

Back and to the Left

On wandering into memory's weeds thanks to one of Graham Coreil-Allen's *New Public Sites* walking tours

About 140 yards separates the intersection of West Franklin Street from West Mulberry Street along North Fremont Avenue in West Baltimore, basically a city block—roughly the same distance between the Lost City Diner (<http://lostcitydiner.com/>) and the Station North Chicken Box (<http://www.stationnorth.org/projects/station-north-chicken-box>) along Charles Street. Standing on the north side of the West Baltimore intersection, atop a Jersey wall, it certainly doesn't look that far away. I, along with some 40 other people, line this side of the street on the afternoon of April 24, taking part in a walking tour led by Graham Coreil-Allen (<http://grahamprojects.com/>) as part of his *SiteLines* (<http://lostcitydiner.com/>) exhibit, on view through may 15 at the Current Gallery (<http://www.currentspace.com/>). Coreil-Allen, dressed in the plain-front slacks, teal polo shirt, sports jacket, and baseball cap of a tour guide, has led us from the gallery to this spot as part of the afternoon's pedestrian adventure. He carried a megaphone with him, the requisite prop of a tour guide, which he genuinely needed at the moment. Overhead, police and television news helicopters hovered not too far away from us, near the Gilmor Homes (http://www.baltimorehousing.org/public_housing.asp?rid=15) housing project where people were gathering for the afternoon's march to City Hall to protest the death of Freddie Gray (<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/freddie-gray/>) while in police custody. Many of us would join that march when we connected to it on Greene Street. But first, we had to get to cross the street, four lanes of divided high-speed traffic colloquially known as the "Highway to Nowhere." (http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-09-10/news/bs-md-highway-demolition-20100910_1_highway-project-marc-station-parking-parking-lots)

Coreil-Allen calls himself a "public artist," and his New Public Sites (<http://newpublicsites.org/>) project combines elements of urban planning, architecture, and radical geography (<http://geography.charting-sustainability.org/>), with the guided tour model of the service economy to examine the everyday aspects of the urban environment: streets, buildings, embankments, developments, etc. Though he's been working on (<http://bmoreart.com/2012/10/new-public-sites-graham-coreil-allen.html>) this project and leading (<http://bmoreart.com/2014/09/uncanny-urbanism-graham-coreil-allens-new-public-sites.html>) his tours for a few years—read his 2010 thesis (PDF (<http://newpublicsites.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/nps-t.pdf>)) for a good introduction—this was my first time to go on one

of his strolls. And I'm doing it on the same day that, by mainstream news narratives (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/26/us/baltimore-crowd-swells-in-protest-of-freddie-grays-death.html>), that peaceful protests first turned violent.

Now, it's incidental that this Coreil-Allen-led tour and his gallery show happened at the same time as the April 24 Freddie Gray march; that said, what his project and tour offers is a reminder that the conditions that created the world into which Freddie Gray was born, and the root causes that primed the events gripped our city in the time since that march, were not independent. The present state of inequality was manufactured and developed by people and policies of the city, state, and country.

The coincidence of the New Sites tour and the city's protests and ensuing uprising caused Coreil-Allen to improvise his programming a bit; he postponed last weekend's event and today's, the Wandering Shards of Specter Riches walking tour, which starts at 2 p.m. from Current, is in some ways a response to "recent events," which I'm placing in quotes because there's no way to talk about what is gripping our city right now, and who is involved, in language that isn't loaded. We're presently occupying a point where we're relooking and re-thinking about where we live, and committing words into ideas about the matter is a partisan act.

I'm going to refrain from delving too deep into the content of the tour I participated in here, nor am I'm going to elaborate on his performance as the tour guide—and it is part performance piece, as slyly considered as Andrea Fraser's "Museum Highlights" (<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/193356>). Not because I'm uninterested in what he has to say about the various histories of development in/around downtown West Baltimore, eras about which I knew a healthy amount already just from being a local writer/citizen. And not because I didn't appreciate the entire experience—I did, and in what has grown in my mind as a significant compliment is the fact that halfway through the tour, as Coreil-Allen pointed out Federal warning signs and talked about why Jersey walls were created and traced the history of Martin Luther King Boulevard, the first point of comparison that popped into my mind was the late local creative worker Peter Zahorecz' syringe stencil project from the 1990s, one of those quietly profound artistic feats that get you to look at the everyday world you encounter with new eyes.

That interest in the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the ordinary struck me here: the curiosity with which Coreil-Allen approaches his subject matter. His application of an artist/architect's eye to the socioeconomic history of place compliments a number of politically minded and publically engaged artists and art collectives of the past 30-plus years (at least), and Baltimore has witnessed a fair amount of that activity. Most recently, the Contemporary (<https://www.contemporary.org/>) under Irene Hoffman (<https://sitesantafe.org/event/irene-hofmann/>), from 2006-2010, was especially interested in experimenting with presenting this hybrid variety of work.

And this is one of those moment where I become the old guy shaking a fist at clouds: Coreil-Allen's tour also made me recall those shows and similarly inquisitive projects like the Cram Sessions Chris Gilbert curated when he was the contemporary art curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art, which asked questions about the role of artists and museums in the communities in which they reside. I'm thinking about the Contemporary's *Headquarters: Investigating the creation*

of the ghetto and the prison industrial complex, The Reverse Ark: In the Wake, and Participation Nation, exhibitions that never seemed to spark much substantive local thinking or engagement. That's not a knock: politically engaged art, installations, and projects are as difficult to do well as run a successful political campaign or change-producing community organizing effort. Failure is always a possibility. But in looking over what writing about these projects I could find online, the quality of the discussion was a bit tepid: they were often met with a mix of curiosity and apathy, as if the intersection of creative labor and real world issues was insufficient to produce thoughtful dialog.

And I bring that up here because "recent events" has so many of us, for good reason, thinking about the What We Do given the All That Has Happened. Yes, that's the anxiety of comfortable, but that's OK. All conversations have to start somewhere. So let's wonder aloud about what good an art critic, criticism, or art in general is in a city on fire. And let's make an effort not to forget that when we're doing criticism and creative labor when the city's not.

by [*bretmccabe*](#) on [*May 9, 2015*](#) □ [*Uncategorized*](#)

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