, https://soundcloud.com/guggenheimmuseum/just-above-midtown-gallery.

12. For further information, visit El Museo del Barrio, "El Museo del Barrio," http://www.elmuseo.org.

13. Interview with Herb Tam, in *Alternative Histories: New York Art Spaces 1960–2010,* eds. Lauren Rosati and Mary Anne Staniszweski (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

14. Linda Goode Bryant, quoted in Stuart Brumfitt, "JAM New York | The Black Power Art Gallery," *Amuse*, July 11, 2017, https://amuse.vice.com/en_us/article/nem7ww/black-power-art-gallery.

15. Common Field, "Common Field," https://commonfield.org.

16. Hand-in-Glove, "About," https://handinglove-conference.wordpress.com/2011/07/19/about/.

17. Start in Manchester, Manchester Mind, Youth from Charlestown Community Primary School (Exhibition Organizers), "And Breathe... Exploring the relationship between Art and Mindfulness" Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, UK (March 2018–October 2019), http://manchesterartgallery.org/exhibitions-and-events/exhibition/and-breathe/.

18. For further reading, see Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); and Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

19. Linda Goode Bryant, "ENCOUNTER," interview by Caroline Woolard, BFAMFAPhD, 2016, video, 1:10, https://vimeo.com/192485777.

20. Sal Randolph, interview by Susan Jahoda and Caroline Woolard, personal interview, 2015.

21. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Temporary Services: Guide to Re-Creating 'Untitled' (Perfect Lovers) by Felix Gonzalez-Torres," interview by Tim Rollins, *A.R.T Magazine,* 1993. Excerpt available here, https://temporaryservices.org/served/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Felix_GT_booklet.pdf.