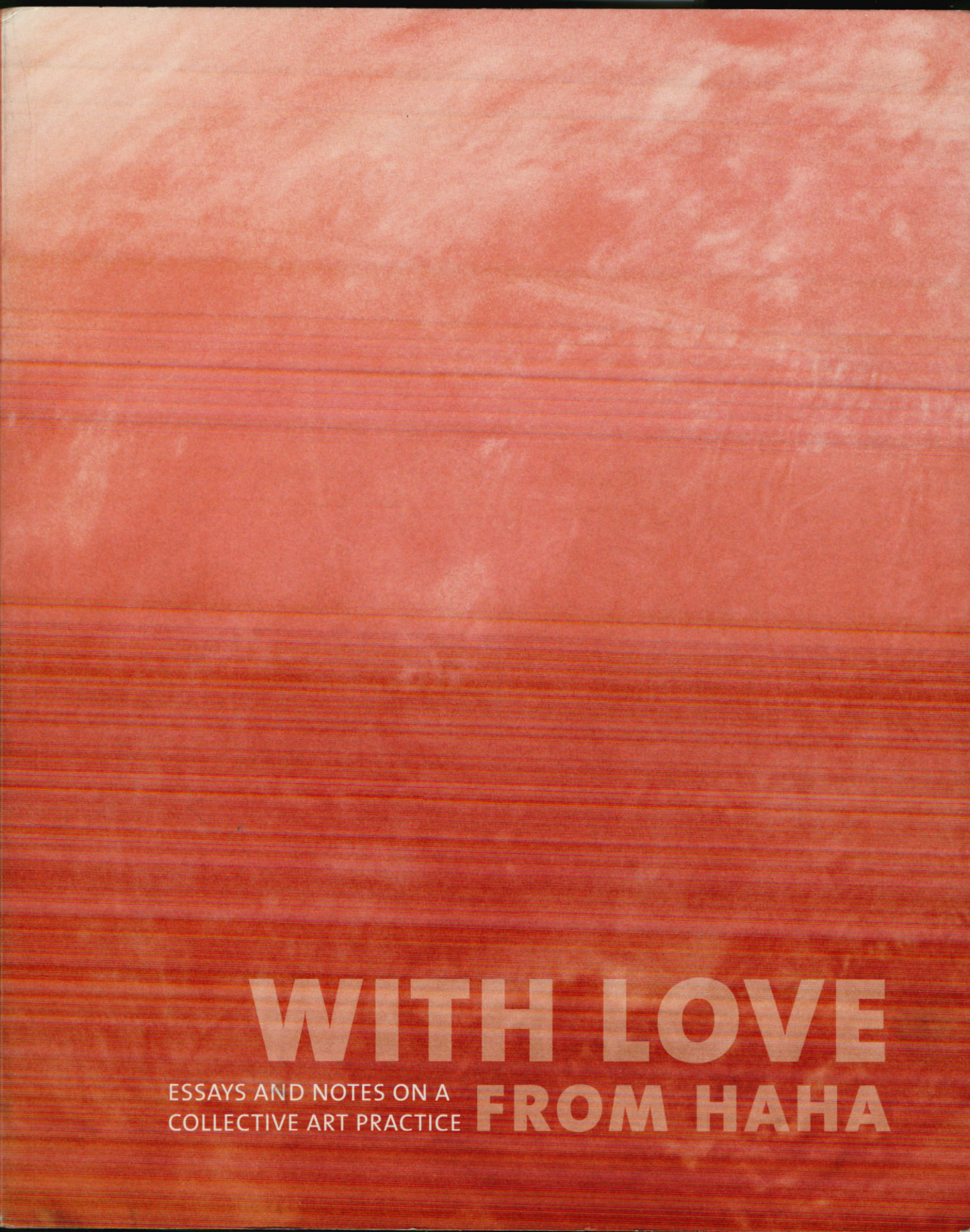

WITH LOVE FROM HAHA

ESSAYS AND NOTES ON A COLLECTIVE ART PRACTICE

EVERYDAY ATTITUDES

Margaret Crawford

Taco venders in a Los Angeles parking lot redraw the boundaries between public and private space.

When I first encountered Haha's work, in 2002, I felt an immediate affinity. I later discovered that several Haha members owned copies of a book I had edited, *Everyday Urbanism*. I am an urban scholar and theorist, not part of the art world, but I'm assuming our respective interests in "everydayness" overlap. Exactly what everydayness means is not clear. In *Everyday Urbanism*, I define it as an approach to urbanism that takes urban dwellers' everyday lives as the starting point for research and design. Since my own work began with investigating the many theories conceptualizing everyday life, I thought these might help define our commonalities. Henri Lefebvre, the first—and in my mind still the best—theorist of everyday life (although often irritatingly vague) is helpful here in several ways. First, his description of the pervasiveness of everyday life ("banal and repetitive, obvious but invisible, everywhere and nowhere") gives a sense of its vast territory. It follows that anyone interested in exploring this complex realm of human practices and meanings must focus on the ordinary rather than the exceptional and look for significance in concrete practices, not abstract concepts. Lefebvre was the first to argue philosophically that these commonplace and even trivial aspects of life are worthy of sustained interest. In fact he insisted that, although apparently meaningless, everyday life actually constitutes the basis of all social experience and should be the true realm of political contestation. Although other writers, such as Michel de Certeau, subsequently introduced more refined descriptions of everyday practices, the rediscovery of Lefebvre's work on everyday life in the 1990s (he published his first volume on the subject in 1947 and his last in 1981) opened the door to a new and widespread interest in lived experience.

EVERYDAY ATTITUDES

As intellectually significant and influential as these writers have been, their work remains somewhat general and abstract, focused on theory and analysis. Artists and designers concerned with everyday life, even those working under the umbrella of Lefebvre's ideas, have necessarily added a layer of interpretation and activation. Over the last ten years, these artists and designers—whom I will call "everyday practitioners"—have gone beyond Lefebvre to produce a set of attitudes that enable a more active engagement with everyday life. The concept of everyday urbanism was one attempt to make these ideas useful and applicable in the setting of urban "everyday space." I recognized a similar approach in Haha's work. Like other everyday practitioners, Haha saw everydayness less as a body of theory to which it adhered than as an approach or

sensibility that could be applied to many different situations and activities. The following four qualities, for me, sum up the attitude toward everydayness that I share with Haha.

OPPORTUNITY

I've adopted Laurie Palmer's helpful suggestion that "opportunity" is a better word than Michel de Certeau's more widely used "opportunism" (with its inevitable overtones of self-interest) to describe Haha's starting point for engaging with the world and producing art. To me, this is a key element of the everyday point of view. It means, first, an acceptance of existing circumstances. It suggests a willingness to engage with places, people, and conditions without formal, ideological, or personal preconceptions, as well as an openness to unusual sites and sponsors. Rather than aspiring to determine in advance what constitutes an appropriate (or ideal) client, commission, or venue, almost anyone or anywhere can contribute to interesting and worthwhile results. The lyrics of the R.E.M. song "Stand" sum this up very nicely:

> Stand in the place where you live...
> Think about the place where you live
> Wonder why you haven't before
> Now stand in the place where you work
> Your feet are going to be on the ground
> Your head is there to move you around.

To me, this underlines the idea that opportunities can be found everywhere and that the best place to start is wherever you happen to be. The design projects presented in *Everyday Urbanism* are very much about standing in the place where you live or work. Situated in various areas of Los Angeles or West Oakland, they literally reflect the authors' daily surroundings. Many of Haha's projects also start in their hometown of Chicago. But even when invitations take them elsewhere in the United States and Europe, its members engage with the circumstances in which they find themselves. That is, they do not differentiate between work produced in museums or other conventional art settings and work done in unusual places, such as a retirement hotel, a public swimming pool, or a taxi. In fact, one of my favorite Haha projects is *Murmur*, done in collaboration with the Lafollette Park water polo team and installed in their Chicago Park District field house.

Pushed to an extreme, this eliminates existing hierarchies of "interesting" versus ordinary locations, suggesting that any place is equally worthy of consideration. In this sense, everyday practitioners' field of operations is almost infinite, although their actual practices are structured by the practical circumstances of who they are, where they live, and what they know.

It is important to point out that a lack of preconceptions doesn't indicate a lack of ideas or opinions. As Lefebvre points out, the analysis of everyday life, by revealing the specific concerns of different social groups, produces a particular kind of politics that allows issues and demands to emerge not via abstract political ideologies or electoral choices but through the actual experiences of diverse groups of people in the city. In *Murmur* Haha worked with the social and spatial situation they found to raise important questions about Chicago's racial polarization and the difficulties of communication between different communities.

SPECIFICITY

Specificity is the central contradiction that unlocks the meaning of everyday life for us. Although critics of "mass culture" and "mass consumption" commonly presume that everyday life is generic, a close look at the reality of everyday circumstances reveals the opposite: the facts and experiences of everyday life are always unique and specific. Since every opportunity involves a new set of circumstances, this inevitably produces highly specific projects. If every new set of circumstances requires a different response, the extremely varied conditions within which everyday urbanism and Haha have worked have produced a range of responses, each unique to its circumstances, that fit no single category and, thus, are almost impossible to classify. This may, however, be more of a problem for critics, historians, or curators than for the larger audiences everyday practitioners engage. Although this approach produces nothing resembling a formally predictable outcome, the meanings it generates are clear.

Everyday urbanists have produced buildings and objects—wildly speculative proposals as well as simple and practical solutions. Haha's work is even more varied, taking the form of installations, videos, performances, and objects and involving materials as different as audiotapes, inflatables, dynamite, and a hydroponic garden. Projects cross genres, disciplinary boundaries, and professions. If some are clearly recognizable as art objects or are located in gallery spaces, others function more like social work or public media. Again, in theory, this situational and specific approach could result in an infinite number of different outcomes. In practice, of course, it is limited by the concrete constraints of time, money, and knowledge. This constitutes, I think, a fairly radical type of empiricism. Unlike the example from which general principles can be deduced and applied to other situations or the serial approach, which consists of many slightly different iterations of the same idea, this everyday type of knowledge is not normative but based on the accumulation of experience.

ARTISTRY

Interest in specific circumstances shouldn't be mistaken for an absence of creativity or inventiveness. Although Haha and the everyday urbanists have recognized, listened to, and worked with or incorporated various local communities, publics, and groups in their projects, their work is not community-based art, advocacy planning, or bottom-up urbanism. They may have bottom-up sympathies, but they never work just as a passive conduit for the local place or as translator for the will of local people. Instead, they bring their own fresh (and admittedly outsider) viewpoint to these places and people. In this way, the specific circumstances that generate each project, rather than dictating a way of working, function as raw material to be transformed.

At the same time, these everyday practitioners don't just impose their aesthetic will on the circumstances. Instead, they suggest an alternative model of creativity, best described by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's term "dialogic." Bakhtin defined the dialogic as an epistemological mode in which there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which can potentially influence the others. As a result, words, discourse, language, or culture (or art, architecture, and urbanism) become relativized, deprivileged, and open to competing definitions. Undialogized language remains authoritarian or absolute. I see everyday

practices as being almost structurally dialogic, consisting of multiple collaborations, each rooted in the specific circumstances of a new situation and, as it develops, incorporating multiple actors and desires.

FLEXIBILITY

Working creatively within specific circumstances both requires and produces flexibility. To be able to take advantage of opportunities when they present themselves, you must continually alter your mode

of understanding, interpreting, and practicing. This necessitates a shape-shifting mode of practice, an ability to oscillate between what are often regarded as opposing realms. This might mean, for example, working both from the bottom up (in terms of subject and sympathy) and from the top down (invoking sophisticated knowledge and techniques). Or, in de Certeau's terms, it could mean being both tactical and strategic.

This type of flexibility is important because it almost inevitably produces complex meanings; it allows projects to operate at the level of both high theory and base materiality, and to mix the critical with the celebratory. Particularly in the case of designers, flexibility allows them to step outside of their professional roles to discover other ways of accomplishing their goals. For me, such flexibility is the everyday practitioner's biggest advantage in working within the current global condition of increasingly contradictory cultural and social circumstances.

Both the everyday urbanists and Haha have, for example, demonstrated an interest in manipulating the boundaries of private and public. I link this to recent reformulations of the concept of "publicness" such as that of Nancy Fraser, who argues against the

METRORAIL STATION AND CHILDCARE CENTER, 1996
Aleks Istanbullu and John Kaliski, Chatsworth, CA
Blurring public and private results in more habitable spaces.

STORE, 1961
Claes Oldenburg, Store, 107 E. 2nd St., NY
Objects in Claes Oldenberg's project Store *were inspired by the visual culture of the surrounding neighborhood. Food, advertisements and signage were represented in plaster wall reliefs and sculptures, and reflected back to the neighborhood through the storefront windows.*

notion of a single generic and unified public. Instead, she points out that there are "multiple publics," constituted on the basis of social, cultural, and economic interests, which are continually redrawing the boundaries between public and private. Based on this, I argue in *Everyday Urbanism* that supposedly "private" commercial activities such as street vending and garage sales complicate existing definitions of private and public space in socially and politically significant ways. By introducing behavior, objects, qualities, and relationships connected with the more enclosed domestic sphere into relatively open urban space, these activities suggest new ways of reinvigorating sterile and moribund urban spaces. Inverting the avant-garde strategy of defamiliarization, or "making strange," this blurring of public and private produces refamiliarization. It domesticates urban space by making it more familiar, more like home. This turns the urban environment from a not very pleasant "no man's land" into something more like an interior—a softer, more habitable place.

The art world has produced its own categories of public and private (for example, the public museum versus the private gallery). Many of Haha's projects question these distinctions, blurring the boundaries by considering any venue as a possible site for art. By destabilizing existing conventions of public and private, each situation-specific practice opens up new possibilities. Haha also takes on the accepted notion of an existing art audience by using the circumstances of each project to assemble very specific publics into larger and more complex audiences, thus continually redefining the ways in which different groups of people can relate to art.

PARALLEL PLAY OR COMMON GROUND?

In spite of these shared attitudes and interests, there are significant differences between everyday urbanism and Haha's practices. In certain ways we resemble toddlers at a playground, sitting alongside each other, playing with the same toys, but not really interacting—the stage in a child's social development called parallel play. In part, this reflects the profound structural differences that exist between design professionals and artists. Their distinct aesthetic practices, while adjacent (sometimes literally so, as in the Ecole des Beaux Arts and many American universities), operate according to very different social logics. Designers are institutionalized experts, operating in a bounded field defined by accredited degree programs, professional associations, and often state licensing requirements. In this context, addressing everyday life becomes a professional and personal challenge. Activated by clients with very focused demands, they

are rarely hired for such "ordinary" projects as tract houses. Instead they depend on elite patronage to produce monumental urban schemes, large corporate projects such as office towers, or private houses for wealthy clients. Defining themselves as a luxury service for the elite maintains their professional status but limits their abilities to understand the everyday built environment. On a personal level, as Lefebvre accurately points out, the culture of design almost forces them to imagine themselves as outside and above everyday life. Believing everyday experience to be ordinary and trivial, they ignore its specific content. Instead, they evade it by using the techniques of abstraction and formalism to make it unique and exceptional. Trapped in the straitjacket of professional practice they look longingly at the artist's greater freedom.

Artists, in contrast, require no credentials to practice, operating in an unbounded marketplace that anyone can enter. Without the burden of professionalization, artists from seventeenth-century Dutch painters to Claes Oldenburg's *Store* to Haha have been able to engage with everyday life in ways that are difficult if not impossible for most designers. Free to represent, speculate, comment, and act out various aspects of daily life, their work has enriched our understanding of the multiple meanings of everyday lives.

If this marketplace provides artists with room to maneuver, it also generates a huge reserve of practitioners who are in some ways unsuccessful. While artists are free to produce what they want, they require a sponsor in order to reach an audience. Such sponsors, whether commercial galleries, museums, or public programs, necessarily demand that their products resonate in some way with some audience. But success in meeting this demand doesn't become visible until after the work is completed. Thus there are no guarantees of continued success (and absent a salable product, as in Haha's case, no guarantee of remuneration), leading some artists to envy the certainty of the professional's tasks.

Is there, then, a common ground where these two types of everyday practice might meet? Is it self-serving or utopian to imagine that everyday life might furnish this site? Can the affinity I mentioned in the first sentence of this essay become operative rather than just appreciative? One possible location for this overlap is "the ditch." In a recent article, Michelle Provoost and Wouter Vanstiphout, members of the Dutch architectural history and planning collaborative Crimson, identified a new venue for intervention into everyday urbanity.[1] Using singer Neil Young's account of leaving the mainstream for the ditch, "where the going

FLOOD, 1992-95
Haha, 1769 W. Greenleaf St., Chicago
Spanning the storefront windows of the Flood garden, a pool of gently circulating water created a shared place of reflection for those inside the storefront and for passersby.

was rougher but I met more interesting people," she describes the ditch as a place where both artists and architects, as well as architectural historians and planners, have (often temporarily or partially) stepped out of their customary roles to take on highly specific urban projects. These projects, in around the world, have focused on everyday lives and places in need of innovation and imagination.

Moving to the ditch requires designers to give up some of the security and status that their professional projects offer, and artists may sacrifice some freedom of expression in exchange for greater social utility. But without realizing it, everyday practioners have already spent time in the ditch. Few of the projects in *Everyday Urbanism* are professionally based. Instead, the designers took on issues that no client would sponsor, either working pro bono for nonprofit groups or independent contractors or speculating about possible projects. Haha organized *Flood: A Volunteer Network for Active Participation in Healthcare* as a hydroponic garden in a storefront that, in addition to growing vegetables and herbs, served as a center for HIV/AIDS services. Although *Flood* was sponsored for its first year, it continued for two more years with community involvement and momentum. The everyday attitudes these projects share would seem to be the ideal qualities for continuing to successfully operate there. See you in the ditch.

1 Michelle Provoost and Wouter Vanstiphout, "Facts on the Ground," *Harvard Design Magazine 25* (fall 2006/winter 2007).