Experiments

chair |CHe(ə)r|

noun

1 *Furniture*: A separate seat for one person, typically with a back and four legs.

2 *People*: One who holds a position of authority or dignity, such as a department head, bishop, or one who presides over a meeting.

3 *Tennis*: An umpire.

4 *Music*: The position of a player in an orchestra.

5 *Slang*: The electric chair.

6 chairs

Six chairs, one table and a bottle are the main characters in these short scenes about how decisions made by certain individuals can, and do, affect the lives of millions. Based on a game from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, 6 Chairs works with small groups of actors to create new pieces of physical theatre out of past political debates, famous scenes from stage and screen, and great works of children's literature.

Above: Sketch of scene from one of Jana Sanskriti's plays.

Opposite: Sculptures from a "6 Chairs" workshop
at Goddard College, July 2014.

An inert and empty chair is an invitation, an easy anthropomorphism, and an action waiting to happen. When used for their regular purpose, chairs are silent, usually obedient servants, until they decide to rebel and topple out from under their captors with a crash. In the hands of artists, ordinary chairs can transform into powerful instruments, positioned as stages for many of George Brecht's Fluxus pieces and by countless performance artists thereafter, or infamously dragged across a studio floor to punctuate the end of a Velvet Underground album. Peter Schumann's two-dimensional chairs in his Bread & Puppet Theater represent a vacancy or silence of people, persons disappeared or massacred by prisons and governments and wars. For rural Bengali theatre activists Jana Sanskriti, a chair onstage signifies state power in that culture where most people sit on the floor, recalling the original meanings of words like *diwan* and *suffah* as the dignitaries who once sat on the plush elevations of divan or sofa and bestowed these titles upon furniture that once literally kissed their royal asses.

On a more pedestrian level, chairs are cheap, plentiful, and available for use. When artists tour to a new town and need to borrow a chair, or two, or ten, that can most likely happen. Any studio hosting a theatre workshop probably has a stockpile of folding chairs, which is where Augusto Boal first developed his Great Game of Power. In the game six chairs sit in a row with a table and a bottle positioned nearly. Participants are asked, "Which chair is the most powerful?" and the crowd talks about the chairs as if people are, were, or will be sitting in them. They immediately personify the chairs: "The one in the front is leading the others," and, "Yes, but the one in the back can see the rest," and then, "But the ones in the middle have best access to the bottle." An easy anthropomorphism. Next come statements like, "Well, if that chair did this…" and people start taking turns repositioning the chairs, always trying to make one more powerful than the rest.

Above and opposite: "6 Chairs" workshops, autumn 2014.

I frequently play or facilitate this game as an aside to other Theatre of the Oppressed work. It's an exercise about staging scenes with attention to spatial power relationships. For the less theatrical, the early stage of game offers non-verbal ways to tell stories through sequences of image, as the chairs are low-stakes stand-ins for human bodies. As the game progresses, people insert themselves into the arrangement of chairs, each one trying to usurp the power of the others.

The Great Game of Power can be a very moving and deeply revelatory process, and I was interested in making it into an ongoing practice that could even evolve into short performances. I held several series of workshops to focus on the Great Game of Power, which I also titled "6 Chairs" in instances where the connection to Boal's work was less explicit. I worked with actors and activists, students and teachers. We made chair sculptures, and sometimes performed them as scenes.

Each experiment ended in a different dynamism. At Goddard College a handful of us made a series of sexta-sedentary sculptures around political themes for a public arts event where the chairs, tables, and bottles seemed to reconfigure themselves in an hour-by-hour act of stop-motion animation. At the University of Pennsylvania, small groups of actors worked the chairs through non-political themes, and at another workshop in Philadelphia folks with varied theatrical training did the same with overtly political themes. Both workshops arrived in similar places in not really knowing what to do or where to go beyond the confines of these six chairs. I'd provided a frame, but in making works of art to fill it people perhaps needed more experience with the tools or more specificity in the subject matter to make something resounding. Once played to its conclusion, the Great Game of Power leaves the performer feeling like, "Game over. Let's move on."

One breakthrough I had was in a project called Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge. Community arts organizers asked me to make some scenes to spark dialogue between South Philly residents about changes in their neighborhood. Six chairs replicated a block of rowhomes. When one occupant took over two thirds of them and ousted another resident, the landscape of identical chairs made a clear frame to display a picture of gentrification. The universality of the chairs, the locality of the theme, and the minimal use of words in the piece offered space for the audience of neighbors to say what they saw, and this otherwise "experimental" technique became tangible, functional, dialectical, and transformative: Here's a problem as a simple sketch. How many angles can we see it from? In what ways can we approach it? What solutions might arise? This game with few rules, when grounded in a realistic situation, might just be winnable after all.

Videos
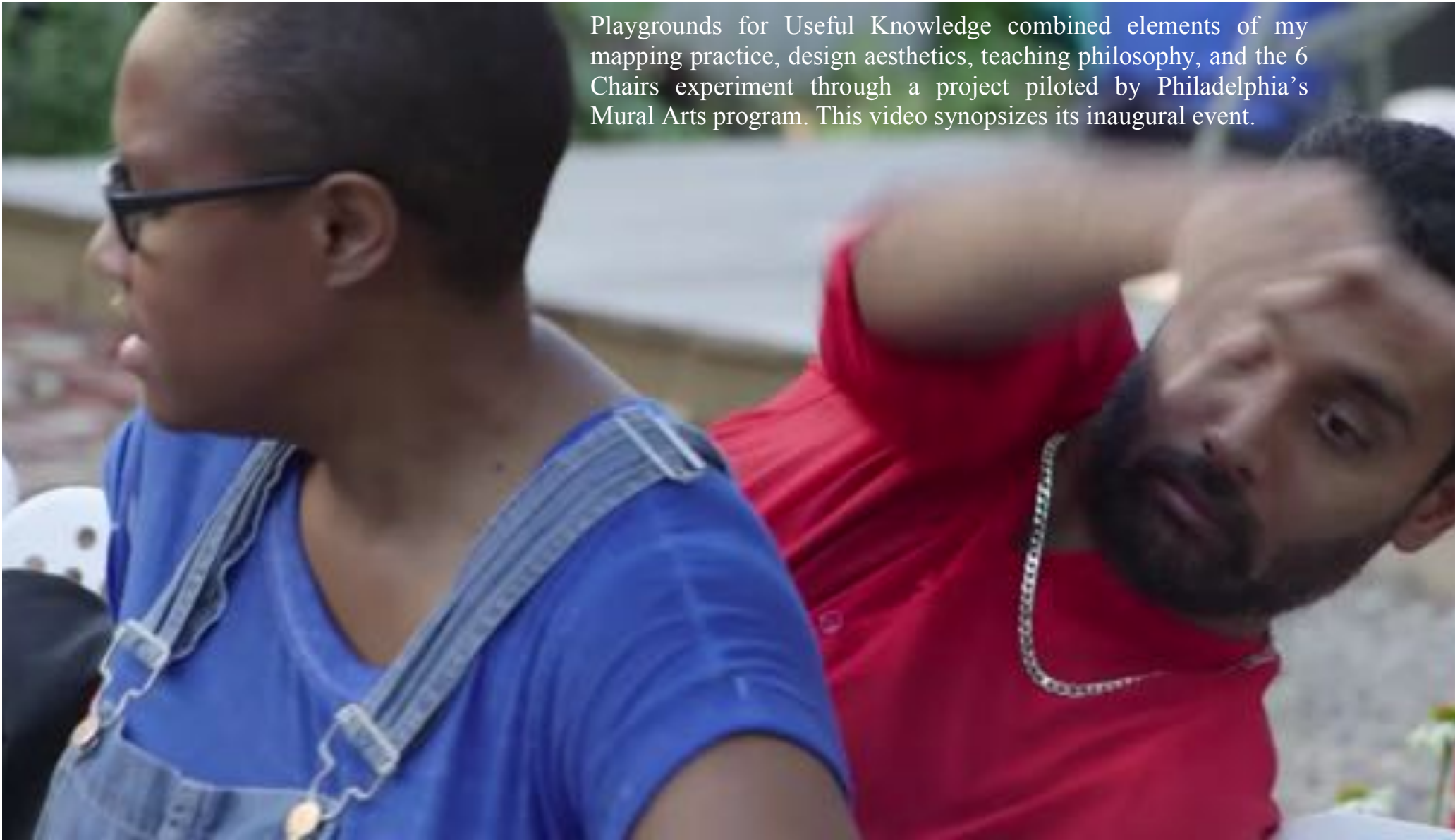
Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge combined elements of my mapping practice, design aesthetics, teaching philosophy, and the 6 Chairs experiment through a project piloted by Philadelphia's Mural Arts program. This video synopsizes its inaugural event.