

Public Art, Archives and Civic Participation at Creative Time NYC

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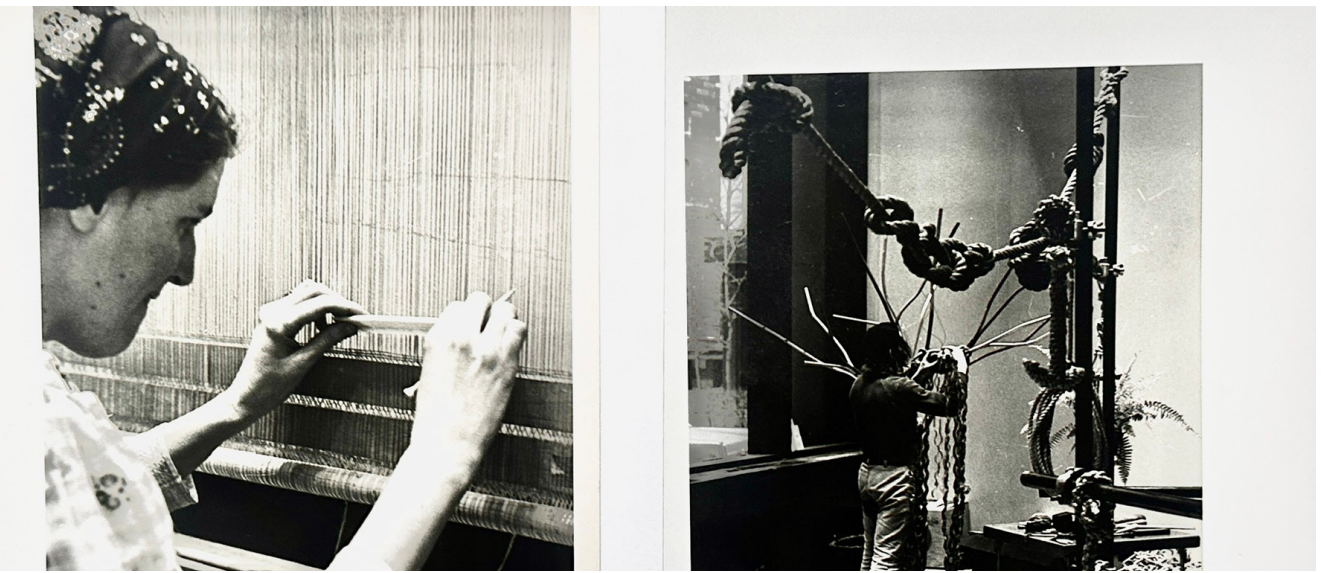
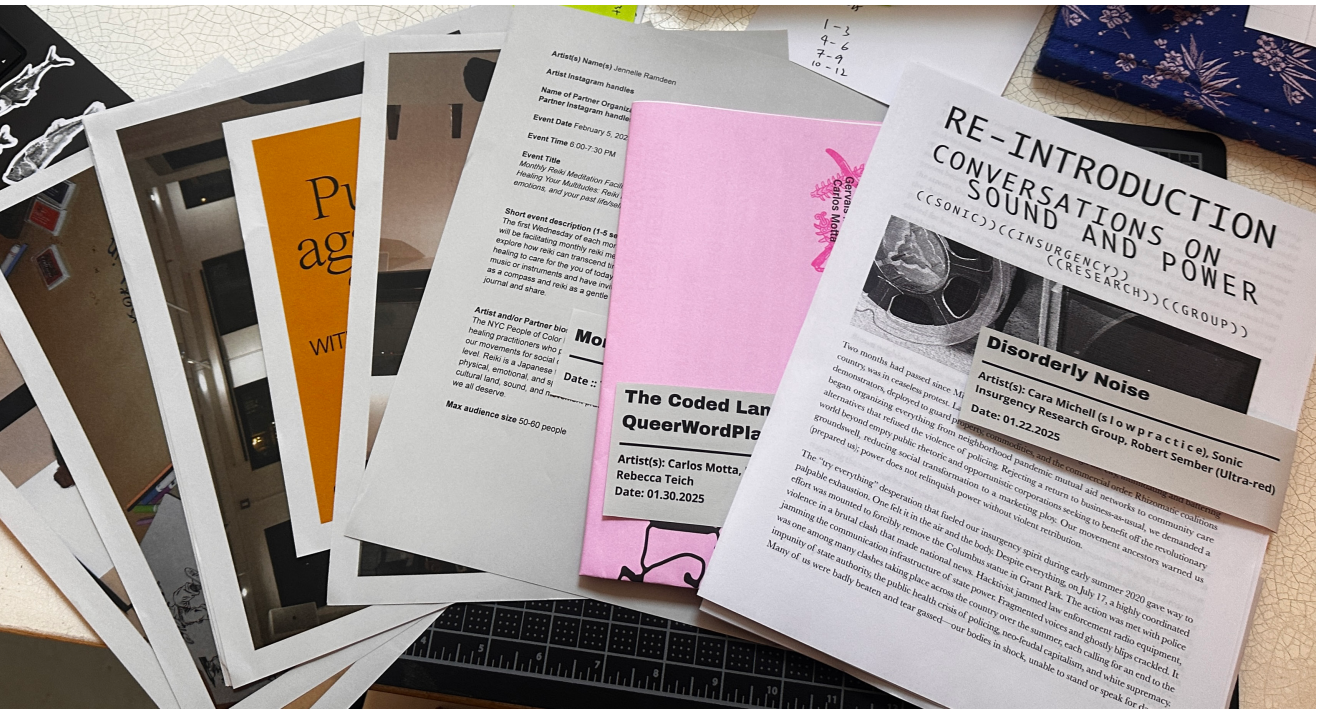
How can a cultural institution do more than present art, and instead create the conditions for people, histories and communities to become visible?

During my Leadership-in-Action experience at Creative Time in New York, I explored this question through archival research, public programming and the everyday work of an organisation dedicated to art in public space.

My experience shifted my understanding of public art away from the artwork as a singular object. I began to see public art as an infrastructure: a network of relationships, memories, spaces and forms of access that allows a public to form.

Creative Time is a New York-based public arts organisation known for commissioning ambitious art projects in public space.

My placement combined work across Creative Time's archive, digital records and public-facing programmes. I worked with materials documenting projects across several decades, visited the Creative Time archive at NYU Fales Library, and was involved in their public programmes.



What I Worked On

Archival Research & Website

One of my main responsibilities was reviewing Creative Time's historical project archive and improving information on its website.

I worked through archival files from 1974–2000s, checking project information, identifying missing materials and comparing physical records with what was already available online. I also visited NYU Fales Library & Special Collections, where Creative Time's physical archive is held. This gave me access to materials that were not always available through the website, including photographs, correspondence, press materials, audio and other project documentation.

The second part of this work was bringing what I found back into Creative Time's digital archive. I reviewed and updated project pages, corrected information, identified gaps and considered what additional material could make each project easier to understand online.



A Research Moment That Stood Out

One of the most interesting parts of my research was looking into *Masterpieces Without the Director* in collaboration with The Metropolitan Museum.

While researching the project at the Fales archive, I found an approximately seven-minute audio recording connected to it.

The recording itself was only a small discovery, but finding it made me think more carefully about how cultural history is preserved.

A project may have happened decades ago, but if its documentation is difficult to find, incomplete or not digitised, it can become almost invisible to people researching it today.

Before this experience, I thought of archives mainly as places where historical materials were stored. Working with Creative Time's archive made me realise that the way something is catalogued, described and made accessible can directly affect how its history is understood later.

Public Programming: Creative Time HQ and Sanctuary After Dark

Another important part of my experience was seeing Creative Time's public programming in practice.

CTHQ is used as a gathering space for talks, workshops, discussions and other public programmes. Spending time there helped me understand that a cultural organisation can create value not only by commissioning artworks, but also by bringing people together.

One programme that particularly stayed with me was **Sanctuary After Dark: Legacies of Queer Nightlife**, presented by Creative Time in collaboration with Body Hack.

The event explored the history of queer nightlife in New York and asked how clubs, parties and nightlife spaces have operated as forms of sanctuary for queer communities. It brought together different generations of artists and cultural workers and connected the history of the Clit Club, a queer party active in New York from 1990 to 2002, with Body Hack, a contemporary collective that organises parties and fundraisers supporting trans and gender non-conforming communities.

What interested me was that the programme treated nightlife as more than entertainment.

A nightclub could also be a place where people found community, organised, raised money, built relationships and felt safe enough to express themselves.

This made me reconsider what we mean by a "public space".

As an architecture student, I often think about public space through its physical design: where it is, how it is built and how people move through it. Sanctuary After Dark showed me that the programme happening inside a space, the people organising it and the community that gathers there can be equally important. A space does not automatically become meaningful simply because it is open to the public. What happens there, who feels welcome there and what relationships are built there also matter.

It was also interesting to see Creative Time programming outside its own office. Rather than asking audiences to always come to the institution, the programme could take place within a space and community that were already relevant to the subject being discussed.

That was an important lesson for me about public art and community engagement: sometimes the organisation does not need to be at the centre of the experience.

What I Learned

Before this summer, when I thought about public art, I tended to focus on the visible outcome: the artwork, its site and how people interacted with it.

Working at Creative Time showed me how much invisible work exists around that outcome.

Behind a public project are researchers, producers, archivists, communications teams, artists, partner organisations and communities. There are also decisions about what information is recorded, what is communicated and who gets invited into the conversation.

I became much more interested in these processes.

What I Take Forward

The most important thing I learned at Creative Time is that public engagement happens at many different stages of a project.

It can happen through an event attended by hundreds of people.

But it can also happen years later, when somebody finds an old project through an archive or website.

This has changed how I think about my own work in architecture and public space. I am now more interested not only in designing spaces or interventions, but also in the systems around them: how people are invited in, how information is shared and how projects continue to exist after the physical intervention is gone.

That is something I want to continue exploring in my future research into public art and urban development.



Image: Creative Time Milk Carton Project

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Maiko, Yukiko and everyone at Creative Time, NYU Fales Library & Special Collections, the Laidlaw Foundation, and everyone who shared their time and knowledge with me throughout my Leadership-in-Action experience.