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FEATURES

REAL WORLD ORDER

Digging into the obsessions behind Wicker Park protests of "The Real World"

Joshua Fischer

The time, 10:53pm, shines in luminous yellow light against a Lite Brite-blue background on the A.Z. Zenith Currency Exchange sign. Next door, what has become the infamous "Real World" house stands like a de facto king's castle, the Friday-night-trafficked North Avenue its moat. Across the street, a crowd has been gathering for about forty minutes. Somewhere between 300 and 400 people congregate here. A curious mix of activist types sporting cut-off shorts and shoulder bags, cherub-faced alternative boys and girls who could easily be seen in a suburban mall, a handful of clubbers poured into skin-tight tank tops and requisite black pants, and patrons from the bar next door (in Structure shirts and Dockers) commingle, watching the house as if it were a giant television. In the currency exchange lot, a dozen cops, with arms akimbo or folded, survey the crowd. "You call this a protest?" one officer wonders aloud. "You ever see that show 'Jackass'?" another officer asks. "I'd like to see some of that."

According to a flyer distributed around the neighborhood last week, 11pm is the official start time for the newest in a string of protests that have occurred here during the last four weeks. Yet, when 11pm flashes on the blindingly bright currency exchange sign, the scene remains the same. There isn't much organization or direction to this protest until the crowd notices a rhythm that's been slowly building. To the far left, a multi-racial group of six or so young men have been freestyle rapping in what seems to be an impromptu rhyme circle. For the past few minutes, the rhymes have made their way to a crescendo, the rhythms driving faster and hitting harder. A refrain becomes audible, "We are the ones who started the riot!" and a few heads turn. Then a new chorus arises, "Fuck MTV!" and members of the crowd chant with them.

After a few odd pranks—a man flashes oncoming traffic, someone hangs a sign reading "MTV is 'Real' lame" on their front door and the perplexing appearance of the Internet-ubiquitous "ALL YOUR BASE ARE BELONG TO US" slogan—the rhyme circle takes a lead and moves to the alley behind the house. About 100 protesters follow as they chant, yell and have their own alley party—until a police paddy-wagon enters, pulls in and slowly moves the

No one understands.



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crowd out, killing most of the protest momentum.

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Yet, just when it seems that this protest hasn't accomplished anything, the unthinkable occurs: Guarded by a small set of security guards and police officers to clear a path, five members of "The Real World" cast exit the house and the crowd erupts. Shouts of "Go home!", and "Go back to suburbia!" ring out above the riotous din of cheers and jeers. Oddly, a group of four young women scream in adulation as if a boy band were on the way, tearing through the crowd to get close to the pre-celebs. "The Real World" five, two young men and three young women, appear almost terrified and stare straight ahead as they enter a nondescript dark blue van—sans cameras—and escape through the alley, but not before the driver/cast member waves his middle fingers at the crowd.

So what, exactly, are the attendees of these gatherings protesting? And why do they bother? It is, after all, just a TV show... albeit a popular show that's been on for more than a decade, airing on one of the most popular cable networks. Or maybe it is more than just a TV show. There's a power in "The Real World" that some acknowledge in protests, which others, less conspicuously, try to use for their own ends. It seems that for some, "The Real World" is a potent force.

The protesters are a mixed group. While some attribute themselves to larger organizations, the majority seems to be individuals with their own agendas. Months before the protests, various activists reportedly met to discuss the show, which they heard would be coming to Chicago. Many share disdain for mainstream media sources, finding their brand of news and entertainment to be pollutants in our "mental environment." Some take issue with Viacom, the parent company of MTV, and its monetary influence on other corporations, which ultimately decide how we live. Still others have local concern for affordable housing and how the commodification of culture, practiced by the likes of MTV, is part of the gentrifying force. Calls from independent media sources such as Chicago Indy Media followed. Soon afterward, wheat-pasted flyers revealing the location of the house began turning up. Planning was made by word-of-mouth—conversations and small meetings with other activists who were not happy about "The Real World" using Wicker Park to sell its brand of cool.

On July 21, a different scene from Friday's events transpired. The crowd was more focused and the police were more active. There was more confusion, more aggression and sixteen arrests. Beginning with Nato Thompson, who was arrested after writing slogans such as "WHAT IS REAL?" on the sidewalk in front of the house, arrests were made on charges that included blocking traffic, disorderly conduct and impeding a police officer.

Carlos Pecciotto was the second to be arrested. Days later Pecciotto recounts the night's events. He wears an Autonomous Zone (a local radical organization) shirt and says that while his shirt indicates where he's coming from politically, the night of the July 21 protests he was representing himself and his views on media activism.

At the event, after hearing of Thompson's arrest, Pecciotto reacted. "I take out my drum and start to play a little

rhythm. I'm circulating around the crowd... not blocking the sidewalk." Within a few minutes, he claims he was confronted by several police officers, arrested and handcuffed with his drum still hanging around his neck.

"I think it's incumbent upon me protesting... something that would seem as trivial and spectacular as the 'Real World,'" Pecciotto explains. "To tie ['The Real World'] in with a lot of other more salient issues to oppose current media practices... Right here is a very clear example of the polluting of our mental environment."

Salem Collin-Julien, a Humboldt Park resident and lifelong city dweller, saw Pecciotto as he was arrested. (Though she is affiliated with the Department of Space and Land Reclamation, an organization of artists/activists that has hosted events concerning affordable housing issues, and the Wicker Park "Real World" Consortium, an ad hoc moniker created to give protesters a name and media contact, she says she represented only herself at the protests.) Before Pecciotto's arrest, Collin-Julien watched as Thompson wrote on the sidewalk with chalk. She says an officer approached Thompson, asking him to "take a walk and talk" with him. When Thompson refused, Collin-Julien says, he was arrested. "Everyone was in shock for two seconds, and then Nato [Thompson] said, 'Somebody say something.' A couple of us started screaming at this cop... there was a lull and then about seven squad cars showed up and Carlos was the next to be arrested."

Collin-Julien and Pecciotto call it a "semi-organized coincidence" that the mish-mash group of activists, anti-globalists, anarchists and radicals came together to deliver their outcry. The protests were decentralized without a single leader, rather several groups and individuals reacting to the presence of "The Real World" and using it as a platform to voice their opposition to what they feel the show stands for and its effect on the neighborhood.

Amongst other issues, such as the show's corporate connections to Viacom and what she perceives as Viacom's negative influence on the world at large, Collin-Julien says she doesn't like the attention the show brings to the neighborhood in enticing more people to move in and force others out. "What happens is people with a lot more money and power come into a neighborhood and throw their desires on the table by buying up houses, buying up property. And the people who were living there are usually not prepared to deal with that. I think that's why these things happen so quickly." And what about the artists' role in making a neighborhood more enticing? "I don't think it's about the artists," she said. "It's about people not being prepared to have to unify in such a way and have to defend their neighborhood."

What does MTV have to say about all of this? They're not talking. After being bounced from a person in New York to California back to New York, this is what Alison Bennet, the media contact for "The Real World," had to say: "There's not much of a story anymore. It was unwanted attention. If you want access to press weeks and the house in November, cooperate with us and let things lie; don't fuel the fire. We have no comment. We've been getting calls from the Chicago Tribune to USA Today—we're not commenting."

The protests, then, have something to do with gentrification. At least that's what Jack Wasserman, owner of the Local Grind, believes. The Local Grind is a coffeehouse that opened thirteen months ago and operates around the corner from "The Real World" house. "There's not going to be affordable housing coming up in this neighborhood anywhere," says Wasserman. "People who own these buildings put money in a while ago and they are paying off for them now. That's the way our country works: You make investments they pay off and you get to reap the benefits. Every one of the artists in this neighborhood is hoping and praying that that's exactly what's going to happen to them—that they should get so lucky that somebody likes their painting: They can sell it, they can practice their craft and do whatever they want, which is all someone who owns a business wants."

The Local Grind has become something of a second home to "The Real World" cast. They frequent the joint often and Wasserman couldn't be happier. He likes the cast and enjoys the attention the show brings to his business, the neighborhood and what it could potentially do for tourism. "[The cast members] come in here a lot," Wasserman said. "They can't believe how people are so rude to them. One [cast member] girl said, 'We're just people. This is just my job for the next three months.'...They told me so many people have come up to them since the beginning and said, 'We're so sorry.' That's really important to them. One of the [cast member] girls said a lot of people have said, 'We're so sorry. I'm an artist, and I live in the neighborhood. Most of these people [the protesters] are not from the neighborhood.'"

It's important to Wasserman that viewers of "The Real World" see positive things in the neighborhood. "If [the cast members] are back in the house talking about how rude people were to them... that's going to get on TV, and that's going to hurt our city. That's going to hurt tourism." Tourism, Wasserman contends, helps make a neighborhood better. "It's because more tourists came to Chicago in the last ten years... that has made the city have to clean up."

Kara Salgado, executive director of the Wicker Park Chamber of Commerce, has been living in Wicker Park for the past ten years and likes how the neighborhood has cleaned up. She saw a report on Fox News, which said the protests were against gentrification. "There are other ways to go about it, rather than protest 'The Real World,' which really has nothing to do with it," she says. "... If those protesters got together and formed a non-profit organization, they could get funding to preserve affordable housing in the neighborhood."

Like Wasserman, Salgado believes the show can have a positive impact on the area, "You can't buy the kind of advertising 'The Real World' gives," she says.

Salgado says, Bunim-Murray, "The Real World" production company, approached the Chamber of Commerce early on. They became members and told Salgado they wanted to leave Wicker Park a better place. They also paid their fees and said they would like to buy some of the street pole banners before they leave town. Their aim, Salgado says, was to be low-key and to help the neighborhood.

But, says Adrienne Eaton, manager of Wicker Park's Myopic Books, "Some people just don't want to be on TV." Myopic garnered attention after displaying a small but strongly worded message on a sign posted in their window, which read: REAL WORLD STAY OUT NO FILMING HERE GO BACK TO THE SUBURBS

The sign has since been taken down. While it was posted, a common misconception around the neighborhood followed that Myopic simply disliked "The Real World" and were voicing their discontent. Eaton clarified the matter: With all establishments, "The Real World" must have a waiver signed allowing them to tape. Myopic did not sign the waiver due to a general policy wherein no taping or filming is allowed in the store, not even student films.

One evening, before the sign was posted, a few "Real World" cast members and camera crew entered the store. The clerk at Myopic asked them to leave and received resistance before the crew eventually left. Even after the camera crew had been asked to leave, they set up the camera across the street, aimed the lens at Myopic's store window, and sent in a crewmember with a boom microphone, apparently in order to record "The Real World" cast members' conversation while in the store. When asked again to leave, the crewmember claimed to be simply changing the batteries on the microphone, but the clerk persisted until the crewmember left.

After this blatant attempt to subvert their wishes, Myopic posted the sign.

"We've noticed from having the sign up, some people respond, 'Why wouldn't you want to be on TV? This is such great advertising.' People don't seem to get that some people just don't want to be on TV. We don't advertise in many places. That's not our customer base."

Blair Fischer, on the other hand, was excited when he first heard "The Real World" was coming to the neighborhood. Fischer, an associate editor at Playboy.com, lives down the street from the house and saw it as a great story. "I thought it'd be fun to do a diary: What it's like living in the same neighborhood, a pseudo-documentary," he says. (Playboy.com later made a decision to drop the story, though Fischer says it wasn't for any particular reason.)

But the thrill of being neighbors with "The Real World," which first inspired him to do the story, has worn off. At first he was curious to meet his new neighbors and to see how they were going to affect the neighborhood. Now he just takes a look when he passes by the house to see if the door has been repainted after protesters painted things such as "EmpTV" and "Dorks." Fischer was also able to talk to one of the male cast members. "He thought it was a weird climate," Fischer says. "He thought the area just has a few people who had [the protesters'] opinion on the show and that it wasn't representative of the city."

Fischer has also heard gentrification was a major issue for the protesters. "Gentrification is a reality," he says. "I don't know what you're going to do with protests. It won't change anything. It'll just make people more afraid to live here. [The protesters] are volatile; it just sends a terrible message."

Fischer has been living in the neighborhood for three years and, obviously, he's not keen on seeing people gentrified out. "But, I'd rather have the area get nicer than deteriorate to what it was five years ago," he says. "There's a great balance in Bucktown right now. It's never going to be exactly the way you want it... It's as close to ideal as it's going to get."

Members of the "Free the Real World 7 Campaign" have one of the most unique angles on the presence of "The Real World" and the protests. And they're not protesting gentrification, though they recognize it as an issue. For the FRW7, the protests give the public an opportunity to question major media outlets.

Since the first protests, the group has been making and distributing leaflets with their own take on things. The first "communiqué" was a call to action, proclaiming, "STORM THE VIACOM/MTV PRISON! LET'S SET THE REAL WORLD 7 FREE!" Through satire, though they may argue otherwise, they're making their case: "These young people [the cast members] have been brainwashed into thinking that participation in this entertainment/experiment will someday make them 'cool'," the communiqué reads. This initial flyer was more lighthearted, attacking MTV's supposed authority to dictate to (or brainwash) viewers what is cool. However, after the July 21 protest, the FRW7's second communiqué took a serious turn, alleging police brutality and collusion between Viacom and the City of Chicago—an idea favored by some protesters outside the FRW7 as well. A spokesman from the Chicago Police Department division of news affairs flatly denies this. By the third communiqué, handed out at the August 3 protest, the FRW7 returned to the subject of cool.

"Most outlets are focusing on the gentrification issue, but the area has been gentrified," several members of the FRW7, who want only to be identified as a group, said. "The media giants are our issue, purveyors of your reality or what is news or entertainment." The FRW7 take issue with the massive control of media and beyond by a small number of major corporations. They're the ones shouting, "We will get you to a safe house! We will help you be deprogrammed!"

And members think the protests, especially the last one, have been a success: "We welcome [the 'Real World' cast] to Chicago and our neighborhood, just not the virus that they bring with them."

And it's this "virus" that's at the heart of what's bothering the protesters. It's not just "The Real World," but what MTV represents. MTV packages and sells culture for its viewers to consume. MTV sells "cool," but that's not so cool with some people.

At Myopic Books, Eaton and co-worker Jesse McDowell say they don't like the general direction the neighborhood seems to be heading. McDowell refers to it as "Gentrification and the co-option of a culture." Eaton elaborates that some of the new people moving in who are attracted to what they perceive as cool culture and cool businesses make things difficult for those already living and working in Wicker Park. Condo and business owners running things more high end, jacking up the pricing on everything so eventually, says Eaton, "all the 'cool' kids

have to leave."

"It seems like [new residents and businesses] aren't interested in living here and being a part of a community. It's more like a consumption thing. And that's what especially MTV makes it look like: Here is this already-set-up cool place with all this culture that you can just come and buy and soak up... versus coming here and starting a business that's community-based and meeting people... we used to know all the neighbors of all the shops around here, now we know a few people," she says.

In aggravating an already tense situation, "The Real World" is giving all sides something to use in their plight. Many people have theorized that if MTV had simply taped "The Real World" somewhere in Lincoln Park instead of Wicker Park, the show would've gone off without a hitch. That may or may not be true. But gentrification wouldn't be much of an issue. Retailers would cash in on great advertising and neighbors wouldn't have to confront the issue of affordable housing. They may have welcomed the cast in their bars and restaurants, showing off what a nice place Chicago truly is; although there are stories that, even in bars outside Wicker Park, the cast members have not received the warmest receptions.

As it turns out, Bunim-Murray did consider taping in Lincoln Park. Rick Moskal, director of the Chicago Film Office, assisted in choosing the neighborhood and says they were looking at Lincoln Park for a while. While he wasn't in on the discussions, as the decision of the neighborhood was ultimately the producers', he learned that they were looking for a neighborhood that was "within walking distance of the right kind of nightlife the cast needed access to." Another factor was a neighborhood to provide a low profile to prevent fans from "gathering in front of the house as they have in some other cities."

And therein lie the match, the fuel and the fire. Lincoln Park, presumably, wasn't deemed as cool as Wicker Park. Wicker Park is apparently a place where one can tape a popular TV show about cool culture and cool people while maintaining a low profile. Where MTV can continue its attempts to be the epitome of cool, the very source where all the kids find out what's hot and consume the music and the culture. And while some may see MTV as nefarious in this practice, others see it as benevolent.

Back at Myopic Books when their anti-"Real World" taping sign was still posted, Eaton relays this story: "We had a guy out here yelling at us today. He was saying, 'I don't understand what your problem is! This is free publicity for Illinois. And this is free advertising. And these nice people come in and this is what you do.' Then he's looking at the sign, shaking his head and says, 'Some people are so ignorant!'"

(08/09/2001)

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