

WhoCares

essays by

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Finding Cythera, Disobedient Art, and New Publics

Doug Ashford



The idea is that the activity we undertake with each other, in a kind of agonistic performance in which what we become depends on the perspectives and interactions of others, brings into being the space of our world, which is then the background against which we understand ourselves and our belonging. I find this a compelling account because it stresses historical activity and human creativity, but without falling into a naive view of individual agency or intentionality. The world made in public action is not an intended or designed world, but one disclosed in practice. It is a background for self-understanding, and therefore something not purely individual. It is also immanent to history and practice, unlike ideas of community or identity, which tend to be naturalized as stable or originary.

—Michael Warner, “Queer World Making”¹

My experiences with the capacity of art to re-create public life through performance and play has been made understandable through a history of collaborations: in classrooms, in the museum, in the street, and throughout the social contexts occurring between them. The conflict between these spaces and the habits and events that inform them is the matter that inspired the planning for the conversations that follow. As a consultant on the organization and documentation of *Who Cares*, I was often reminded that the collaborative work artists do to effect public life is intimately linked to the performance and play of conversation. The possibility of transforming a politically silent art system into a variety of discursive and engaged forums has occupied a signal community of artists for many years. The struggle for a truly public context for culture is far from over.

In helping to plan the *Who Cares* project, I looked for political proposals in an unexpected place: easel painting. Historically, painted pictures have modeled a world decolonized from the constraints of official power and subjective pose by visualizing the social relations that can only be built or arranged in a purely invented place. This idea of a painted picture as a performed invention is perhaps as old as pictures themselves. And the dialogic performances of a picture, the collective speculation in the space we hold between us in the viewing of art, are also very old, reaching back to the Enlightenment concepts of “the public sphere,” “the parliamentary room,” and “the politics of virtue.” To get to this collective speculation, I began with the psycho-geographic drift of the sixties and I worked back from that stage of radical public art practices to other precedents; ending with painting as one possible origin of our ability to see modern dialogue as simultaneously aesthetic and political.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, many paintings were made based on the liberating effects of nature on social conversation. There were two in particular that occupied me while I was planning the *Who Cares* discussions: *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* and *The Embarkation for Cythera*, both painted by Antoine Watteau between 1717 and 1719.² Literally pictures of lovers in transit interrupting an ongoing public communion with each other

and the arcadian setting they inhabit, I looked to these images for a way to imagine a resolution to the anxiety I felt (and still feel) when confronted with the conflation of ethical expectations of political result and sensual expectations of pleasure and release found in social dialogue. But these paintings represent more than the traditional salon *parler*.

Although painfully elitist, they offer symbolic possibility of conversation leading to collective excursion, a departure from what is expected in an improvised performance. For me, this is an extremely contemporary proposal. They insist that the tension between the drive toward pleasure and the social necessity of politics are intricately linked in the performance of every cultural exchange. When we dance, we pose and reform. When we converse, we challenge and accept. Paintings of social escape and interaction ask that a viewer accept happiness and knowledge as dialectically interdependent.

Cythera is the island where Venus was born from the collision of the son-castrated genitals of Uranus with the foam of the sea. For Watteau and his audience, it is understood as dramatically metaphoric, a figurative place inspiring the reassignment of desire and morality according to the social hopes of the libertine's imagination. The social conversation that generated sexuality was imperative in discussing this transformation, especially in its insistence that in the alliance with passion all existing aesthetic and political expectations be ignored. What is key here, though, is that it was conversation as subjective experiment that was the bridge to this realization, both for love to develop and for knowledge to be produced. Watteau's scenes represent the ambiguity of conversation as a form of free association—talk as performance, conversational address as drag, and discourse as a form of call-and-response—that in turn predicts and parallels the parliamentary social entreaty, the parley described in the enlightenment philosophy as a potential basis for emancipation. So these paintings of lovers on a trip are more than signposts to pleasure, they are guides to the challenges for public expression. Viewing them, one can imagine how social space must be emptied if it can be designed to accept the discourse of emancipation. Such an “empty” space—capable of representing dissent and difference—still stands as a metaphor for democracy.

Now that the three conversations of *Who Cares* have taken place, I conjure Cythera again as a reminder of how this project began as a series of meetings separated from the necessary productive work of Creative Time: a space that could be somehow emptied of purpose and utility. We wanted participants to be able to speak of the public culture that seemed impossible, to speculate and realign. The poverty of responsive, socially active visual culture in New York City was the genesis, three years in the making, of Creative Time's proposal and of my involvement. My contribution began as a reflection on artists' insistence for the *dialogic* nature of art, for art's potential to create contexts in which groups of people could re-design their relation to each other, to fairness, and to happiness. I wanted these conversations to reflect the potential of art to call for non-normative models of happiness, models that resist those profitable pleasures engineered by the increasingly consolidated ownership of culture. Such calls are a consistent character of all countercultural practices: if we want our happiness, we have to design our own forms of interaction, both physical and social.

My insistence on counterculture in my requests to the participants as an organizing theme for these meetings was not particularly unique.³ There have been calls for reprogramming culture and intellectual life in America for more than thirty years now, from the search for alternatives in museums to free presses, from war resister leagues to commercial-free journalism, from community schools to food co-ops and more. Such calls are increasing now under a condition of growing intellectual expression management, from the anti-abortion and pro-oil lockdown on scientific research to the self-censorship of journalists and the ideological invasion of the academy by censorial “watch groups.” Art and its attending institutions have cyclically responded to such crises, but recent cultural repression dominated by the explicitly dark conflation of a planned deprivation economy and the social terror imposed by our government's sponsorship of endless war, poses a particularly immense social field of repression.

For many involved in cultural organization and discourse today, the progressive role for public art sponsorship and promotion depends on representing often subaltern histories of radical public uses for art—uses that under the eclipse of today's market frenzy are very difficult to discern. Many institutions of art and criticism seem to have selective amnesia concerning work that questioned the ownership of our economies of production, the use or development of cities, and the social function of urban institutions. The paucity of historical thinking in America is an epidemic any teacher can attest to, but it is curious that the capacity to imagine countercultural discourse has diminished even in New York—a city that has inspired so many re-inventions of self and space, that has seen definitions of pleasure change and adapt to the imaginations of its residents.

Accordingly, even though the participants of *Who Cares* were asked to describe *new* possibilities for critical visual forms, they spent a lot of their conversation describing what kind of visual dialogical tactics worked in the *past*. Artists do this. We list and compare, trying to recognize new examples and hoping to mis-recognize official taxonomies of received ideas. Indeed, my inclusion of Watteau on a list of progressive public art practices, which for me includes James Brown, The Guerilla Art Action Group, Archigram, and Louise Lawler, speaks already to this process. One purpose of the *Who Cares* meetings was to compare these lists—to set a new agenda for the possibilities of resistant art rolling into the future and to collectively build, through conversation, a foundation of examples that could be used by future practitioners. Suitably, this publication includes a partial enumeration of references, definitions, and inspirational examples that can be read alongside the testimony and inquiry of the three conversations. In other words, as these conversations evolved as performance, the possibilities of the past could be set alongside speculation for the future.

The following conversations diverted in another important way from planning expectations. Although I wrote in the letters to the participants that I wanted the evenings to be “working meetings,” a central reverberating image for the whole project was not “work” at all. It was *play*—or at least ludic interaction as a potential form of research. This is something embodied by Watteau's pictures and presented or theorized by other enlightenment projects: from Charles Fourier's utopia of “conviviality” to Friedrich Schiller's “play instinct.” Play and experiment is exemplified in many of the practices and problems discussed in these transcripts. For the critical efforts that

we have labeled countercultural, much that is important about play begins with conversation. Equally important though, is an understanding that the emancipatory moment for new communities demands privacy. It is, after all, hard to play in public. Private play, claiming freedom from interference to generate independent discourse, is crucial to developing countercultures. Imagination looks to be separated from the constraints of late capital's mediagenic complicity and the false ideals of "participation" that our neo-liberalism has perfected. Separation from garish examples of marketing as "interaction," the consolidation of media ownership into tinier and tinier spheres of self-reflection, and the literal selling of electoral outcomes through advertising onslaughts is increasingly important to many activists and artists alike.

Although seemingly in contradiction with our topic of the possibilities for public art, the consideration of social subjects is incomplete without an understanding of privacy—how communities redesign themselves in opposition to, or in separation from, dominant culture. I would like to include all communities in this definition: those seeking to escape normative boundaries for desire and sexuality, those creating new languages and subjectivities out of the possibilities that association gives them: clubs, labor unions, consumer cooperatives, user-groups, and civic associations of all kinds. Two generations of feminist and queer social practices attest to the process of separated non-utilitarian conversation's critical relationship to power: In order to raise consciousness we might need to be alone for a while! Importantly, these critical trajectories help us to distinguish between the forms of isolation impressed upon us. With financial deprivation and compulsory pleasure regimes being projected from on high, it is important to discriminate the non-normative effect of self-determined programs. More than ever, artists need to be alone to re-think their relation to an industry overwrought with competition and overrun by market promotion.

In a context of increasingly commercialized relations for visual art production, the management of expression has as much to do with implicitly forcing speech as it does to actively squelching it. A repressive apparatus of official censorship does not only manage our expressions, it also pressures a population to adopt certain stances and attitudes. It is hard to tell what is worse: being told that certain images or ideas are offensive to the majority by a militarized state or being told that to be accepted we must speak a certain way or say a certain thing, as illustrated by recent official demands that we speak English, have a flag on our car, or get married in a chapel. This insidious form of public management through compulsive affirmation has a direct effect on artistic practice. As artists we are barraged by signals in our industry to be positive, encourage participation, and "keep the faith."

Private dialogue as experience can be understood as an independent, aesthetic product in the re-estimation of privacy and friendship.⁴ For my purposes here, it was critical to accept early on that the *Who Cares* conversations would be justified in themselves, separate from any use they might have in the future, separate, certainly, even from their potential publication. The conversations were justified simply in the bringing together of individuals in a temporary space of mutuality. The private, separated time for conversation is a potential space for multiform inclusion. It is here that we might censor ourselves just a little less than in public. Through the

experience of juxtaposition and comparison, the list of points and ideas in talk is metaphorically democratic. Conversational comparison can be seen as a map or a plan, a proposal or a picture. Abstract and romantic in an art historical sense, this visual form of inclusiveness is part and parcel of post-enlightenment aesthetics—from Schiller's suspension of the self to the world in play to the Deleuzian affect of a subjectivity that is always in a state of becoming, the "stammer of inclusion."⁵

And as most of us know, going public is always risky. As Hans Haacke reminded us in the seventies, "art is social grease."⁶ To the managers of public spaces today, relational practices based on the open-ended inclusion of audiences in art world celebrations fit frighteningly well into the logic of uneven social development. An art festival, a public art program, or an art center might be more persuasive and less expensive than a police officer's baton. Just as meta-advertising designers incorporate leftist progressive political trajectories to sell sweaters and suits, public art projects can legitimate the smooth, uninterrupted authority of urban renewal and its attending erasure of cultural difference. Cities now find distinction through art and its industry's symbolic capital. As Miwon Kwon has clearly argued, public art's currency comes in giving cities the identity they have lost to redevelopment while they continue to redevelop.⁷ The expected intervention of "new genre public art" under the official guise of community-based art production was arranged neatly in the 1990s to re-enforce the idea of city as a paradigm of controlled and developed appetites. Even this publication and the process it seeks to engender risk a dilemma: public practices increasingly being linked to the policies of development of a new "cultural class," a demographic addicted to an unending consumption of newness and promotion. This narrative for art is now linked to the design of experiences that form a symbolic foundation of capitalist accumulation.

The difficulty of planning democratic contexts that will effect a replacement of existing discourse is not to be underestimated. Although the conversations for *Who Cares* were planned to make room for the failures that privacy allows, our exchanges often reflected work and careers. The implicit and invisible weight of institutions sponsoring supposed speculative critical forums needs to be better understood. Whose conversation about whom is going to be used by whom? Artists' collaborative agendas, even if designed in private, can be appropriated into the boutique factory that has become the American city. As planners, we should have been more acutely aware of the implicit weight of an institution in purportedly producing private reveries. For many (and specifically, for some who were invited to these talks), any engagement in conversation without the concrete commitment for art sponsorship to disassociate our work from this spectacle is like polishing silverware in a burning house.

From talk to love to revolt. Since the beginnings of modernity, we have seen the notion of happiness linked to emancipation. Again public conversations are asking what kind of freedom particular public practices predict. If we are free, then what are we free to do? In a way, this is one of the first questions informing the modern disruption of private concerns and public occupation. The members of Watteau's libertine courts are in a sense "free" to pursue their own subjective transformation in the separated context of theatrical play. In the associative roles they perform in private collective escape, new subjectivities and experimental forms of political understanding

are experienced. Michael Warner has argued beautifully that the shared performance of private understandings can change public understandings of democracy.⁸ To make private models into “inhabitable worlds,” artists need to convince, seduce, cajole, and strike. For democracy to be modeled in a new way, participants need to be able to speak in dialogue outside of the need for promotion or success. To make private models into inhabitable worlds, artists and all residents of the city need to demand that culture represents the true complexity of their happiness. If that happens here at all in this document, let it be as a model for more.

1 The epigraph to this essay is drawn from Annamarie Jagose, “Queer World Making: Annamarie Jagose interviews Michael Warner,” *Genders* 31, 2000, http://www.genders.org/g31/g31_jagose.html#n11 (accessed June 11, 2006).

2 For a complete discussion see Mary Vidal, *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature, and Talk in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

3 See the full text of my letters to the *Who Cares* participants on page 138.

4 See my essay “The Boy in the Park, or The Miniature and the Model” in Wolfgang Tillmans, ed., *Jochen Klein* (Cologne: Walter Konig, 1998), 75–92. The essay examines how the discrete art object is equal to the more “respected” process of institutional critique in terms of proposing re-alignments of political and aesthetic thinking.

5 See John Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000). I connected to the possibility of the “stammer of inclusion” as a radical formal method through Jan Besemer’s writing on the politics of painting. See Jan Besemer, “Abstraction: Politics and Possibilities.” *X-Tra Contemporary Art Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (year): [page #].

6 Hans Haacke, e-mail message to author, July 17, 2006, in reference to his work *On Social Grease*, 1975.

7 See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002).

8 I am indebted to Michael Warner’s thoughts on performance, politics, and the public sphere: Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter Publics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).



Anywhere in the World

Conversation 1
November 14, 2005

This *Who Cares* discussion was motivated by the cultural phenomenon of art biennials and urban art festivals, and their rise in parallel with the growth of transnational corporate power. A number of globalized industrial and corporate practices—notably the outsourcing and distribution of individuals and labor, often without ties to any particular city, country, or continent—find similarities in the way artists today are asked to be both everywhere and nowhere, and their practices transportable, transferable, yet in some way specific to their location or community of presentation. As Critical Art Ensemble insisted years ago, the nomadic character of critical practices is in response to capitalism that is everywhere and nowhere. In this context, creative practice is challenged to map and model new experiences of citizenship and occupancy.

But in the post-9/11 moment, the promise of participatory and socially involved art practices has only led to constantly suspended hope. The PATRIOT Act and the security culture it has spawned have created a formidable barrier to free artistic exploration and expression. When we consider this in light of the history of the failed institutionalized “community-based” practices of the 1990s, the compounded factors that inhibit those seeking to inspire, fund, or produce sustained radical art practices begin to take shape. It is perhaps fitting, then, that this discussion begins with a look at the impact of these forces on the nature of artistic expression through the participants’ personal experiences, from the tightening of security to the reactions of a fearful public.

During this discussion, participants share experiences from the 1980s and 90s, when public art practice and the idea of community-based initiatives created a context in which artists were put involuntarily at the service of institutions and urban development. But many communicate their belief that local issues generate sustained involvement by a broader audience and fuel larger, global actions. The conversation touches upon the need for discursive spaces—places where people can come together and share a dialogue on art and social issues—and examines how these spaces have enriched artistic practice in the past.

For much of the conversation, the participants consider ways in which art practices can create dialogic and collective representations and effects. Although the discussion revisits the question of art’s political efficacy, eventually the group focuses on how to see beyond the ideologically convenient museum and art fair celebrations of socially relational forms, to a real horizon of new audiences, their politics, and the practices that might affect them.

participants

DOUG ASHFORD, moderator
ANDY BICHLBAUM (THE YES MEN)
MIKE BONANNO (THE YES MEN)
TANIA BRUGUERA
MEL CHIN
DEAN DADERKO
PETER ELEEY
CHITRA GANESH
HANS HAACKE
LUCY LIPPARD
ANNE PASTERNAK
PATRICIA PHILLIPS
MARTHA ROSLER
DAVID LEVI STRAUSS

DOUG ASHFORD The purpose of tonight's conversation is to discuss the context in which we find ourselves, as scholars and artists, in what we now understand as a globalized economy. There are two parallel things that, for me, exemplify this moment.

One is that, as artists, we're expected to do projects that work everywhere, that can function in the present festivalized moment and that, increasingly often, don't speak to local or coherent communities of concern. In terms of the art world's current methods, art is considered socially relational, yet nonspecific. Ideas of local or timely concerns are being left behind.

The parallel for me, which I think is interesting and also perverse, is that in the same way artists are expected to be global and itinerant, whole sections of the economy are also expected to be nomadic. People are expected to work in whatever countries they can find employment while often being denied citizenship. So, I'm hoping that we can speak to that larger economic moment.

I'd like for each of us to describe individual experiences we've had that demonstrate how the nature of public expression has changed in the last five years. I will start. I want to tell you a story about my student who was taking photographs down by **Federal Plaza**. This was a nineteen-year-old kid involved in a simple photojournalistic project. He was taking photographs across the street from the Federal Building and guards came and stopped him. They took him into the basement of the Federal Building and made him empty the film from his cameras. As a teenager, he had little sense of his rights and no idea how to protest legally. When I started doing stuff in the street in 1981, it was an open place for discourse, but now it is seen and experienced by this generation as tremendously regulated.

PATRICIA C. PHILLIPS I am also a teacher and teach at the State University of New York. A SUNY trustee is advancing and advocating for the **Academic Bill of Rights**. This is another very significant public realm or public sphere that is becoming subject to regulations and controls about what people teach and how they teach. It's a disturbing dynamic. I don't want to focus this on academia, but I think it's interesting and alarming how the public is regulated—and who assumes the authority to do this.

ASHFORD Well, now this student and his colleagues are in their studios with eighty other kids making little **cardboard cameras** that don't have film in them. They're going to go back down there next week with all their cardboard cameras and they're going to stand around the Federal Plaza with cameras that have no film in them and see how the security system responds to the fictional cameras.

MEL CHIN Well, I'd advise the students to be cool, but to continue using creativity and to lie if necessary to keep from being beaten or arrested. You know, in 1991, I took 600



Oto Gillen, *Federal Plaza*, 2005

The **Academic Bill of Rights** is a document introduced in October 2003 by Students for Academic Freedom (SAF) and right-wing activist David Horowitz. It lists eight principles that call for an academic environment where decisions are made irrespective of one's personal, political, or religious beliefs. The Bill has come under sharp attack, however, for using egalitarian principles and a self-identified "bipartisan" framework to promote and instill a specific conservative agenda.



Oto Gillen, *Cardboard Cameras*, 2005



Mel Chin, *Support*, 1991

yards of the best selling yellow ribbon and made a thirty-foot rope. I made a noose out of it and hung it up in an oak tree at the McGuinness Boulevard exit of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway where all the traffic flowed into, what was then, the densest yellow-ribbon neighborhood in Brooklyn.

These women came up in a Cadillac and they were from the Veterans of Foreign Wars outpost there. They knew something was up. We were dressed covertly—we had jumpsuits on—and we looked like workers. So we blamed somebody else; that's the first step.

But they said, "Excuse me, exactly what does that mean and what is it for?" And I thought about describing, as an artist, why I did it: How I saw that the war was coming to an end and instead of rejoicing people were crying in their Midwest neighborhoods about wishing the war wasn't over because it meant the yellow ribbon tying club was ending. I was concerned about this emotional suicide—the lack of knowledge about the origins of your emotions—because you should be happy that the war is over.

But instead, I just told them that it was a symbolic rope to hang Saddam Hussein and she said, "Okay, fine." To me, it was more important to have the statement be maintained for as long as it could be, so that there were possibilities for other discourses to happen outside of it, you know?

LUCY LIPPARD You could have told her it was giving her enough rope to hang herself with.

ANNE PASTERNAK When Creative Time did Jenny Holzer's *For the City* project (2004 and 2005) fire engines and police vans were called in to inspect the New York Public Library site because they had gotten a 9-1-1 call that there were terrorists communicating on the library façade.

LIPPARD One if by land, two if by sea.

I live in a very small rural village and I had one of those **rainbow flags** that said, "We the people say no to the Bush agenda" on my barbed-wire fence before the election. And my friends said, "Well, that will last one day." It lasted two days and then it came down and I didn't expect to ever see it again. The day after the election, it turned up—folded very neatly—in my mailbox. Now, what does that mean?

MARTHA ROSLER Those rainbow flags were created by the artists' group I'm associated with, **Artists Against the War**. It was formed on the basis of a group of meetings in the summer of 2002 when we realized that the shit was going to hit the fan.

The group did a draw-in at the Metropolitan Museum, drawing Assyrian objects. They did an **erase-in** where they drew the objects and then erased them. They had a stroller action, wheeling strollers down Fifth Avenue because half the Iraqi population is under fifteen. We've just done a project, which I really wasn't part of because I was away too

much. It's a DVD project, **Disarming Images**, which I think was shown just last week at SVA.

We were intending to do projects that would be in the street. We printed 25,000 of those rainbow flags and they really have been everywhere. We felt that we needed to draw the public into a dialogue about what was going on and hopefully to agitate against the war and against the Bush presidency. We'll do more things.

DAVID LEVI STRAUSS *Disarming Images* was screened four days ago, on November 10, 2005, at the School of Visual Arts Amphitheater in Manhattan, and Barbara Pollack put together a little group of us to speak afterwards. She asked us all—Anne Messner of Artists Against the War, Michael Shulan (who, with Charlie Traub, was instrumental in putting together the *Here Is New York* photographic response to 9/11), Paul Chan, and myself—to respond to two questions: Can artists and writers play a role in creating a culture of dissent? And how do images influence public opinion at a time of war? My response was later published as the article "The Line We're On" in the *Brooklyn Rail*. One of the things that came up in the discussion after the screening was young artists' confusion about how to negotiate the "art and activism" split, and Paul Chan was, I thought, especially articulate about this.

ASHFORD I'm embarrassed to ask a question on these terms, but since art has become legally actionable by our government I'd like to discuss this kind of work—like what is being done by Artists Against the War—illuminates the perceived distinctions out there between art and activism. I know that these distinctions are things that some of us have been battling against for a long time, but do you see that as activism or do you see that as art practice and how did it get started?

ROSLER Well, it was started by a bunch of people sitting around in living rooms, mostly on the Upper West Side, actually. People were saying, "What are we going to do? We have to do something." And, of course, we see it as activism, but it's artists' activism. That is, it takes the form of symbolic activity.

LIPPARD And I hate that distinction.

ASHFORD I know, I know, that's why I said it's something we've been talking about for awhile. On the one hand, as artists we don't want to limit the capacity our work has to engage the social imagination towards disobedience and regeneration. On the other hand, the instrumentalization of culture, including so-called "relational" art practices, seems to liberate only biennial openings.

Artists Against the War (www.aawnyc.org) is a New York-based organization that protests the war in Iraq through visual actions. Since 2004, they have demonstrated at the Metropolitan Museum and Grand Central Station, as well as creating flags, t-shirts, postcards, and stickers that address concerns about the war in Iraq and give voice to dissent.



Erase-In project at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Disarming Images is a 60-minute, three-screen DVD installation documenting non-violent protests in the US against the Iraq War and the "war on terror." Copies of the DVD installation are available for purchase through Artists Against the War.



Jenny Holzer, *For the City*, 2005
Projection at New York Public Library.
©2005 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. "Love Lies Sleeping," from *The Complete Poems: 1927–1979* by Elizabeth Bishop. ©1979, 1983 by Alice Helen Methfessel. Used by permission from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.



Artists Against the War, rainbow flag

ROSLER Well, it's too bad Paul Chan is not here, because this is my biggest argument with him. He always says publicly, "My art and my activism are totally separate." And I always say, "Can't you say they're on a spectrum?" "No, they're totally separate." It's ridiculous that I'm speaking for somebody else, but I think his point may be that his art is riddled with doubt and ambiguity, but there's nothing ambiguous about activism or about what it stands for.

MIKE BONANNO (THE YES MEN) Well, we have a close friend, "Bob," who we work with all the time who thinks that art is totally ineffectual and that activism is only social organizing. Our friend is an artist and he says his art is political, but he says it is also totally ineffectual and, therefore, is not activism.

CHITRA GANESH And does "Bob" feel that the activism is effective in comparison to the art?

BONANNO (THE YES MEN) Well, he considers activism a way of building social networks and social organizing, so that you can have a mass movement. And he constantly says that the thing that builds social networks is not the art, but going door to door, talking to people, and forming coalitions. I don't know. Andy and I don't necessarily believe that, but Bob is really convinced of it. He's been part of activist struggles, even armed activist struggles, over many years, so he's kind of hardcore about it.

But it's part of the discussion, right? How do we bring the symbolic into the development of social networks in new ways? And at what point do you feel uncomfortable with that?

GANESH Well, I think a lot of activism feels symbolic these days too. Meaning, I sometimes wonder whether people are working within outdated organizing structures, particularly certain types of meetings, rallies, and protests, that perhaps were once more effective means of effecting change, but in a contemporary context really may not reach the broader public that they aim to involve—especially within particular sectors of, for example, current anti-war movements or mainstream feminist movements—it can feel like the same group of people over and over again. So these days it seems like the same small group of people at Union Square, perhaps rallying around a cause you believe in and may want to participate in, but it doesn't feel like it's generating a mass movement any more effectively than art does.

TANIA BRUGUERA Yeah, I don't want to offend anybody, but I also think the methods that are being used for activism are really old. They should catch up with new technology. I'm not saying let's use the website the way every website is used. I'm saying, let's analyze the new media and let's see how we can bombard things from those media in a way that's

going to reach people that we are not currently reaching because we are using old methods. We are using old ways to communicate ideas and I think that's where Democrats lose the battle.

For example, I went to Mexico and I saw an impressive **demonstration by farmers**. There were at least 500 people on the street every day for about five hours, shirtless and with their butts out. And I have photos of that. That was the best art piece I've seen. And, of course, that was very unusual. I'm not saying people should do that, but it was a very effective way to demonstrate anger and to demonstrate how low things have gotten.

I have to say, coming from a different place, Cuba, that I feel things are very safe here in the U.S. I mean, people protest here in a very safe way. I don't want anyone to go to prison or whatever, but it's safe in the way the protesters structure the methodology of fighting.

ASHFORD You know, reading about the **anti-NAFTA demonstrations** in Buenos Aires, Argentina two weeks ago, it was pretty incredible.

BRUGUERA You think?

ASHFORD Yeah. Since Seattle and before—ACT-UP, May 1968—the street has been a platform for collective art making. Civil disobedience is an art history too. Emphasizing difference between symbolic and real dissent brings great comfort to those who manage expression.

BRUGUERA And I think we need to learn from real people. As artists, we are not real people. We need to listen and see like real people and not be so literary. Real people have amazing ways of communicating, because they cannot talk, they don't have newspapers, they don't have anything, so they talk with gestures, symbolic gestures, and that's very clear.

PASTERNAK I have to disagree. We are real people. I think it's really important for us to honestly take a look at who our audience is and recognize that we're a part of our own audience. That idea of separation really reinforces our marginalization within the culture.

ROSLER I don't know if we're "real" people or not. I certainly take your meaning, Tania, to be that we are an educated group and have sophisticated backgrounds of one sort or another. But, regarding the question of old methods, I think that there's one thing every ruling group knows, which is that feet on the street bring down governments and that there's no arguing with that. When you can get people out into the street, it shakes governments and it shakes regimes and that is the endgame.



demonstration by farmers



anti-NAFTA demonstrations

BRUGUERA But are these groups bringing “the people” to the street or are they bringing a small number of dedicated people to the street?

LEVI STRAUSS Upwards of 750,000 real, dedicated people went into the streets here in New York on the eve of the **Republican National Convention**, to say “No, you will not come in here and use this city as a backdrop for your war-mongering propaganda,” and “No, you will not hold your party here and push your corporatist agenda and expect us to just stand by and watch.” It was a symbolic gesture, yes, but symbolic gestures are what’s driving the whole thing from the Right. I think the idea, put forward by the regime now in power, that “real people” necessarily have different political and social interests than the “intellectual elite” (including artists and writers, but also the press) needs to be confronted and criticized. Bush/Cheney and company have put on “real people” drag (a symbolic gesture), but they represent the real (corporate, financial) elite in this country, and their interests are definitely at odds with the interests of the vast majority of Americans.

ROSLER I actually also wanted to address Chitra’s argument, your rightful uncertainty about the same group meeting over and over again. I see this as the old-fashioned flame analogy, that sometimes it’s a pilot light and it burns low, but it’s a form of internal organization. It keeps a transmission and a confirmation of ideas that have certain ritualistic qualities that are absolutely essential, so that you don’t have to start over each time.

It took how long to end the Vietnam War? At least ten years. And yet the organization of people out there protesting, for example, at the Republican National Convention happened in an infinitely shorter time.

I think that there are many ways in which artists engage in what’s been called interventionism and I don’t think there are too many artist-interventionists at this table, except for the Yes Men. But think about **Tutte Bianchi** in Italy and **Yomango**, or even **ATTAC**, which was formed by the editorial board of a monthly newspaper, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and yet has had resonance in various countries. These are people who engage in performative events that are, nevertheless, political in intent. I think it’s a mistake to say that one thing works and another doesn’t. I think the Right shows up with its base and so do we.

As a young person protesting against the Vietnam War, I will never forget my friends who were ten years older saying, “That street stuff—that’s old. It’s been done; it’ll never work.” And so I now want to say to my younger friends who say, “But it’s old, it doesn’t work”: Yes, it works.

GANESH Well, I’m young and I think it does work, But I would like to see this organizing expand the contexts in which it happens. When it’s happening in Union Square, it can feel very abstract and people are often shopping and not paying

attention. But say it was happening in your local subway station or in your neighborhood where you are a familiar face and you were standing out there; then people might actually come up and ask you, “What are you doing?” and then you would talk to them, and have a much more intimate engagement. I think it’s crucial to organize and dialogue in specifically local residential contexts, such as your own neighborhood, or in neighborhoods where those affected by a said issue may live or work. I have noticed certain issues that slip under the radar of the mainstream press—such as, for example, the homophobic murder and dismemberment in the subway of a gay youth by the name of **Rashawn Brazell**, the police harassment of transgender youth in the West Village, or the inhumane treatment of detainees in the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn—have gotten local residents to mobilize around them. And in this way, the local and global intersect as several cross sections of ethnicity, class, and religion come together to address local instances of broader issues, such as human rights violations, or gender-based discrimination.

DEAN DADERKO I’ve also had an interesting experience that relates to this. I was part of a discussion that was organized by an artist named Matt Keegan. It was basically about gay visibility in the art world. A large group of people came together, and what’s most important and pertinent to this discussion is that the group was intergenerational. And so everybody started talking and, all of a sudden, an artist who was of an older generation stood up in the back and said, “Well, we’ve been through this already,” and I stood up and said, “What’s important here is that NOW we’re all here together in this room, and we can help each other.”

What I think is really interesting is that there are these opportunities to bridge past and present so that work that has already happened, like community organizing, doesn’t have to be done over and over again.

CHIN That bridge is also good for getting advice. Bill Dobbs and I were at an **ACT-UP** presentation. And I remember I saw the ACT-UP drag queens up there, and I said, “Bill, Channel 13 is going to give you three seconds and they’re going to shoot that as a protest and that will make your message ineffectual.” We can all take a lesson from some of the older generation’s efforts, such as the 1968 Olympics and Tommie Smith and John Carlo’s black power salute that embedded in our memory a powerful image of civil disobedience.

It’s not like you’re wrong with your method or your belief isn’t firm. I think understanding the methodologies that will enhance or catalyze public expression is probably what we’re talking about. I mean, just get to step one first.

I think the desire to win has taken away people’s ability to even begin to express themselves, and that includes myself. Art as activism is often about method. So it’s like organizing, if you can’t get to the end product, create the pool to begin the catalytic thrust of the work.



Chitra Ganesh, *Forever Her Fist*, 2006, from the comic series *Tales of Amnesia*

Rashawn Brazell—a 19-year-old African-American gay man from the Bushwick section of Brooklyn—disappeared from his home in February 2005. His dismembered body parts were found a few days later in garbage bags in the NYC subway and in other locations throughout the borough. Though his story was initially not covered in most mainstream media outlets, it incited overwhelming responses from bloggers, activists, and outraged community members. A community effort helped set up the Rashawn Brazell Memorial Fund with a set of initiatives that include creative responses to social injustice, support for LGBT teens, and critical attention to issues of intolerance.

ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was founded in New York City in March 1987. It is a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.



Republican National Convention

Tutte Bianchi is an Italian civil disobedience movement named “all white” for the white overalls they wear during demonstrations. The Tutte Bianchi believe it is important to concentrate on direct action tactics. They received some attention in 2000 during the Prague World Bank meeting and in 2001 during the Genoa G-8 meeting by using their bodies to push against police barricades in non-violent protest.

Yomango is a “lifestyle project” that originated in Spain in 2002 to promote shoplifting as a form of civil disobedience and as a survival technique. The name, Yomango, is meant to be a parody of the Mango clothing line popular in Spain and is also Spanish slang for “I steal.” The Yomango actions include workshops to train for civil actions and events such as stolen-goods fashion shows.

The Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l’Aide aux Citoyens (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens, **ATTAC**) is an activist organization founded in France in 1998. Originally created to pressure governments to introduce a tax on foreign exchange transactions, the organization now devotes itself to a wide range of globalization issues. One ATTAC slogan states: “The World is not for sale.”

Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz collaborated on several activist projects in the late 70s. In December 1977 they organized *In Mourning and In Rage*, a response to the sensational media coverage surrounding the Los Angeles Hillside Strangler. They used the media as a performance venue by designing a press event as a performance. [For a full description of the project see Moira Roth, "Interview with Suzanne Lacy," 1990, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lacy90.htm> (accessed June 10, 2006).]



Mel Chin, *Truth Hertz*, June 20, 1994

ARTISTS CALL Against U.S. Intervention in Central America was a nationwide mobilization of writers, artists, activists, artist organizations, and solidarity groups that began in New York in 1983. Quickly mobilizing artists and their organizations across the country, ARTISTS CALL collectively produced over 200 exhibitions, concerts and other public events over a period of twelve months. These events increased awareness of our government's involvement in state terrorism across the hemisphere, linked the notion of aesthetic emancipation to revolutionary politics, and provided concrete resources for the cultural workers, and public intellectuals in the region and in exile. An excerpt from the ARTISTS CALL general statement published in January 1984 reads, "If, as artists, we can silently witness the destruction of other cultures, we forfeit the right to make art of our own." Image: Peter Gourfain, Button for ARTISTS CALL Against U.S. Intervention in Central America, 1984



LIPPARD In the late '70s, **Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz** did media analysis—monitoring TV coverage. Then they made their visually dramatic protest performances on violence against women just the right length for a TV spot, so the media would be less likely to edit and the artists would have more control over what went out. That's a lesson that seems to have been lost, or wasn't picked up by other artists.

CHIN But now the media is multinational, they are global networks. The Yes Men have been able to do some amazing excursions into it. My own excursions were not so much a planned artwork, but a way to find out what motivates media, so I did some experiments. I was selling O.J. Simpson t-shirts in front of the Los Angeles Courthouse on the day of arraignment. The shirts said, "**Truth Hertz**"—neither guilty nor innocent, justice was for lease.

It was a weird experience. Because, at the same time, there was an activist demonstration in the street against violence against women, with actresses. And everybody had their O.J. T-shirts. And the cameras, it was weird, that moment, it's like they caught up and said, "We've seen protests before." And then someone said, just like wildfire, "They're merchandising murder." And the cameras flipped and they spent all their time on the vendors. The whole day was spent on that.

So the question becomes: How do you even create the methodology to spark another kind of attitude? How do you use rumor, effectively?

The point of sharing this story was that I was surprised. I was doing this research, but trying not to be an artist. Instead, I was trying to make a couple bucks and cash in like those guys in the street. And then I learned something about how the street reacts. It's almost like we have to hit the streets again in order to see what they are about.

ASHFORD Over the years there have been so many projects that have created a symbolic power from human interaction and today such protest is either not growing into larger forms of public expression or isn't being supported by art institutions.

As artists, we've banded together periodically. A great example is something Lucy Lippard, Martha Rosler, and I were involved in, **ARTISTS CALL Against U.S. Intervention in Central America** in 1984. It mobilized art institutions across the whole country—from galleries to museums to the covers of magazines—to speak out publicly against U.S. military intervention in this hemisphere.

LIPPARD Thirty cities across the country, some thirty galleries in New York City, and some events in Canada too.

ASHFORD It was a way in which the legitimating capacity of our industry—of our institutions—was mobilized. So often I think we separate ourselves from our institutions artificially. As Peter reminded me, these are our institutions. How do

we now, in a moment of political crisis and war, mobilize our own institutions? **ARTISTS CALL** Against U.S. Intervention in Central America and other examples prove it has been done before. Activism and art were put in proximity to show how both create contexts for truth.

LIPPARD When we're talking about how 700,000 people came out for the Republican National Convention, how were they gotten out? I'm a dinosaur since I'm not even on the Internet and don't do e-mail. I live off the grid, I haul water, and so forth, so I'm like in another world. So I'm curious, what type of community access do we have now? Was the organizing all done on the Internet? No more getting small groups together and getting them to go out and have more meetings...none of that?

PASTERNAK No, not much of that. There has been a recent shift in public opinion about the war in Iraq. Do you think it is related to activism or that it's the result of the media's change in strategy?

LIPPARD Well, the media has to pick up on *some* things that are going on, but they control the spin.

ROSLER Yeah. I heard some guy on the radio this morning, a political correspondent for *The Daily News*, the chief of their Washington bureau. He said forty-seven times, "The American public has made up its mind about Iraq. It knows what it thinks."

BONANNO (THE YES MEN) Mm-hmm. But I think that what Lucy just said is kind of critical. Right now, we could organize a flash mob over the Internet that could maybe get a couple of thousand people to show up at an instant to do something ridiculous in any given place. The Internet creates a context for social networks, but it doesn't actually make them. And I think that's why our friend, Bob, who I referred to earlier, says that art isn't activism. I think this is the critical issue, what kind of networks are those and are they temporary or are they more sustaining?

ASHFORD We know that those social networks are there, we also know that there are coherent communities that exist and we know that there's a sense of public outrage. Why is it so difficult for artists to be put into sustainable working relationships with those communities?

We seek people out individually in our practices. We're asked by curators and organizers to do a project at this festival location or this biennial and we participate in it, site-specifically as artists parachuted in as social actors. It's often a short-term relationship. But there are many other people and historical practices, like Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle and **Street-Level Video** of Chicago or Rick Lowe and **The Project Row Houses** of Houston who have developed larger social collaborations that have sustained themselves.

Street-Level Video began as a one-day video-installation block party called *Tele-Vecindario: A Street-Level Video Project*, organized by four video artists including Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle. The project taught video techniques to over fifty teenagers from Chicago's West Town neighborhood, who represented their lives and experiences on the 75 monitors installed up and down the street. The success of the event led to the founding of **Street-Level Youth Media**, a storefront project that teaches kids media literacy and video production skills.



Project Row Houses is a neighborhood-based art and cultural organization located in Houston, Texas's Third Ward. It was established in 1993 on a site of twenty-two abandoned shotgun houses to connect the work of artists with the revitalization of the community. The project was inspired by the work of African-American artist Dr. John Biggers, who celebrated the social significance of the shotgun house community in his paintings.

I would like to get to some sort of tactical discussions. Who are our audiences? When and where and how do we work with them in ways that will create public expressions of resistance in public places?

I remember years ago, Hans, you telling me as your student that it's not the work, it's the writing and all that information that happens around the work that matters, the secondary expressions.

BRUGUERA The problem I've found in contemporary practice is that artists are talking to artists. They're not talking to a broader audience that is not involved in the art world.

LIPPARD But this has always been a problem. I mean, in the old days, I remember spending months doing huge art projects for a big Washington march and having the organizers, Leslie Cagan or somebody, saying at the last minute, "Oops, we're running out of time, we'll just cut the poetry or we'll cut the performances with these giant sculptures," that we'd spent months making... [Laughter]

PHILLIPS In a recent performance at the Bardavon 1869 Opera House in Poughkeepsie, New York, Laurie Anderson talked about a trajectory audience. She said that you start as a child performing in your home for your family and friends. Then as you develop as an artist, of course, the audience becomes much, much larger and more diverse, and finally at the end of your life you end up back in that home with family and a group of friends. It is a Shakespearean life and artistic trajectory.

I thought it was interesting, but I also thought it was too linear. I think it actually works in a much more cyclical way. There are opportunities to work more intimately and at a smaller scale, and then there are those opportunities to work much more broadly and expansively and they somehow have to work together. You have to figure out how to do both.

Maybe this goes back to methodology, which we're also talking about. I think it's never just either/or, it's trying to determine how to navigate or orchestrate a number of scales and trajectories.

ASHFORD From my own experience, working in the 1980s and 90s, the momentum around public art practice and particularly the idea of community-based arts initiatives put artists in a context in which we were asked to seek out relationships with audiences that were different than traditional museum audiences. But we were also loaded with reductive ideas of audience often designed by social workers.

This instrumentalized "community-based" culture created a context in which artists were at the service of institutions. Not just institutional development, but of urban development overall. This has happened to everybody at this table, I would think.

ROSLER Pink frosting on gentrification.

ASHFORD Yeah, a new gentrification.

ANDY BICHLBAUM (THE YES MEN) I think it comes down to the local/global thing that Doug started out with, such as the fact that the art world privileges a kind of pseudo-global view of things. And local issues are often what are most generative of effective art that can gather people together and get large numbers of people directly involved in things. Look at the mass protests that have actually changed things. In 1943, President Roosevelt changed some major legislation just because of the threat of blacks converging on Washington to protest segregation at a time when blacks were so important in the war effort. You know, that was a visceral issue and, so often, art is about issues that are disconnected from anything that's going on. I think institutions need to focus differently and encourage different sorts of practices, but I don't know how that can be done.

PASTERNAK Artists can work without institutions. Let's not forget about the power of the artists' individual and collective practices...

BICHLBAUM (THE YES MEN) Actually, we've depended on institutions. But I'm not putting ourselves forward as the kind of artists who work on local issues. I mean, we've definitely worked on global issues, almost by definition. I'm talking about people who react to local concerns, local situations; who create things, do things that address those situations effectively; and who get other people on board. Art institutions almost never see those relationships as valuable.

LIPPARD But the art world brings legitimacy and resources to activism. Let's face it, the general public is bored by all the information they need to make sensible decisions, and artists can give it a twist, a jolt that makes them pay attention. For instance, I'm involved in an organization in the Southwest working on environmental issues, especially water, and when we had a water symposium at the Center for Contemporary Art a lot more people came than to a similar thing at the community college that sounded boring even though it probably went deeper into the issues. I'm not sure it was the art itself that brought people in, but it was the mixture of art and information that was attractive. So that mixture can be potent, but our art institutions do about a tenth of what they should do to follow this up.

CHIN Yes, but art is scary right now. We live in a time of fear in art. It's kind of a scary thing. This thing about institutional support is complicated. Do you really think the people on the boards of those museums are really all like-minded like those of us sitting here? I don't know, maybe there are a couple of spies sitting right here, you know? [Laughter]



Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani, *Index of the Disappeared*, 2005 (installation view)

Cities, Art, Recovery Summit, curated by Radhika Subramaniam and sponsored by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, was held from September 8-11, 2005. The event featured roundtable discussions, performances, films, and art installations that promoted a public exchange on how people remember and rebuild after tragedy and how the arts are crucial to recovery.

Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC), founded in 1973 by David Rockefeller, serves as the creative hub for connecting residents, tourists, and workers to Lower Manhattan's vast and vibrant arts community and is a principal player in the redevelopment of the downtown area. LMCC's programs include the Workspace:120 Broadway artist residency; Swing Space, matching 100,000 sq. ft. of vacant commercial space with artists and organizations; free outdoor performances and a summer-long arts festival; as well as annually distributing 1.5 million dollars in grants to artists, organizations, and workshops in the downtown arts community.

At the museums, you have extremely conservative people that believe in art of a certain fashion. It's about class and they're still there.

So how are you going to come in and say, "Well, we want to hit the street and shake things up"? There's a relationship with the military and economic forces and we're just a little peanut, you know?

ASHFORD One institution that has protected me over the years is the social project of the academy. As a teacher among others, sharing skepticism as a creative tool has been crucial. And teaching is a creative practice of intense complexity.

GANESH There's no doubt that the skills I've been practicing as a teacher have definitely helped me figure out how to engage multiple audiences with my own work as well. As we had just mentioned, it's not just about the art alone, but also how the art gets written about critically. And I think this is equally true with how the art is discussed and brought into everyday conversation or a broader public.

ASHFORD Can you give an example of using pedagogical tools to change the audiences addressed in public work?

GANESH Sure. I've been working on an ongoing collaborative project with a friend and colleague, Mariam Ghani. Recently for the **Cities, Art, and Recovery Summit**, which looked at what roles artists play in responding to tragedy or crisis, we built a reading room and library around detention and deportation. It was there throughout the conference, but it wasn't clear from the conference materials how people should use this space, or that they were even invited to interact with the materials in our installation. It became our responsibility to get people in there and invite those who had contributed materials to our archive to use the space and in turn bring their own people in. But this was difficult to actualize because many of them are extremely busy, full-time activists who weren't able to put this extra effort in. So, understanding the fact that actively bringing in an audience was part of our role and incorporating that into our practice necessitated the use of those pedagogical tools I use in my own teaching—bringing in a group of viewers who may not be familiar with contemporary art, having them interact with an art-going audience that may already be familiar with the **Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's** programming, and facilitating discussions between two pretty divergent audiences. And in this process, using the strategies you might use for seventh or twelfth grade classes—asking open-ended questions, eliciting the viewers' prior knowledge and experience, and connecting that to the artwork—are all successful techniques for having a critically minded discourse around the work with adults as well.

ASHFORD A space that creates conversation between different people is beautiful.

DADERKO I think one of the things that's probably most lacking in New York, at least for me, is the idea of the discursive space. Because these days certainly, you walk into a gallery and you walk out. You're not there to talk about what's there or to have these conversations. And somehow I think that really is the most problematic thing, that this kind of ideology doesn't circulate within that system or doesn't very often.

ASHFORD But then, Dean, you have organized and designed many different social contexts in New York City where that has happened. **Parlour Projects** functioned as a discursive space, right?

DADERKO I was seeing work in studios and I was realizing that this work wasn't being presented in galleries because the galleries didn't know how to contextualize, engage, and sell it. It's a whole other side of the system, it's a monster, in a way.

I'd worked at a commercial gallery, as director for Andrew Kreps, and one of the things that we did was when we had an exhibition we'd ask the artist, "Okay, do you want to come in and we'll do a public talk about the exhibition?" And that was radical for people. People didn't expect the artist to come in and be available to talk about their work.

LIPPARD But that's why artists' groups have been so effective. I think back to the **Art Workers Coalition**. I got radicalized by sitting around with artists brainstorming about what to do next, listening to people who were better informed than I was and had wild ideas that were contagious.

ASHFORD And to differ with you, Mel, I sort of believe that those agendas can be understood by even the most conservative museum board as being an important part of your institutional mission. I mean, there are examples of this happening. Even in the context of a war culture like we live in, corporations can be shamed into understanding that the radical discourse between artists is one of the reasons that art happens. If they want to be involved in it, they have to be involved in all of it.

CHIN How long can you wait for change? Strategy can also be put into this context of patience, of what you catalyze in order to have the next effect happen; to provoke thought or even to provoke expression may be good.

In 1995, the **GALA Committee** was founded to create a conceptual art project for two years on prime time television inserting ideas into *Melrose Place*. It's a project where it's hard to gauge impact because of its viral lifestyle. Jump to 2001. You have a chemical industry newsletter, in England, where an article on RU-486 shows women

Parlour Projects, whose name was inspired by the French parlour, meaning "to talk," operated from January 2000 to November 2004 in the front room of an apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Curated by Dean Daderko, Parlour Projects presented mostly solo exhibitions and paid particular attention to work that was performance-based or interactive. Exhibition artists included Daniel Bozhkov, Karin Campbell, Anoka Faruqee, and Inhwan Oh.

Art Workers Coalition (AWC) was a New York-based anti-hierarchical organization of artists founded in 1969. The group's early agenda was refined during an "Open Hearings" in which artists and critics spoke. The group demanded equal exhibition opportunities for artists of color and women, and expanded legal rights for all artists. The AWC split in 1970. One faction became involved in the anti-war movement, while another became the Art Workers Community, which continued as a service organization for several years, offering health insurance, a credit union, and publishing the *Art Workers News*.



The **GALA Committee** (a conflation of Georgia/Los Angeles) was a group of students and faculty from the University of Georgia and CalArts founded in 1995 by Mel Chin. The group was organized around developing site-specific art objects/props for the set of the TV series *Melrose Place*. After two seasons and the creation of more than 150 props, the project entitled *In the Name of the Place* ended by being sold at auction at Sotheby's Beverly Hills branch and was included in the 1997 exhibition *Uncommon Sense* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Santiago Sierra is a Spanish performance artist internationally known for his controversial work. In a work titled *245m³* (2006), he pumped car exhaust fumes from six parked cars into a former synagogue in Pulheim-Stommeln, Germany. This created a gas chamber filled with lethal levels of carbon monoxide. After signing waivers, visitors were allowed to enter the synagogue while wearing gas masks.



Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO) was founded in 1989 when it switched the voiceboxes of three hundred Barbie™ and G.I. Joe™ dolls during the Christmas shopping season. The BLO's goal was to correct the problem of gender-based stereotyping in children's toys. After completion of the operation, the G.I. Joe doll said phrases like, "I love school. Don't you?" while Barbie said, "Dead men tell no lies." Image: *The Yes Men, Barbie Liberation Organization*

protesting in the streets, right? And then the side picture is a still of Alison of *Melrose Place* with her RU-486 quilt, as seen on the show. So you have a conceptual public art project related to a public protest. I mean, things take time.

I see an anxiety in this discussion, but there are different kinds of strategies that could free us or free the art community and institutions. Do you think institutions would support things that take time? Because usually they want immediate gratification. How many people saw that show? How many people did it transform? Time is everything!

LIPPARD I think it's also important to talk about the failures, because one reason we're always reinventing the wheel is, frankly, every artist who's done anything in public thinks that it was a great success, even when it was clearly not. But they say, "Oh, ten people came up to me and said their lives have been changed," and so forth. It's hard to get people to even admit to the failures.

HANS HAACKE Perhaps I should pick up on what Doug remembered me saying about secondary expression, as he called it, namely the talk and the writing that is triggered once a work is out in the public arena. It can, indeed, have an important impact. It is unpredictable, though. You can rig it to some degree but the means to do so are limited. In the terms in which we are talking at the moment, it would be a "success" if it is picked up by the media. Whether it is also of interest in other respects is an entirely different story!

PASTERNAK Usually, Hans, widespread dialogue means controversy is brewing.

HAACKE Yes, for better or worse that is often the case. The Yes Men have done it very well. On the other hand, the games **Santiago Sierra** has been playing are distasteful.

ASHFORD Yes Men, maybe you can speak publicly about using press releases and stuff. I'm remembering the **Barbie Liberation Organization**, where you sent press releases secretly behind the scenes to get the press to respond in ways that were not expected.

BONANNO (THE YES MEN) If the goal is to have a public message, then the goal is to have a public message go through the media, which has its own set of compromises. So controversy can be useful and, if you get shut down, it could be desirable, but it depends on whether it's important to have the art presented or not, because not having the art could be more powerful in terms of the message getting to people.

But it's not necessarily a better thing or a worse thing, because then there's the question of whether the art is useful politically or not. And it can be, I think it can be.

PASTERNAK Success could be defined by the controversy an artwork garnered.

BONANNO (THE YES MEN) I don't think that you could say, across the board, that it's either one way or the other.

BICHLBAUM (THE YES MEN) Regardless, though, I think we have to realize that we're talking about one of two kinds of successes. All of this is the pilot light kind of success. Keeping the hope alive, keeping the message out there so that we don't have to rebuild everything next time around and when the conditions for change arrive, then, it must have ...

ROSLER Well, you're helping to make new conditions.

BICHLBAUM (THE YES MEN) Yeah, maybe contributing to making them arrive, but mainly that happens somewhere else, somehow else—namely, with the other kind of success, which would actually be bringing change on, and I think that would depend on having more local approaches to things, institutionalizing local approaches somehow and making that more palatable.

BONANNO (THE YES MEN) Andy is talking about these galvanizing community projects and I was thinking about a predecessor to the Yomango people who go out and shoplift, as the only uncommodifiable act.

ROSLER But they make a big show about it ...

BONANNO (THE YES MEN) Yeah, they do. It's very clever, it's fun, and they do make theft fashionable.

But, prior to that, some of them had been part of this group called the **Fiambrera** and they were engaged in community projects that were really quite incisive. Through food and music, they would really get community support for anti-gentrification measures and things like that. They built these incredibly strong social networks that were able to successfully overturn new laws and efforts for gentrification in Madrid and Seville, and in Barcelona, to a lesser extent.

To come not full circle, but partway back, that kind of makes use of the idea of pre-Internet social organizing. I mean, they were doing things that didn't involve the Internet at all, that just involved their roots in their community, and making sure that they could talk to everybody locally as well as their elected representatives.

And then, through the Internet, they would distribute this internationally. Through a website they could say, "Hey, look what we did through these symbolic acts." A lot of their projects were symbolic, like going through the city of Seville and putting these little tiny flags in every pile of dog shit. This is an important example that I come back to in terms of seeing the local and bringing it to the global.



Fiambrera Obrera is a Barcelona-based open collective that intervenes in arenas of high political conflict, such as the borders between rich and poor countries, or the inner cities of Madrid, Barcelona, or Seville. They believe in direct action using tactical principles both in the street and on the internet. Image: *Fiambrera Obrera, Si 8 Do, 1999*

BICHLBAUM (THE YES MEN) They also tapped into local customs. There would be these big parades where they would carry the saints through the streets and they would work with the people organizing those parades to protest things. So, for example, at a certain point in the parade it's traditional for a flamenco singer to turn and belt out a big flamenco song for the mayor who's on the balcony. And they arranged it so that it was a protest song that he belted out. I can't remember the exact issue; it was about building, turning a park into a garage. But things like that made Fiambrera's actions really powerful.

PASTERNAK Hans, earlier you mentioned that media coverage and the talk around a project determines its success. Do you feel that way in every case? If the media's message takes over, that personal encounter an individual has with an artwork is diminished or even lost.

HAACKE I am not suggesting artists should operate according to the criteria that determine the news cycle. In fact, I am a bit uncomfortable with our use of the word "success," particularly when applied to evaluating artworks. It risks reducing them to something rather one-dimensional. Communication and interaction among people are more complex. Reaching them and affecting their perception of the world occurs at many different speeds and many different levels. Even though we have reason to be impatient about what's happening today, we shouldn't underestimate the potential of the slow burn.

In the "good old days" of the Vietnam War and Ronald Reagan's messing around in Central America, the art world was politically engaged; artists (among them many blue chip artists), prominent galleries, and collectors got involved. Today that's not cool. It can hurt one's career and one's business. Sure, everybody agrees, the U.S. invasion of Iraq is a complete fiasco, with an unconscionable toll that's rising every day. But who really cares? Over here we are safe, there is no draft, a lot of money is around, and the art market is doing well.

ROSLER Well, actually, a lot of people care, come on! Let's get back to Dean's discursive space argument.

The education department at, of all places, MoMA, ran a panel last summer before the election on what artists can do about politics. And it was really interesting for many reasons. First, that it happened at all. Second, that it happened at P.S. 1 in Queens, so it was basically held at the outpost. Third, that everybody chosen for the panel (except for one person who was a friend of the man who organized it) had some kind of identity politics as the rationale for being there.

So, it was invoking a past model in order to justify something else. And everybody except Adrian Piper, who arrived late and gave a really wonderful talk about the shape of things, was vacillating, saying "On the one hand, on the

other hand." The cartoonist **Tom Tomorrow** was there, and he kept saying, "Luckily, I'm not in the art world."

So this audience was full of young artists sitting, leaning forward on their seats, and it wasn't until Adrian came in late and gave them an analysis of what was going on in the real world that they sat back and breathed a sigh of relief, because they were waiting to be told.

Of course, this was before the election. "This is what we can all do. Let's all rise up now and we'll have group meetings and we'll do this." In other words, people really wanted to have some kind of discussion about how they could insert themselves in the political process.

DADERKO Yeah, that's right. And I wonder whether those people that were sitting forward were given a chance to speak during that panel?

ROSLER Well, they all expressed disappointment that everybody was so mushy. But the other thing is that back in the 80s when theory (that is, conversation) was fashionable, the Whitney used to run these wonderful seminars for artists and you couldn't get in the door; they were so oversubscribed. So I'm on the education board, I'm looking at their upcoming lectures and I say, "So these are art-appreciation lectures, right? How about the ones we used to have where it would be subjects of interest to artists?" And they said, "Oh, that's an idea."

So my current thing is "Why don't we go back?" Because, in fact, I think there is a significant cohort of younger artists who are interested. **16 Beaver**, for instance, what they do is sit around and educate themselves and make contacts—and it's not like they're a political cabal. They're not a cell, they're artists. They are completely involved in reading, educating, and making contact with and bringing in artists who are activists elsewhere; and yet they have a very low profile here as themselves. But I take it that there's a lot of desire for conversations and so on.

LIPPARD But I think it should come out of the artists rather than the institutions. I don't trust the institutions.

ROSLER There's often not a place for it to happen. I'm saying that, in the few instances I've seen where there is a little door open, people rush to come in.

DADERKO Yeah, I often go to the Studio Museum in Harlem, because the public programs that Sandra Jackson is organizing up there are fantastic. The level of discussion feels really vital.

I was at a discussion where **Glenn Ligon** was sitting up on a stage and somebody said to him, "What you're doing isn't art. What's art about what you're doing?" And just to be able to have that level of questioning happen openly, you know it's a fantastic thing that they're doing. That is encouraging.

Tom Tomorrow is the creator of *This Modern World*, an award-winning weekly cartoon of social and political satire.

16 Beaver is the address of a space in New York City's Financial District initiated and run by artists to create and maintain an ongoing platform for the presentation, production, and discussion of a variety of artistic, cultural, economic, and/or political projects. Since its inception in 1999, the group has organized more than 200 events in a range of formats including lunches, walks, film screenings, readings, panels, and artist presentations.



Glenn Ligon, Prisoner of Love #4, 1992



Mel Chin, *Revival Field*, 1991–present

George Frost Kennan was a U.S. advisor and diplomat. In the late 1940s, his writing inspired the Truman Doctrine. He is best known for the policy of containment towards the Soviet Union—that is, keeping its influence and expansion in check—which made him a key figure in the emergence of the Cold War. The State Department's Policy Planning Study 23 of 1948, which Kennan helped author and which was famously quoted by Comsky, states, "We have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population.... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy.... Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity.... To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming.... We should cease to talk about vague and unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization." Pages 510 to 529 of the document—which includes the excerpt above—are available online, <http://www.why-us.org/pps23.shtml> (accessed July 10, 2006).

CHIN People who know me from *Revival Field* think I'm an eco-artist because of it. But it's a lesson about success and failure, because when the chair of the NEA rejected it, everybody—ABC, NBC—wanted me to argue for it on television. I said "No," to all that, because a year before, when I gave up making all studio art to investigate this concept, the first polluter I called was in petroleum and he was being prosecuted. I told him the idea, this would be the first project in the world and it would be great PR and all this stuff. And he just said "No," flat out. He said, "If you're an artist, all you want is publicity, because that's what I know about artists."

So, I did not go on television. If I had, I would have been on the news fulfilling his prophecy. It would have been a year of negotiations with a state senator and everybody on up, in order for him to say, "I told you so. I'm not going to allow him to do it." So I reduced the conversation to the issue of how public funds are generated and how they are spent and decided by one person. Meanwhile, I continued the negotiations to start the first *Revival Field*. And so, failure in a sense. But, now there are labs and businesses all doing green remediation because of that. And, someday, there will be a *Revival Field* because of it.

You have to make some decisions, if you're going to be an activist. To me, it's a success, but what we're talking about is time and delaying gratification.

ROSLER You know, there's the *succès d'estime* and the *succès de scandale*. So the question is: Which one are we interested in? I think they do often conflict, but, obviously, if these are agitational things that we're involved in there are differences between an ecological issue and a directly political issue and one related to something like a war. We can see it's not that one has priority over the other, but they do have different time scales in which they can unfold.

There's a certain urgency to try to organize people for an election, for example, or against killing people in foreign lands, which is again a little bit different.

CHIN We have fifty years of American foreign policy that began with a certain kind of ideology by **George F. Kennan** and Truman. Chomsky indicated from his understanding and exposure of their policy, that the critical term that would have obstructed us from being the number-one global power after World War II was the word "human rights." And the way we have to obscure our actions in the world is to say that we're there to defend or promote democracy. So every time I hear "democracy," it scares me too.

LIPPARD But artists do provide models. And it's not always easy. Martha, remember that time we were sitting around in somebody's studio trying to make signs for a march in Washington around the beginning of the Reagan regime? We'd decided to have no words, just images. The bad guys were easy—we did death squads and generals and stuff in black, white, and gray and then Xed them out in red.

But when it came to the good parts like health care, diversity, the environment, and school lunches—the things being cut and damaged by the Reagan administration—that was really hard. I remember you or somebody drawing a little barn in the country...it just didn't work. Then finally Mike Glier came up with single iconic colorful objects—a red cross, a glass of milk, a leaf—and it looked great. His was one of the most successful march things we did because it was all visual. Everybody understood the message and they knew we were artists...they even clapped when we went by.

ASHFORD I want to keep Martha's idea alive, that intense set of social relations between artists where artists were meeting regularly. We've known each other for twelve years. We have worked together. We don't talk about practice that much, but we see each other every other week. Why isn't it possible that we can, amongst ourselves or with institutional support, make settings where these contacts and discussions can be brought up repeatedly? The slow burn and the long-term, can be discussed as it goes on, but we could also move to the immediate. We need a space for this.

It takes so long for institutions to respond to timely issues. For example, you want to do something about the election and by the time you get people together, resources together, contacts together, and sites together the election could be over.

PASTERNAK I think we're not acknowledging the elephant in the room. Artists feel like they're participating in the political process today by voting or by donating artwork for a benefit to raise money for political candidates. But so many are not using their voices, their skills, in a more public and potentially more powerful way. I think that's a difference between the 70s and 80s and artists today.

ROSLER That has to do with the collapse of art school and its conversion into a hothouse for getting a gallery. "Thinking is bad for studio work"—I've been told this over and over at the wonderful institution where I work—that thinking is bad and it's an impediment and...

HAACKER It doesn't sell.

ROSLER Well, not only doesn't it sell, it's a stopper. It prevents these young artists from really finding their *métier*.

PASTERNAK But it's not just young artists, Martha.

BICHLBAUM (THE YES MEN) I think there are tons of artists who are participating in the political process, but I think the bulk of them aren't called artists and they aren't acknowledged by anybody.

I mean, in what way does door-to-door activism not constitute art? When you go door-to-door, you do a little

®™ark (derived from "Registered Trademark") is an activist art collective founded in 1996. Famous ®™ark stunts include gw bush.com, a fake campaign Website for George W. Bush; the Barbie Liberation Organization, where the voice boxes of three hundred Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls were switched; and Voteauction.com, a satirical site that allowed US citizens to sell their presidential vote to the highest bidder during the Presidential Elections of 2000.

The **VISIBLE Collective** is an art collective whose work questions and challenges ideas, theories, and images in the post 9/11 "war on terror." The collective is directed by Naeem Mohaiemen. Their most recent project is *Disappeared in America*, which deconstructs a global climate of Islamophobia through art projects and lectures in museum and gallery spaces throughout the world. Image: Visible Collective, *Patriot Story*, 2005 (video still)



"Culture war" gained wide use after the publication of *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* by James Davison Hunter in 1991. Hunter described a polarization around hot-button issues such as abortion, gun control, homosexuality, and censorship, which had transformed American politics and culture. In 1992 at the Republican National Convention (RNC) in 1992, Patrick Buchanan proclaimed, "There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself."

performance for whoever's answering the door. You figure out, "Okay, what do they want to see?" It's art.

There are plenty of institutions that are interested in doing that. They're not art institutions; they're organizing institutions, they're something in between. There's culture-jamming resources that know plenty of people who are doing things. We attempted to do something like that with ®™ark. It was all symbolic, but there are real examples of people trying to foment this at a lower level. Maybe what art institutions could do is to devolve some of the authority and just fund those institutions.

Look at an organization like protest.net, which is a website that keeps up with what protests are happening around the world and puts a lot of people in touch with each other to figure out how to do the protests. On the site there are expression of exactly what is needed where. In some cases, it is collaborations. In some cases, it might be financial. You know, maybe somebody needs to buy a catapult or needs to figure out how to build one. That's definitely art, when you build a catapult to protest the FTAA as a new...

ROSLER Right, they were flinging teddy bears!

BICHLBAUM (THE YES MEN) That's definitely a political use of art. And I don't know if the people who did that considered themselves artists; I don't think so, but they are.

Let's say someone would offer funding and enable those people to actually buy a catapult—just using protest.net as an example.

ASHFORD Oh, I have an example from someone that we wanted to be here but he's traveling, a man named Naeem Mohaiemen, who directs a collaboration called the **VISIBLE Collective**. Since they work with actual organizations that are invested in non-citizen and citizenship rights in New York, an arts agency could be invested through them in terms of a larger collaboration or activist projects in the city very easily. It would be easy because there are so many artists who are leading these double lives invested in some political and studio practices. As a collective they are working in the contexts of art of mass media and the contexts of social movements, equally.

GANESH They've also already been collaborating together. The **VISIBLE Collective** has already created the projects and dumped their money into it. And they're really committed to getting it to travel to different places. It would be great, because it's site-specific. They redo it every time.

ASHFORD One of the first casualties of the "culture wars" was the NEA's decision that many artist groups would no longer be funded. In a way, this changed our material, our conception of artists' dialogue with each other and with new audiences. First, in 1983 or 1984 when Frank Hodsell was



Photo © 2001 Gareth Lind

chairman, they eliminated direct grants to writers and critics. Then, they terrified support organizations and withdrew support from artists' self organization.

ROSLER Not to be a devil's advocate, but why are we talking about funding? It's not the issue. It's not so much the source of funding, but how to get people together. You can't really expect institutions these days to hand a bunch of money to people who are going to catapult teddy bears across a barbed-wire fence into a group of delegates.

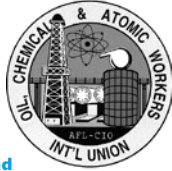
CHIN I think it's about climate building. I think we may be too insular in this realm. The galleries form their own kind of insulation and the museums form another kind. Then you have this group of rabble-rousers and that's a whole other thing. How do you invite people into that who are not traditionally activist types?

LIPPARD Open meetings.

ROSLER Right, and using non-traditional means, like Internet organizing. **MoveOn** has made such good use of this in producing house parties bringing together "ordinary people." They are engaged in online votes and chats and discussions and every so often, real-world events are held, around online addresses by celebrity spokespeople or around MoveOn screenings, like Fahrenheit 9/11, or just in direct relation to electoral strategies.

Deconstructionist Institute for Surreal Topology

MoveOn.org Civic Action was started by Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, two Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who shared deep frustration with the partisan warfare in Washington D.C. On September 18, 1998, they launched an online petition to "Censure President Clinton and Move On to Pressing Issues Facing the Nation." The petition met with a huge show of support, which led to the formation of MoveOn with the goal of bringing real Americans back into the political process. MoveOn.org now has over 3.3 million members.



Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union

Gallery 1199/Bread and Roses was founded in 1979 in New York City as a cultural resource for union members, students, and others who would otherwise have little access to the arts. Bread and Roses is the not-for-profit cultural arm of New York's Health and Human Service Union, 1199/SEIU.

PASTERNAK Mel, maybe it's not about driving people into our meetings, but going to other people's meetings.

CHIN Yeah. That's for sure.

PASTERNAK Why aren't we aligning ourselves with unions, for example?

CHIN Yes.

ROSLER Well, there's a problem with that and I would like to speak to it a little bit, because that's what I was going to talk about an hour or so ago. There is a reason why artists don't necessarily attach themselves to groups like unions. Their vision of what art is and what to expect from an artist is very different. They believe that an artist is essentially a contract artist-producer. Back in the day, in the early 1970s, when we were trying to work with some unions in California, specifically with Tony Mazzocchi of the **Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union** who was an absolutely fabulous guy, they wanted us to do silkscreen posters, but we wanted to do mass-produced posters. For them, it wouldn't be art if it was a poster that looked like a poster. We would be just like any other graphic artists they might hire, only more trouble to work with.

The other thing is that there's this problem with irony. Artists tend to think in terms of statements that are ironic. But for unions and so on, they feel their membership doesn't understand an ironic statement.

Even though our culture's pervaded with irony, it resides on television. It doesn't reside in political campaigns. And it's funny because in other countries, of course, ironic statements abound, but our culture is very literal.

So you wind up either trying to be the servant of the union or being much more radical than they want you to be. It's very hard to be a bureaucrat-artist. I don't object to people doing it, but I have a feeling that nobody sitting here really would find that a rewarding mission.

LIPPARD Well, for several years, Jerry Kearns and I did shows at **District 1199**, the union headquarters in the West 40s, and we tried to blow up their pretty conventional ideas of what art from or about unions should be. We did some conceptual works on organizing and an anti-Reagan comic show, *Who's Laffin Now?*, with Ida Applebroog, Peter Gourfain, Keith Haring, and others. And the union membership loved them.

But one of the things we did was **Hans Haacke's** absentee landlord piece, which had caused the Guggenheim to cancel his show in 1971. We'd thought it might be too subtle for this audience, but instead it was too obvious. The union members said, "Hey, we live in these places. We already know this."

Then there's the whole problem of artists' love affair with irony. I've said, "the people's voice is not ironic," and I got in a lot of trouble. But it's right.



I remember another time when Jerry Kearns did a poster with the Black United Front—a beautiful photograph of black people surging across the Brooklyn Bridge (to protest killer cops, I think), with light glowing through the banner, really kind of uplifting. And it was really successful in the streets, but John Perreault wrote about it in the *Village Voice* and said something to the effect of nobody would fall for this, it's too obvious. So here was a very effective political image being dissed because it wasn't subtle or ironic enough, but it worked in context.

This kind of thing happens when the art world confronts real people. And frankly, I think it's a liberal idea that "artists are real people too." I don't think we are. We're coming from another angle, which makes it all the more imperative to know not only who our audiences are, but also how they see, how they think.

GANESH I have a bunch of thoughts on what Anne mentioned about aligning ourselves with different organizations. It really seems to depend on clearly articulating the project with the group you might be working with, and giving them enough time and leeway to participate at their own comfort level and pace. I've found that some activists or organizations that my collaborators and I have approached can be initially suspicious of our intentions and motives. Because in their previous experiences with artists, a lot of times a project might go like this, "Okay, we need your help right away because this needs to be produced in a hurry, and be ready for this deadline in two weeks," and after that the artists don't interact with that organization again.

So I think the idea of funding a continuous project or collaboration, something that may even go on or develop over a number of years, would be really interesting. That type of project would allow all parties involved—artists,

Hans Haacke, Shapolsky et al.
Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, 1971

Mariam Ghani and Chitra Ganesh, *How Do you See the Disappeared?*, 2004, <http://www.turbulence.org/Works/seethedisappeared/> (accessed June 10, 2006).

Desis Rising up and Moving (**DRUM**) organizes low-income South Asian immigrants, families facing deportation, and detainees of color to end detention, deportation, and policing of immigrant communities. DRUM is a membership-based organization that builds power in communities for racial, economic, and social justice. Desi means people of South Asian descent: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the diaspora including Africa, England, Fiji, Guyana, and Trinidad.

activist organizations, youth workers—to solidify and retain their commitment over a period of time. Unlike what often happens in the art world context, where after the press release is sent out, the opening happens, and the show maybe gets reviewed, it's no longer so urgent or pressing an issue.

Another aspect of my collaboration with Mariam Ghani involves a questionnaire around detention and deportation that eventually gets posted onto a website that is called “**How Do You See the Disappeared?**” Basically, it was created in opposition to Special Registration questionnaires that targeted immigrant groups were forced to fill out after 9/11 so the government could collect cold, hard data about them that could then potentially be used to detain or deport them. The questionnaire of our project asks people open-ended questions that are not necessarily demographic in nature—which we call warm data—but still make a narrative around detention and deportation. Since the questionnaire is on the website, its not like “Okay, we have three weeks, and we're going to make all our friends answer the questionnaire and put that up so that everybody can see that a lots of folks have responded.” Instead, it's more like, “Oh, we noticed there was a big jump in how many people interacted with the website after something we did at the end of October.” It's ongoing, though it was originally launched around the Republican National Convention. We're going to revisit the questionnaire and reassemble the *Index of the Disappeared* reading room installation again in March 2006 in the context of *DETAINED*, an upcoming exhibition around detention and Asian and Arab communities at the Asian American Arts Centre in Chinatown. This way organizations that we work with or request contributions from for the next edition of our zine see that our commitment is ongoing, and won't get defensive or feel used and say “Oh, you just call us when you need something or show up at meetings when you want a bit of research, but then we never see you again.”

ASHFORD But for me, outside of a school, those sustained relationships are hard to find, at least in the context of the art world, right? I mean, what allowed that to happen? Was it your own initiative, your own energy, that sustained it?

GANESH Well I had already been working within the South Asian community around this issue, through **DRUM**, Desis Rising up and Moving, and had activist friends and colleagues working with groups like the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund or on special projects of the ACLU. But I think that persistence is also a key part of it—being open and going to meetings again and again to make the connections. Also continuing to enter activists' domains, rather than exclusively inviting people into our spaces or networks. And since it's an exchange over a period of time, its not like we have to go crazy going to twenty-five meetings a week for three weeks before we organize

a show and then forget all about folks who are continuing to do that work in their own space.

DADERKO And I feel like it's also important to realize that these are often cumulative efforts. It goes back to this idea of the slow burn. There are artists, because of their investment and interest in specific topics, who have sustaining practices. Ultimately I feel like it's about having a kind of sustaining practice more than it is necessarily about “Okay, here's this project and how do you judge its successes or its failures.”

Parlour Projects started out by inviting some friends to put up some work. Of course, I did want a dialogue, so I made sure that happened. By the end of the program, the e-mail list grew to thirty-five hundred people. I would have two hundred to three hundred people show up for an opening at a space that was fifteen-by-twenty-feet.

PHILLIPS There are a couple of different ideas that I hope to connect about the questions of time and temporality that keep coming up. We've talked about time-sensitive work and artists who work spontaneously or on short-lived projects and yet we're also talking about more prolonged practices that deal with sustainability and more enduring issues. Mel and others have talked about who sets the terms for success—and that success can often be very fleeting or belated. It seems that success itself is very temporally influenced.

At the 2005 **Istanbul Biennial**, I was very interested that the curators, Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun, actively engaged emerging artists who had time to participate in Istanbul-based residencies to develop site-responsive projects. They emphasized this as a tactic of their curricular practice. They wanted to work with artists who had time to involve themselves in residencies in Istanbul. They weren't as interested in artists who had big names, hugely successful practices, and significantly less time to commit to Istanbul. I think the question of sustainability and how that plays out is a big part of this.

DADERKO Well, it also ties together with the idea of how you grade a success. Because, ultimately...

PHILLIPS ...who sets those terms?

DADERKO ...if I had decided whether I would continue the Parlour Projects based on what kind of press I got...

PHILLIPS ...or how many people showed up...

DADERKO ...it would have been over immediately.

PHILLIPS And I think that is a critically important question: Who is setting those terms of success? Is it about the media and the press? Is it about the number of people who show



The 9th International **Istanbul Biennial's** concept statement written by curators Charles Esche and Vasif Kortunon stated that, “the 2005 Istanbul Biennial promises a distinctive approach to the burgeoning phenomenon of international biennials, one that is rooted in the place it is shown while always looking out at what is relevant for the rest of the world.” The curators had half of the fifty-three artists in the exhibition live and work in Istanbul for one to six months. They also worked in sites that had a reference to the everyday life of the city (rather than using historical monuments). Finally, they created a “Positionings Programme,” which “highlighted specific local and international constellations within and beyond the city,” the central feature being the Hospitality Zone where Istanbul artist initiatives exhibited work, a famous city magazine set up shop, and an international student workshop and an archive of contemporary art books was housed.

up? What are the other kinds of conditions that we might want to talk about or think about in terms of our practices?

Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110, Fall 2004, p. 51-79.

Joe Scanlan, "Traffic Control," *Artforum* XLIII, no. 10, Summer 2005, p. 123

PETER ELEEY On the biennial front very generally, I think we've been starting to see a shift away from the dominance of the relational aesthetics paradigm over the last few years. There is this idea of "relational" work being characterized by its active nature—in actually producing social relationships, rather than simply reflecting them—that has made this kind of work seem "political" to many people. And yet, these works are political primarily by their creation of a *framework* that's ostensibly democratic and free, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's work, where people are just supposed to show up and have a conversation and be free to do whatever they want within it.

In other words, the work takes no explicit position. It's completely non-prescriptive, perhaps to a fault. But I think what is interesting in the context of our discussion is how well this structure navigates the globalized, decentralized condition that characterizes much art-making today. What I find brilliant about so many "relational" works is how they manage to be site-specific and yet transferable. On one hand, the work is simply a structure, and it can easily travel to a variety of locations. On the other, many of these works depend upon the active participation of the local viewers at a given venue in their construction of meaning, which immediately localizes and grounds them. I think we can look to "relational" work as an example of how globalism has compromised political practice.

Now people are starting to pull back somewhat. We had hoped that both **Claire Bishop** and **Joe Scanlan** could be here tonight. Joe wrote a nice piece called "Traffic Control" in last summer's *Artforum* that picked up on a point made by Claire Bishop in her larger critique of relational aesthetics (published in the Fall 2004 issue of *October*), about how these supposedly open structures essentially legislate a kind of forced "freedom" where people feel like there are still certain kinds of rules prescribed.

LEVI STRAUSS How do you think Thomas Hirschhorn's project at documenta 11 fits into this? Claire Bishop said that the independent stance of that work implied "the readmittance of a degree of autonomy to art," wherein "the viewer is no longer coerced into fulfilling the artist's interactive requirements, but is presupposed as a subject of independent thought, which is the essential prerequisite for political action."

ELEEY I've talked with Thomas about it. On the basis of those discussions, and what I know of the project otherwise, I think that it is open-ended in a way that combines two different frameworks: the community of the housing project that helped build this work and then, obviously, the documenta audience, the art world audience. Importantly, those who had helped build the piece in the local community eventually owned it, since all of the elements of the artwork,



including the Mercedes that was ferrying people back and forth from the main show, were auctioned off by lottery.

One thing that is problematic for me about that project is the same issue I find with Rirkrit's, which is a certain resistance to criticality. What is success and failure in these pieces and what sort of evaluative criteria can we apply to them? In Hirschhorn's case, it seems like the thing that he would point to is that he lived in the housing project when he was making the piece. Very early on his electronics equipment was stolen. They were eventually returned. He said to me that a great thing was being able to get his stereo equipment back without involving the police. "Well, a great thing about that was being able to get my stereo equipment back without involving the police." So, on that one level, the project seemed to me to be about a larger effort to demonstrate and earn respect for the artist in this community that otherwise saw him as just this interloping foreigner.

I think the fact that the work was called the *Bataille Monument*, generated around the philosopher Georges Bataille, is distracting, a kind of red herring for the critical press. Because, really, I think the structural aspects of these projects (including his other "monuments"), rather than their explicit content (such as a given philosopher), is where they are most interesting. Take the project that he did near his studio in Aubervilliers, just north of Paris, the *Musée Précaire Albinet*, where he borrowed works from the Centre Pompidou and showed one artist a week in this "museum" built in and by residents of a nearby housing project. I think these are both examples of very localized practices.

Thomas Hirschhorn, *Musée Précaire Albinet* (Vernissage Kasimir Malevitch), Aubervilliers, 2004 © Thomas Hirschhorn

ROSLER But I think I disagree with you about his Bataille project. Tania, did you want to address it?



Hershey, Pennsylvania

BRUGUERA Just a little, yeah. I just want to say that my problem with all of these projects—and I've done some of them as well—is that, in a way, the educational part is missing. I was laughing when you said that he was happy the police were not involved. I think getting the equipment stolen is a symptom of a privileged power relationship. And I'm not talking about Hirschhorn specifically, I don't even know him. I'm talking about a phenomenon that happens in our world where we go to places, and we say, "Oh, because we stayed five months, that's a long time, wow." That's not good.

The educational part is missing because we go there and we impose our aesthetic point of view. We don't make a link between the art history these people know and the art history we know. So I think there is a gap between what they understand and what we are proposing to them.

I think that's something that, in general, should be a goal for the institutional work as well. If you're going to work in a space, how are you going to create a space for discussion, not only between artists, but also between the artist and the people from this local place? I'm not saying "real people" any more, because people are offended. How do we create a dialogue with all the people who have less knowledge of the way contemporary artists make metaphors?

ROSLER Do you know about Pullman, Illinois, or even **Hershey, Pennsylvania**? There are these towns that were built by capitalists for their work force—company towns, in other words.

PHILLIPS That's true, these were communities formed by industrial paternalism. Employees were housed, provided for, and regulated.

ROSLER Yeah, well, I kind of see Thomas **Hirschhorn's documenta project** that way. I spent a number of hours talking to him about it there, but the first thing that struck me was the relentless masculinism of it. Because it was one hundred percent male and all the interests were male and all the people running it (except for the café where it was run by a family) were male.

I spotted these women all around. I know this is going to sound sentimental, but if you saw it you would know how powerful this was. The women were always behind the window, but out on the lawns were these artworks made out of sheets. They had all pink sheets or all blue sheets and they were on these square drying frames. And so in and around Hirschhorn's cardboard structures that were constantly collapsing were these artworks by the women who were doing their ordinary chores, but just in an aesthetic way of their own. I mean, they were invisible, it was completely not

an artwork, and it had nothing to do with the project, but for me it became a metaphor of this parallel universe.

Hirschhorn said that he had gone around to all the towns in the area, because he wanted a town that was willing to do the work and to take care of it. And he had this contract that they would work on it. And he said that he moved in there because, in the last community project that he did, everything in the project was vandalized and he realized he had to live there in order for that not to happen.

So, in a way, it was this enormous effort to create what appeared to be a harmonious relationship of basically Turkish workers in Germany for the delectation of the international art appreciation crowd. And I didn't understand why more people didn't seem to question this at all.

ASHFORD I love the analogy to Hershey, Pennsylvania. I feel that way with this "relational" art moment, too, its promotion of "celebration as resistance" seems so invitation only. And I'm not sure that I am the real audience for this, because I often feel that I'm not privy to what is active in those practices. Maybe that privacy is part of the critique.

ROSLER But, you know that people like Rirkrit didn't write that theory. They never meant to have their work become this kind of synoptic practice that engages us all as a model for how to run the world.

If anything, it fits into another text, which I don't like very much, Foucault's **Heterotopias**. I think it's the smallness of scale that interested Rirkrit, just this gesture of here we are, sitting around, talking and sharing ideas.

DADERKO I was just going to say, it's funny that we're bringing Rirkrit up. I had this strange dream the other week that, in the aftermath of Katrina, I got a grant to take a Rirkrit project to New Orleans. And so, I think that, ultimately, it becomes this thing about contextuality and how art works.

CHIN I have learned if you want to be an activist you have to go beyond the artwork. Perhaps the real job would be to create a place where the academic practices could be liberated from their own tyranny.

PASTERNAK Are people satisfied with the level of activity that they see going on?

LIPPARD Activity—what kind of activity? Activism. Hell, no.

ASHFORD No. No one here is. But neither are you, right? You're not satisfied either.

PASTERNAK No, but I think we're taking it for granted that we're not satisfied. We're not really thinking about why. And I'm curious if any of you can conjure a project that had real resonance for you?

Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces (1967), **Heterotopias**," 1967/1984, <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> (accessed June 10, 2006). The preface states, "This text, entitled "Des Espace Autres," and published by the French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* in October 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967.



Thomas Hirschhorn, **Bataille Monument**, 2002 © Thomas Hirschhorn

In May 2004, **Steven Kurtz** called 911 when his wife experienced heart failure. The lab equipment used by Kurtz for CAE projects alarmed the responding paramedics. They contacted the F.B.I. who searched Kurtz's home and confiscated many of his things including art materials and computers. Six weeks later, a federal grand jury charged Kurtz with mail fraud for obtaining small amounts of benign bacteria. As of publication, the trial is still pending.

David Levi Strauss and **Daniel Martinez**, "After the End: Strategies of Resistance," *Art Journal*, Spring 2005, p.42-49. David Levi Strauss and Daniel Martinez, "After the End: A Modest Proposal," *Art Journal*, Summer 2005, p.52+. David Levi Strauss and Daniel Martinez, "Teaching After the End," *Art Journal*, Fall 2005, p.28. See Appendix, page 154, for full text.

Accuracy in Academia (AIA), is a non-profit educational watchdog group based in Washington D.C. that promotes conservatism and opposes what it perceives as liberal thought on college campuses. AIA's mission states that it "wants schools to return to their traditional mission—the quest for truth." Founded in 1985, AIA is an outgrowth of Accuracy in Media.

BONANNO (THE YES MEN) Well, the thing that comes to mind is the **Steve Kurtz** case and how that personally impacted so many people. It triggered a very immediate kind of emotional reaction and that's what gave it strength and that's why it's still going. You know, it wasn't an abstract issue at all and that's why it was powerful. I think that's why any issue is powerful.

And I think that's often why art is ineffectual and why it doesn't pass over into real activism, I guess, by our friend Bob's definition. But it is a pilot light and for real social organizing activism to happen, I think it has to be local and it's often not going to be defined as art. It's going to be a challenge for art institutions to find out how to define that as art, either through an intermediary or directly.

PASTERNAK Won't art institutions define it as art if artists do?

ASHFORD I think that institutional understanding of social and dialogic practices is key. As a young artist, I was invested in both art and activism practices as something that I thought were valuable and interesting, exciting and contemplative and worthwhile. I feel that the art school is a part of the art world. And, as someone who has managed and designed programs for an art school, I think it's extremely important for that academic world to exemplify those practices. Whether they're understood as having particular authorship, and whether they're understood as being part of an historical canon, I don't really care.

PASTERNAK Doug, I don't disagree with you, I just wonder whether institutions are actually artists' allies right now when their culture is fearful of reprisals for supporting publicly unpopular views?

DADERKO I've worked with a number of artists who present programs here in the city who aren't getting museum exhibitions and certainly aren't getting gallery exhibitions, but are showing all over the place in Europe. And so, I feel like if institutional support—just in terms of public visibility—is not going to come from the galleries, there's no reason why there shouldn't be some kind of institutional responsibility just in terms of being able to further dialogue.

LEVI STRAUSS One of the most active institutional sites for this dialogue now is, of all places, art schools. At Patricia Phillips' request, I just did a series of three conversations with **Daniel J. Martinez** on the politics of teaching art that were published in *Art Journal*. We talked about how the classroom or studio is one of the last radical autonomous zones in America, where you can do virtually whatever you want. As soon as you step out of the studio or classroom, you have to deal with the politics of the larger institution, which are as screwed up as any, but inside the studio, it's wide open.



LIPPARD You've never been hit by **Accuracy in Academia**.

LEVI STRAUSS Not yet, no.

LIPPARD I've been hit by them and I don't even teach.

ASHFORD The academy is a temporary autonomous zone at best, there's no question.

CHIN I took a stint at East Tennessee State University, because it's in my local area. I basically became a Basler Chair of Excellence for the Integration of the Arts, Rhetoric, and Science for one semester. We built a full-scale WMD singlewide trailer, hauled it down to Texas, and won first place in the Art Car Parade. We hand-built this MX missile. We thought that since most people couldn't find one, we would make one. [Laughter]

It was inspired by Reverend Forbes's quote "Poverty is a weapon of mass destruction." It was the *Warehouse of Mass Distribution*, because instead of weapons it could carry food and serve as a distribution center for people who were hungry.

The school paid for it and this is East Tennessee State. But when it came time for the press release to CNN they held it back. The president's office held it back. They were scared.

You write your own press release, so I had written one, "WMD Found." But the university president's office rewrote it. They rewrote it so well that it became, "Come see

Mel Chin and BFA/MFA candidates of East Tennessee State University, *The WMD: Warehouse of Mass Distribution*, 2004

Chris Hedges, a *New York Times* reporter and veteran war correspondent, was booed off the stage in May 2003 while giving the commencement address at Rockford College in Illinois due to its anti-war sentiments. The full text of the speech is available online, <http://www.granta.com/extracts/2100> (accessed July 10, 2006).

this little froufrou thing that this guy did in the yard,” and that was what they sent out. That was the authorized version, so no press would pick that up. So, art schools may be free of it, but these academic institutions are terrified and prone to self-censorship.

LIPPARD Art schools aren't free of it. When I was giving a commencement speech at the Art Institute of Chicago just after we started the Iraq war, I was booed for antiwar statements—actually booing at the Art Institute!

VARIOUS SPEAKERS Wow.

LIPPARD Not overwhelming; it wasn't a **Chris Hedges** moment, but I was just amazed. Luckily, I had Studs Terkel on the platform with me... [Laughter]

LEVI STRAUSS It occurs to me that much of the current malaise is due to the fact that no one has any time, anymore; certainly no “creative time.” Both art and criticism take a lot of time, so the lack of it (or the “management” of it) affects these acts disproportionately, and this has a political dimension. Frank Luntz, the Republican PR guru (he was largely responsible for making the specious connection between Iraq and 9/11 stick), is now busy building a “free time agenda,” since his focus groups tell him that the biggest complaint among twenty- to forty-year-old women voters is that they no longer have any free time (and they remember when they did). My sixteen-year-old daughter knows she doesn't have enough free time—to think, to read, to make things happen. I find myself talking to my college-age students as if they have time to think, and they tell me that's all over. Everyone's run out of time.

So it seems to me that one of the things that programming and granting institutions like Creative Time—that want to have an effect—can do now is to slow things down, to give artists and writers time. The disappearance of free time has far-reaching consequences, and this lack will continue to haunt us.

ROSLER It haunts us creatively.

LIPPARD It's always a matter of priorities, when it comes down to it. How do you spend your time?

BICHLBAUM (THE YES MEN) How does an institution actually further work that creates social change? We've talked a lot about the problems—how it can't work because of boards of directors or because of the way it plays out in the art world—but maybe strategizing how it could actually be rethought could be a discussion.

I think we have had a bunch of concrete examples of techniques, you know? Such as, how to diversify the practices, how to create sustained relationships with other kinds of institutions and settings.

ROSLER Well, it's true. I mean, a friend of mine who is a museum director in Europe said it was all fine as long as he had these nasty interventionist-type artists inside the institution, but once he funded their projects outside the museum, he almost lost his job—it was really serious. So I think there needs to be some neutral space where it doesn't make the institution go down in flames.

HAACKE I believe I heard tonight that some audiences are considered worthwhile and other audiences are of lesser or no interest. The same distinctions seemed to be made between institutions. Obviously, one doesn't have limitless energy and therefore is likely to address the kind of audience one is most comfortable and competent to work with. I believe it would be wrong, though, to dismiss, generally and in principle, any segment of the public. For better or worse they all affect the zeitgeist. We are dealing with a social continuum. The institutions are part of the same society we are part of. We participate, we benefit, and we are its victims—simultaneously. When we think about the possible effects of our work, we should not only consider the public of today but also audiences five years down the road, about how we can—with a bit of luck—incrementally change the climate of this society. Let me repeat: with a bit of luck! At critical moments it often takes particular constellations of institutions and individuals to succeed. One has to have one's ears and eyes open and seize opportunities when they present themselves. And let's be wary of getting caught up in sectarianism.

LIPPARD I think Chitra's ideas about the length of time to sustain an activity or a group of activities combined with a lot of people involved, not only one or two artists, is someplace to go, something to go forward with...

ROSLER Speaking of which, I should speak for Artists Against the War again and remind you that maybe the projects that we do are not earthshaking, but we have a sustained effort. I am also involved with a tiny online group that has a person in Australia and a couple of former Germans now in the U.S. and somebody who used to live on a farm in Wisconsin, but has moved to Madison, and the last member is in San Francisco. Every once in a while, we work on something we consider political. It's all done via the Internet, but we're in touch and we have been since January of 2002 when we did a workshop together in Florida for three weeks.

And again, 16 Beaver is a model that has a sustained engagement with a community they have created. We talked about audience production, but you not only address an audience, you build an audience. You build a constituency and you build a group of people who feel implicated in that constituency.



America Starts Here: Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler, organized by Bill Arning and Ian Berry as a joint project of the MIT List Visual Art Center (February 9 through April 9, 2006) and the Tang Museum (October 1 through December 30, 2005). During a decade-long collaboration, from 1985 to 1995, Ericson and Ziegler produced conceptual art projects that used poetic language and wit to highlight social issues. Their works included public projects, site-specific installations, drawings, and mixed media sculptures.

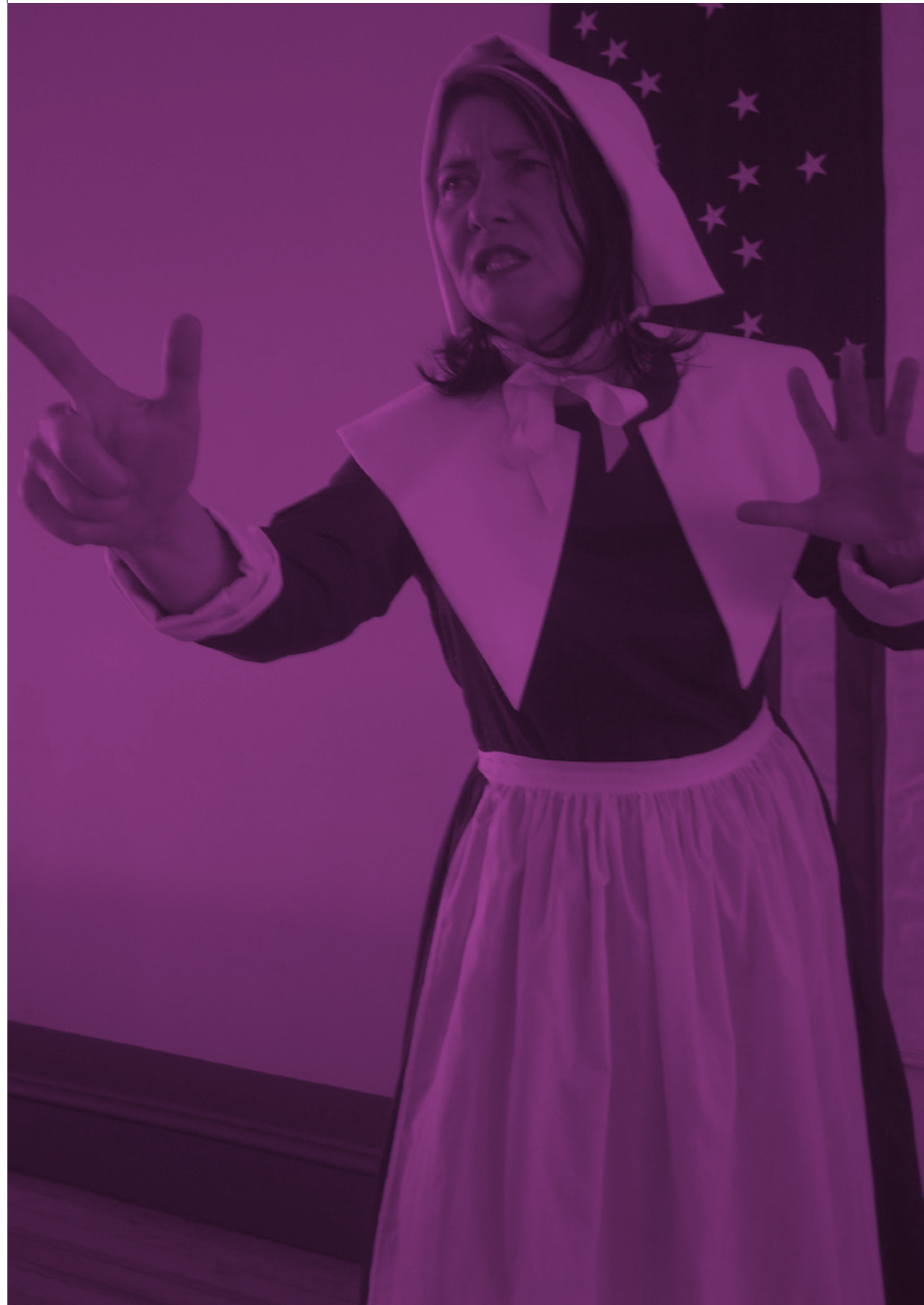
PHILLIPS I would like to return to ideas of success and failure and how we define those terms. I am thinking, as an example, of the retrospective of the work of **Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler** organized by Ian Berry and Bill Arning. The artists did a performative project called *Loaded Text* (1989) where they wrote out every word of the pending sixty-five-page Downtown Durham Revitalization Plan on the cracked sidewalk adjacent to the U.S. Post Office that was scheduled to be replaced. Kneeling side-by-side, the artists wrote one page on each section of sidewalk, rendering an inaccessible document and process more visible. They then used their art project budget to hire a contractor to replace the sidewalk.

I wrote an essay about the project for the exhibition catalogue and, in many respects, it was one of their most successful projects—and also one of their greatest failures. They were represented by the media in Durham, North Carolina, as opportunistic New York artists who came and squandered their artists' fees and took advantage of the community, and so forth.

So I think this entire issue of success and failure is a very interesting topic because I think it's often ambiguous and often temporarily based. We succeed at times, but we don't know it until the future comes.

I guess the other thing that I think really struck me at the beginning of this conversation, Doug, was when you were talking about your students at Federal Plaza photographing

and then having their cameras and their film impounded. Then they actually developed another sort of tactic or strategy to deal with that incident. So, there is this kind of recursive way of being in the world and thinking about our practices—something happens and you come up with a thoughtful, but effective response to it. And I found that very interesting and very hopeful.



Beauty and Its Discontents

Conversation 2
December 5, 2005

The argument between art as a form of aesthetic enlightenment and art as a form of social transformation still echoes through the dialogues surrounding art practices like a ghost of modernity everyone thought had died fifty years ago. In the planning of “Beauty and Its Discontents,” the organizers focused on ways in which aspects of contemporary art are affected by socially based criticism that is still mistaken for a “denigration of beauty,” alongside the role that industrial standards of glamour continue to play in reducing the political potential of even the most poetic moments of daily public interaction.

In the following discussion, participants respond to the growing institutional isolation of art from historical process and political urgency, and how this isolation—driven by the perceived need for autonomy from bureaucratic restraint—has been organized under the banner of the “aesthetic.” For many of the participants, the divide between beauty and politics is ironic at best. Many artists maintain throughout the discussion that they do not consider separations between aesthetics and social transformation in their practice.

The participants discuss a misperception of political art caused by a lack of intellectual discourse and the rise of reactionary ideologies associated with beauty that took shape in the mid-1990s. Some share the view that there is currently less variety in art publications than there has been in previous decades, leading to fewer outlets to express contesting points of view. Others voice their concerns with the affect of the current hyper-market conditions on issues of beauty and social action in contemporary art, from the rise of specialty markets that cater to every kind of sub-culture through relentless target marketing to the ways in which markets infiltrate spaces of dissonance.

At one point, the question arises: Is anything being done to change the perceived predicament of a culture drained by the market? The answers come slowly throughout the rest of the discussion, from examples of art that explores the emancipatory moment, a shared solidarity in a social or collaborative practice, to the “situationist orgasm moment,” a complete rupture with reality that offers productive results.

During the discussion, artists offer heartening evidence of engaged group practices, strong artistic presence in urban spaces, and alternate models to reactive modes of critique. In a time of growing counterculture, the need for artists to make their own scenes, explicitly and implicitly, is greater than ever.

Marlene McCarty, *Looking for the New World, 2005–06*

participants

DOUG ASHFORD, moderator
JULIE AULT
PAUL CHAN
PETER ELEEY
COCO FUSCO
BYRON KIM
MARLENE MCCARTY
ANNE PASTERNAK
HEATHER PETERSON
PAUL PFEIFFER
MICHAEL RAKOWITZ
AMY SILLMAN
ALLISON SMITH
KIKI SMITH

DOUG ASHFORD I'm starting tonight with a story. Sometime in the late 1990s, the artist **Harrell Fletcher** was working on a public project that involved a large park. In order to garner audience participation in the project, Harrell asked a boy in the area to tell him what kind of sculpture the park should have. The boy said, "You should make a turtle and that turtle should be, like, turtle-sized." Deciding that was a pretty good idea, Harrell asked the boy what the work should be made of. "Oh, it should be wonderful," he said, "so it should be made of gold." Harrell said, "Great, but here's the problem. If you have a gold turtle and it's part of a public work, then people would take the gold or want to take the turtle home." The boy said, "Yeah, I understand that. So you need to paint it green." As someone who's been involved in dialogic projects from the street to the university for twenty years and has tried to rethink the needs of audiences, I find that much of the discussion about public art is centered on social effect, on culture as an instrument. When do we get to talk about the way things look and why they look that way?

I'm hoping that people will freely speak about things that didn't work, the quality of failures, and aspects of public practice that are not working. Let's brainstorm about tactics rather than just talk about how great things are working out for us.

At the last dinner conversation, David Levi Strauss reminded me of something else, which Byron Kim and I spoke about a little on the phone before this evening. A lot of times when artists get together we end up talking about how institutions are inadequate to artists' needs. They're not doing enough work or they're not doing the right thing. And I think that's often true, but I also wanted to remind everyone of a quote I read by **Andrea Fraser** in *Artforum* just a little while ago. She wrote, "Every time we speak of the 'institution' as other than 'us,' we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions." So, I just want to remind us that we're all beautifully and barbarically inside and outside of institutions all the time.

The agenda tonight is to discuss what some of us understand as the false dichotomy between art as a form of social transformation and art as a form of aesthetic enlightenment, of aesthetic contemplation. The context that we find ourselves in as producers is often institutionally split between these two roles: (1) art that's organized around the idea of subjective interaction as an object in a gallery or a museum and (2) art that's organized in and around the idea of something that's discursive and that's engaging political action.

ANNE PASTERNAK As you all know, Creative Time has had a history of presenting art that is timely and directed towards social change. But for years, we haven't been getting stimulating, socially progressive proposals. The reasons are many, including the pressures brought on by the strength of the art market, and so I thought this was a good moment



Harrell Fletcher is a Portland-based artist who creates socially engaged, interdisciplinary, site-specific projects exploring the dynamics of social spaces and communities. He often engages with a group of individuals—schoolchildren, gas station attendants, older people in retirement homes—asking their opinions, getting their viewpoints, and documenting their experiences. Image: Harrell Fletcher, *I'll Follow You*, 2005

Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, September 2005, 278-283

to sit down and talk about this changed environment in which we are all working.

COCO FUSCO But the market was even stronger in the 1980s when a lot of activists worked and political art was being made.

PASTERNAK Without a doubt, the contemporary art market is stronger now in terms of the dollars pouring in and out, its influence on media, etcetera.

FUSCO I think the stock market was stronger in the 80s. Artists were making millions, collectors were buying a lot more, museums were a lot stronger, and tax laws were much more favorable to museums in the 80s than they are now. So, this idea that the current market is so strong is baloney. The market is strong in that you can sell work for under five thousand dollars. And who does that effect? People under thirty. It's a myth.

I think there's a perception about political art that is a product of the blackout of intellectual discourse and the rise of certain kinds of reactionary ideologies associated with beauty in the mid-90s.

PAUL PFEIFFER But does that mean you think there is currently more art selling for lower prices than in the 80s? In the fashion world, couture designers still produce fifty thousand dollar gowns, but it's no secret that they stay afloat by mass-producing thirty dollar bottles of perfume.

FUSCO There's a lot more turnover of artists. There are people with a certain amount of money who are buying, and so there are all these galleries that keep turning over in Chelsea. And they keep on raiding art schools to find cheap merchandise to sell to people who want a step up from IKEA.

PASTERNAK We could argue about the strength and influence of the market all night, but let's not. I think the more fundamental issue is what artists are being fed in terms of their role and how they matter in society. There are new cultural myths at play that shape the opportunities, even the identities, of artists and force into question the role of the artist in our society today.

ASHFORD So, then is that a question about schools or is that a question about the larger context for how art is promoted and discussed?

FUSCO It's about schools, but it's not only about schools. It's also about a reduction in the number and the variety of points of view represented in publications. So, it's about how the art world represents itself to itself. I think that we now live in an age in which *Artforum* is our *Pravda* regarding the art world. We don't have the same variety of publications that we had in the 80s. We don't have the same number



of outlets to express contesting points of view. We don't have a kind of space in which to publicly air dissent. And that gives an impression to the young that there is no dissent.

PASTERNAK Coco, you are making an interesting point, because the truth is, I think there's more media coverage of artists than there has ever been before, but it's not respectful of artists' freedoms.

FUSCO It's not about art; it's about fame. Okay? It's about fame.

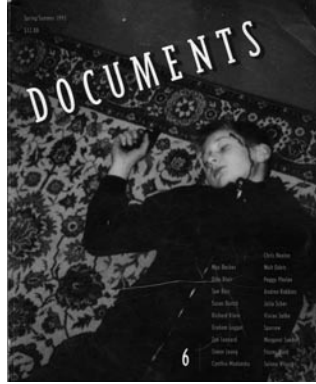
ALLISON SMITH And about money.

FUSCO It's about fame. It's about celebrity. It's about personality.

This is not just a symptom of what's happening in the art world. It's also a problem for university publishing, which has had to direct itself towards what is commercially viable, which means fewer books are published on a smaller range of topics.

A great indicator of this shift was a show that Brian Wallis did at *Exit Art* in 1996 about the history of the alternative press in which he saw that the number of underground publications, which were available in the United States in the 60s, 70s, and early 80s, dropped off after that.

COUNTERCULTURE: Alternative Information from the Underground Press to the Internet, curated by Brian Wallis, was held at *Exit Art* in New York City from February 24 to April 20, 1996.



DOCUMENTS magazine, a journal of art, culture, and criticism, was founded in 1992 by five friends and Whitney Independent Study Program alumni Christopher Hoover, Miwon Kwon, Jim Marcovitz, Helen Molesworth, and Margaret Sundell. Published from 1992 to 2004, the journal was named after a short-lived journal by Georges Bataille, which was published from 1929–31.

Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving free speech rights in the context of digital technology. EFF was founded in July 1990 by Mitch Kapor, John Gilmore, and John Perry Barlow in response to the search and seizure of Steve Jackson Games in early 1990.

Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics Organized was a journal published from 1976 to 1996 by the Heresies Collective, Inc. based in New York City. The Collective consisted of a group of about twenty-four feminists from a variety of disciplines ranging from visual artists to anthropologists. Twenty-seven issues were published.

ASHFORD This is something we talked about during the last dinner, not in terms of publications, but in terms of the scarcity of contexts in which artists are in conversation with each other on a formal and informal level. I mean, there were artists' meetings all over that generated space and generated discourse. As a younger artist, especially in the early 80s, social collaboration was a constant part of my visual practice. I remember in any given month moving from reading groups and tenant meetings to PADD, A.I.R. Gallery, and Printed Matter. We organized shows in Coney Island and Club 57. Personnel and projects changed, but the notion was consistent: art provided a context for social forums.

So, I guess the question would be: Is there anything that we're doing now to change this predicament of a culture drained by the market? Can anyone bring up some examples so that we can talk about tactics to generate those kinds of conversations or publications again? There are examples today, as in publications like **DOCUMENTS** magazine. It's such a hard thing to run a publication.

MARLENE McCARTY I agree with what you're saying about publications dropping off, but in my naïveté and isolation in my studio, I thought, "Oh, it must have been absorbed by the Internet." There must be forums and opportunities to really voice your opinion, and say what you think.

FUSCO That's exactly what people thought in 1994. That was the discourse of the information highway. That was the promise made by the rhetoric of the **Electronic Frontier Foundation**.

McCARTY So then, I'm asking, is there something out there that I'm naïve to?

FUSCO Well, I think some people thought for a while that the digital domain was going to be the alternative. And it promised that in the mid-90s. But then I think that a lot of people involved realized that the promise could not be sustained, because the digital domain became increasingly privatized. And museums lost interest, because they couldn't figure out a way to capitalize on the next phase enough.

AMY SILLMAN I was working on **Heresies** in the 70s, a feminist magazine. And I definitely remember hanging-out as being a crucial part of the political environment in the 1970s. If you were a young art student, then you would definitely meet people and hang out with them. I couldn't have understood the politics of feminism as a student without actually meeting older artists and going to their houses and seeing how they lived.

I actually have a different question tonight. I don't know whether the question of beauty has any relationship to what I do. In fact, I actually don't think it does. I'm not particularly interested in aesthetics. I'm not interested in the creation of beauty. I'm actually interested in other things.

I am a person who works in a studio most of the time and although I haven't exactly formulated a strategic way for my work to be distributed differently from the traditional way, I still don't think about my studio practice as being some sort of retrograde, old-fashioned thing. My studio practice is not a search for beauty.

FUSCO But at least, you need to recognize that with the rise of people like **Dave Hickey** in the mid-90s, a discourse was reintroduced into the art world that was politically designed to destroy another kind of discourse. It was designed essentially to completely destroy any kind of practice that engages with the social, because his argument negates the value of many socially based arguments. He rescued all those people who didn't know how to react negatively to the onslaught of post-structuralist theory, to the introduction of institutional critique, to the popularity of collective practices engaged with the political. Suddenly, there was a language that wasn't negative, that wasn't overtly racist, that wasn't overtly sexist, and that was reconstituting the aesthetic. And all these very powerful institutions and people latched onto it. Remember this guy appeared out of nowhere from Vegas.

McCARTY You're coasting again on the institutional level. All I can do here is think, "As a working person, as an artist, I don't give a shit about that stuff."

FUSCO You can not give a shit about it, but it completely changed the way that the art world operates.

McCARTY That's true. But it's out *there*. That's out *there*.

FUSCO It's not out there when you're a professor and you go into the classroom and your students, who have never cracked a book, tell you that they don't want to read anything because they care about beauty. It is not irrelevant when curators, who have also never cracked a book, ask you endlessly about beauty. It is not irrelevant when people have absolutely no generalized understanding of the history of the relationship of art to the social, and yet they come up with these completely banal criticisms about work that engages with the political. That's when you see the fall-out repercussions of that discourse. It's not about whether I read Dave Hickey, because I don't. It's about my recognizing the political impact of a series of texts that were appropriated for political reasons by art institutions, which then had a fall-out effect on all our practices.

ASHFORD Coco, it's a good example, but it's an example that's being presented in a way that's a bit reductive in relationship to the artistic practices that are trying to redefine this dichotomy. The emphasis on aesthetics as oppositional to politics in art production seems to me more about academics protecting their turf than what artists actually think about.



Amy Sillman, *Big Girl*, 2006

Dave Hickey is a writer and cultural critic. His collection of essays on art, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles, Art Issue Press, 1993), called for the "return" to beauty in art making and art criticism. A second collection of essays, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Los Angeles, Art Issue Press), was published in 1997.

FUSCO Doug...

ASHFORD It's true. And I think everybody here understands the didactic capacity of that guy's writing, but...



Omme Kolsoum

PETER ELEEY Isn't there a post-Hickey way...

ASHFORD Coco, many of us are also invested with ideas about how we associate with each other publicly around the idea of aesthetic contemplation and epiphany. We have had experiences with **Omme Kolsoum**, with Patty Smith, with the ecstasy of a shared experience of music. Often developed formally with an eye toward social practice: "Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine." Right? Even those of us invested in direct social activism have had those experiences where we felt emotionally engaged. We have empathy with other people when identifying with the collective effort to make our subjective selves feel different. And that collectively felt difference is a political moment!

I want to go back to what I said in my introduction. The idea of exporting these problems to some other institution that we're supposedly not participating in, to me, is not the point of this conversation.

PFEIFFER I've been doing a lot of looking online at a site called **Flickr** recently. It's a photo blog. People upload their photographs, give them keywords, and then they link to friends. If you go to the Flickr homepage you can search by any kind of subject category, like cat, and you get a whole list of people who have cat photographs.



Flickr

FUSCO That's database art!

PAUL PFEIFER: And it's visual, and it's a social space, or a space where the like-minded can swap information, at least. In many cases, it's all about art, like blogs where people compile images of their favorite artists' work, or the ten favorite shows they've seen this month. There are lots of young artists out there with their own photoblogs, too.

ASHFORD So?

PFEIFFER Exactly. My point is that there are plenty of opportunities these days to create your own social spaces. We've never had more opportunities. But do they matter if they're not on the radar at *Artforum*, or the Columbia MFA program, or a big gallery, or with powerful curators and critics? If we're in information blackout mode, it's also self-imposed. I'm not trying to cast blame here. I'm just saying that's how control works in an information economy. Too many MCs, not enough mikes.

SILLMAN There are so many markets right now. There are shops dedicated to skateboarding, to robots, to the underground art that's going on that's related to Japanese

anime, and to the whole zine world. All of a sudden, it starts to feel really commercialized. Then there are all these different frameworks like Flickr. But, Marlene, you were saying that's not what influences you when you're in the studio, or that's not what impacts you in the studio. What is informing you when you're in the studio?

McCARTY It's not to say that those things are not present, but they are so obfuscating and they can shut one down so rapidly. I'll tell you what's really at work in the studio is a total fuck-you attitude. It's just like, "Fuck it. I don't give a shit." Otherwise, you don't get anything done and you don't get anywhere. It's a downward spiral when your thinking starts cycling: "Oh, it's so horrible in Chelsea. Galleries have just become big boutiques. And that damn psychedelic-like pattern shit." You know, you can't go there.

AMY SILLMAN I was actually asking because I was curious if beauty was of any importance to you. I don't really think it is necessarily of importance to anyone I know.

ASHFORD But don't aesthetic innovations and formal experiments model emancipatory moments? Shared concern happens when people appreciate things that move them. Those moments have happened to all of us. I know I'm not alone. Those moments have moved us to collaborate together on projects to try to transform institutions, museums, and markets. Those moments have moved people to pray in front of paintings. Right, **Byron**? Those moments have moved us to make acts that have tried to dissemble the social relations of art.

ELEEY I think the idea of an "emancipatory moment" is interesting in this broader discussion. I think that Allison Smith's work explores this kind of emancipation, the kind of liberating social sublime that we get from collaborative practice of a certain sort. I think that's part of it.

But I also think, Amy, that we might be misunderstanding each other's definition of the word "beauty" because I definitely think of your work in terms of a kind of beauty and, also, *against* beauty. Even when we were talking last week and you said you were trying to work towards an almost purposeful ugliness in the work, that is a part of this dialectic. Maybe you're thinking about something differently, but I think that counts.

A SMITH I don't know if I've really been thinking much about "beauty" specifically, but I have been thinking about "making" a lot lately. And, in reading over the notes Doug provided for this evening, I found myself transposing the notion of making onto that of beauty. Some of the more interesting aspects, to me personally, that emerged from my recent *Muster* project had to do with issues of craft. There are an enormous number of creative and politically motivated people working right now in the D.I.Y. spirit to generate



Byron Kim with *Assembly of the Buddha Sakyamuni*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996



Performance by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, 1992–1994

The **Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program (ISP)** was founded in 1968 and consists of four interrelated parts: Studio Program, Curatorial Program, Critical Studies Program, and Architecture and Urban Studies Program. The program encourages the theoretical and critical study of the practices, institutions, and discourses that constitute the field of culture. Alumni include Andrea Fraser, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jenny Holzer, Glenn Ligon, Julian Schnabel, Roberta Smith, Richard Armstrong, and Lisa Phillips. For an analysis of the ISP see Howard Singerman, "A History of the Whitney Independent Study Program: In Theory and Practice," *Artforum*, February 2004, 113+.

collective art practices—radical quilting bees, renegade craft fairs, and collaboratively printed artist zines, for example—that propose alternative economies and communities around the handmade. These interestingly call to mind other art historic movements that have emerged in times of national division and turmoil. Through my work, I'm interested in investigating the role of craft in the construction of national identity, and I find the social histories of many craft practices to be an incredibly rich source of inquiry from a political point of view, one that is consistently underestimated in the art world.

I came to New York in 1990. And just to give you a little bit of background, I'm thirty-three, so I think I'm one of the youngest people here. Both **Coco's** and Kiki's work were really important to me. I came of age at a time that was really vibrant in terms of active dialogues about identity. I felt personally called to respond to that. I knew that it was going to take me a long time to articulate what I wanted to do, and I feel like I'm still doing that.

So, one of the things I wanted to say, **Coco**, is that you shouldn't feel like your work is lost on a younger generation of artists, because I'm part of that generation. Not all younger artists are in this for celebrity.

I went to graduate school at Yale and was considered the feminist artist of my program. I was basically told by a faculty member, to my face, that art had no social relevance whatsoever and that essentially I should get over it and work on something else. So after Yale I went to the **Whitney Museum Independent Study Program** and I had a friend, a fellow participant, who came into my studio almost like an intervention saying, "Allison, we just don't understand why you're making things." Neither of these attitudes were helpful. I felt really out of place. In both places, I was trying to find community. I was trying to find that dialogue, which I felt my work was emerging from, and to contribute to it. One of the things that I learned from art and theory of the 90s was that political art is always necessarily temporary and local, which is perhaps why some of that art, though effective at the time, lacks long-term staying power for a younger generation of artists. Many of the ephemeral, performative, or highly conceptual strategies used then, in their effort to avoid commodification, leave little to engage with in the physical sense, and I'm not sure it's sufficient to suggest that today's art students just don't read enough. Another lesson of the same art that I have always carried with me is that new strategies of creative political engagement have to be reinvented constantly. In my own work, a reconsideration of the notion of making, in the broadest sense, is key.

And regarding the idea that political art lacks currency today, things do work in cycles. The fact that this meeting is happening right now suggests perhaps that the tides are turning.

HEATHER PETERSON What do you think allowed you to stick to your guns when everyone was telling you, "This isn't relevant?"

A SMITH I don't know how to answer that besides a belief that it was. I think a lot of people here tonight are also teachers in different programs. Amy and I have talked about this before. There are so many students, young women students for example, who don't want to identify with feminism. But then it becomes our job. I mean, I remember my experience as a student, so now I'm in the role of trying to advance that dialogue with younger artists. If you think that all your students just don't care, maybe that's not true, and it is up to you to engage with them in new ways.

SILLMAN We were talking about this because it's really hard to find someone who will say that they're a feminist under thirty.

FUSCO They don't need to be feminists, that's what I tell them. They don't need to be feminists yet. What the feminist movement has essentially done is pushed the glass ceiling back so that you don't really feel the effects of gender and equity until they are thirty-five. [Laughter]

I get these blank stares. I tell them, "Come and talk to me after you're thirty-five, when your tits have fallen, and you're no longer a second grader. Then we'll talk about it, when you're arguing about equity with men your age, dealing with the job situation, and not having parties all the time." Things change as you get older. I've seen it. I have students from ten and twelve years ago who now address me in a totally different way.

PASTERNAK Maybe this is too far off the "beauty and its discontents" subject, but what kind of power does art have today?

FUSCO Well, I can think of some really great examples of situationist orgasm moments in the last couple of years involving art.

PASTERNAK Situationist orgasm moments?

FUSCO Situationist orgasm moments. When **The Yes Men** were on the BBC World News apologizing for **Bhopal** and the BBC actually believed that they were from Dow Chemicals that for me was a situationist orgasm. That was one of the things in art that made me happiest last year.

It is when there's actually a breakthrough and when there's actually a moment of complete rupture that is productive. It doesn't happen every day. And I think one of the most interesting things that came out of **The Yes Men** example was that survivors of the Bhopal disaster, family members who lost their relatives, at first were really pissed off at **The Yes Men**. Then they decided that this was the only



The **Yes Men's** Andy Bichlbaum appeared on BBC World news in the guise of a Dow Chemical spokesman, "Jude Finisterra," to take full responsibility for the **Bhopal** disaster. The appearance coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the tragic event, a chemical release that killed thousands and seriously injured over 100,000 people.

way to make their issue known on a global scale, so they agreed to meet with The Yes Men.



In April 2001, the anti-globalization movement held a People's Summit and organized protest marches against the FTAA summit in Quebec City, Canada



Henry Darger (1892-1972) was a reclusive artist who lived and worked in Chicago and posthumously became an important name in the world of outsider art. His major work was a 12-volume, 15,143-page manuscript called *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, along with several hundred watercolor paintings and drawings illustrating the story.

Denis Diderot (1713-1784) was a French philosopher and writer. He was a prominent figure in the Enlightenment and was the editor-in-chief of the famous *L'Encyclopédie* (1750-1765). His art criticism was also influential. He wrote accounts of the annual exhibitions of paintings in the Paris Salon, the *Salons, critique d'art* (1759-1781). Diderot's other major writings on art, include his *Essais sur la peinture* (1765) and *Pensees detachees sur las peinture* (1775).

PAUL CHAN I think you've brought up an interesting example. I have my own examples of moments where there's a formal point in which everyone becomes confused. You know a protest is going well when newscasters don't know what to say, they're just sort of dumbfounded, like during the **FTAA protest in Canada**. The idea is that art provides an opportunity to radically disperse power. Politics of anything is about power—who has it, who wants it, and who benefits from having it.

For me philosophically, art may be antithetical to questions of power. There is something within a **Henry Darger** painting that gives me the opportunity to realize there's a radical powerlessness there. And it makes me feel a little inhuman, which opens me to the possibility of something else happening. And I think these moments become incredibly personal and ethical.

We make dead things. So, at what point do you realize that you're basically making Frankenstein. And, for me, the question of how far do I want it to go on living becomes important. I think power becomes sort of a dynamic.

ASHFORD It's like **Diderot's** idea of an emotional community that arises out of the aesthetic moment of looking at a picture. I believe that those things do happen. I am trying to understand this historically and theoretically, as an Enlightenment concept and also understand how that concept has been corrupted by hypermarket culture.

BYRON KIM I totally agree with Paul. I sit in my studio looking at this thing and regretting that I am dealing with this mute object and that I'm having an exclusive conversation with myself or with only a few other people. Often, I make work in an atmosphere of disappointment. I feel backed into a corner and, finally, begin to sense some possibilities. Something beautiful arises out of the intimacy of the disappointment or the regret or the loss or the lack of being able to communicate. I'm always sitting in my studio comparing my work to some other thing and wondering whether this work might be beautiful because I learned this kind of thing is beautiful. I'm thrown into utter confusion when I do this and that is exactly the reason why I keep doing it.

SILLMAN I don't understand what you mean, Paul, when you talk about dead things. I wouldn't be able to walk through a museum and be interested if I felt like it was a mausoleum. Do you just think that about your own work? Or do you think that about everything you see?

CHAN I don't think we should make a normative value judgment on things that are dead. I don't necessarily think that dead things are bad. In fact, I think that's a whole problem, we think dead things are bad. But it helps me

to focus on the idea that there are certain things I do for the living and then there are certain things I do to remember and to articulate the dying and the dead. And so, art becomes one of those ways in which I help to formulate a discourse around what it means to be dead or dying. And I think for me that ultimately comes down to a very fundamental idea that these things that we work with, whether computers or pigment, are inanimate things. They're not a baby.

SILLMAN I just don't understand this death thing in regards to the idea of making because I don't separate the thing that I am touching and moving around all day from being alive. The making, the phenomenology of it, I don't separate that from my own body. My body is there still in the work!

FUSCO But once you're done Amy, it's done.

SILLMAN But it's not. It's actually not done...

FUSCO The thing about the majority of art objects, with the exception of those objects that purport to initiate yet another process of disintegration, or decay, or entropy, is that they are finished. And in that sense, they become dead things.

ELEEY But let's talk about active things. For me, there's a very distinct and clear definition between art and activism. Activism is oriented towards a very specific goal and is measured and evaluated on its effectiveness at achieving that end. Whereas art, on the other hand, is generally not oriented around a specific goal, and is less often evaluated on its ability to achieve a singular kind of purpose.

SILLMAN But I could give you counter examples. I could give you examples of activism that doesn't have a specific goal, and of art, that has a very specific goal.

FUSCO I'd like to go back to Doug's question about the hypermarket culture. Over the last ten years, the market has infiltrated spaces of dissonance. The market has subsumed all alternatives. When I was in school, school was opposed to the market. School was an alternative to the market. The artists who were my teachers developed their anti-capitalist, anti-market aesthetic orientations as artists—as performance artists, as anti-object artists—because they worked in schools not only as teachers, but they also presented their work in schools as artists.

Schools were the spaces that allowed Chris Burden to start, **Living Theater** to survive, and a lot of the minimalists (who are now idolized by these people who are in love with the market) to have a beginning and to have a life. Over the last fifteen years, the market has taken over the art school and the alternative space, so that spaces that began in opposition to it have become spaces of collusion.

Today both schools and alternative spaces participate in the market. So, when people say, "I don't know anything

The **Living Theatre** was founded in 1947 by Judith Malina and Julian Beck. It was one of the first troupes in New York to break away from traditional theatrical restraints towards a more sociopolitically aware, reality-based theater. It became one of the best-known street theater groups in the United States, especially for its confrontational approach to audiences in the 1960s. Its political defiance led to participation in sit-ins, Vietnam War protests, and peace marches.

else.” I say, “Well, I’ll tell you why you don’t know anything else. This is what has happened.”

ASHFORD There was a time in which artists were encouraged—encouraged by themselves, encouraged by each other, or encouraged institutionally—to be re-invested in relation to dialogic forms of practice. One of the things I notice about my students is that they feel so professionally specialized. They have a relationship to the school. And they have a relationship to an idea of patronage, public or private. When you try to bring up a political or a social movement, even in a philosophical moment, they don’t see it as fitting into the continuum of the institutional placement of the work.

I’m wondering, isn’t it possible that there could be, with small amounts of money, a sponsoring context in which artists would be put into situations where they would have conversation with people and audiences and collaborators...people who are doing other kinds of work? Could they then see their work as related to other kinds of work? An anti-art school?

SILLMAN I definitely feel like there is a way of being challenging in a classroom that might not be possible in a marketplace. You go into a classroom and encourage the students to talk about something in an open, questioning, curious, or critical way.

I feel like everything I have learned, I have learned by teaching. I talk to people that I don’t agree with. I teach with people who I don’t necessarily understand. I articulate ideas in books that I’ve read to people who don’t know them. Teaching, for me, is the middle space between having work in a gallery and making something for a protest march or a magazine. Teaching is the front line. I still think teaching is the most ethical part of my life.

I try really hard to make students think about how their ideas about form need to be challenged and to be challenging. Because I think form is the vehicle by which their ideas come across. So going back to your proposal, Doug, in a way I think the most radical thing that we could do is start a new school.

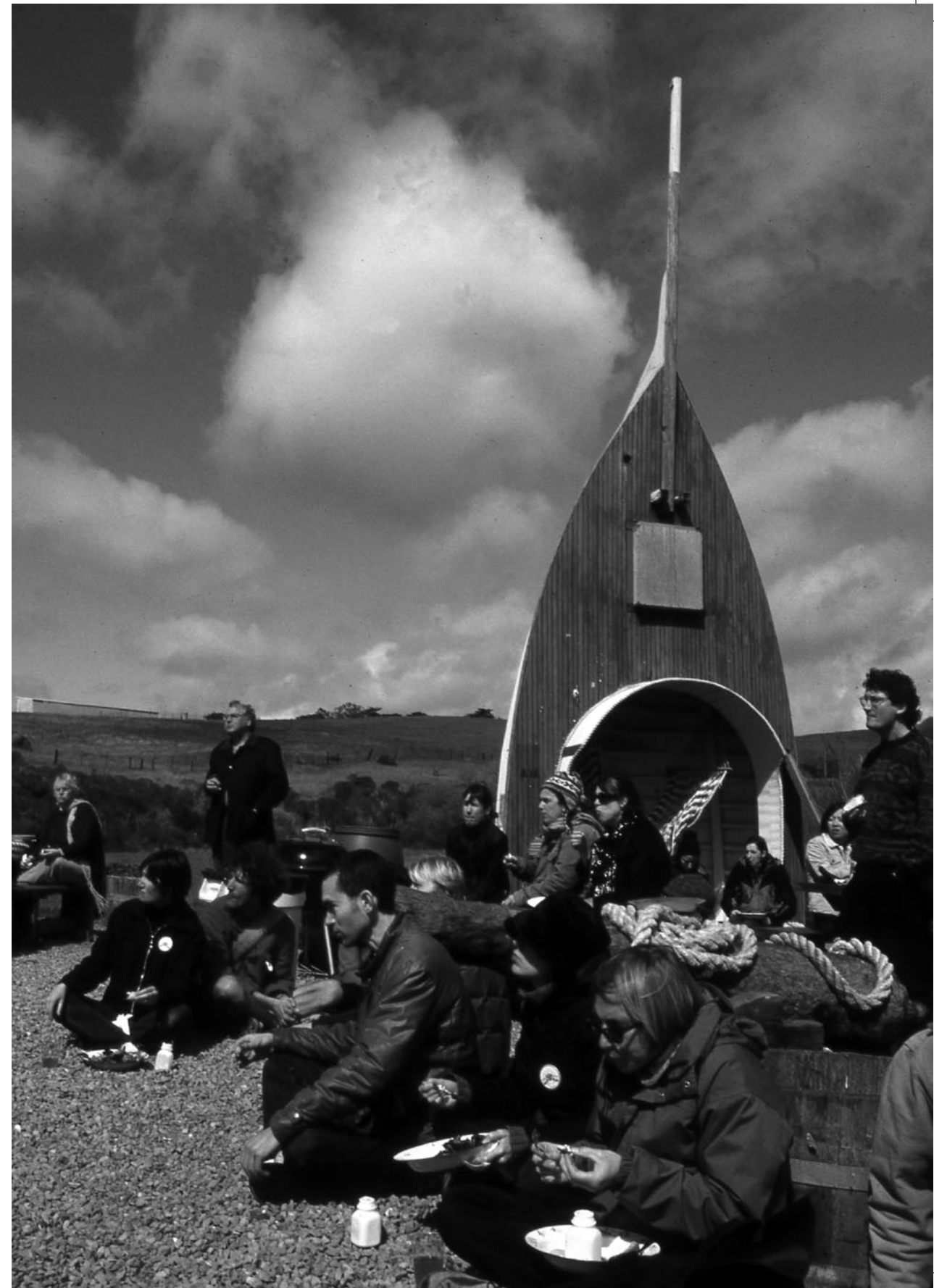
MICHAEL RAKOWITZ Starting a new school is a focus of conversation where I teach in Baltimore, where Maryland Institute College of Art. Part of it is in response to a series of exhibitions called *Cram Sessions* that was organized and curated by Chris Gilbert, who was the curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art for a while.

The last in a series of four exhibitions, *Cram Sessions: 04 Counter-Campus* was looking at alternative educational institutions. So, it looked at places like 16 Beaver Street and people like **Nils Norman** who champions the notion of radical pedagogy along the lines of those presented in *Streetwork: The Exploding School*, which was a very popular book in the 1970s about how education can’t happen in the classroom. The exhibition takes it that much further



Cram Sessions, organized by Chris Gilbert, was a series of four experimental month-long exhibitions held at the Baltimore Museum of Art: *01 Collective Effort* (March 3 to 28, 2004); *02 Dark Matter* (November 3 to 28, 2004); *03 Sound Politics* (April 6 to May 1, 2005); and *04 Counter Campus* (November 2 to 27, 2005). Image: Installation view of *Cram Sessions 04: Counter Campus*

Nils Norman and *The Exploding School*: See his website: http://www.dismalgarden.org/pages/exploded_school_contents.html. Facing image: caption TK



Nomads and Residents was founded in New York City in 1999 as a forum for visitors in the arts. The group's mission was to help make connections and support networks.

Parasite was a New York-based, artist-run organization formed to support, document, and present project-based artwork with a focus on projects committed to political and social causes. Parasite created projects at "host" organizations in order to develop a discursive context.

and recognizes that these spaces have existed. I imagine **Nomads and Residents** and **Parasite** have provided this type of space. And now, 16 Beaver Street seems to be a model and has been cloned in different places around the world.

I think we're in this healthy moment at the Maryland Institute College of Art where students are getting pissed off with the administration. There's a sense of distrust for the institution. But then the onus is on them to start to make discoveries about how they want to be taught and how they think about these ideas, which I find the students in Baltimore hold in very high regard and find important. Students need to look at these alternative educational projects and look at updating them so they're pertinent on tactical levels as well as in terms of subjectivity.

Students are fascinated with these projects. And I don't find the students so affected by market in Baltimore, but that might just be a geographic disconnect.

PASTERNAK Well, the problem is that that the safest place to deal with it is in school, but the question remains: What happens once they leave school?

MCCARTY The ideal place to do it is in the real world. It's not about going to school, going to graduate school, going to more graduate school...

SILLMAN I agree with you guys, but at the same time, I'm not telling my students that this will be how to make a living. I'm telling them how to stay together. The people from Skowhegan now show and teach in the real world, and the conversations that started at Skowhegan are now out in the real world. Then school is crucial.

ASHFORD I've been thinking about the pyramid scheme of art schools. The 8,000 MFA students a year is absurd. But I also feel that there's an idea about the training of the artist that is not about professionalization. It's about a combination of what Amy and Coco were both talking about. I hope to train someone to be a skeptical and creative citizen. There's a value in that.

FUSCO There's no space in that.

ASHFORD Many of my students end up resisting the professionalized role of the artist as it is organized at this moment in history, because they can't or won't cope with this boutique world of galleries and collectors. But they often end up doing multiform practices, which maybe don't fit into received ideas of art in terms of the making of things, but they definitely are invested in creative practices. Unfortunately, there are few spaces or contexts for this work.

SILLMAN I'm curious, Coco if you're saying that it's not happening in the schools and it's sure as hell not going to happen in the marketplace, where do you see opportunities for artists?

FUSCO I think artists have to decide where they want to make those opportunities happen. And I think a lot of my peers are more interested in making a living, they don't want to work on making opportunities or changes. It's not the students. I'm not trying to rag on students all the time. This is a reality that I have to face everyday among my peers. People who used to be much more engaged with the social decided to focus instead on making a living. And that's a reality.

If you want to make something happen, you make it happen. You find the people who will work with you. You find a way to do it. You change your methods. You experiment. You look for an audience. You find a way. Lots of people go through all kinds of changes in their practice in the course of their careers. They end up channeling their work into lots of different areas.

But there is a lot of complacency out there that isn't about the market. It's also about an individual decision that it is too hard to think hard. It's too hard to make an effort to do something else. Many people don't want to challenge things. That's real.

ASHFORD Allison and Michael, you both have practices that started off in different ways, with **The Muster** on Governors Island and with the **paraSITE** shelters and other projects. What are your experiences? You were able to make this work in a time that was completely different from the history that many of us here at the table are talking about. There was no...

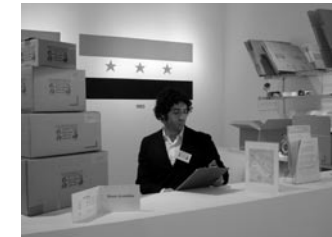
A SMITH Well, that's what I keep thinking. I feel like we've gone full circle in this discussion back to the idea that it's the responsibility of the artist to seek out new forms of engagement and critical dialogue. And there are examples out there for the younger artists who want to work in those ways. There are examples that could be shared by many of the people who are here right now; you are role models.

ASHFORD I say it all the time, "Make your own scene. Don't accept the scene that's there. Make your own scene."

A SMITH I connect to the title of this series, *Who Cares*. **The Muster** was a project inspired by a genuine desire to know what, if anything, people in my artistic and queer communities are fighting for. "Muster" is a military term meaning an assembly of troops for the purposes of inspection, critique, exercise, and display. Using references to Civil War battle re-enactment to metaphorically suggest a kind of relentless infighting, I wanted to create a space for ecstatic proclamation, for expression and dialogue, to frame a polyphony of ideas and voices. My experience

The Muster was held on May 14, 2005 on Governors Island in New York City, and centered on the question, "What are you fighting for?" Created by Allison Smith and inspired by Civil War reenactments, it featured over 100 participating artists in approximately 40 tents. **The Muster** was sponsored by the Public Art Fund.

ParaSITE is a project begun by Michael Rakowitz in 1997. The artist describes the work as, "[T]he appropriation of the exterior ventilation systems on existing architecture as a means for providing temporary shelter for homeless people.... Since February 1998, over thirty prototypes of the **paraSITE** shelter have been custom built and distributed to homeless individuals in Cambridge, Boston, New York, and Baltimore. All were built using temporary materials that were readily available on the streets, such as plastic bags and tape."



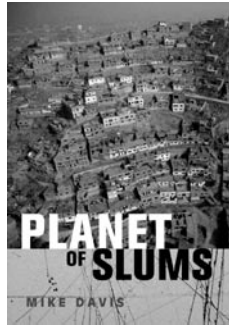
Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2005

with this project has been incredibly rewarding and cathartic. Over two thousand people attended *The Muster* on Governors Island, and it was not the same people you would find at a Whitney Biennial opening.



Dennis Adams, TK, TK

RAKOWITZ I came out of a situation where, as an undergraduate, I focused for the first two years on graphic design, because of parental fears about not having any kind of economy afterwards, and then I sort of segued into sculpture. After becoming disillusioned with where the work would potentially end up, I went into a graduate program at M.I.T. that was a public art program that existed in the Department of Architecture. And the people who I was influenced by in my graduate work were clearly, I think, involved in teaching as a means for generating income. It's something that kept the discourse critical and aware of this countercultural moment. It was also a survival mechanism for me, purely pragmatic. I think that in studying with people like Dennis Adams there was a sense of emancipation in regards to not always focusing on market, which I know nothing about really. It showed me that there is a kind of steady income available that allows you to focus on the ideas that are not necessarily attached to something profitable. When I'm teaching courses, I'm coming from that. I try to show students that you can create your own scene or come up with a franchise of students that find the same things important, regardless of the market. I think this is starting to reveal itself in Baltimore where there is a group of students that are starting to stay in the city and deal with its issues. They are really integrating themselves into the urban tragedy that is Baltimore.



Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York: Verso, 2006). *Publishers Weekly* writes that, "Davis paints a bleak picture of the upward trend in urbanization and maintains a stark outlook for slum-dwellers' futures."

PASTERNAK I'm seeing this in mid-sized cities around the country. And I think this is important. Besides, it's hard to come to New York City—you just can't escape from the horrors of the economics. Perhaps you go to graduate school and you're tens of thousands of dollars in debt in student loans. The cost of living is outrageous here.

A SMITH Must there be a dichotomy between the notion of marketable art and a more socially engaged practice? I mean, do they have to be polar opposites? Aren't there ways that you can work within a given situation, i.e. our market-driven art world, and still do work that is socially meaningful and relevant? Participating in the market affords visibility, and with visibility, you are part of a public dialogue in which you can effect positive change.

PASTERNAK For sure this is possible and it happens, but rarely.

CHAN May I just interject something? Whenever I get a chance to talk about this, I do, because I think it's incredibly prophetic. The writer Mike Davis, who wrote *City of Quartz*, has a new book called *Planet of Slums*. In this book,

he discusses how the future population of the world will live. He says that for the first time in humanity people will predominately live in urban environments, specifically mid-sized cities. And you can actually see this trend. For example, in the U.S. immigrants now circumvent the metropolises where immigrants have traditionally gone—New York, Los Angeles—and instead they go straight to the suburbs because obviously the cost of living is cheaper there.

The other thesis Davis talks about is how by 2050 the world will be a planet of slums because the explosion of population growth in these cities are not and cannot be sustained by the usual suspect of job growth. So, cities growing in numbers, but not growing economically become slums. And who's organizing these people? It's not the Left, it's not the Right, it is Pentecostal Christians, Populist Islam, and Hindu fundamentalists.

Actually I'd like to bring this back to beauty, because I think beauty is still really important to me. That is why I became a painter. I think the discourse about beauty may have something to do with Dave Hickey, but, frankly, for me, it has a lot to do with this return to religion. I think it's directly connected with this idea. And since religion isn't going to go away any time soon, I don't actually think that the discourse of beauty is going to go away anytime soon. Our Western notion of what beauty comes from a very theological background.

PASTERNAK Would you explain this a bit?

CHAN I think Western art is inextricably linked to cultic objects. Once upon a time art functioned as objects that where supposed to embody the unknown and the invisible, for instance, God. Over time, though, something changed, such as the advent of modernism. But I see the return to this idea everywhere.

I saw this in Vieques, Puerto Rico. I was hanging out with the people who were resisting the naval bases. They were eight- and twelve-year-old kids and eighty-year-old grandmothers, and they were climbing naval fences to put their bodies on the line. And in this charged political space, they had art: this plastic figurine of a Virgin Mary. And they would keep it clean! The Virgin Mary plastic statue provided the opportunity for seeing this sort of terrain, of a future time when the Navy would leave.

Same thing in Iraq. Iraq had a huge art market. And they loved Giacometti. Basically, Giacometti provided the existential form of how Iraqis saw themselves. So, if we take the history of art seriously as a history of cultic objects then I think this discourse actually goes beyond the market areas in New York and Los Angeles. I think there is still an aura of the museum and the gallery providing objects that can better us as human beings.



Vieques, Puerto Rico

ASHFORD That's what I was trying to get to with the idea of the emancipatory moment. And I also think that your comment about religion is particularly important in terms of social organizing, because those collective aesthetic moments that I had as a kid—in relationship to rock 'n' roll or in relationship to fashion or in relationship to club culture—are experiences that many kids are now having in relationship to highly organized religious institutions. I think those are aesthetic experiences. People identify with each other around those experiences.

SILLMAN Whether they are from the suburbs and went to Harvard or from the slums and worship the Guadalupe Virgin, beauty is not a static universal. I don't want to treat it that way or think of it that way.

I learned to expand and transform my idea of what was beautiful by going to art school and I'm really glad that I did. I feel like that is the thing that interests me about modern art. I don't think that there is "Beauty" that exists independently. There are practices around beauty and fetishes around beauty. I came to New York from Chicago, where I grew up. In Chicago, in my baby artist, baby feminist social circle, we didn't care about gestural painting. I thought those paintings were hideous. When I came to New York to art school, I was told that they were beautiful. And I was like, "This gray shit?" Because of my background in Chicago, I didn't understand. But then I changed my mind.

So, that was transformative. To get out of one kind of aesthetic and into another aesthetic was very valuable to me. It challenged my notions of what was beautiful. I wouldn't leave beauty in a hallowed space.

FUSCO One of the problems that I've had as a professor in an art school is that there is very little criticality in the discussion of what constitutes the beautiful in the classroom. Now, that is the fault not only of the students, but of the professors who use their personal definition of beauty to determine what should reign in a classroom as opposed to any kind of historically, theoretically, or politically informed understanding of beauty. As a result, it ends up being about this personal epiphanic moment.

You know, when you empower adolescents that way, they end up just kicking each other in the stomach. They have no way of being analytical about their tastes. I think that is extremely dangerous in that it feeds into a reactionary idea that beauty is just about what I think and not about what history thinks.

SILLMAN I don't think it has to be reactionary if you describe it as being a bodily experience, a sensate phenomenological experience which we all are having all the time.

FUSCO You know what, that ends up just being "whatever makes me feel good." When you tell a twenty-two-year-old, beauty is "what makes you feel good" they don't...

SILLMAN But there's a language of critique for that. That's what modernism was. It was the news delivered in a new form, a radical challenge to what was previously assumed to be meaningful—a total transformation of form, content, and delivery all in one.

ASHFORD That was the anecdote I was going to start off with. I had a lecturer in my class three weeks ago who said that in this period of war culture, with this level of disenfranchisement, and with the idea of globalization running rampant, anybody involved in an aesthetic, self-motivated practice is "self-indulgent." There were two weeks of discussions...

FUSCO Well, why not have a counterpoint to what students are being told constantly, which is that an aesthetic, self-motivated practice is wonderful? Why not have somebody come in and tear that down? At least having one person come in and tell them that isn't a bad idea.

ASHFORD I'm trying to get back to this question: Who gets the advantage of this false dichotomy between epiphany and participation?

It doesn't affect my work. It doesn't affect my teaching. I'm always teaching aesthetics and politics as intimately related, not just form and content, but aesthetics and politics. Inquiry into the idea of engaging bodily with somebody and inquiry in terms of engaging with social issues have been connected since Beckett, since Breton, since Hoch. This was understood fifty years ago.

PFEIFFER I also came to the conversation today questioning the dichotomy between beauty and politics. When I hear stories of people badmouthing the social or badmouthing beauty, it reminds me of the way people sometimes talk about communism today. People reference it as if we were living in the Cold War era, as if the subject was being beamed to us with a capital 'C' from the 50s or something. I think we often use terms as though their meanings are more stable than they really are. I mean, it wasn't so long ago that the aesthetic categories of Clement Greenberg were the only option. To argue over beauty and politics today is to me like arguing over communism and capitalism as such in 2006. The terms of discussion have already been transformed, if not rendered obsolete, by larger social shifts.

One formative reference in my own thinking about aesthetics and politics comes from the cultural studies movement. It's something that **Stuart Hall** wrote about in the essay "New Ethnicities," where he looks at the state of black British cinema in the late 80s and calls for practitioners and critics to acknowledge a kind of end of innocence. He writes that it's not tenable any longer to say, "I'm black, or I'm coming from this or that ideological position, and therefore whatever I say is right or true." Instead, there's a need to recognize all language, particularly visual language,

Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Black Film, British Cinema*. (London: BFI / ICA Documents 7, 1989), 27-31. Reprinted in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 441-449.



Mysterious Object at Noon

Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2004).

The RAND Corporation (the name is an acronym of Research and Development) is a non-profit think tank that conducts research for decision makers in government and commercial organizations. Founded in 1946 by the U.S. Army Air Forces, RAND initially worked on issues of national security.

as inherently contestable. Looking at art making this way there's always a political dimension involved. To me, beauty and the contestation of meaning are one and the same thing.

The film *Mysterious Object at Noon* by the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul is an excellent example. The film is absolutely beautiful, partially because of the way it's shot in black and white, but also because it plays with the language of ethnographic filmmaking in a way that totally fucks with your expectations and takes you to a place that's very different from where you expected to go. The capacity to communicate in ways that escape the traps of reductive thinking—that's the definition of beauty.

I think there's a white elephant in the room that needs to be reckoned with, and that's the increasingly central role the creative fields play in society these days. A lot of what used to be considered progressive, innovative thinking among artists and activists has been swallowed up and turned into a standard job description among creative types in general. I mean, thinking outside the box is what Apple commands designers to do now. Maybe the political dimension of art making seems less urgent to a lot of young people today because that urge is being sated in other places.

ELEYY When you say that aspects of political practice or thinking have become fully absorbed by these other fields—a kind of institutionalization of politics within industry, I guess—it makes me curious to hear why you think that's occurred. Is it because those other fields have more power than the art world or the activist community has to keep them separate and resistant to co-optation?

PFEIFFER I think that in today's information economy, the model set by the culture industries, which used to be thought of as a set of relatively marginal practices, has become the central mode of production in society. Surplus value no longer comes from mass-produced objects; it comes directly from people's brainpower. I'm taking this idea from Paolo Virno's book *A Grammar of the Multitude*. The promise of art as a scene of revolutionary thinking hasn't been abolished, it's been flattened out and subsumed within the current modes of information-based production. Mao and Che are the favored subjects of ad campaigns these days, in case you haven't noticed.

FUSCO I think to claim that the art world has lost its power is really disingenuous. **The RAND Corporation**, which is a think tank for the military, has done three reports in five years on the arts. They obviously think that there is something very significant about what the arts do. They've done one on performing arts, one on digital arts, and they just came out this year with a report on visual arts. The military spends more on image culture than they do on supplying computers for real information gathering. So, somebody with a lot of power has figured out that visual culture and the culture

of the image is incredibly powerful. They are basically interested in harnessing the power of the visual arts.

McCARTY But I think they're also frightened by us. I mean, did you read **Richard Florida's** *The Rise of the Creative Class*? There is actually redemptive power in the fact that the creative class is growing faster than any other class within the United States. And, of course, the military is going to cotton onto that and be like, "What's going on here and how can we control it?" The thing that I came away with from that book was the fact that there is massive power amongst those of us working with ideas and information if people could just connect.

PFEIFFER Yeah, that's the thing that the design industry can't do and the fashion industry can't do. It can't create a political community. I'm holding on to the idea that art doesn't have to be mainly about creating a marketable stylistic identity. Otherwise, I'd be bored to tears. One of my oldest activist friends now works in an advertising firm. The stories she tells about the corporate working environment make her job sound just awful. But sometimes I feel like things are not much better in the art world. Then other times I think it's equally tedious to bellyache about such things and much more interesting to just stay engaged and make art. Whatever the mood, at this point it's questionable whether art can muster a political community, or if it's losing that capacity quickly.

FUSCO Yeah, and I think that as long as the training that artists get is so geared towards individualism, intuition, and the personal epiphanic moment you will not have it.

ASHFORD There is a schizophrenia between the making of things and the idea of social transformation that's reflected in lots of institutions.

PASTERNAK Two years or so ago I got involved with a political action coalition, called **Downtown for Democracy, D4D**. This group of young artists, graphic designers, writers, and editors came together to use their creative intelligence to raise money for progressive political candidates. I was so excited that here was a PAC for the first time in my life that was started by the creative industry. But I also wish they weren't using their resources to only raise money—instead, I wish they used their creative skills, intelligence, and connections to actually shape information and a wider public consciousness.

McCARTY I had a conversation with a few of the members; it was just brainstorming about things to do. The sensation I left with was profound disappointment. They had skills, they had access, they had everything, but it was all about communicating with other cool people. My point of view was, "For this election, you gotta get out. You gotta get out to the

Richard Florida is best known for his work on the creative class and its ramifications in urban regeneration. He is the author of the bestselling book *Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2002) and *Flight of the Creative Class* (New York: Collins, 2005).

Downtown for Democracy (D4D) is a political action committee founded in 2004 by professionals in the arts, music, fashion, film, publishing, advertising, design, and other creative media. Their goal is to mobilize America's creative community to engage new voters and elect progressive candidates.

Women's Action Coalition (WAC) was a direct-action organization active from 1992 to 1995. The first meeting took place on January 28, 1992, when a group of approximately seventy-five women attended a meeting entitled "Women Strategizing in the '90s." WAC's mission statement contained the memorable phrase, "WAC is watching. We will take action." Despite early growth and successful actions, issues of race and class diversity and ethnic and sexual identity caused conflict within the organization. WAC's numbers dwindled and the group's last meeting was held on November 6, 1995. Image: Women's Action Coalition Logo



people. You gotta get to the ladies in the Laundromat in Ohio. It's not about getting to the other cool designer across the street on Broadway."

PASTERNAK Marlene, Julie, and others at the table remember the **Women's Action Coalition**. D4D has thirteen people organizing big national fundraisers for progressive causes, whereas WAC had thousands of us organized and impassioned in a matter of weeks with no money and yet there were franchises all over the country. WAC had a great impact. By the way, WAC was actually started by a group of women who were primarily artists and its earliest meetings were at The Drawing Center in SoHo.

It seems that at this current moment, we don't seem to come together.

SILLMAN Well, I don't know that we all agree about this personal/private thing necessarily being an evil.

ASHFORD But we do agree that there are not those same social moments in which we are put in a position of forming coherent communities. The idea of privacy needs to be changed publicly.

FUSCO To bring in another student anecdote, when I try to counter this in the classroom by bringing artists who do work with the social, my graduate students' immediate response is that any artist who engages with the social is engaged in exploitation. They believe that if you dare to think of something other than your private space, other than your little room, you run the risk of exploiting somebody. You're exploiting the people you're working with, you're exploiting the poor people you photograph, you're exploiting the social issue that you're dealing with, you're exploiting the insane person in the insane asylum you made a film about. And so, that becomes their moralistic high ground on which to basically retreat back to the studio.

SILLMAN I understand that. You don't have to argue that with me. There are a lot of different ways to see transformative activism or the transformative personal understanding of what is possible. The cutting edge of that is not going to be "I'm alone" or "I'm together." You can work together with people and still be an asshole. And you can be alone and still be really ethical.

FUSCO It's not about working alone; it's about an ideology of individualism. I work alone most of the time, but it's not in the service of an ideology of individualism. Whereas I do think that we have to recognize what art schools are doing. Name me an art school that doesn't put everybody in their own room. Name one. There isn't one.

ASHFORD I agree, Coco, with the idea of the art school being something that's creating this ideological moment, but only in part. I think that ideology existed when Group Material started and that it existed when WAC started. It has always been in existence at different levels of dominance and in different kinds of forms. But artists have historically been the people that have taken down the **Vendome column**. I mean, it's one hundred and fifty years of history. And the idea—at this particular time in a context in which there is an international crisis—that artists don't have a cohesive political moment cannot be blamed only on art schools.

FUSCO In the past there were interdisciplinary dialogues. Artists talked to people who had knowledge from other fields. There were so many conferences with anthropologists, sociologists, geographers...

ASHFORD ...or with labor unions.

FUSCO Now artists talk to artists, and then they talk to more artists. They don't talk to anybody else. I mean, it wasn't like that twenty-five years ago. It was not. And if you're lucky, you get to read **Slavoj Žižek** in an art magazine.

A SMITH People could share more. I'm really proud of the fact that I took my grant from the Public Art Fund and basically gave it away. The gesture was to share it with anyone and everyone who wanted to participate in *The Muster*, to use that money to create a very literal platform with a lot of fanfare for people to say what was on their minds. And whether or not *The Muster* really created a community or whether or not it was anything radical, that's sort of beside the point for me. I wanted to make a portrait of something beyond "us and them." It was a gesture toward opening up a potentially unwieldy, incoherent and cacophonous dialogue, and...

ASHFORD It was more than a gesture. It really did open it up.

A SMITH One of the interesting things about *The Muster* was that it revealed how hard it is for people to imagine an alternative. There is so much protest. We're all comfortable talking about protest. We're all comfortable critiquing our current administration, the art world, other artists, students, etc. Wherever you are on the spectrum of art theory and critical discourse, we all know how to criticize something. So I disagree with Coco's earlier point about there being no public space for the airing of dissent. There is a whole industry centered on criticism. Maybe what is needed now is not more critique, but a profoundly radical creativity.

With *The Muster*, I wanted to do a project that would give people the opportunity to imagine something that they would proclaim, rather than protest. And what I found was how difficult that was for people to answer my question, "What are you fighting for?" I think even this conversation is evidence



Vendome Column is located in the Place Vendôme, Paris. Napoleon erected the column to celebrate the victory of Austerlitz. During the Paris Commune in 1871, the painter Gustave Courbet proposed the column be disassembled and re-erected in the Hôtel des Invalides. The column was taken down, but when the Paris Commune fell the decision was made to rebuild the column with its statue of Napoleon. Courbet was financially ruined when he was condemned to pay part of the expense.

Slavoj Žižek is a Lacanian-Marxist philosopher and cultural theorist. He is well known for his counterintuitive observations on a wide-range of topics including fundamentalism, opera, globalization, human rights, Lenin, cyberspace, David Lynch, and Alfred Hitchcock. He is the international director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities and the author of many articles and books including *The Fragile Absolute* and *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*

Democracy, a project by Group Material, was held at The Dia Art Foundation, New York in 1988. During the project, installations on education, electoral politics, cultural participation, and AIDS were tied closely to round tables and town meetings.

of that, how difficult it is, no matter how many times you say, “Well, let’s think of some new ideas.” It’s so difficult to get to that place.

SILLMAN I had an idea once. I haven’t implemented it, so I’m at fault for not having done it, but I think it’s a good idea. I’m friends with lots of filmmakers and video makers and they don’t make any money. I thought that every time I have a show I should be in charge of having my gallery open one or two nights a week to show the work of time-based artists. Every time I have a show I could do this because I have the whole month, and it’s only from 10 am to 6 pm, Tuesdays to Saturdays...

ASHFORD It’s a lot of time, right?

SILLMAN I know. I don’t think I really use it properly in some ways. In my show in 2003, *I am curious (yellow)*, I made t-shirts and that was my political action. I hawked them during the opening. They said “Pussy Against Bush” and had a small drawing of a cat leaning against a bush with its arms folded, and the names of three women artists having solo shows on the back. But my idea is that if every gallery artist-type would open the gallery to a different kind of practice one night a week...well, I just wonder if those of us who do have these gallery positions are using the galleries in the right way.

A SMITH I like this idea. It’s almost like imagining that there are as many town halls as there are galleries. And they’re pretty much empty and dark at night.

ASHFORD I remember turning the Dia Foundation into a town hall meeting for a night during the Group Material project *Democracy*. It was great. However problematic the social use of museums may be, I still try to see them as truly public places.

McCARTY I have a specific thing, too. It’s just something very small that I participated in this year, but it was so invigorating. And it does fall into the design realm for all those who are feeling bad about that.

I was asked to do this workshop in Maine, this summer design retreat. They wanted me to mentor these young designers and do their kick-off talk. And I was like, “Ugh.” But I was desperate for the money, so I said I’d do it. And then I started to wrap my mind around it and I thought, “I am not going to do this unless I have a good time.” I kind of went crazy. I dressed in a Pilgrim costume and did an entire super-political presentation.

A SMITH Alone?

McCARTY All by myself. And it was so inspiring. We did this whole pamphlet based on **Thomas Paine**, pamphleteering, and the Declaration of Independence. And it was this really spontaneous, activating thing. The people left saying, “Oh my God, that was so easy and so fun.” And it happened that there were some people from Cal Arts and Cranbrook there. And they were like, “Oh my God. You have to come do this at Cranbrook. You have to come do it at Cal Arts.”

JULIE AULT In your Pilgrim suit?

McCARTY I’ve got my mother making a Pilgrim outfit. I went into that workshop thinking, “Fuck the conversation about, ‘Oh, you can’t be too feminist. You can’t be too political. People will get turned off.’” I just thought, “Burn me at the stake. I don’t care. I’m going for it.” And it was so transformative.

There were twenty people in that class, and those twenty people walked out saying, “Oh, my God, that was so easy. And that was so cool, and I feel so engaged, and not disconnected.” And now I feel like, “Just say it. Just say it.”

A SMITH There is such a developed theoretical language around socially motivated art practice. They don’t know the “language” or they think their work isn’t going to really change anything. I’m just trying to imagine my students in conversation with you, Coco, and I just feel like they’d think they were being set up to fail, which is a shame.

FUSCO Well, there are plenty of other art students in digital media at schools like Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Carnegie-Mellon, and the School of the Art Institute in Chicago who are enamored of the idea of tactical media. They read Critical Art Ensemble and Guy Debord and others, they fuck around with Wal-Mart, and they have a blast. They’re not intimidated by me or anybody else who comes to talk to them, because they’re not at all concerned with being artists in a traditional sense. They’re interested in being **tactical media** practitioners.

Unless there is a recognition of the moment—and I mean that really in a Marxist sense—where we are institutionally, where we are economically, and where we are politically, we can blab all we want about what we like or the wonderful things we are doing, but we still have to recognize where we are, and what we’re doing in relationship to what’s happening in the world. If I can’t make my students understand that then the rest is just BS.

KIKI SMITH In my experience, I’ve learned most through making and doing and listening, from having a relationship to a material through my body and being here.

ELEEEY I was going to say more or less the same thing. I’m all in favor of book reading, but I think that there could be a similar amount of awareness of one’s place in the world

Thomas Paine (1737-1809) was a revolutionary and radical pamphleteer. His writings helped guide the American Revolution. His most famous pamphlet, *Common Sense*, was a treatise on the benefits of personal liberty and limited government.



Marlene McCarty in Pilgrim outfit, 2005

Tactical Media is the appropriation of mass media in order to oppose and criticize a powerful person or organization. It uses technology and hit-and-run tactics to put forward an often short-lived activist agenda. By generating information and creating a reaction, tactical media attempts to reverse the one-way-flow of communication and power. Organizations that have used tactical media include @™ark, The Yes Men, and Critical Art Ensemble. See Wikipedia contributors, “Tactical media,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Tactical_media&oldid=58219095 (accessed July 10, 2006).

that could come from being alone in a studio, not reading anything, and just making stuff. It's hard for me to despair to the point of thinking that's impossible. I think there's a lot of work that's made under those circumstances that does have that awareness.

CHAN I came to this country in 1981 and I realized that one of the things that was markedly different from Hong Kong was that in Omaha, Nebraska, where I grew up, I was increasingly pin-pointed as a target market. And you can easily see how this has progressed: first, it was selling boutique clothes to 16-year-olds, then it was 14-year-olds, then 7-year-olds, and now even toddlers have their target market. As I was teaching I realized that one of the reasons people go to art school is that it is a radical escape. If you're constantly being told that you are a consumer, of course, one of the models for being in the arts is to become a producer.

A beautiful thing for me about Darger was that he provided a radical escape. And that escape was incredibly important to me. And so, in a way, the escape becomes an essential component of my engagement back into the world.

I was swimming in Foucault and Derrida at the School of the Art Institute, and I loved it. But what I realized within Darger was that the sexual anxiety and the connection between image, body, composition, and form provided a new horizon, it provided me with a new language to talk about things. I couldn't get there until I realized that escape was an essential part of how to understand what real engagement is.

And so, I think when we complain about students, what we don't realize is that perhaps the lack of critical imagination comes from us, the teachers. We have not found a language to re-describe this form of escape so that they can escape from what they're feeling, which right now at 18-years-old is horrifying. It is horrifying as a consumer and as a person living through war. Frankly, today's 18-year-olds will not have the same social welfare net that we'll have. And this is frightening. I think art school, as a form of escape, is incredibly valuable. And I think, in fact, that if we don't re-describe this sense of escape within art so that students can see it as an opening, as a form of engagement, we've lost the opportunity to realize what being-in-the-world means for us today.

SILLMAN I think there's a new description of the primitive in what you're saying.

CHAN I hope so.

SILLMAN I have to play devil's advocate and contest that, because I've seen so many cycles of finding the primitive who really describes what art is about. The one who wasn't part of anything, the one who was outside the culture, the one who was insane, the one who was trapped in his office, the one who wore a grass skirt. Those are myths. They are myths about art that...

CHAN It's a funny thing. It doesn't make me want to go into an apartment in Chicago and draw for myself. Strangely enough, I had the opposite reaction. It's too simple to believe that human beings simply identify things by seeing them. There is something that we all know as children called reaction formation. You can react negatively and you can react positively. Art provides the horizon of freedom from which that can come about.

SILLMAN I agree with what you're saying, but I also think that the important idea is that of transformation. It's not about imitating an escapist, and it's not about imitating Darger. It's also not about imitating Foucault. It's about transformation.

There's a lot of Marxist writing that doesn't consider making from the inside of that experience or from the beginning, from the non-cognitive unknowing space of making something and through an idea or object as it materializes. Psychoanalytic theory might be a little closer to what we might want. And then there's a lot of aesthetic theory that is also of no interest in terms of describing the cultural or the process of making.

Most writers don't want to address issues of a synthesis between mind and body, because most people don't want to address a transformative synthesis between mind and body.

CHAN I think for me **Adorno** provides that space as a philosopher who writes about art and the making of art. His writing provides the opportunity to re-describe what it means to make something and how this thing transforms me. No matter how brutal or how beautiful that thing is, and this is just an example, it doesn't leave me until it leaves me speechless in a way. I mean he described it as essentially a space of speechlessness.

ELEEY It seems like the most engaged and interesting part of what we've talked about tonight has been around epiphanic ideas or thoughts that people have had about what makes things or might make things different, not necessarily around this specific dialectic of beauty and its discontents or around these larger problems, but on a smaller scale. In the time we have remaining, I'd like to encourage everyone to share more of those smaller things.

FUSCO For me, the **anti-Republican National Convention** week in this town was a moment of collective engagement in the utopian good that involved many artists, thinkers, and activists working together. It was an incredibly invigorating and wonderful celebration. I don't see why we now have to retreat into personal epiphany when we have that very recent moment as an example of social cohesion.

I think that the immaturity of that moment was in only conceiving of getting rid of Bush, and not imagining an actual political future. What is left to be done is to take those Downtown for Democracy people and all the other people

Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* [*Aesthetic Theory*], ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main, 1970). Reprinted with translation by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). The *Art Journal* writes that, "*Aesthetic Theory* contains the stubborn insight—rarely offered by cultural critics today—that redemption may be glimpsed only by means of the most difficult and determined artistic ciphers of negation."



**anti-Republican
National Convention**

who were involved in trying to get Kerry elected, and actually get them to imagine what an alternative politics would be and how to engage with it.

PETERSON There has been a lot of talk around the table about the problem of language. I think as artistic language gets co-opted by many different forces, artists need to think differently about how to communicate.

It was very interesting to hear about these ideas of escape and to hear specific examples from both Marlene and Allison who used costume and fantasy, in a way, to break through to audiences. Marlene, you talked about how the Pilgrim get-up worked and it seems to have made it easier for the people who engaged in that with you. And then Allison talked about creating a platform for public expression through *The Muster*. Both of these are interesting and specific examples that help us think concretely about this notion of language and how to communicate differently to break through.

CHAN Can we be honest? What do we want to break and where do we want to end up through? What exactly do you want the visual or the aesthetic to do? Do we want to shut down **Army recruitment centers**? Do we want to get Bush out? How much consolidation of power and identity are we willing to bear on the aesthetic in order to change things? And how much are we not willing to, so that the aesthetic retains a utopian space for us and for anything that longs to escape the punishing reductionism political discourse must exercise in order to ascend toward power.

After tonight are some of us going to go the Army recruitment center to shut it down like the **Berrigans** did in the 60s? Are we willing to step up to the plate with the twenty-five people who are on the plane right now going to Santiago, to walk to Guantanamo to do the hunger strike? I mean, are we willing to do that?

FUSCO I'm working on militarism in my projects right now, but I don't think one needs to be so reductive or re-appropriate the strategies of the 60s. I think there's a lot of work that can be done artistically about the military invasion of American culture. It isn't directly related to being in the hunger strike, but it is about exploring the way in which fascism is our present reality, not something from the past. I believe that we do actually live in a militarized fascist state that people don't want to recognize. And I don't think the answer is to focus on one thing, but instead to look at the ways in which the culture of militarism has disseminated itself into our lives, and has normalized itself, and made itself so invisible to many, but incredibly powerful to many others.

For me, pushing people to the edge isn't productive. It's about thinking, "Okay, here are these social, political, historical, economic, cultural, and artistic phenomena. Now how do we begin to work on them, if we're interested? And if we're not, what other aspects of the contemporary reality



Army recruitment centers

Daniel and Philip Berrigan were two brothers and Catholic priests who became internationally known peace activists after taking non-violent actions against the Vietnam War. For a time, they were on the FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list for actions against war. In 1980, they founded the Plowshares Movement.

Facing image: **Coco Fusco, *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America*, 2006**





Killer-Cola

are we interested in working in?” There are other artists who are interested in other aspects. For instance, there are the guys who do **Killer-Cola** in Colombia. Right? They do great graphic design against Coca-Cola and their implication of Colombian workers and the way in which they bust unions, kill organizers, and all those kinds of things. And I’m totally one hundred percent with them.

CHAN I think today when there is an aesthetic intervention it is easily consumed as simply an aesthetic “intervention.” We have lived through an industrial economy, a service economy, a knowledge economy, and now I think we can say we are in the midst of a spectacle economy. We consume the information and imagery of a spectacle like war, for instance, the way we choose and buy coffee: right, left, or center. What I’m fanatical about are things that “escape” this economy. Aesthetic interventions function quite legitimately in this economy, which robs it of the kind of transformative force needed to break through these overwhelming exchange relations.

FUSCO I’m very critical of a need to impose a barometer and a measurement that we can quantify. On this project, you’re going to yield this result and it’s going to get people to do this thing. You can’t do that with art that actually has any kind of lasting value. You don’t know what it’s going to do, because you can’t measure its effect over a long period of time. And so there has to be some space for that opening, because if you just push people and say, “Are you going to go to Guantanamo?” Of course, most of our friends are not going to go. And then you’re going to lose them. And that’s the problem that my generation had with a lot of people. So, we learned to know better.

AULT That is a feature of this conversation, I think. I don’t want to demonize Creative Time, but you’re asking, “Well, what’s next? How do we do it? What are our strategies? What should we be doing?” And then we shoot out a few things and they become the basis for codifying a public culture that doesn’t necessarily emerge from considered desire or need or process. This is one of the reasons for my silence here tonight. I have trouble relating to the general, latent agenda of this conversation. I’m sympathetic to the notion that there is a generalized crisis that we feel that we’re in. But to talk about that in terms of coming up with strategies over dinner, at least in this case, doesn’t seem to work, and isn’t personally productive.

These are really complex, massive situations and questions that we’re thinking about. I find it hard to be articulate about what I want to see happening within culture. What do I think artists should be doing? What is the power and potential of art? These are questions that I don’t expect to answer in my lifetime. And frankly, I’m not really interested in generalizing these kinds of things either.

ASHFORD The necessity for open-ended discourse evolves into specific value and example.

PASTERNAK Julie, I respect what you are saying, but as the leader of a public art organization, I have the opportunity, even a responsibility, to help artists engage with the world. So I think there can be value to open discussion, for those who may feel isolated or frustrated. If nothing maybe is gained from a conversation such as this, so be it. But I do have a question. I have been wondering what it would mean to start a fund for artists to turn to when they do want to create a timely, socially progressive project. On one hand, it might sound attractive to some artists to help them realize their projects on their own and not be limited by an institutional voice. But then there are people who would be right in saying it’s a cop-out for the organization. So I wonder how best artists can be supported in these efforts.

CHAN I heard this crazy statistic of how the U.S. military is spending a billion dollars a week in Iraq. And the insurgency is spending around \$200,000. And so, I always sort of do a mental experiment: How much is the U.S. government spending domestically to quell dissent? And how much do we need to spend in order to resist and transform? I think it’s about \$200 on our end.

So, I don’t think it’s actually money. It might be something else. I’m not sure what it is, but I don’t think it’s money.

The groups that I know of that are working aren’t looking for any kind of institutional connection, because it diminishes their capacity to break through. It becomes a very easy way to say, “Oh, this is just a creative thing.” What they’re looking to do is to break something.

PASTERNAK For sure, Paul! They would be right. At the same time, plenty of artists want the support of an institution and hope to benefit from its networks and resources.

ELEEY But then at the same time we were hyper-aware going into this of the limitations and restrictions that come with institutional affiliations, of the restrictive effect our presence can have on work of this nature. That’s not exactly this kind of thing; the way Paul has described it.

PASTERNAK Absolutely.

FUSCO But I think something did happen to cultural funding. A lot of the individual artists programs have been eliminated in the last fifteen years, and some artists think, “If only I had money,” because a lot of the money that was available is no longer there. Even though there are people, like Paul says, who are not interested in it, there are many others who are very interested in it.

But I think there’s something else. There was this pressure that was not only put on individual artists, but also

Creative Capital is a New York City-based nonprofit organization that was founded in January 1999 with the idea of combining innovative ideas from the commercial sector with the integrity of purpose of the nonprofit sector. It helps support artists' projects in performance, visual arts, film, video, and emerging fields by providing funds, advisory services, professional development assistance, multi-faceted financial aid, and promotional support.

on small-scale cultural organizations to become more like businesses, to become more fiscally responsible, and that killed a lot of them after the 1980s. **Creative Capital** is that way. I mean, it's basically teaching artists to be capitalists. You have to meet with all these entrepreneurs. You have to have a business plan. It's insane. If I wanted to be an entrepreneur, I would be an entrepreneur. The nonprofit sector has been severely damaged by the insistence on entrepreneurial return.

SILLMAN Well, think tanks don't just have three dinners, you know. I feel most people have expressed how they approach things. That's it. Nobody is going to be able to do more than that over dinner, although it's still interesting to have this conversation. It is worth it to me to find out how people are thinking about stuff and not get distracted by other discussions.

ELEEEY At the same time, coming out of the culture wars, many in our community assumed government and private donors would recognize and support the kind of work we did based upon economic, quantitative terms, rather than qualitative ones. We said, "Okay well, fine. You were going to reject us on aesthetic terms. We're going to force ourselves upon you on your terms." And so we end up with Christo and Jeanne-Claude's *The Gates* discussed primarily in terms of the amount of money involved in realizing the project, and by extension, the "generosity" that's associated with that when the artists are paying for it themselves. The artists seemed to talk about this more than they discussed the work itself. Of course, City Hall regularly defended the project on economic terms, even offering predictions of positive economic impact on the city at the initial press conference announcing the project. That is largely a problem of our own making that we continue to perpetuate. We have trouble making arguments for art on its own terms, even though the experience that most people seek from art has nothing whatsoever to do with economics.

ASHFORD There's so much more funding if you're providing a service than if you're doing a small-scale art presentation along the lines of Creative Time, Trans, White Columns, or Participant. The number of foundations that fund this kind of work is miniscule. You can really count them on two hands. And in the sort of service world, there are tons of people who want to help you grow.

AULT And you can't downsize.

ASHFORD You can't go down. You can't go back.

FUSCO You can't go down, because the only way to get more money is to be bigger, and bigger, and more stable, and more business-like. It's madness. It kills the heart of a lot of freaky artistic practices.

K SMITH It doesn't feel very safe for me to talk here, because I think as a person, one is whole, but it's a whole of parts that have different aspects or facets. As an artist, I want my heart and my work to reflect that complexity, and as a citizen, I want my life to have an active relationship to society. Not all those things have to fit together or be evident all the time, nor are they dispersed all the time.

Art has many possible manifestations. I'd like the art world or the art community to be as multi-dimensional as is its changing truth. Obviously different things have dominance at different times and it is a continuum that is constantly disrupting and erupting new. This evening, we have been superficially pitting beauty against social content. I would never say beauty is in conflict with social content. They aren't in conflict nor is there historical evidence to support them being seen as antithetical.

Art is one of the few open spaces in society, so it is not in my interests to try to constrain or control other artists' necessities.



War Culture

Conversation 3
December 14, 2005

The last conversation of *Who Cares* was the first of the three planned. It was conceived in response to the most urgent social issues of our moment: the wars fought against “terror” and in the name of “freedom,” including those in Afghanistan and Iraq and the varieties of cultural upheaval they have fostered. The dominant question following 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq was how we, as artists, critics, teachers, and organizers of art projects and exhibitions, could create cultural narratives, events, and effects that would contribute to the conversation around the wars in more advanced, profound, and truthful ways. At the core of this internal discussion is the question of how artists find ways to continue to work critically in a historical period overwhelmed with ideological manipulation, violence, and despair.

When *Who Cares* was being planned, the realities of the growing American war machine were proceeding in a manner left relatively unexamined by dominant media and cultural institutions. Even journalistic traditions of skepticism and investigation seemed to collapse under the weight of fictional “weapons of mass destruction.” Since then, the state of the Iraq war and the shape of public opinion have changed dramatically. The nightmare of a war culture is not only its obvious physical casualties, but also the ways in which the national attitude closes in on itself at every level. War culture threatens effective American art practices, which now occur in this increasingly repressed public sphere. The vagaries of the ill-defined “war on terror” compound these cultural shifts. As we were reminded by President Bush’s spokesman a few weeks after the 2001 attacks, “Americans need to watch what they say, watch what they do.”

This conversation begins with participants sharing examples of these cultural shifts and how they have affected their individual practices. Calls are made for a change in strategy: through the creation of an alternative emotional landscape that offers opposition at the level of mood, rather than just information; through different models of intimacy that change the current, war-influenced notions of affect and sensation; and through a reframing of situations that inverts the ways in which we think about such notions. The discussion then turns to the current trend towards the privatization of knowledge and the use of fear as a tool of oppression and censorship.

Finally, the discussion examines how the institutions that form public opinion deny artists their critical role by pushing them to the periphery. Even though New York art institutions insisted during the “culture wars” of the 1990s that art could play a foundational part in addressing various crises of democratic society, today these same institutions often ghettoize engaged social art practices. Another failure is found in the corporate models foisted upon nonprofit organizations, specifically the insistence beginning in the late 1990s upon quantitative assessments of the success of art projects by funders, art agencies, and local governments—a trend that further undermines support for radical art practices.

One dominant question emerges throughout the discussion: How can creative practices respond to war culture? The participants take a look at how counterculture can allow and encourage new public practices that foster public engagement around social and political issues, from models that defamiliarize us with the accepted culture and interventions that use and respond to contemporary corporate and media culture (such as tactical media responses like culture jamming) to collaborative art spaces that create a community committed to critical thinking and social action over the long term.

participants

DOUG ASHFORD, moderator
GREGG BORDOWITZ
PAUL CHAN
PETER ELEEEY
DEBORAH GRANT
K8 HARDY
SHARON HAYES
EMILY JACIR
RONAK KAPADIA
STEVE KURTZ
JULIAN LAVERDIERE
JOHN MENICK
HELEN MOLESWORTH
ANNE PASTERNAK
BEN RODRIGUEZ-CUBENAS
RALPH RUGOFF
NATO THOMPSON

DOUG ASHFORD I want to set a tone for the evening by quoting two texts. The first is a poem, “The Dawn of Freedom, August 1947” by a man named **Faiz Ahmad Faiz**. The great public intellectual and anti-war activist **Eqbal Ahmad**, who was an influence on my childhood, used this to help explain his work.

These tawny rays, this night-smudged light
This is not that dawn for which,
ravished with freedom,
we have set out in sheer longing
so sure that somewhere in its desert
the sky harboured a final haven for the stars
and we would find it.
We had no doubt that night's vagrant wave
would stray towards the shore
that the heart rocked with sorrow
would at least reach its port.
But the heart, the eye,
the yet deeper heart still ablaze for the beloved
their turmoil shines in the lantern by the road.
The flame is stalled for news.
Did the morning breeze ever come? Where has it gone?
Night weighs us down.
It still weighs us down.
Friends, come away from this false light.
Come, we must search for that promised dawn.

Another quote I want to read is from an aide to the Vice-President of the United States as quoted in **What Happened Here: Bush Chronicles** by Eliot Weinberger. He told his listener, a journalist, the following:

You are members of the reality-based community—those who believe that solutions emerge from the judicious study of discernable reality. That's not the way the world works anymore. We're an empire now. And when we act, we create our own full reality. We'll act again, and again, creating other new realities, one after another, which you can study, too. And that's how things will sort out. We are history's actors. And all of you will be left just to study what we do.

Very modest.

Tonight we're going to try to have a conversation that speaks towards doubts, failures, and more complex understandings of how public expression in the United States has been compromised in recent years. I am hoping in this informal setting we can speak honestly in capacities that may contradict our professional lives. We're focusing on “war culture” and in a sense it's a kind of case study. I see the first two conversations of this series as more abstract, and tonight's conversation as more of a case study.

I guess I want to start by going around the room and having everyone share a thought that you've had about the

Faiz Ahmad Faiz, “The Dawn of Freedom, August 1947.” Translated by Agha Shahid Ali. See also Faiz Ahmad Faiz, *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995)

Eqbal Ahmad was a journalist and anti-war activist. He was strongly critical of the United State's Middle East strategy as what he saw as the “twin curse” of nationalism and religious fanaticism.



Eliot Weinberger, **What Happened Here: Bush Chronicles** (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 2005).

way this war in Iraq has influenced or impacted your work or your life.

BEN RODRIGUEZ-CUBEÑAS In response to your question, I have two initial thoughts. One, on the practical level, I'm involved with an organization called the Cuban Artists Fund. Its mission was to bring artists from Cuba to the United States, and we can't do that anymore, because it's impossible to get a visa for artists from diverse countries. And yet, I am familiar with a lot of organizations that still bring artists here, but they're not coming from Third World countries, they're coming from Europe. They're coming from countries whose governments can afford to send artists to the United States. So, that's something that I see on a practical level.

Two, related to my work (and my work is varied), at some point during the war I just started to feel as though I was powerless. That everything I had done and everything that I could do was not going to make a lot of difference in this huge world that we live in. So, I could get really depressed, but I don't. However, I think philosophically it's caused me to think deeper and to think more long term and to think about what we can do to make a difference even though things are so complicated and so difficult.

RONAK KAPADIA I live in Crown Heights, I'm twenty-two, and I started college a week after 9/11. I feel like in a lot of ways I don't know another world other than the one we are in. I came into my politicization as a queer artist of color and a performance scholar after 9/11. It's hard for me to think of an unsullied moment in a lot of ways. I am now doing a lot of uncovering of previous periods in history and finding that a lot of stuff that I'm seeing now is nothing new. It's a continuation of a larger project in this country. It's kind of disheartening to realize that you're coming up in a moment, in an age, where Bush is really the only president and that it is this culture that I have had a stake in during the last four or five years while I've been developing my own consciousness as an adult.

So, I don't know what we'll look like in three years after this current regime falls. And I'm not particularly optimistic. It's hard to think of an art practice without thinking of current events and that kind of immediacy. Not feeling victimized, but realizing that a critique of militarism and xenophobia are always central to my work. That's what I'm in. That's my moment. And I don't have a previous moment to compare it to. So, that's the one thing that I think about when I think of this war—I don't remember a previous moment in terms of my own consciousness.

EMILY JACIR It's hard to respond to your question without considering the profound impact the previous Gulf War and the sanctions, as well as America's full support of Israel's apartheid policies, has had on many of us in terms of politicization and activism long, long, long before 9/11.

This war is a continuation of those policies. Also, being Palestinian I am coming from a situation in which our country has been under brutal occupation for my entire lifetime. So it is hard to address your question in terms of the impact of this current administration's war simply because coming from a war zone and dealing with being in a war before this one started puts me in a different contextual frame. Also, this war was not a surprise to me. It's part of a longer Euro-American project in the Middle East to destabilize the region and to divide Iraq along religious lines. I guess that's my main concern right now, the victory of America/Europe in dividing what was once a secular country along religious lines and the effects of that on the region in terms of religion and religious extremism.

But hand in hand with that, during travels in Europe (and I'm not defending America), I see that many Europeans refuse to take responsibility for their collaboration with America in this war and that is very frustrating. Also, I was in Europe during the Hurricane Katrina disaster and I found that people were really surprised by the poverty they saw on their television sets and my response was, "Who the fuck do you think lives here? I mean American people are working one hundred-plus hours a week. They don't have health care. They don't have vacation time like in Europe. People are barely making ends meet in America." There is a great misconception about who lives in this country and how they live. I think people actually believe the image America exports of itself vis-à-vis television programs like *90210!*

And then there's Abu Ghraib and the torture camps, which the Europeans are also collaborating with as well as some Arab countries like Jordan. So, these are my fragmented initial responses to your question.

JOHN MENICK The last five years has been a real learning experience, to say the least. All the rules of thumb I brought to American politics have been thrown out the window. I mean, 9/11, two fishy elections, two dirty wars, the erosion of civil rights, etcetera. I can't say my work has been able to deal with Iraq in a direct way, or whether that's even necessary. I don't know, I am probably as cynical, pessimistic, despondent, and pissed-off as the rest of you. So, I'll just turn it over to Julian.

JULIAN LaVERDIERE I actually have found the war rather inspiring; after all, it's given this round table a renewed *raison d'être!* I don't mean this to sound inadvertently provocative; actually, I believe it's important to afford enough gallows humor to recognize that the only virtue of the war or our government's hubris may be the consequent revivification of America's dying counterculture.

When I was an art student in the early 90s, I struggled with the anxiety of influence that my Marxist professors had over me. My class developed nostalgia for our teachers' Cold War fear and Vietnam War era angst. Seminars on institutional critique and politically correct protest strategy

were virtually mandatory. Yet, we were rebels without a cause, just students conditioned with a longing for the bygone ferocity of the 60s protest movement. We were taught to feel guilty for not being Situationists, Black Panthers, or members of the Weather Underground; and so, ironically, we learned to lust for that symbiotic relationship that exists between an oppressive government and the activists who rally against it.

Perhaps this is indicative of why there is an American youth-culture desire for apocalyptic unrest, and at this rate we may just get our wish. Hollywood certainly caters to it, with popular disaster flicks depicting the end of western civilization. Freud would probably diagnose films like *The Sum of All Fears*, *28 Days Later*, or *The Day After Tomorrow* as evidence of a pop-Thanatos, a mass media death-drive.

The “Oil Wars” have instigated a new battery of fears to hold our attention hostage: dirty bombs, bio-hazardous attacks, and a renewed interest in global warming. The cultural appetite for a History Channel brand war with black-and-white battles between good and evil is now being sated by full-color, live simulcast war coverage in high-definition.

GREGG BORDOWITZ I don’t know how to answer the question. I’m agitated in all sorts of ways. I’ll try to answer your question specifically regarding the war. Since last spring, everything that I have done publicly has been against the war. So, every lecture I’ve given has been an anti-war lecture, and I’ve given a lot this semester, because my book, *The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous and Other Writings* 1986-2003, came out last spring. So, all last spring I gave anti-war lectures. I was asked to do book events, and I would show up and do anti-war lectures. Every class I taught was an anti-war class. Opposing the war is a problem of counterculture. It’s not only about informing people about alternative historical narratives, or arming people with alternative facts.

I think that the problem at the moment is finding a way to produce an anti-war culture. That’s a larger problem than simply protesting the war. We need to find a way to foster a counterculture, which means fighting the battle at the level of mood, not just giving information. How do we create an alternative emotional landscape?

The manipulation of panic and public moods—the ways that sensations are marshaled to induce complacency and inactivity—must be understood. Is it possible to produce new emotions? It seems to me that the job of making art at the moment is to understand the political role of affects and the different ways that art making participates in the cultural production of affects.

SHARON HAYES It’s nice to follow you, Gregg. It makes things a little more alive in my head.

I think that in a way I echo a lot of what other people have said. My first reaction is that, to a certain extent, the war changes everything and nothing. There is this way that it repeats and provokes our accumulation of other events. It’s interesting that these other events become part of how people answer Doug’s question.

By the same token, I agree that it is a different kind of moment. A lot of my time is spent trying to figure out, on a small, immediate, local level, what the conditions of this current moment are. Maybe one way I could answer that, to get towards this issue of mood, is descriptive. When I walk around these days, I feel like my senses are a bit peaked. It feels more urgent and important to look for moments, even if fleeting, where there can be a collective address of a social and political situation and its impact on us. I don’t know if that’s really helpful, but I feel like I’m in a slightly... agitated state.

ASHFORD It’s like a social anxiety?

HAYES Yeah, it’s an anxiousness, but it’s also like a porousness, like taking a lot of things in. There’s a way in which I’m really urgently looking for something. It doesn’t necessarily feel productive, but it’s something.

K8 HARDY This whole time I’ve been thinking that all I can do is sum up my feelings by saying that I’m really agitated by the war. And I feel that has affected my practice and work. It’s rather simply put at the moment—coming off of what Sharon just said—but that’s how I’m going to leave it.

HELEN MOLESWORTH I recently organized an exhibition called *Part Object Part Sculpture*, which, at the time I was organizing it, didn’t seem to have much to do with the war. Although I’m reminded of something that Lee Krasner said about her paintings, that they were intensely autobiographical if anyone would just look at them.

The exhibition is a reconsideration of the legacy of Duchamp for transatlantic sculpture made after World War II, which takes very seriously his interest in the erotic and the bodily and how he tried to think of that in tandem with his interest in commodity. In the organizing of this exhibition, I found that it suggested different models of intimacy, which in my mind, harkens back to something that Gregg was talking about. My own sense of how the exhibition ended up being a profound anti-war statement is, in part, because of the models of intimacy it proposed. And that’s partly why I was interested in coming here, not only to talk about very overt forms of thinking against the war, but also to talk about trying to re-gauge notions of affect and bodily-ness and sensation, which seem to me very important to do right now.

PAUL CHAN I think the war has made my work more desperate. I think the war has made my work more inhuman. And I think, in a way, it makes it better.

Part Object Part Sculpture, an exhibition curated by Helen Molesworth at Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, from October 30, 2005 to February 26, 2006



Henry Ford received the "Grand Cross," German's highest honor for a non-citizen, for his financial backing of Hitler's party. The "Grand Cross" was also awarded to Mussolini that same year.

DEBORAH GRANT I've come to understand that everything that is conspiracy is fact, and everything that is fact is conspiracy. I'm beginning to understand that the things I have been thinking about or trying to understand regarding the idea of corporate war have actually been decided and presented in a particular way. I think it goes back to when **Henry Ford** received a medal on his seventy-fifth birthday from Adolf Hitler. Everything I was thinking about when I was in graduate school—this idea of random, yet selective that I was trying to understand for myself—is basically happening in its own way. In fact, everything is more selective than random.

STEVE KURTZ I'm a member of **Critical Art Ensemble**. Since it began, the group has been dedicated to anti-authoritarian activities. And what we are most interested in are the issues that are off the public radar or are generally only mythically, rather than historically, understood, yet have a profound effect on everyday life. Consequently, I always thought, "You know, I hope I get through this whole project without ever having to do a work about war—it's so obvious."

But sure enough, about a year or so into Iraq, CAE came to believe, "We have to do something about the war whether we like it or not." And that's when we started investigating

germ warfare. We thought, "Well, let's go to one of the problems that's transparent due to false consensus, and is having a terrible impact on society. Let's reveal the economic and social consequences of 'biosecurity' that aren't readily accessible by the public." And in this particular case, we looked at the linkage between the war economy and global healthcare, and it's an unfortunate relationship. We began looking at the losses of finite resources in the military for research on diseases killing millions of people every year. Instead, what interests the military are minor occurrences, like the 2001 anthrax attack, a one time event where five people died. I don't know what that translates to exactly, but it's approximately the same number of deaths that happen in forty-five seconds every day from HIV. But "threats" like Anthrax is where billions and billions of dollars go, along with other limited resources. It competes with the emerging infectious diseases that people are really dying from like HIV, malaria, and multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis.

It was in the context of this kind of horror show that CAE thought, "We have to address the war. We have to address the hyper-reality of this war and how the neoconservatives are constructing hyper-realities that keep people focused on the places that are of little risk to their lives." So, we started thinking about how we could reframe this situation, to use a trivial example, like the way the Atkins diet reframed dieting and brought about a complete inversion of the dieting process. It's that type of tactic that we are trying to engage in regard to this war. How can we find ways to take manageable, consumable bites of it, reframe them, and chip away at this dark mountain, because we obviously have the time. It is going to go on for years, so we can think about this as a long-term process. And it needs to happen on all levels, as Gregg and Helen were pointing out. It certainly has had an effect on how the group thinks and how we're going to pursue our tactical responses.

NATO THOMPSON You know, I was really into the anti-globalization, **anti-WTO movement**. And the war put a break on that in a profound way that mystified me. When Bush came into office it was a very rainy day. I remember that day so well because that gloom never left. But what was so profound to me was I knew—as soon as Bush came into office everyone knew—a war was coming. A lot of people at the time said, "That's going to up the stakes." Everyone assumed that radical culture was going to get more intense once Bush got into office. In fact, some anarchical friends of mine, particularly malice-leaning types, said, "Oh well, you gotta vote for Bush, because it's just going to be the end all, be all. It's going to really push it to a head."

But, in fact, what we didn't expect was that Bush coming into office would put a mental block in people's minds and that the level of radical participation would drop off dramatically. That was a very profound kind of moment in my opinion. People were still operating under this Clinton era, neo-capital framework and to see the stakes change freaked



Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) is a collective of five artists dedicated to exploring the intersections between art, technology, radical politics, and critical theory.



anti-WTO movement

Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) is a proposed agreement to eliminate or reduce trade barriers among thirty-four countries in the Americas and the Caribbean. The FTAA has been criticized and opposed as a tool of United States' economic imperialism.

people out. There was so much inertia after Clinton and then things shifted to straight-up state fascism. It is a hard thing to adjust to.

The good news is the rest of the world is still really going for it. Like Argentina was blowing up with the FTAA situation over there. Stuff is still going on around the world. Over in Hong Kong, the WTO protests are huge with the Korean farmers leading the charge. So, it's not that things are down and out with this war globally, it's mostly in the U.S. and I think particularly in New York City. I always think, "Oh man, New York City's really depressed." Because my friends in Chicago are more active than New York. And my friends in Los Angeles are more active than New York. I always feel like New York suffers a social capital malaise. So, I'm always like, "Yeah, New York City's got some stuff to work out."

And one last thing that's on my mind is how we can support those people in this country that are doing radical art practices, because they're not gone. There are great spaces doing cool stuff that could use funds. We could all lend a hand to help those who are doing really good work, like using our own writing prowess to force magazines to publish legitimate forms of practice and producing radical culture ourselves. I think it's really out there, it's viable, and I think it's important to back it up.

PETER ELEEEY I've been thinking a lot recently about the personal level of the war, because my cousin is going to Iraq next month, and I don't know many other people with relatives in the service. It has been interesting mostly in terms of how difficult it is to discuss within my family, most of whom are opposed to the war, though there are a number of people who have been in the service. Some of them seem to be at least partially faithful to the war effort, perhaps because it may feel like not supporting it would demean the value of my cousin's life, should anything happen to him.

My cousin enlisted out of high school not long before September 11th, and shipped out for basic training the week that the attack happened. For him, I think it was the classic story of not feeling like there were other options and thinking that military service was a viable job with good training. Even though lots of other people in my family have gone to college and done other things—seen the world in a bigger way—those examples weren't enough to keep him from enlisting.

This is a hard thing to discuss, and the difficulties of trying to talk about within my family has made me think about how hard it must be on a broader level for us to talk about the issues of class and privilege and the aspects of hopefulness or hopelessness that underlie attitudes towards military service. The ways we conceive of what's possible for ourselves is of course tied directly to the success of recruitment efforts, the success or failure of which has a direct bearing on the continuation of this war.

ANNE PASTERNAK This gathering was, in part, inspired by my cynicism and anger over the war. As we went to war in Afghanistan and then Iraq, it struck me that we could walk around the galleries and museums and never know we were at war, that our country was divided, and that countries around the world were infuriated with the United States. In talking with artists, I recognized it might be a good idea to come together and share our views—as diverse and even oppositional as they might be—about the relationship to art and war at this moment. And it has been my hope that in some ways our individual practices might be inspired tonight—I truly hope so, at least, because I believe profoundly in the power of art to inspire consciousness and even social change.

RALPH RUGOFF I have two very different reactions to the war. One was in the days before the war when there were protests around the world, and there were maybe ten or fifteen or twenty million people in different parts of the world protesting. There was a big protest here in New York. In San Francisco, of course, there was another one. And I felt very uplifted that there were that many people out there who felt that it would take extremes to oppose this war around the world.

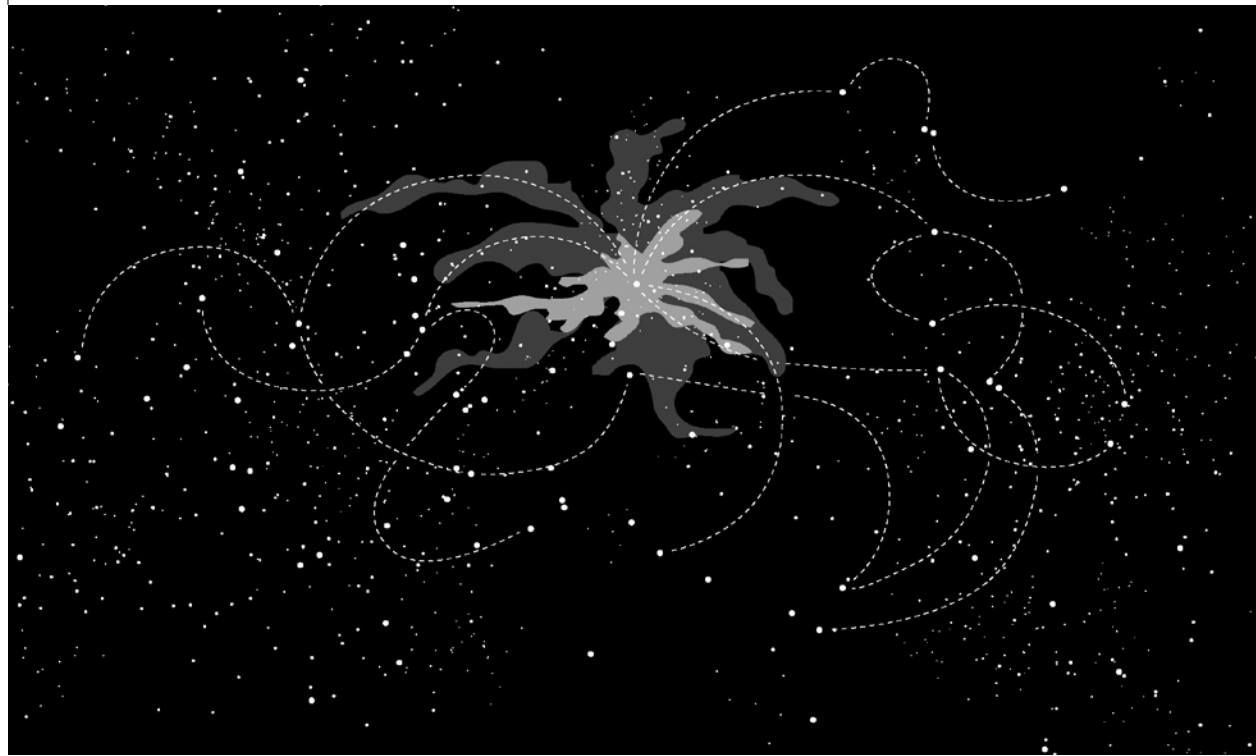
Six months later when that initial will to oppose the war was no longer visible, I felt a lot of despair and also estrangement. I felt I didn't really recognize the country I had grown up in. I think my despair wasn't only about the war in Iraq. It was the war on democracy, the war on healthcare, the war on the impoverished rather than a war on poverty, and the war on the free press and our civil liberties.

And I think that now in retrospect, there was also something slightly depressing about the fact that there had been this enormous mobilization before the war and it had dropped dead. There was a sense that we had rehearsed this form that people knew and that had worked in the past. But it wasn't working anymore. It wasn't enough. People somehow had this almost ritualistic belief in public demonstrations, we would do this ritual, and then things would get better. There wasn't a connection to what you had to do beyond that.

So, one response I had was to curate a show called *Monuments for the USA* where I invited seventy artists to make a proposal for a monument for the United States, to whatever they thought was appropriate to commemorate about the United States. Paul Chan did a wonderful piece for that show that suggested renaming constellations after core democratic rights and principles. One of the things I thought might happen, as people were thinking about what they would commemorate or celebrate or criticize in the United States through the making of a monument to it, was that through this process the artists would somehow create a different and more accurate profile of where the country was right then.

I do think there is a great role for art to potentially play in all of this. I agree with a lot of things Gregg was talking

Monuments for the USA, an exhibition curated by Ralph Rugoff at CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, California, from April 7 to May 14, 2005.



Paul Chan, *Title*, yeat

about. I don't think we're living in an Enlightenment Age where the public is swayed by reason and they make their decisions based on reason. You have to go beyond just reiterating the right reasons to do the right things. You have to find ways to create a mood or a sense of a horizon that people are moved towards. And you can do that through images and art.

There is a Mexican artist/designer group called **Torolab** and they have a saying that this is no longer a time for protest; it is a time for proposals. And I try to take that as a challenge when I think about these issues, because it is too easy to react against what's going on. Instead I try to think of a proposal that's going to counter that effect.

ASHFORD I want to talk some more about what Nato had commented on, the lack of a counterculture. I think it was also reflected in what Ralph was saying about the way that protest movements need something else happening around them or through them. I tend to disagree a little bit; I think that a happening with people on the street every weekend protesting against the war would be a great thing. And I think that it would lead to other kinds of work. It would lead to those countercultural moments that Gregg was describing, and it's related to the idea of intimacy and rethinking intimacy, which Helen was talking about. I might be asking too big a question, but I'm wondering if someone can figure out why New York, as Nato said, is displaced. Why has it become a desert of countercultural work of both the intimate and the explicitly political kind?

GRANT Economic plight. I remember, growing up in Coney Island in the 70s and all the abandoned lots that I used to play in from Surf Avenue all the way to Neptune Avenue on West 36th Street. What I remember about these abandoned lots is that they were specifically left that way, either from burnouts or as land speculation. It made more sense to leave them abandoned than to have anyone in them.

Now I feel like that same thing is happening again, but in this case there are buildings. Gentrification is everywhere; it's in Chinatown, Harlem, and all these different places. So, I feel like everyone is caught economically one way or the other. I feel like New York is caught in that place of economic strife, of not even understanding where it's going to turn next. Harlem is growing. Brooklyn's growing, too. It becomes a weird thing where you are barely able to make it, where you realize that you have to come up with next month's rent. At one point during the late 80s or 90s, the idea was come to New York, make money, and send it home. Now it's becoming a situation where you're almost economically trapped in New York.

I also disagree with the idea that we're fighting against the corporation. I feel like we are the corporation. And what I mean by that is that we vote everyday with our dollar for products and things. So we're the corporation through our constant dollar-voting or through just the way we deal. In most cases, an individual may have a political viewpoint one way or the other, but an aspect of being a part of the corporation is that the corporation was indoctrinated a long time ago. So, we cling to corporations, our corporate sponsors. Sometimes we are supported by people who have the money who are thinking in the direction that we're thinking. But we work hand in hand in one way or another with corporations. I mean, eventually we are holding the devil's hand.

ASHFORD The economic re-organization of our world into "all against all" is clear.

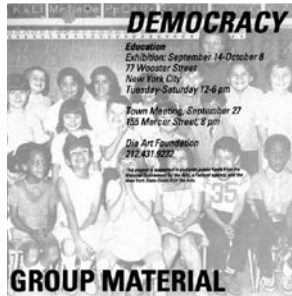
BORDOWITZ I want to bring this part back to Nato. Why do you think there's less counterculture here than elsewhere? What gives you that sense?

THOMPSON Okay, I'm going to be quite frank. In cities like Chicago, there's a different feel. I talk about this with my pals. It's weird when you go to New York, because the social capital game is so high. People are very ambitious here. Activism feels like a career move in New York City, but it doesn't feel like that in other cities. I'm serious. Because in Chicago no one thought they were going to be in the Whitney Biennial. No one went out on the street and got it documented, because they thought, "Someone might see this." You know what I'm saying? But here it feels like all culture is part of someone's career. I swear to God it does.

It's nothing against the good folks here. I'm not saying that, but there's ambition here. There's a lot of money in New



Torolab, established in 1995, is a Tijuana-based group of artists, architects, and designers who focus on concrete action to social issues in the urban spaces of Tijuana.



Group Material, active from 1979-1996, was a New York-based artists' collaborative who mounted provocative temporary exhibitions around social and political issues such as the U.S. involvement in Central America, AIDS, and mass consumerism.

York City in ways that, I think, ten years ago there wasn't. I mean, call me crazy, but I feel like this is the center of the art world and these terms of the culture industry, of cultural production, is important in how you delegate your radical practice in a cultural space.

ASHFORD Nato, you and I have had this discussion before, and I have trouble with it because of my own history. The market dominated the early 80s, it was a gigantic art sale, it was the junk bond world—a market explosion. But there were also artists taking over buildings, there was **Group Material**, there were artists working dialogically in the Bronx and Brooklyn, there were people going to Cuba and Nicaragua and working with unions and activist groups and coming back and starting formal experiments, there was public theater, grass-root health campaigns, and client-based “educational movements.” I'm not saying it's great right now, I'm just saying I think it's a little bit too easy to blame this lack of cultural activism on market domination. We had a junk bond art world in the 80s and there was experimentation. There's experimentation now that goes undocumented.

BORDOWITZ The counterculture—or whatever has announced itself as counterculture—is stymied around the idea of countering “wrong” arguments and information with reasonable ideas and facts. That cannot be the limit of our activity. Making a counterculture has to do with producing enough heat and light around a moral equivalent to war. You can't be just anti-war. You have to be for a set of positive principles and ideals and it is very difficult at this moment to be for something.

I am very afraid. I think this is a proto-fascist moment. I am concerned about something more than the media domination of information. I want to understand how the Republicans successfully operate on so many different levels, including the level of emotions. They have created a worldview—that the good life some people are living in this country, and the promise of a good life most people are laboring hard to achieve, will disappear if we don't dominate and control resources at this moment when there is no opposing superpower. This is the worldview they've produced, without saying it directly. This is justification for U.S. aggression that most people believe, whether they can articulate it or not

People are willing to protest. Some people are. But when I talk to young people about the anti-war protests—and of course, this is just anecdotal—they make comments like, “Well, I protested and the war continued anyway.” For young people, there is no place to drop out into, there's no supporting structure for dissent. There is no sustaining alternative culture. So, people who oppose the current regime get discouraged. They participate in dissent episodically, for a day, for an event, for efforts not anchored in a sustaining alternative.

Right now I'm forty-two and I feel irrelevant to the dominant culture. I feel so marginalized. And it's painful. It's not romantic; it's not bohemian. But I'm willing to do this. I'm willing to come here and do difficult intellectual work for the price of dinner. I am literally singing for my supper here, because I respect a lot of people at this conversation.

ASHFORD I think that a lot of people at this table are in a very similar position. We're calling it different things, we may call it “aesthetic innovation,” we may call it “reinventing intimacy,” we may call it “searching for the irrational,” but a lot of people at this table are realizing the way that historical countercultural narratives are now quickly consumed and put to rational effect and we are looking for other kinds of ways of working. My interest, as a teacher, is in how public agencies can help inspire and motivate those kinds of practices that resist both instrumentalization and decoration.

HAYES I did read the letter that Doug wrote inviting us here and I thought it was interesting. The whole discussion about supporting projects and artists and activists, for me, is bound up in what you were pointing to, Deborah. I think there is a change in New York, which is sweeping across a lot of places internationally, that has to do with real estate and this certain kind of privatization. And it's an internalization of this same kind of proto-fascism you're talking about, which is this feeling that I have to get what I need now. And if I don't get what I need now then I'm locked out or blocked out. So, I have to find a space. I have to grab what I can with whatever resources I have.

One of the absences I was thinking about is this desperate need for space. And that is something that reverberates. It's not only physical space, but it's very connected to physical space. Because there's a different relationship to space in Los Angeles and Chicago. I think that's also one of the blocks, how do we struggle in a city where we cannot grab a ground. There's been temporary occupation of buildings, but it's like we're constantly being moved around the city.

PASTERNAK There is the very real issue of access to space, as you point out, but there also is a critical issue of having time. I'd guess that for most, if not all, of us, our days are filled with an onslaught of demands on our time and the pressures of responding to hundreds of e-mails, cell phone calls, etcetera. How are we to even consider working on a much greater scale of time? The religious Right started its conservative agenda on shaping the country's political and social sphere with a long view of time, taking a multi-generational approach. Yet our concern is with the next, most immediate, need and it is increasingly difficult to integrate a long-term view into our work and into our lives.