



Dearest Reader; In the last Critical Practice Notes (#5, Winter 2018/19) you were invited to a conversation, a study group as it were, on fascism and responses to it. You didn't write back. I decided to do my own study. Over the past year one cultural organization has drawn my attention in Los Angeles; it's called NAVEL. The reason for my interest is spelled out in the essay that follows. I'll say the impetus of the essay stemmed from a desire to find a distinct and perhaps avant-garde anti-fascist aesthetic there. Spoiler- I didn't find it, I found something else. Yet from the distance of this introduction I imagine if I wanted to go back and objectify queer bodies, I might arrive at something. But for the essay that follows I didn't do that. What I did arrive at is a renegotiation with a politics of culture, a kind of politics I've generally dismissed. So again I invite you to read this, and again if you have a response, a thought, a counterpoint, please write me back- it might end up somewhere meaningful.

-Your Scold,  
Robby Herbst.

### Assemble: Culture, Like Weimar Is a Hedge, Or Is It A Bet?

What's the opposite of an assembly? Disassemble, get in line, suck it up, head for the hills, listen to what I say, follow the leader, order, chaos? Today is characterized by this kind of madness; gratefully the center hasn't held, sadly the center has ceded to a kind of parade of strongmen.

Assembly. In the past few years theorists Judith Butler and duo Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have published books looking at "assemblies" as social and political formations: respectively; 2015's *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly*, and 2017's *Assembly*. In early 2019 the art and event space NAVEL, in Los Angeles, began an ongoing platform called ASSEMBLIES. NAVEL supports the formation of distinct collaborative research, discussion, and creative groups through a discursive and self-reflective ASSEMBLIES platform. A biannual experiment now in to its second term, the first round of ASSEMBLIES saw groups form around African American ethics in music, re-conceptualizing Los Angeles' City governance, revolutionary wealth re-distribution, feminist and anti-colonial media literacy, and providing solar energy to power a bus tour for a queer African American artist collective called #SNATCHPOWER. The gatherings of

assemblies appear as a kind of madness, but they are structured and directed through a format developed as the ASSEMBLIES platform.

Butler's and Hardt+Negri's works both turn to the assembly as a social and political formulation responding to the limitations and demands of individually oriented identity politics and right-wing populism (respectively). In proposing the assembly they seek direction for "alliance" amidst the "multitudes". Ultimately in this era of Trumpian attacks on notions of democratic heterotopic power and identifications I'm wondering if culturally centered projects like NAVEL's Assembly could be considered as an anti-fascist training grounds for innately queered formations, or does it remain within the realm of experiments within the economy of art?

The specter of Occupy, the movement of the squares, and the Arab Spring hangs over both books, though they reach different conclusions about it. As political theory Hardt and Negri's book wrestle with leaderless social movements. How they might be moved by there anarchic spirit, yet directed by a different form of leadership then what immediately presented itself at Occupy gatherings. They see the popular assembly (its success, it's failings) as an object lesson in leftist political leadership, and power-from-below, towards a future beyond neo-fascist-capitalism.

For her part, the philosopher Butler embraces the assembly itself. She opens her book as such:

Since the emergence of mass numbers of people in Tahrir Square in the winter months of 2010, scholars and activists have taken a renewed interest in the form and effect of public assemblies. The issue is at once ancient and timely. Groups suddenly coming together in large numbers can be a source of hope as well as fear, and just as there are always good reasons to fear the dangers of mob action, there are good grounds for discerning political potential in unpredictable assemblies. In a way, democratic theories have always feared "the mob" even as they affirm the importance of expressions of the popular will, even in their unruly form.

Butler sees the assembly as the place where the marginalized, particularly the precariat, make themselves seen. In the

assembly they engage themselves with a performance of “the people” (as in “We the people”) and accomplish two distinct tasks. They reaffirm the public-sphere as a location affirmative to the social-bonds that connect disparate individuals, and they make their demands upon the expansion of this very public-sphere known.

At NAVEL, Amanda Vincelli initiated ASSEMBLIES. She’s the Program Director and cofounder of the organization, and has been involved there since NAVEL’s beginning in 2015. She received an MFA from CalArts in 2017, and got her undergraduate degree from New York City’s New School in Strategic Design and Management. She is from Montreal. NAVEL is a non-profit 501C3. It’s located south west of South Park’s Staples Center. When you walk through the open second floor former warehouse space and out the side door that puts you on the roof, you can just about reach out to touch the 10 freeway as it rumbles past. When I went to NAVEL for the first time a video was being projected from this roof-top to a higher exterior wall, I imagine it’s primary audience were cars on the freeway itself.

NAVEL’s programming is notably diverse; both demographically and culturally. A recent month of programming included Swallow (the presentation of an “inbuilt queer club” designed by architects and designers Alison Veit and Noemi Polo), an event called *سفره دايمة* SOFRA DAYMEH (a night of “exquisite dining and conversation” centered around the Palestinian table organized by Daleen Saah and chef Reem Assil), and an exhibit of media arts and related workshops called The Zapatista Wi-Fi Rebellion (organized by Gloria Galvez with Color Coded). I’ve been struck by this diversity since the first time I encountered NAVEL; its public and its programming may take place in a sort of white cube, but it doesn’t speak neatly to that sensibility at all.

Vincelli presents as a Caucasian (but the nuance of her French-Canadian accent may not register in Southern California). From our conversations it appears to me that she has two programming goals at NAVEL; figure out how to make the organization self-sustaining fiscally, and figure out how to devolve her leadership so that it’s held by its community. ASSEMBLIES play a part in both goals. When Vincelli refers to the NAVEL’s “protocols” with me, her background in Strategic Design and Management perhaps speak loudly? “The strategy (of NAVEL) is to produce the protocols so the community interest, and what they feel, is most pressing is presented in the program.” The organization’s protocols according to Vincelli host a multiple points of “access” for the community, and she insists that is how the organization has always operated – so much so that there is a “snowball effect”. Vincelli stresses that NAVEL has a very open proposal process, whose diversity is built upon its preceding reputation. It is a diversity she stresses which has been built through outreach – to artists and communities who live in the area. When she tells me how they’ve been in communication with a nearby group of Latina mothers who’ve requested art education programs for their children – and how NAVEL looks forward to providing this – I asked her about the history of PSSST, the now closed controversial non-profit art-space in Boyle Heights that claimed its desire to produce art classes for its surrounding community as proof of its

political consciousness. Vincelli reminds me that NAVEL doesn’t own property, but that it rents. And that, assumedly, unlike PSSST NAVEL is doing community outreach “for all the right reasons”. She adds: “The space will be demolished. We’re occupying it till it’s last days. It was a private space before, till what it is now, and it’s continuing to open up to larger and larger groups of people.”

Before the start of the second iteration of ASSEMBLIES, NAVEL provided each sessions’ leaders a two-hour training in group facilitation led by social justice leadership facilitator Povi-Tamu Bryant. Povi has continued to make herself available to support the work of these leaders. But facilitation didn’t appear as stumbling blocks for the instigators of round one ASSEMBLIES whom I spoke with; Jennifer Moon, and Emma Sutton. Sutton lead her assembly, Human Connectivity and Sustainability, as a seminar in the same manner she would run a yoga workshop she does in private practice. She had proposed it to NAVEL, and then to NAVEL’s public, in order to explore the relationship between the body, trauma, human and natural ecologies. It consisted of 5 meetings. They included discussions, readings, movement workshops, and field trips to a composting facility and an urban organic farm. Sutton did the heavy organizational work in the assembly, proposing and scheduling meetings, readings, and leading conversations. However a culminating zine that summarized the assembly’s experience was completed together by the entire group, in a day of shared writing. Part of it joyfully declares, “We believe in fostering communities where cooperative action around sustainability, thrives. We believe in reinforcing a sense of optimism and humanity and hope in collectivity.”

Jennifer Moon’s assembly was titled “Faction 3 of the Revolution: Redistribute Wealth.” This theme stemmed directly from the interdisciplinary artist’s aesthetico-political practice; where Faction 3 of the Revolution is sandwiched between Faction’s 2 and 4; Political Pop Culture, and Science and Technology. Moon’s Revolution is an idiosyncratic, competent, personal and political philosophy and tract, which has in-part guided some of her cultural production in the past decade. Though the language of Moon’s proposition formed the basis of her assembly she told me that she happily fell into the role of administrator of the group, rather than its “leader.” This meant she was more of a secretary than a guru. According to Moon this assembly had a participation count that fluctuated between 15 and 5 members through its meetings. According to Moon and a video recording found online of this assembly’s final presentation at NAVEL, the group developed a fluid discourse together, and together they choose to move from the wide frame of Moon’s proposition to researching collective housing in Los Angeles. Moon told me that there were “tender moments” in her group. And the group displayed this affinity by adopting a collective name for one another, referring to themselves individually each as “Camille.” They did this so as to refuse individual attribution to collectively developed concepts in the assembly, borrowing the idea and name from contemporary French eco-autonomists of the Z.A.D.. Through NAVEL each assembly is meant to commit to a 6 gatherings, though Moon’s group has continued to work together on the issue it discussed after the summation of its

official term; they've gone together on a field trip to the LA Based cohousing community Eco-Village. NAVEL's Vincelli tells me that one of the biggest positives she's witnessed through ASSEMBLIES is seeing groups of strangers come together in ways to discuss issues of mutual meaning. Moon says that a third of her group were strangers to her before Faction 3 began. Vincelli told me of a woman in Moon's assembly that works as an editor in the porn industry who participated in Moon's group. She described her experience in LA before her encounter with ASSEMBLIES as one of alienation, and that she'd never 'til then encountered a place where she could share in such a manner, particularly about her own precarity.

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When I asked Vincelli if NAVEL's Assembly project was created in response to political trends in the United States and the rise of social inequality and disparate power relationships in Los Angeles, her response was pragmatic and emphatic. "I don't think NAVEL's goal is to directly address poverty in the United States" and "certainly, the program is aware of the political power of organizing in this way, but it is not delusional about having the capacity to solve the very complex systemic issues some of the groups are addressing within a semester." She stressed to me that its purpose is to represent and host its community and to promote the longevity and sustainability of ASSEMBLIES at NAVEL. Participants in the assemblies are asked to pay a small fee to support the program, and to create "micro-grants" for their use. While Vincelli underlines what appeared as an objectivist's technological perspective of creating neutral curatorial formats, the fact remains the platform she's created with ASSEMBLIES involves leadership training, and socio-political discourse and activity. The current term finds assemblies gathering around topics like organizing digital workers and artists adapting to climate catastrophe.

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NAVEL itself is like its ASSEMBLIES project - it's everywhere and bringing different people along.

Gloria Galvez was a classmate with Vincelli at CalArts. She tells me she's been involved with NAVEL since its start. Her relationship with NAVEL began as a "collective resident." In NAVEL speak, collective member means she got a key to unlock the door. When NAVEL wasn't being used she could do what she wanted there. NAVEL business model started with the concept of a co-working space, it then changed, but kept that name, to become a rental space for events. According to Galvez it still receives significant income from its rental business, so scheduling exhibitions, assembly meetings, or personal time there can be a challenge. She believes her activist work in prison reform groups, and her relationship to the experimental anti-colonial school called at lands edge made her attractive to Vincelli. Today Galvez is on the Programming Committee at NAVEL, a step up in responsibility and support. Projects she organizes through the committee receives funding, production and curatorial support from the organization. Galvez' exhibition the Zapatista Wi-Fi Rebellion came about this way. The show included a bent video by the collective Anxious To Make; it detourns commercialized digital speech and imagery. The new media

provocateur Fran Hieh opened a short-term branch for his Zapatista inspired Spacebank during the short exhibition.

The north east facing wall of NAVEL, the one that fronts Venice Boulevard, it's mostly windows. There's a bar and service area in the open landing area near the top of the steps. Also a glassed off conference room looks into the galleries central space. Galvez tells me that one reason NAVEL's exhibitions are so post fine-art is because actual flat wall space is relatively limited, though truth be told there is a lot of wall there. Videos, projections, performances and lectures are just common at NAVEL.

Galvez suggests a second reason NAVEL's presentation of culture is so ranging. She says it's their mission statement. The statement is actually labeled as NAVEL's "intent", and it reads as a manifesto. Where other non-profit art spaces may offer implicit-critiques of the arts economy, NAVEL's implicates the entire global capitalist system:

*The current state of the creative and intellectual class is precarious, unsustainable, and atomized. Under the conditions of late capitalism, the spectrum of options is slim between passive complacency, commercial compromise, or overwhelming hustle and insecure conditions. The current models of cultural institutions tend to provide mostly short-term visibility and support structures; many lack in opportunities for long-term engagement, care, and collaborative practice.*

*Art has the power to bring radical thought into meaningful forms and actions, which could lead to healthier and more just systems. However, critical and creative practices are vulnerable to instrumentalization, privatization, and subsumption into cultural capital. How can we maintain an autonomous position?*

*The tragedy of the commons calls for more intentional communities, collectives, and co-ownership models that act as protective layers, absorbing and distributing some of the financial and social pressures we face as individuals. This is what NAVEL is invested in exploring and actualizing. We believe the first steps towards more equitable cultural and socio-political systems requires a collaborative investigation and practice which:*

- *Rethinks the topography of existing cultural establishments*
  - *Explores alternative governance and organizational structures*
  - *Favors process, collaboration, conversations, and re-negotiations*
  - *Builds long-term relationships and engagement*
  - *Uses technology, architecture, design and art as tools for rethinking and restructuring*
  - *Is accessible and culturally equitable*
  - *Redistributes resources*
  - *Makes kin*
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My interest in studying ASSEMBLIES developed from a desire to examine ways people have been making visual their power in relationship to fascism in this era of Trump. I'd

hoped to find a common cause between the deeply political meaning of the assembly book titles and the ASSEMBLIES project. Conscientious Anti-fascist organizing and action is taking place in Southern California; particularly addressing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). There has been vibrant, intersectional, representational, and direct action against ICE and its agents in the Los Angeles region. It's a daily battle for many, particular immigrants. Ad-hoc groups (along with other established ones) like the Koreatown Popular Assembly are rallying grassroots response to ICE incursions into the community.

In my search for common cause with NAVEL's ASSEMBLIES I'd been hoping to cite at NAVEL a visual language for our Los Angeles heterotopia; a crystalized radical form to hold up to the nation up a gem. This would be proof of a singular anti-fascist aesthetic from the woke-communities of SoCal. At one point I thought I'd glimpsed this in Emma Sutton's Human Connection and Sustainability assembly. Particularly in a declaration like, "We believe residing in each of us, from our evolution within nature, is the knowledge and understanding of how to coexist and flourish alongside nature." Then this shimmer quietly stepped back into the meaningful riot of holistic expression it had jumped out of.

What's funny is that the opposite of assembly, a disordered mob or chaos, is in many ways what appears as an assembly itself. NAVEL and its ASSEMBLIES are hard to hold down to a specific image and theme. While an assembly aims to give structure to disparate publics, aside from the invisible platform supporting it, it really does look like a lot of people doing random stuff together. It is the tedious aesthetics of attending and participating in meetings. Currently there are 8 NAVEL ASSEMBLIES going on, they meet at different times and places. Some didn't want to speak with me, others welcomed my questions. They each have their own language, conditions, and group dynamics. This profusion of styles is in striking contrast to the disciplined singular aesthetics we attribute to fascists; fascism's stark symbols, its ugly rhetorical phrases, its totalitarian uniforms. Fascism is a logo – the democratic riot of assemblies, they're an unruly mess.

But in the left we can identify an antifascist aesthetic, in Antifa with its committed recapitulation of black block identifiers; balaclavas, hooded sweatshirts, patches. punk. A December 2018 article in *Commune* magazine by A.M. Gittlitz titled "Anti-Anti-Antifa" comments on the way that this fixed black block aesthetic visually can identify Antifa as a subculty gang, which leaves it strategically weak. Gittlitz argues that in actuality defeating the fascists means so much more than just blocking up and battling Nazi's in the streets. It means doing the hard work of building an anti-racist world in the everyday. He suggests the concept of gray blocks. He advocates for ditching the black and becoming a part of the crowd; In context he reminds us the anti-fascist agenda is broadly supported. In the article Gittlitz says; "In moving forward, Antifa and pro-revolutionary groups more broadly should continue to change their wardrobe, ideas, and targets, in an effort to build a more effective movement against the state and capitalism."

An interesting conundrum's advanced by Hardt and Negri in their *Assembly* book is their recognition that public

assemblies invert Michel de Certeau's hierarchy of "strategy" over "tactics" in political organization. They note that grassroots democratic assemblies are primarily tactical in their position. In Tahrir Square, or Frank Ogawa Plaza assemblies are nothing if not public response units. If public assemblies apply inward or outward leadership it's invariably short-term and strategic in use. In their work of political theory Hardt and Negri wrestle with the conundrum of conceptualizing the power of "the party of movements" when the voice and action of the multitude are primarily spontaneous and reactive, and distinct leadership and leaders are fleeting and secondary. Our concept of political franchisement traditionally is built around singular images of charismatic leaders with distinct messages, not idiosyncratic mobs. For it's part NAVEL approaches its assemblies neither tactically nor strategically. NAVEL doesn't advance a singular concept of its political power- its mimetic form does so because it can and it should, though it isn't in response to a specific crisis. Like the eviction crisis, which has spurred the LA Tenants Union into existence, and into use of the assembly to successfully build popular power. NAVEL operates as a vessel from which many forms might emerge. This is the form of activism known as culture — an activism, if we can call it that, which may or may-not find its way in finding the way to building effective movement against the state and capital. It may or may-not be politics, it may or may-not be representation. Culture like, Weimar, is a bet, or is it a hedge? I imagine that classical liberalism has always embraced culture for these *enlightening* reasons, though there organizations have been top-down, rather than from the bottom upwards and outwards.

As a cultural organization, a 501C3, renting space in the city, the spare politics of self-preservation might define its existence and the parameters within which they frame for their ASSEMBLIES project. NAVEL may be just a cultural space, yet it appears to be doing that well. It is hosting and producing vibrant and extremely broad ranging forms. ASSEMBLIES could be a palimpsest of grassroots power. Doubtless there are other organizations just like it, grappling with the meaning of inclusion and inequality at this moment where those terms appear to be everything. Theorist Judith Butler doesn't ask much of assemblies; just that they happen amidst the precariat. Whether or not this visibility is a hedge against organized and perhaps armed fascists, that is the bet. While NAVEL is relatively private, it aims to disappear amongst the public that surrounds and supports it. It is hoping to keep going grey, both as a tactic for expansion and a strategy for its survival. We should hope so much.

What do you say? Got other ideas regarding queer visibility, organization, & fascism? Do you think the focus of this proposal studying responses to fascism is off? What would Arendt or Adorno, or your turtle say? Letters wanted perhaps for future publication. C.P.N. 3424 Council St. LA, CA 90004