

# On Community

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DANIEL TUCKER & DAN S. WANG

*In the Summer of 2010 Daniel Tucker and Dan S. Wang plotted and planned a series of one on one conversations. These are the edited results of those dialogues.*

DANIEL TUCKER VS DAN S. WANG  
CONDUCTED IN PERSON  
SAINT LUKES CHURCH MONONA, WISCONSIN  
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**DANIEL TUCKER:** Why does community matter?

**DAN S. WANG:** To me, it is pretty much self-evident because of some basic needs coming out of human life. I think the idea that community would even be something nameable and distinct is a fairly recent development in human evolution. There is something elemental about the social. There are lots and lots of needs that have to do with how one belongs to a group of people. This has to do with our social needs, and all sorts of needs related to self-understanding. Not to mention the more concrete things having to do with economic and material reality.

What do you think?

**DANIEL:** I agree. It's one of the most basic features of life. I am interested in attempts to define community towards political ends. In *Community Technology*, Karl Hess states that community is "understandable work,

friends, someplace to stand, a reason to stand up, and a certainty of being counted, of being heard, of being recognizable and not an indistinguishable part of the whole.” This book was really influential for me when I was in high school, in terms of getting a sense of what community could look like beyond people who just live next door to one another.

Another reference point has been the critical writings found in the book *Contesting Community: The Limits and Potential of Local Organizing* (Rutgers Press, 2010). In that book the authors outline 5 key points of the political importance of the word “community” that explain: community is an important site of reproduction; it is the site where people interact with social services and the state; it is also the site where ideology and understandings of the world are formed; it is where people learn to participate in politics and public life. Finally, because social movements need communities as staging grounds for all the reasons stated above and how important they are in people’s daily lives.

**DAN:** I am reminded of Critical Art Ensemble writing skeptically about the use of the word “community.” They argue that in liberal culture the term fulfills the function of mythologizing what social formations can be, in the same way that “family values” gets used in conservative culture. I don’t know that I would go that far, but I definitely see problems in how it is used in liberal discourse, for instance when we talk about the so-called African-American community or the so-called gay and lesbian communities. This is the language of mainstream media and political discourse. What you hinted at in terms of political formations, groups with perceived shared interest being referred to as a “community” simply because they may have a particular group interest. That is a part of the whole question of community that is worth putting out there, even though we do not have to re-hash those critiques.

**DANIEL:** “Community” is one of the most common code words within liberal and progressive political work. It is most frequently used to communicate authenticity and engagement in many cases where there are not such simple explanations. It is common to hear people say “the community” wanted this or that as a justification for a decision that was made without ever explaining who constitutes that community or how the decision was made. For that reason it has a lot of political currency because it conveys people’s consent but can remain abstract. This is not just done by professional politicians, but by NGO and activist leaders.

**DAN:** I somehow feel the need to complicate the question by introducing the word “collective.” Or rather collective situations or arrangements, since I am not strictly talking about formalized collectives. There have been times in

my life when some important needs have been met by a fairly small group of people arranged around some kind of sharing, that is to say, in a situation of collectivism. This is true of most people—a universal experience, but with infinite variation. So there is something porous about the different kinds of group situations and formations. Maybe it has to do with scale, structure, durations or various circumstances where a community could be a collective or the other way around. This is just one word with one set of associations. There are so many others, all of them denoting different kinds and instances of grouping.

One example of a specific community in my life with fairly strong bonds was the condominium association that I belonged to and served. We were a part of it for seven years—twelve units, twelve households, racially and generationally diverse, bound together by shared investments and common decisions that had to be made. We were a community because beyond the concrete tasks before it, the members also cultivated a kind of care for each other, an affection. There was turnover, of course, but at a rate conducive to stability. I am not sure that this particular group of people still operates or thinks of themselves as a community. I have certainly heard of co-ops or condo associations that do not, despite the shared financial interest. But for the time that we were there, it did, and we maintain some neighborly relationships from then. It may not sound very unconventional, much less radical, but having a medium through which to develop meaningful mutual relationships between persons—and *kinds* of persons—otherwise unlikely to know each other at all is not to be underestimated.

I would say that I have put myself in touch with different communities of artists and peers that exist in different arrangements. For example, I have a community of artists and intellectuals, a peer group, who are people of color. It has a commonality and shared language partially based on that. It is dispersed spatially, and not necessarily a community that sees itself gathered in a room regularly. There are artist communities of color that do gather spatially, but mine is a dispersed one. Still, as a community, I depend on it to perform certain kinds of functions for me, and it is important to me that I find ways to serve this community.

I will stop there because I want to know about your experiences and examples.

**DANIEL:** Something you said about your artists-of-color community, that it is dispersed. That this community does not “see itself” is a key concept for me. Because I think in terms of cultivating community, bringing people together in different ways through art spaces, publications, and events... that there is an idea about making potential communities visible to themselves and others. In the early years of the publication *AREA Chicago* we discussed the idea

of becoming a “community newsletter for a community that does not yet exist, that does not yet know or see itself.” This would be a way to address social fragmentation within the city. We wanted to use the publication to construct an audience, to make people and practices visible to each other. That is an agenda that I have tried to take into the rest of my work, often involving the making of documents about communities and social movements, whether that’s *Farm Together Now*, *Town Hall Talks*, *Retooling Dissent*, or *Visions for Chicago*.

The inspiration comes from things I was interested in as a kid, books and documentaries about communities of cultural producers, scenes and subcultures. I was obsessed with these kinds of documents. I could not stop looking into these things. There was even a book called *Slamdek from A-Z* about the local punk-rock scene in Louisville where I am from. And even though these relatively small scenes were not of consequence to that many people, there was something about the representation of these scenes, communities, and groups of creative, politically-engaged people that inspired me.

Often times a narrow definition of community (in terms of geography, religion, or dominant race and ethnicity) excludes other instances of community. They may be artistic subcultures, or communities based on shared gender or sexual identities that don’t align with the normalized or dominant definitions. This may seem basic, but conflicting definitions of community have had huge impacts on politics that people have not found a way to deal with. A great book on this subject is *The Big Sort* by Bill Bishop where he describes the sorting of people into like-minded bastions as having a significant impact on the economy, culture, and electoral politics.

**DAN:** I just want to call attention to the fact that we are having this conversation in an Episcopalian church, which is a community for the people who belong to this church, maybe their most meaningful community. For a lot of Americans, if you ask them for an example of community in their life, church would be the strongest example. I think there are community formations that are available out there that people in my circles, politicized intellectuals and artists, leftist non-believers, critical-art types—a lot of us struggle with this question of community because we do not avail ourselves of these options. We find something to criticize about church and other existing formations, and then are left to create our own.

**DANIEL:** That is a big challenge at this particular moment, when there is a high level of social fragmentation that breaks down along generational and cultural lines, with many older institutional forms of community not being continued. Younger people are confronted with the challenge of how to create community for themselves. Sometimes those breaks and discontinuities are really important, because these may be corrupt and compromised

institutions which need to be left behind. But then there are missed opportunities in many cases, in terms of engaging with the spaces, structures, and gathering points that people have invested in over time. These places have infrastructure, they have features built into them, which give a kind of coherence that could be expanded upon and pushed if people took them seriously and did not dismiss them outright in favor of the production of their/our own very specific subcultures. To me, the conflict between the very specific subcultures and broader conceptions of community is central to the social fragmentation I experience and observe.

To ground this in our own experiences again, could you say something about communities you are a part of right now?

**DAN:** Here again, I start to wonder about the word community. It is a little too general. I would say that right now, I feel like I am a part of various networks and groupings that exhibit different qualities that we associate with the word community. But they are operational as networks in the way that information travels, the way that relationships are cultivated and multiplied. We could talk about the community through which we found each other, i.e. a grouping of people who identify with critical art or creative research and activism, many of whom reside in Chicago, but which extends far beyond. Many of the scores of people you and I work with fall into this community. In its dispersion it is more of a network in which information and projects can circulate, without the earthiness of a sited community where the frequency of social interactions is greater because you might run into one another or otherwise regularly share intimate space. But whatever you want to call it—a network, tribe, or community—I do belong to it, and am extremely grateful for that.

Another community would be my large extended family of mostly (but not all) biological relations. I have many cousins and distant relations, and many people to whom I have family connections whom I do not necessarily know very well, but yet we see each other at family functions. It is a Chinese community in that it is shaped by certain traditional obligations, but also a particular immigrant community, Chinese-American, in its collective anxiety about those same obligations.

**DANIEL:** I see myself as a part of the same network of socially and politically engaged art and culture in Chicago. That constellation has been hugely influential on my life. But it has also been important to me to always try to embrace and discover new groups of people and activities. Some of that might reflect a restlessness that I feel. But it is also about never settling on too narrow of a definition of what would constitute politics or culture at a given place at a given time. That was somewhat informed by my experience of participating in DIY Punk activities in Louisville in the 1990s.





Sandhill Farm, Rutledge,  
MO (2009). Featured  
in *Farm Together Now*  
(Chronicle Books, 2010)

*Photo by Lauren Cumbia*





I hate to see groups I care about settling for narrow conceptions of ourselves and what we could be. So as I have tried to support the development of a community in Chicago, part of my desire has been to support it through continually introducing new elements, people and ideas into that community. And not let it become a scene, which I associate with identification based on sharing consumption patterns. That is important to me.

**DAN:** The fact that the specificity of scenes somehow dissatisfied you from a young age—I find that admirable. My problem right now in terms of community membership is that I split time between places. The geography of communities becomes an issue. For example, I feel like I have a kind of belonging that is very concrete and official in that I pay my taxes and have fixed investments in Madison. But for five years I haven't been here enough to really solidify a lot of social bonds as quickly as I would like. That problem is magnified by the fact that where I live is a low-density neighborhood. So there is a question right at home for me, in terms of what kind of community and possibilities exist here. Is having one's social needs met away from home and in a dispersed way a healthy thing? Given our age of mobility—my exceptional mobility in particular—and the continuing crunch in fossil fueled travel, this is also an important question.

**DANIEL:** I've lived in the northwest side of Chicago for nearly ten years and I only now feel like I am a part of a neighborhood community. That is partly because of the accumulated experiences and relationships over time that create connections deep enough to constitute community in my mind. But it is also because of basic things that have changed. I finally stopped speculating about whether or not I was going to live in this area for an extended period. I made a decision with my family that this is where we are going to be. That decision is partly reflected in the fact that I started a business that connects with people in the neighborhood, roasting and delivering coffee to neighbors via bike. I also rented a space at a local office cooperative that has been the headquarters of *In These Times* magazine located on the southeastern border of the neighborhood, Logan Square. *In These Times* is the social-democratic magazine that has operated out of this space for thirty-five years—providing a distinctly Midwestern perspective on national and international politics. And the other change is that we decided to buy a share of a Community Land Trust that is a housing cooperative in Logan Square. It has been around since 1989 and was designed to be an affordable housing option for people that don't make much money and work as activists. It is amazing how the accumulation of these comparatively recent changes in my life, all explicitly economic arrangements, has changed my own sense of belonging and connection to place. And that is after a decade of doing almost exclusively art



and activist projects about the social and political conditions of Chicago! But stability makes a huge difference in your ability to plan for the future.

**DAN:** There is a set of questions I have about the challenges or the dynamics that happen in communities that emerge from the many tensions built into both the idea and the reality of collective formations. Inclusion and exclusion, for example. Communities always include these simultaneous tendencies. Institutional structures versus non institutional. Mutual recognition, indifference, or repulsion between different communities. All of these tensions introduce an inherent instability to any community. So then perhaps it makes most sense to ask a question about stability, as that seems to be a desirable condition for healthy communities. What does it mean and what does it take for a collective formation or a community to be stable?

**DANIEL:** I think that one of the reasons that people focus their definition so often on geography, on the neighborhood/town/village, is because it has the most stable features that anyone can imagine. In a way, it is the easiest definition of community, because it has the least acknowledgment of the messy social dynamics that actually make up our lives.

**DAN:** Territorial definition of community is definitely one anchor, and there is language, as well. Languages change, they are porous, theoretically and in fact people can learn different languages. Benedict Anderson discusses these things in *Imagined Communities*. I wonder about the life span of communities. We should acknowledge when they are in decline and when they die. Maybe we should understand the instability of communities as a potentially positive thing, as potentially constructive trends of either growth or contraction. It goes back to what you are talking about, where you are deliberately introducing instabilities into your communities because you didn't want to repeat the mistake of insularity and the attachment to unchanging forms that you had observed as limits. I think there is something valuable and healthy there, when communities understand themselves as constantly evolving.

**DANIEL:** One would hope that things could always get better, as much as we might sometimes be satisfied with the best expressions of our communities and our collectivities. We have to be able to discern and determine for ourselves, what is really worth fighting for in terms of stability or preservation. It is a real challenge for people to think about the features of a community that we actually want, and what are the parts that we are willing to let change and evolve and become something different than what we have always recognized. For me, I think about stability as a question about continuity.

What devices can we develop for encouraging a certain kind of continuity while we also acknowledge the necessity and reality of change?

I have been drawn to collectively written histories and documentaries because I think that, through producing these, we can distill the important concepts and features of the places and communities we care about, but we can also allow things to continue changing. Making a record through writing history together is perhaps a less intense or less antagonistic form of struggle for community stability, compared to on-the-ground activism. It's profound, in that you produce a record of the way things looked and felt at a particular moment. But you are not being as aggressive in demanding that they must stay that way. A great example of this is the *Neighborhood Story Project* in New Orleans.

**DAN:** Continuity is definitely a key word, but I do want to put forth the proposition that there is a reality to the life span of a community. If we are talking about sited communities where people live, we see dying communities all over rural America, at least as frequently as in urban America. When I drive through small towns that are nearly depopulated, it hits me that there used to be a community life there that was very rich and had all of the usual features of a vibrant local society.

There is another community that I am involved in that is in a kind of decline. It is something that we haven't talked about yet, an online community. It is one of the relatively older online communities, the Nettime mailing list, which was really active about ten and twelve years ago. I still have friendships and collaborations that come out of that time where I met people through the medium of an ascii listserv. But the mailing list itself has slowed down considerably. It is not the community that it once was and it does not serve the same function for people's social lives. People don't go to it in the same way as ten years ago. It is an instance of community being reshaped by new technology and web 2.0 social media.

**DANIEL:** I can think of a lot of examples where things live longer than they should. But some of the challenge with deciding to end things is about who gets to make that decision. So I would really love to see some organizations for example, find creative ways to die. Or kill themselves, because they have basically outlived their usefulness and are a drain on resources. They are depressing, not models that inspire people, only examples of what not to do. And they could be inspirations for people again if they would come up with interesting ways of ending. But non-profit organizations or businesses with really distinct leadership can be dissolved more simply than messier scenes or communities or the small towns or neighborhoods you mentioned.

**DAN:** You are right, there may be no clean way for a community to die.

**DANIEL:** In my experience, the more informal the groupings the more informal the hierarchy. But it still exists. I think it is healthy to find a way to agree that groups need leaders and then to work together to think about how to make those leadership roles most dynamic, useful and transparent. There is some great writing on this by Laird Schaub in *Communities Magazine* and on his blog at [communityandconsensus.blogspot.com](http://communityandconsensus.blogspot.com).

**DAN:** These days I think about the factors limiting collective achievement in relation to our art community. In the worlds of art and other cultural workers, the enormous competition for scarce resources seems counterproductive, to the extent that the more we engage in it, the more we simply reproduce this world as it exists. And yet we need those resources. Do you see ways of resolving the contradiction between collective desire and the desire for collectivism, on the one hand, and the fragmented allocation of resources, recognition, and opportunity, on the other? What would a system free of this contradiction look like and would it require a different kind of subjectivity?

In other words, I would say that we are a community of committed and skilled people who hold values of progressivism and mutualism. However, our achievement remains limited to the piecemeal accumulation of social capital and little more. At least, for as long as we operate in an economy and professionalized work universe that doles out recognition mostly on an individual basis. Even if it is for a group, it is for a group with a name that is still basically an individual entity for the purposes that I am talking about. It is through participation in and existence within that system that I suspect the collective achievement hits a limit at some point.

**DANIEL:** I wanted to read a quote from an artifact that I was given from a friend. It is a mask/handkerchief made by the French group *Ne Pas Plier* that was distributed at the protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas meetings in Quebec City in 2001. In four different languages it reads “*We will remain faceless because we refuse the spectacle of celebrity, because we are everyone, because the carnival beckons, because the world is upside down, because we are everywhere. By wearing masks we show that who we are is not as important as what we want and what we want is everything for everyone.*”

I really love this kind of stuff. This was totally inspiring to me, even if I have some questions now about what it really means. But I love the sentiment, and I am sort of sad to say that a lot of that kind of sentiment has gone away. That creative refusal, the theorization of clandestinity and collectivity that occurred in the early years of the counter-globalization social movement and was very much inspired by the words and ideas of the Zapatistas in Mexico in the 1990s. I mourn the loss of that sentiment.



I have seen a gradual absorption of some of those forms, aesthetics, and concepts into what we are calling socially and politically engaged art practices, but without some of the antagonistic and critical bite that accompanied these incredibly rich, international, social movements. To a certain extent, folks have gone along with the incorporation of political art into the academic and gallery art worlds. But I don't fault individuals necessarily for what I call "going along with it." The anti-competitive subjectivity that you described as being necessary or possible, or the refusal that is described in these words from Quebec City, is not possible to manifest without the transformation of the material conditions. And the material conditions just haven't been changed by the art practices we love or the counter-globalization movement, and so the competitive, individualistic, and capitalistic social relations prevail. These words didn't change that, these art projects haven't changed that, and our subjectivities are not going to change either, without some kind of transformation of material conditions. The material conditions are what produce the mandate of competition, and necessitate finding the best ways of surviving. And in some cases, for people who are tied into academia and galleries, that has involved the incorporation of their ideas and desires into their professional lives. And so I really don't think that any kind of collective achievement or real articulation of our desires is going to occur without some kind of transformation in the material conditions within which we operate. I don't necessarily mean the overcoming of capitalism, but I do think it is going to require a serious interrogation of the material and economic structures in which we participate. We cannot just say we want to be out of them or that we are refusing them, and that we want to be cooperative. We actually have to create the economic and social conditions in which we can cooperate with each other and still survive.

## **WHAT IS PLACE: A DRIFT CHAT, FROM CHICAGO TO WUHAN**

CHICAGO 10:05 AM UTC/GMT -6 = WUHAN 11:05PM UTC/GMT +8

CONDUCTED VIA ONLINE CHAT, 5/27/2011

**DANIEL:** So you are in China on a "drift"? Can you tell me how it is going? And what *Continental Drift* as a project/process is to you?

**DAN:** The travel has been a remarkable experience, being around people and in places both new and old to me. Depending on the activity, it's been up to twenty or more people walking, riding the subway, touring on a boat, and otherwise moving through Chinese space as our own community. There is deep familiarity in this experience, even a kind of repetition, doing something I feel like I have done before. But at the same time there is novelty, freshness, looking hard at strange things, listening hard to new voices. It is a good combination but also exhausting. Jet lag, night trains, dorm surfing.

*Continental Drift* is a handy name for a working method and analytical frame developed by Brian Holmes and Claire Pentecost, and used by a number of people who collaborate with them, and just their/our variant on the general idea of drifting. In this present iteration, as a travel experience and series of encounters through parts of China, it is for me still very much an inquiry into my home, the place I live, that is say, the Upper Midwest, the cultures and ecologies of that part of the world. Because for me this inquiry has always included the problem of how a trajectory of East Asian origin fit into it, my research and traveling interests take me from time to time to China. For the others on the drift, and for the drift as a shared concept and frame, there are many more general ways of describing it. Claire described our way of drifting beautifully in advance of a lecture we gave a couple days ago at Wuhan University (and in her essay in this book on pages 16–24):

*Continental Drift is a collective and mobile project of inquiry. We aim to explore the five scales of contemporary existence: the intimate, the local, the national, the continental and the global. Within the mesh of scales, we want to understand the extent of our interdependence, how any action we may take has effects on and is shaped by all of these scales at once. We attempt to understand these dynamics so that we can understand the meaning of our own actions, the basis for an ethical life.*

Where are you now?

**DANIEL:** I am in a room with no windows surrounded by an inspiring archive of my own collection of mostly Chicago-based art and political ephemera. I'm at my office at *In These Times* where I also run an exhibition space in their lobby with them called "Art In These Times." We are currently installing an exhibition of posters from the Wisconsin Uprising, the state where you live, the one north of the one that I live in, Illinois, which is the state north of the state where I was born: Kentucky.

**DAN:** Great description. Right now I am in a hotel room, for the only time on this twenty-day trip, looking out from the seventeenth floor from the west bank of the wide Yangtze River, which for the whole day was busy with barge traffic going up and down river. The central China city of Wuhan is dark, the gaudy rooftop laser lights and flashing neon signs are mostly turned off now. Most of the nine million inhabitants are heading for sleep, to dream the dreams that in their waking hours fuel the trends of globalization I see and feel back home. When a friend of mine said to me in reference to Scott Walker's assault on all things public in Wisconsin, "I guess this is what it feels like to be globalized," my mind went immediately to China, the non-western country that I know best. And here we see it, countless and unending people in a hyper competitive society, trying either to get ahead or simply survive.

The city of Wuhan is in the interior, below the Three Gorges Dam, in Hubei province. The city has a great history of disobedience and autonomy stretching back a long ways, including being the place from which the insurrection that finally toppled the last imperial dynasty was ignited. Modern China in some ways was born here, in those same decades that Chicago was growing like crazy, after the Columbian Exposition.

That, and being online, is where I am at the moment.

**DANIEL:** Wow. I wish I could see it myself. You've done these trips, sort of a "critical tourism," where artists and researchers with shared interests convene and travel together. What is traveling with other people like? How do you see it as a form of research?

**DAN:** It is an enjoyable way to deliberately intersect the scales of intimate and global. Part of the research is simply in creating the sociality of such an arrangement which was not random. The core instigators had preliminary discussions about how best to mix the traveling group, such that there would be the most productive combination of bilingualism, native/expats/visitors, familiar collaborators/new acquaintances, etc. There was a lot we couldn't control, of course, but having the shared approach to designing the traveling group determined beforehand did result in a productive grouping. In China, the language barrier can be very difficult, if not deliberately addressed. Moving through space, across rather considerable distances in a vast country strange to most of us, makes the traveling group all the more important. Not only for reasons of safety and social comfort, but because then we bring with us wherever we go a bit of our world—a world newly fashioned in some respects, since it is a group that in its particular constitution hasn't actually existed before.

But the whole point is to learn about places and, ultimately, about the particular places where we actually reside—as citizens with official political status, as keepers of memories and deep experience, as property owners, as creatures invested in highly localized worlds. And to do that learning together, to help each other see things.

Critical tourism is a funny term, and although I do like it, I am still trying to figure out what it can mean. I hope it can be more than assuming a skepticism about mainstream, consumerist tourism, but then essentially playing the same developmental, economic, and social roles that somebody on a regular package tour would.

**DANIEL:** One thing I have experienced when traveling in former Communist and Socialist countries (Moldova, Romania, Hungary, and Croatia) is that there are great differences between myself and those I encounter, in terms



of our understandings of particular local histories, the nature of capitalism itself, and what it is like living in the U.S. (and the former East). So that I have to spend a fair amount of time explaining where I am coming from. This heightened self-consciousness is what stands out to me as the main way I discover where I am from while being elsewhere. That feels very linked to the social process of exchanging with new people for the first time. Are there other more environmental, economic, or cultural situations you are encountering in China, which make you more aware of where you are coming from in the Upper Midwest?

**DAN:** There is a current situation in my state of Wisconsin that I have been trying to explain to people here, a front in the wider assault by conservative political forces led by the Wisconsin GOP. It is the newly proposed taconite mine that would stretch across parts of four counties in Northern Wisconsin, including places that are adjacent to native-owned lands and not far from Lake Superior. The low-grade ore is now profitable to extract because of the demand for steel in China and India, according to the mining companies' representatives themselves. The plan is to ship that ore across the Pacific, who knows, maybe to feed the needs of the construction projects I can see around here. Scott Walker's assault on the public includes a plan to ease the regulatory regimes in our state; in the northern part of the state, new mining is basically the centerpiece of his economic plan. There are some connections to be made at the moment, ones that do in fact make me think of all that is happening where I live, what it means to be from there, what my responsibilities as a citizen, a writer, and taxpayer are, what it all has to do, if anything, with the situations and challenges we've been hearing about from our Wuhan and Beijing friends.

How your travels are like holding a mirror up to yourself when explaining where you come from, that is a wonderful point to make. I have a slightly different experience of that here, because Chinese folks usually want to know my family narrative, which brings me back through particular parts of Korea and then China. That is also why on this trip my Compass companions and I made it a point to bring to China information about Detroit, to show something about this American city we've gotten to know through the same kind of drifting.

I think of you as a place-specific person, living a deliberately located life in the geographic sense. Can you recount a bit of the story of how you decided to be a Chicagoan, and what that process means to you?

**DANIEL:** It relates pretty closely to that point you made about family narrative. My parents are from the Southern United States and they moved away from their families to Louisville, Kentucky, which is about as north as you can get



Town Hall Talks project at the Community Book Store, New Orleans, LA (2008)  
Photo courtesy of Creative Time

and still be “South.” That opened up a possibility, which most people since the baby-boomers have experienced, that is, there being no more expectation that you will stay where you are “from.” An additional connection was that my grandmother and her brothers would migrate from rural Tennessee to Chicago in the 1930s to work in the stockyards. So in addition to being familiar with the city’s rich music, I also had this personal connection that was quite meaningful. So when I decided to move to Chicago, the biggest city near the mid-sized city of Louisville, to go to art school ten years ago. This decision landed me in a very culturally rich place that I was eager to explore and learn from.

Within weeks of moving here, I got involved with the folks organizing the *Department of Space and Land Reclamation*. That was a project, which occurred in April of 2001 that tried to take the energy and analysis of the counter-globalization movement and situate it in a local context. It was an effort to say that the privatization and globalized economic trends that are so horrible for so many people across the world were actually playing out on a local level through the economic priorities of the city’s business and political leaders.

The “think global, act local” mantra resonated with me, but I didn’t know how to build a political, artistic, or life practice around that because most of the models I had available to me in Kentucky were kind of hippie and uncritical, or felt like throwbacks to the civil-rights or early environmental movement. This group of people, who were mostly not from Chicago originally

but temporarily, had made it their homes, developing this analysis was compelling to me.

After several years of doing projects developed out of that analysis, I realized that I liked the person that I was becoming and that the model presented to me by those in the academic and gallery art worlds of how to be a professional artist was depressing. So I decided to start *AREA Chicago* as a way to keep myself grounded while I was being required to travel elsewhere for work and love.

My relationship to this place is deep after ten years of obsessive investigation into its history, ecology, and possible future trajectories. But I think that came about as a reaction to both not being from a place, to observations that I was making in the counter-globalization movement, as well as to the commercial and academic art industries that felt very disconnected from reality. Somehow in that process I began to equate being rooted, being place-specific as somehow being “real.” I think I have toned that down a bit and have opened myself up to the possibility of being “multi-centered” which is a term that Lucy Lippard uses in her *Lure of the Local*, a book that I really love. It helped grow my conception of place, to make sense of the fact that when I got married I had someone else’s list of places and homes to think about, and that I had actually lived in Argentina for four years as a child. I could understand my multi-centered and global perspective in ways that simply “being from Kentucky” or “living in Chicago” never really captured. Lippard writes “This book is also a personal irony characteristic of late twentieth-century life. When I began to write about the lure of the local, I was living in four different states, each of which had its own deep visual and emotional attraction. Although I’ve narrowed it down to two, I will continue to be an emotional nomad and a radical (the root of which means “root”), playing the relatively conservative values of permanence and rootedness off against restlessness and a constructed ‘multicenteredness.’”

The notion of multicenteredness is an extension of the often-abused notion of multiculturalism. Those of us who move around a lot, often come into contact with those who haven’t moved around, or have come from different places. This should give us a better understanding of difference. Each time we enter a new place, we become one of the ingredients of an existing hybridity, which is really what all “local places” consist of.

My concluding question to you is: Why does place matter so much to you? Are there experiences you’ve had that have solidified this perspective?

**DAN:** For me the problems and joys of places, of being in places, have to do with belonging and not belonging, and its relation to the multi-centered existence you speak of. It seems that asserting our belonging to multiple places, in however effective and responsible ways we can imagine, is a real challenge



given the forces of restriction people are up against. On the other hand, visiting a place, being in a place as an outsider, a temporary presence, also opens up that uniquely pleasurable experience we know as “getting acquainted.” The very real difference between people who belong to a place and those who are “only” visiting, whether we are talking about somebody’s house or city, is at some level the basis for hospitality, for welcome. It is the basis for connection, for invitation, for breaking down a wall or barrier. Belonging to a place allows you to invite others in, and to be invited into the places of others. My final question to you is: what does it mean for you, or anyone, to love a place?

**DANIEL:** I think you love a place when you treat it like a person that has feelings and forget that it is really just a complex jumble of land, people and material. Like a friend, you try to encourage it, and you are offended or mad when it gets trash-talked or it doesn’t live up to your expectations.

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