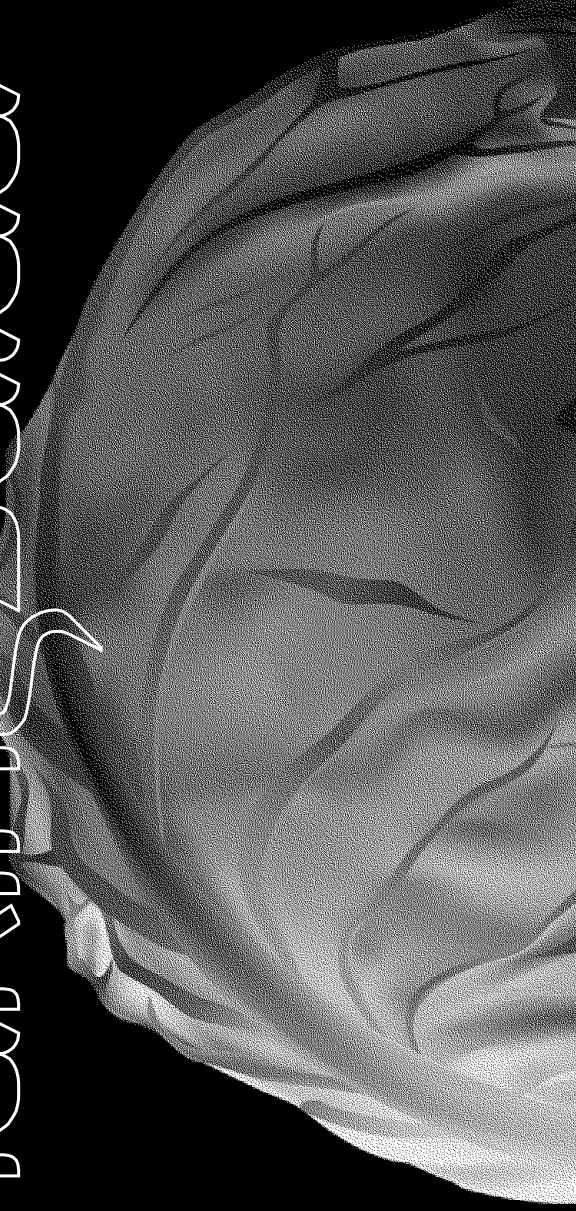
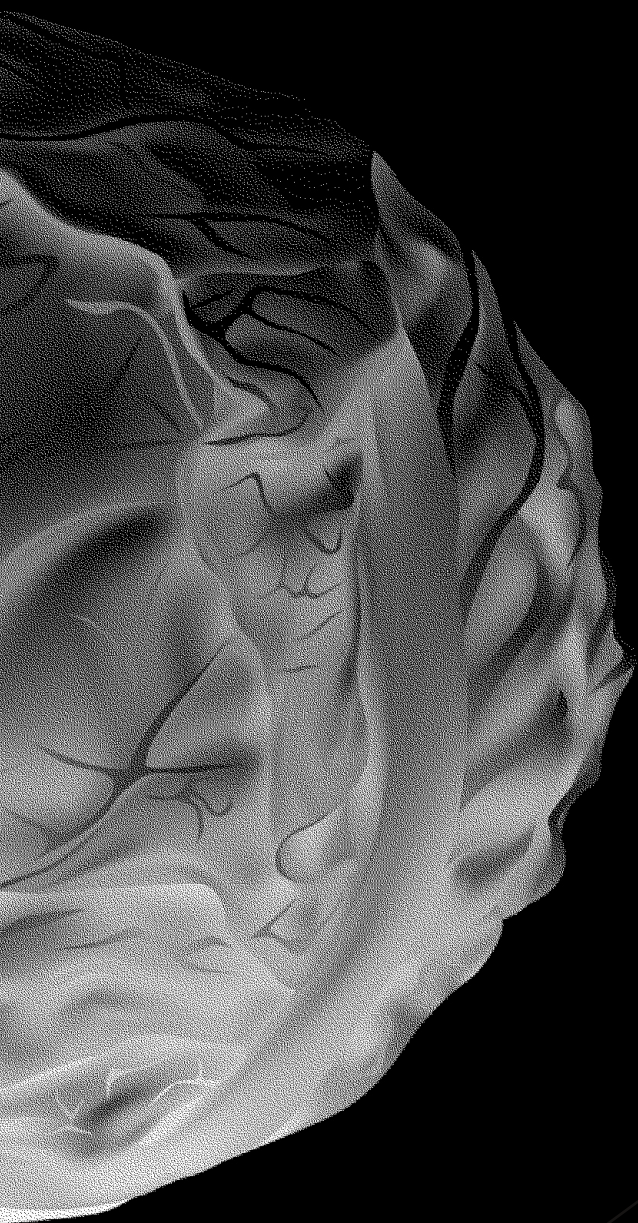




# Agora : Making Salad



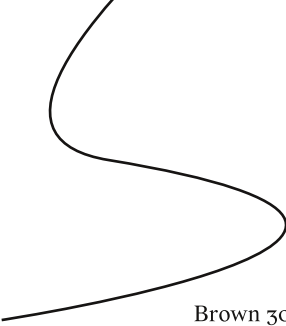


Calvin Hutcheon  
Devin Halladay

hyperlettuce

# A vision

radically public space



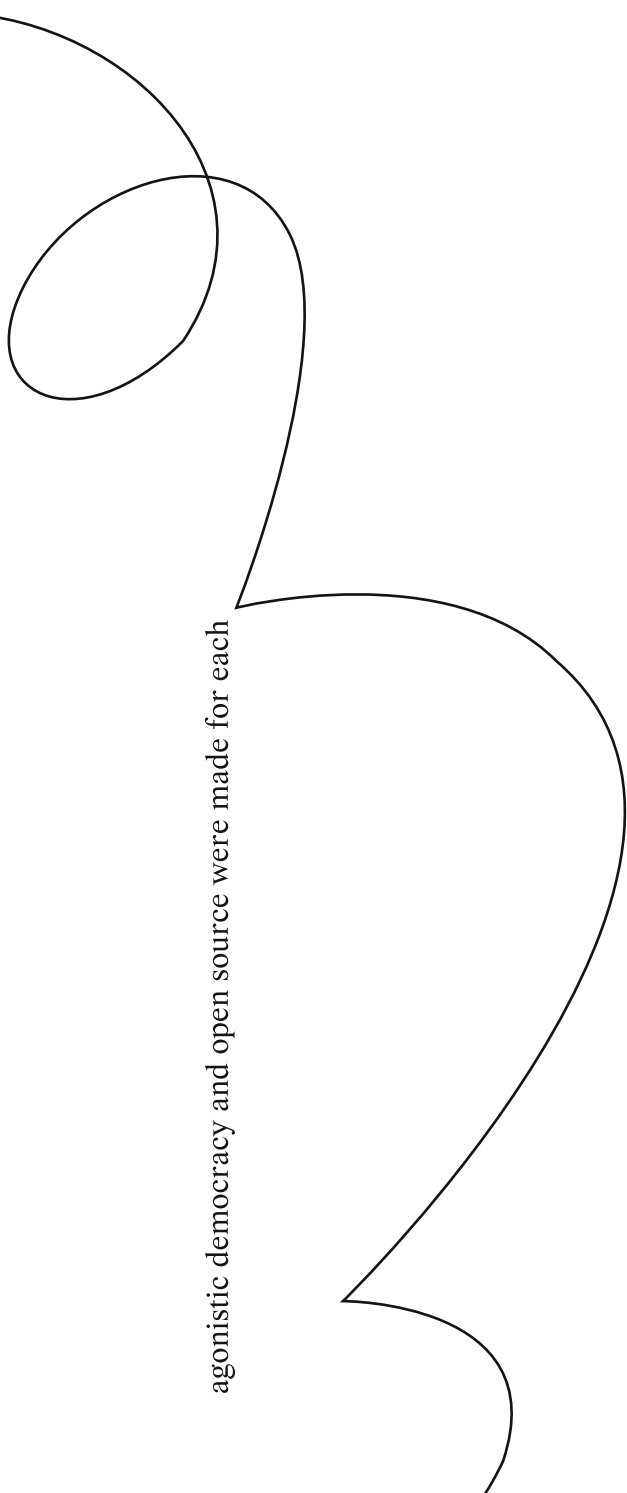
Brown 307 is an open studio. throughout the course of this semester, Devin Halladay and I have conducted a series of spatial interventions, attempting to open the room to agonistic discourse. Employing a variety of strategies, we used basic materials to demarkate and elicit conversation. Using pink tape, we opened space to students, asking people to post important thoughts, ideas and influences. Providing glass markers, we made tools available to brainstorming, messaging and communication. Emptying one shelf, we marked the level with pink tape declaring it a design Praxis library. Finally, we connected a raspberry pi a wall mounted tellivion, connecting the space to a public are.na(provide link) channel.

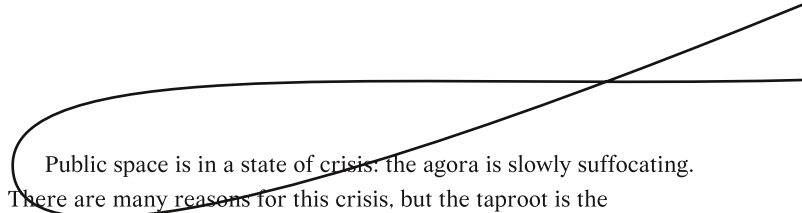
These strategies worked to varring degrees. Though participation was sometimes limited, in one instance discourse conducted within these spaces led to significant department wide conversations. Observing the space and the discourse conducted within it, I compiled a case study (available at: <https://github.com/millennialglyphs/Open-for-discourse-casestudy>), coming to the conclusion that the intervention compelled only surface level interaction. People were sharing concerns, ideas and solutions, but there was no structure in place to encourage follow up. From my study I identified four key actions needed to elicit further organization. These actions are 1. identifying a good idea. 2. connecting people 3. connecting information 4. facilitating meet ups.

With these ideas in mind Devin and I began mocking up an app that would take the place of the are.na channel we had set up on the TV. Our intent was to create a noninstitutional, liminal space to which content could be posted. Rather than a grid, we developed the idea of an agora: a navigable cartesian space populated with content. Unlike a feed, content is populated organically throughout the space, encouraging an alternative mechanism for content consumption. The functions of the app are intentionally limited. We give users only the basic tools needed to develop organization, hoping to focus the platform to this intent. Though only in existence as a mockup, this app has the potential to be implimented into 307 and other spaces, enouraging agonistic discourse and the development of on ongoing organization.

# A Framework

agonistic democracy and open source were made for each





Public space is in a state of crisis: the agora is slowly suffocating. There are many reasons for this crisis, but the taproot is the cessation of agonistic political conflict due to the teleology of modern neoliberal democracy. In simple terms, the teleology, or end, of modern liberal democracy is twofold—to create a boundless polity (a global democracy), and to eliminate political conflict through the rational mediation of political settlements. Put differently, the end of democratic ideals is a post-political world in which the political is eradicated in favor of the rational. But these ideals, dating back to the Enlightenment, have become practico-inert and are failing to serve the needs of a modern networked public. We need to re-envision what it means to be a citizen of a democratic public. In order to do this, we need to rearticulate and assert the value of conflict as the central modality of a properly functioning democracy. We need to create more public spaces where citizens of the polis can be political every single day.

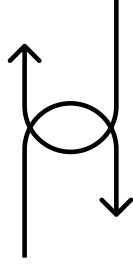
Hannah Arendt, in *On Revolution*, recognized that America's public space had shrunk both in size and number due to the very structure of the United States' democratic system. Given only one or two days a year to be political and exercise one's share in popular sovereignty, the political and revolutionary spirit of Americans began to atrophy. "If the ultimate end of revolution was freedom and the constitution of a public space where freedom could appear," Arendt writes, then "no one could be called happy without [their] share of public happiness, that no one could be called free without [their] experience in public freedom, and that no one could be called happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power." Indeed, our representative democracy has internally failed to provide its citizens with proper participatory models.

Upon coming to a similar realization, Calvin and I decided to take matters into our own hands. No longer able to count on institutions to provide us with proper public space, we decided to create our own in the Brown 307 open studio. Brown 307 was intended expressly to be an "open studio", but we felt it never was truly open—there was no space for discourse, nor for conflict. Students used the room in a pseudopublic fashion, occupying the same space but ultimately isolating themselves in their own digital siloes. We wanted to bring a sense of conflict, mediation, and discourse into the room, fulfilling the promise of a truly "open" studio.

# A Conversation

chicken soup for the critical soul

<https://bit.ly/2HPLLIP>





CH: I guess we'll start discussing the open toolkit we've been developing throughout the course of this semester.

DH: yeah, let's do it. we've managed to create a relatively successful open space in Brown 307. how can we use the strategies we developed for this room to open up other spaces?

CH: From the get go, we discovered the power of demarcating space. We used pink tape to signify that an area was open to discourse, and I think the simplicity of this strategy makes it suited to contexts beyond 307.

Furthermore, we identified the power of emptying spaces of institutional significance. We talked about creating anti-occupations. I think this is an aspect I want to explore further. How can we develop strategies to vacate?

DH: The only way to vacate a space is to first occupy it. Maybe a better question is, how can we get others to vacate? How can we create ruptures in the way others use space? I think one strategy is to provide tools for others to voice their opinions and shape their own spaces.

As you mentioned, in 307 we used pink tape to provide an infrastructure for discourse. Other things we did were less obvious but probably more consequential: inviting others to participate, posing questions to be answered, providing food and tea, etc.

So I guess the question now (sorry for sidestepping your question a bit) is: how do we

create infrastructures for others to occupy? what mechanics make an *open* infrastructure different from a *closed* infrastructure?

**CH:** A solid reframing of the question. One key distinction is the idea of invitation. At one point we discussed how Occupy Wall Street would have been different if instead of congregating in Zuccotti Park, protesters had made private office buildings the focus of their occupation.

The key distinction here is that a park does not need to be deinstitutionalized. One does not need an invitation to enter a park. On the other hand, an office building is purposefully closed. One way of opening spaces is simply to invite people in.

So generosity becomes a central tool. How this translates into infrastructure, I'm not sure. Does it mean propping open a door, serving free food, developing a kind of hobo code that functions as an invitation? Perhaps. Still this only attempts an answers for spaces we inhabit.

**DH:** Yeah, generosity and invitation are key ideas here. Those are methods of forming communities, which in themselves are a kind of infrastructure for shared action. Maybe we first need to look at what makes a community effective and participatory.

As you suggested, I think the way to do this is via small actions—the endemic, as we once called them. Things like propping open doors, writing contribution guidelines, asking questions, developing open file formats, letting others have influence over our spaces.

**CH:** True. These endemic strategies are important, particularly ~~open file~~ formats, yet they are only one step towards developing agonistic spaces.

When I think of infrastructure, I think of something that is ubiquitous, something with high capacity. Is it possible to implement macro strategies alongside the endemic. I want to prop open doors. At the same time, I want to plaster your public domain logo over billboards.

**DH:** It's possible—we need both. Little actions, big movements. Those things are relational; they inform each other. I think F/LOS is a good model of this IRL. lots of people making small changes for their own benefit, while at the same time building better worlds for many other users

**CH:** Indeed. No matter the setting, it seems to be a relational issue. It is also an issue of reward systems. People in FLOS communities find value in participation—making things people want to use. The result is an ecosystem that incentivizes development based on community need.

One could further argue that the success of FLOS has to do with infrastructure. Github is an incredible platform. It makes me wonder if feature such as the issue queue and pull request could be integrated into platforms trying to leverage ~~open~~ collaboration in other fields

**DH:** Yea I think those mechanics are super valuable for real life. Makes me think of our “actionable content” strategy on the Agora platform—means of establishing actionable steps to

follow up/follow through on ideas. Similar things must be applicable to fields other than design & eng

This is where openness is really really important. When everyone in a community is willing to share and collaborate, it becomes much easier to take action and follow through on things that need to be done. Open things are more inclusive and have more potential than closed things

**CH:** It becomes a recursive process. The more open spaces that are created the more opportunity there is to source solutions that may open others.

And that's exactly the idea behind the "actionable content" strategies on Agora. Not only can they be used to open institutional space, they are intended to promote student organization.

**CH:** In fact, one of the big motivations behind this project was to develop infrastructure that would enable rapid student organization in response to ongoing events.

When the Department of Homeland Security made a surprise visit to campus people were caught off guard. There was no unified student response. No one knew what to do. Fortunately this was a purely administrative visit, but one can easily imagine such an event escalating.

Clearly there is an urgent need for open tools that enable community sourced organization.

**DH:** Yeah, the Homeland Security visit was a pretty stark reminder of the reality we're facing: our institutions are too opaque and our communities are not organized enough to open them up. I think one of the reasons we are so bad at organizing is that we

now try to organize online

This is evidently an ineffective way of communicating and organizing groups of people, for the most part. Compare our generation to that of students during the Vietnam war, who were able to cause drastic change through massive and quick organization.

They did all their organization in the trenches (so to speak), person to person. But I think we can reshape our online tools to facilitate real-world meetings and organization

And I think we have to do this — online communities are great, but they rarely cause lasting change in our institutions (though maybe I'm wrong about this)

**CH:** I think this is perhaps a false equivalency. This year there have been significant student student protest regarding the ownership of assault weapons. Arguably, the internet helped facilitate these actions.

However, I strongly agree that the only effective form of organization is one which is centered around engagement offline.

To this end, I think to Obama's 2008 campaign and the controversy surrounding Cambridge Analytica. Clearly these are not open tool kits, but they demonstrate the inherently political nature of networks and the challenges of maintaining open, agonistic spaces.

It seems that networks can easily influence offline behavior. The challenging thing is to ensure that influence is planar.

Is it possible to develop tools that both enable offline mobilization and challenge the the authority of server-power?

**DH:** The only way to achieve both of these things is to mobilize people using custom tools—tools built by the community, operated by the community, and owned by the community.

This is why things like open source communities (not just FLOSS) and peer to peer networks are so valuable: they're able to operate outside of existing, problematic network-power relations. Building an open community is like building a new world.

**CH:** Yes to custom tools and peer to peer networks. I want to better understand methods for keeping networks open. I want to understand the incentives and value systems that make open networks succeed. this is what I am trying to ask: can we make tools that encourage these values?

Can these tools also help open spaces that are currently closed? We attempted to answer this in the context of 307, but can we extrapolate from Agora's tool kit and develop a more universal system that can be infinitely customized and iterated to fit other spaces?

**DH:** I don't know if there's any way to generalize & create a universally adaptable toolkit. There are lots of types of closed spaces and intensities of hegemony/power. I really think the solution lies not in the tools we use but in the intents with which we act in our daily lives

For example, we can't create a more open culture just by putting Public Domain stickers all over and inviting others into a space for a time. It needs to be constant. We can't just be open, we need to live open

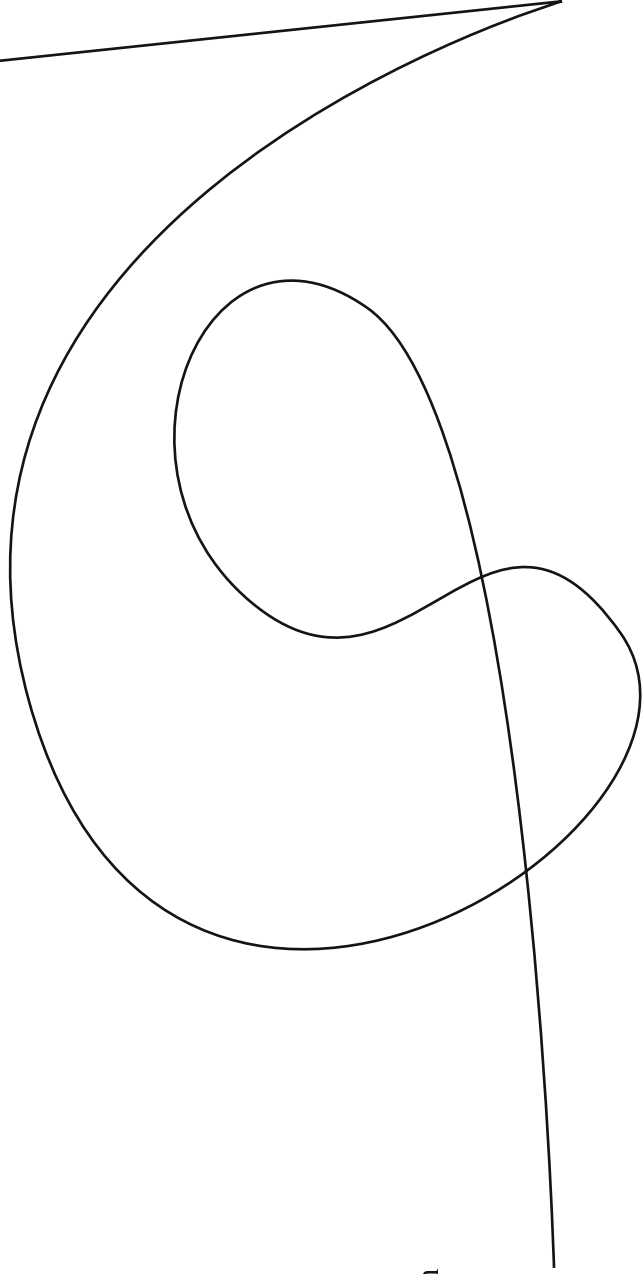
**CH:** Yes. Tools don't have to be actions, or stickers. They can be behavioral. Maybe what we are getting at is the need for an open philosophy.

DH: Right. What we need is a lot of people, all at once, living and acting in open ways, inviting others to collaborate on and discuss the things that move society forward. This can mean lots of things: propping doors, making open file formats, sharing source files, providing tea...

...building software, provoking action, stacking rocks, organizing strikes, designing fonts, sharing food, criticizing institutions, making salads.

# An Application

to open  
to discuss  
to connect  
to discover  
to consume  
to produce  
to enliven  
to critique  
to embolden  
to organize  
to live  
to become





# AGORA



<p>👋 <u>name</u></p> <p>wants to meet at</p> <p>🕒 <u>time</u></p> <p>to talk about</p> <p>this post ↩</p>	<p>Hit return to submit</p>
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