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>> **overview:** **The Chicago Issue:** *(Mapping and Reading Contemporary Culture in the City)*
Welcome to Proximity. Our first issue focuses on cultural networks and artist maps, in addition to essays and features related to local projects, art fairs and spaces. With contributors from all over the world and a wide range of subject matter, we've created a brief survey of why we love this city.
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Dialogic Maps: Diagramming Social Dynamics and Pitching Public Art in Chicago

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Driving through the 5500-5700 blocks of Chicago Avenue on the far west side's Austin neighborhood, motorists' free associations are framed by a series of declarations. "*Coleman's Hickory House;*" "*Old Style;*" and in large, unevenly set type on a blazing orange background: "*I was a burden on my kids.*" Then two similar signs in succession: "*They're gonna have the same problems,*" and "*What society thinks means nothing to me.*"

> all photos courtesy of the Institute



Unlike the surrounding “BUSCH” and “Dollar Store” signs, these statements weren’t advertisements capitalizing on the neighborhood’s urban blight. And despite their juxtaposed typographic style and ambiguous political message, the signs were not the guerilla instillations of a billboard liberator, either. The piece, titled *Family Voices*, was the above-board, NEA-sponsored work of Chicago public designer BJ Krivanek.

Previously abandoned signs were reclaimed to communicate Austin women’s concerns about “how the concept of the nuclear family the centerpiece of American ideology affects a community in which these expectations are not fulfilled.”

The resulting statements were the product of an collaborative process organized by Krivanek through Community Architexts, his non-profit environmental design group that creates “site activations” based on community outreach. During extensive sessions with neighborhood women and girls at the Austin YMCA, Robert Emmet Academy, Recovery Plus Two, and Westside Health Authority, conversations were recorded, transcribed, and edited into sign-bites. Community Architexts installed the signs and

thus completed its mission, which is “to create public works that privilege the individual and collective stories of a community.”

For much of his work, including *Family Voices*, Krivanek uses a site-specific research method called “dialogic mapping.” These architectural diagrams isolate geographic features, directions of access, functional use, and historic considerations, in addition to the more esoteric psychological and socio/economic space occupied by people at the site. The maps serve as tools for isolating points of physical and communicative intersection. Dialogic maps define the existing relationship between a space and those who access it, then isolate a location and find a message that best effects its dynamic.

The maps themselves are attractive if beguiling documents, combining the kind of speculative renderings architects and branding strategists use with Situationist psycho-geography, in which subjective personal meaning is mapped onto the urban landscape.

BJ’s dialogic maps are also deployed as research and presentation tools for Krivanek-Breaux, his Chicago based commercial partnership with architect Joel Breaux.

Krivanek-Breaux participates in public-art competitions and has had success with numerous commissions in Southern California, including *Recovering Equilibrium*, the 9/11 memorial at Los Angeles International Airport. Three of the four flights hijacked on 9/11 were en route to LAX. Affected communities, ranging from flight attendants to victims’ relatives, were asked to describe the 9/11 victims. Text “taxonomies” (groupings of phrases containing thematic linkages but no linear narrative) were edited from the responses and etched onto



mirrored panels in multiple languages. Adjectives describing personal traits of the victims are framed by concentric rings listing American ideals, such as “due process,” and then by general phrases such as “never forget” and “sea to shining sea.” Marble lines emanate out from the disk, charting the incoming flight paths of the downed airliners.

Chicago has a robust “percent-for-art” program. Since 1978, all buildings receiving municipal funding must spend 1.33% of their total budget on public art. Chicago prides itself on its A-list collection from the 1967 Picasso commission in Daily Plaza, on through the fairly recent completion of Anish Kapoor’s Cloud Gate in Millennium Park. Coupled with its rich history of social activism, Chicago seems like an environment well suited to Krivanek’s work. He has a rising profile in the Chicago art and design community, both as a professor of Visual Communication at The School of the Art Institute and as a recipient of prestigious prizes, including a Federal Design

Achievement Award by the NEA. But until recently, and despite a successful track record with public commissions and an environment tailor-made for his socially conscious environmental design, Krivanek’s public work in Chicago has been characterized by its near misses.

For example, Krivanek-Breaux was an unsuccessful finalist for the Soldier Field Veterans Memorial percent-for-art competition and the McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum public art component.

The Soldier Field Veterans Memorial was tied into its controversial 2003 renovations that resulted in the stadium being de-listed from the national registry of historic places. For Krivanek’s proposal, titled Upholding Ideals, strategies of the flag and lists of the fallen were eschewed in favor of an in-depth text and icon rendering in the underground tunnel connecting the cultural bookends of Soldier Field (referencing battle and spectacle) and The Field Museum (referencing artifact and culture).

People accessing either site through the underground tunnel were to become integral participants in a dialogue juxtaposing “the vicarious experience of a Citizen with the direct experience of a Soldier.” In a strategy reminiscent of the LAX memorial, text exploring the visceral bonds between families, friends, and neighbors were set against text referring to political legacies secured through conflict such as “one-person-one-vote,” and “emancipation.” The texts, connected by a perpetual waterfall, would provide a rich, interpretive environment in which viewers could draw their own interpretations.

But then the plug was pulled on the entire proposal process. Sculptor Kathryn Kohvarissa was commissioned directly to create the piece, called “Memorial Waterfall.” Krivanek says he hasn’t had the stomach to go see what Kohvarissa came up with. The water element that was in his proposal remains. In lieu of a dense text taxonomy exploring broad concepts, the water now cascades over seven traditional

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— Krivanek-Breaux

medallions commemorating each branch of the armed services.

In many cases, Krivanek-Breaux’s mapping of specific physical and psychological site features is hampered by tight turnaround times, a lack of specificity in the request for proposals, and a lack of access to the architects and selection committee members. “In this kind of a competition, you’re working in a void,” he says. “It’s just a stab in the dark. You take the risk of proposing something you think

would be appropriate and interesting. You need to conceptualize it and put it out there, but you don’t have the luxury of a lot of deliberation. In a sense research is wasted in that kind of competition.

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design aspect of the maps at least appealed to the rationalist bent of the bureaucracies awarding public commissions, Krivanek says he likes to think the dialogic maps give him an edge. He mentions that they are useful in pitching work, thanks to their presentation and spectacle, and then deadpans, “That’s what I got from Hollywood.” But despite any possible advantages the map might lend to his presentation, Krivanek continually reiterates that the maps in-depth analysis is more likely to be a liability.

“The review panels appreciate that there was some kind of thought given to how the proposal relates to the site, or has some resonance with how people inhabit the site, or is a metaphor for something related to the sight. On the other hand, that’s a disadvantage because it seems like we’re being over-analytical. To some people, that means ‘not artistic’ ... Sometimes people are more comfortable with something that is open ended and not specific at all.” Although he refuses to critique the

methods deployed by other public artists or the selection committees, BJ acknowledges that proposal processes like this one can result in public art that looks stapled onto the sight.

A lack of time for and access to research, combined with the pitfalls of proposing work with a specific message, eliminates site specificity from public art. In his book *From Bauhaus To Our House*, Tom Wolfe coined the phrase “turd on the plaza” to refer to public art that is plopped in front of municipal buildings with no consideration of the space (or the public footing the bill).

Recently, Krivanek has found success back on Chicago Avenue. In 2006, Krivanek-Breaux was awarded the public art commission for the renovation of the Brown Line Chicago stop, due to be completed this April. In an effort to maintain a level of engagement with the surrounding community and create site-specific work without the time for research, Krivanek chose to engage the mood of the surrounding commercial art district, River North.

“Family Voices and the 911 memorial at LAX had some degree of community outreach. Soldier Field was our conjecture about (military) sacrifice and its relationship to society. The Chicago Stop project is about artistic creation.” Reflecting on the process of creative production and its relationship to adjacent commercial galleries freed Krivanek to create a site-specific work less encumbered by a social agenda. In order to relate to the surrounding community, on the simplest level, the piece merely had to look great.

Krivanek’s gloss over the conceptual intentions behind the project is, however, laid open when examining the proposal materials. The initial concept narrative isolates train generated wind as a metaphor for social change, the platform as human self-expression, and the interaction of the two as a means of highlighting the area’s dramatic transformation from a public housing dominated ghetto tiny commercial art playground. The words “disruption,” “interference,” “subversion,” and “incitement” are mapped onto wind blasting against

the station platform which is mapped with the words “critic,” “collector,” “consumer,” and “academic.”

But the considerably toned-down CTA presentation eschews specificity of concept and the implied social stance in favor of talking about disruption and expression in easily digestible generalities about the “process of creativity.”

BJ remains pragmatic. Whether he’s doing research-driven community outreach programs through Community Architexts, or pitching generalized concepts to percent-for-art committees with Krivanek-Breaux, he sees it all as a collaborative process. Though he may be disappointed with what he calls the distancing of public-art committees he considers the limitation to be audience concerns integral to the design process. He further points out that large self-directed projects are incumbent on funding institutions that have their own set of concerns.

The Family Voices signs on West Chicago Avenue are long gone. After the project ran its course, the refurbished armatures were donated to Austin neighborhood businesses in an effort to rejuvenate the area. On the other side of town, permanent anodized signs, etched with symbols and a multiplicity of languages, are going up at Chicago and Franklin. The panels will rattle with the approach of each train. Subtle symbols of human expression will be continually disrupted by winds of change. ♦

