



Adrian Blackwell, *Model for Public Space [knot]*, 2010.
Photo: Christopher Régimbal, courtesy of the artist.

Adrian Blackwell, *Model for a Public Space [knot]*

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“Public discourses are complex and knotted. They intertwine, affect, antagonize, fold over themselves, and flee in different directions,” writes artist, architectural and urban designer Adrian Blackwell in his introduction to his installation *Model for a Public Space [knot]* (2010). A circuitous, multi-level set of bleachers built out of unfinished plywood, Blackwell’s *Model* occupied the Reading Room of Hart House, a multi-purpose building on the University of Toronto campus that houses several student services, for a month, offering visitors a space to meet and engage in “non-hierarchical discussions.” Commissioned by curator Maiko Tanaka for her conference “extra-curricular: between art & pedagogy,” which explored the relationship between art, education and activism, the *Model* accompanied and in many ways illustrated the discussions being held in adjoining rooms about the possibilities and limitations of pedagogical art practice.

Despite its deceptively simple structure, Blackwell’s installation references a heady combination of radical social texts, from Vladimir Tatlin’s *Model of the Monument to the Third International* (1920) and Alexander Rodchenko’s abstract mobiles, to more complex schemas for analysis put forth by French theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Alain Badiou. The *Model*’s spare modernist aesthetic was a marked contrast to the dark wood and ostentatious detailing of the Victorian-era Reading Room that hoped to produce new social relations through a new architectural environment. Two discussions on love, politics and contemporary art hosted by Blackwell and his collaborator, curator and educator Christine Shaw, were meant to demonstrate how the space might be used.

Though the aims of Blackwell’s installation were ambitious, the project operated in tension with its own limits and potential failure. Set in the context of the university, the model seemed to already limit the parameters of the “public” that could access it. Coupled with warning signs posted around the perimeter of the space alerting viewers that they would be climbing the sculpture at their own risk, Blackwell’s model appeared to prove that such non-hierarchical meetings have the capacity to wreak both ideological and physical dangers. Even the title of the work, with its *[knot]* addendum, functioned like a negation of itself through the “knot/not” homophone, perhaps implying that a utopian public space is impossible to achieve. But such tensions between idealism and cynicism are perhaps characteristic of the pedagogical turn in recent artistic practice. Speaking in a roundtable discussion during the conference, Vancouver artist and colourschool founder Kristina Lee Podesva succinctly articulated the need for a pedagogical art practice that, unlike relational aesthetics, was not concerned with making a spectacle out of our everyday social activities (such as talking, or sharing a meal), but instead with facilitating introspection and individual transformation. Perhaps Blackwell’s *Model*, by pointing out our ongoing desire to establish a truly “public” space, offers just this kind of opportunity for introspection and self-reflection.