Chu Yuan and Myanmar/Burmese collabo-
rators, *Offering of Mind: Indian Young
Professional*, performed photography in
front of Swedagon temple and park
grounds, Yangon/Rangoon, 2005 (artwork ©
Chu Yuan; photograph by Chu Yuan)

Mick Wilson

Autonomy, Agonism, and Activist Art: An Interview with Grant Kester

The following is an expanded version of a conversation that took place between Mick Wilson and Grant Kester at the Dublin City Council Pearse Street Library on June 9, 2006. Kester was invited to Dublin by CityArts as part of its ongoing In Conversation series (www.cityarts.ie/home.asp).

Mick Wilson: In the early 1990s, when the essays "Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public" and "Aesthetic Evangelists: The Rhetoric of Empowerment and Conversion in Contemporary Community Art" appeared, they presented profound questions to the domain of socially engaged, community-oriented, or transformative practices in a way that was sustained, systematic, and sympathetic. This was a major challenge. In your more recent book, *Conversation Pieces*, there's a line that says: "After developing my critique of community-based practice I was confronted by the contradiction between the unrelenting purism that drives a certain kind of theoretical reflection and the pragmatic demands of artists working in social movements here and now."[1] Has there been a shift between those earlier essays and *Conversation Pieces*?

Grant Kester: The "Aesthetic Evangelists" essay was written in 1994, so there's inevitably some evolution in one's views.[2] I don't feel like I've forsaken criticality in writing about activist projects, but I have become increasingly frustrated by seeing the "political" criticism of this work used as such a blunt instrument by subsequent critics. My intention in "Aesthetic Evangelists" wasn't to say, "This is 'bad' art because it dares to engage issues of race or poverty outside conventional art-world spaces." Rather, it was to argue that if one chooses to work in this manner it's necessary to develop a more complex understanding of the specific terrain (the politics of incarceration, for example), rather than blundering along with little more than good intentions and inadvertently reinforcing what I felt were damaging ideas about criminality associated with the rise of neoconservatism in America. The key, for me, was to join the interpretation of a given work with a close contextual analysis, in this case focused on the relationship between contemporary art practice on the one hand and the history of urban reform and evangelical Christianity on the other. It was never a question of simply mapping one discursive system onto the other in a syllogistic manner, but of trying to decipher the points of resistance and correspondence between the two.

Unfortunately, some of the more recent criticisms of activist art resort to an intellectual shorthand and simply assume a priori that any project funded or supported by a non-arts organization, whether it's a community group, a development agency, or an NGO, is necessarily subject to compromise and co-optation by the specific agenda of the sponsoring bureaucracy. Thus, its failure, both aesthetically and politically, is read off its institutional framing, with little or no attention given to its specific operation and effects. It is obviously true that some projects produced in conjunction with development agencies or community groups are manipulated to other ends, but one could easily make the same argument about various forms of art-specific funding. I suppose I'm impatient with the reductive nature of this critique because it often seems to imply that the private art market is necessarily more liberal and accommodating, unburdened by

1. Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community
and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley:
University of California Press 2004), 161.
2. "Aesthetic Evangelists: The Rhetoric of
Empowerment and Conversion in Contemporary
Community Art," *Afterimage*, January 1995, 5–11.

the compromises and conflicts entailed by public support. And this, in turn, lines up with a more general attack on public institutions of all kinds on behalf of an ethical normalization of the market—which I associate with the growing hegemony of neoliberalism.

The question of "unrelenting purism" is also interesting to me. I came to realize that the theoretical paradigm driving much recent art theory carries with it certain liabilities in the ways in which it models the intelligence of the critic. Paradoxically, the art-world assimilation of poststructuralism for the past decade or so has encouraged a remarkably programmatic approach to criticism. The critic functions as a kind of policeman of becoming, seeking out and exposing moments of stasis, fixity, or coherence in any given project or work (or reflexively lauding instances of ambiguity or dislocation). Activist or engaged art can never be anything but didactic, reductive, and simplistic in this account, and "authentic" art is always complex, contradictory, and challenging. Any effort to identify or work within an existing social collectivity is suspect, and any suspension or critique of such identity is assumed a priori to be both ethically and aesthetically superior. The more interesting question—whether there might be moments in artistic practice during which coherence is productive and dislocation or ambiguity become formulaic or banal—never gets asked. Instead we see the same metric applied over and over, authorized by appeals to the same theorists: Derrida, Deleuze, Rancière, Nancy, and so on. These writers do provide some useful tools, but their very authority makes it difficult to recognize those elements in a given practice that might have something new to teach us, that might even challenge theoretical *doxa*. And the relative lack of philosophical training or background among artists and critics insures that the theoretical claims of a given thinker are seldom seriously tested. Instead we tend to take their work on faith; the theorist functions as the custodian of an intellectual tradition that is less *engaged* with than *subscribed to*. As a result, critics often treat theory as a set of unquestioned, prescriptive axioms that can be "illustrated" by a given work of art.

I'm not arguing against theory on behalf of some naive empiricism; I simply want to point out the effects of a certain model of critique that has become ubiquitous, if not canonical, over the past decade. One of my motivations in writing *Conversation Pieces* was the recognition that the projects I was most interested in were raising questions that couldn't be productively answered with the standard art-theoretical approaches. At the same time, I wanted to move past critique as sheer negation (ferreting out the compromises or contradictions in a given practice), to account for the positive effects of projects that were so simple in their execution (a bunch of people talking together on a boat) and yet so complex in their effect. I remember that at the "Littoral" conference in Salford, where I delivered the "Aesthetic Evangelists" paper, somebody said, "Well, this is a valid criticism, but which projects do you think are successful?" I realized that if I was going to devote that much energy to writing about this work there must be something about it that I felt was productive; now, how do I describe that? What vocabulary do I use? So many of the hermeneutic tools that we have at our disposal (deconstructive reading, various forms of ideology critique, etc.) assume that the critical enterprise is always oriented toward the discovery of some hidden flaw or sign of complicity in the work at hand, so I really had to rethink my approach. I hope this doesn't mean I lose my capacity to step back
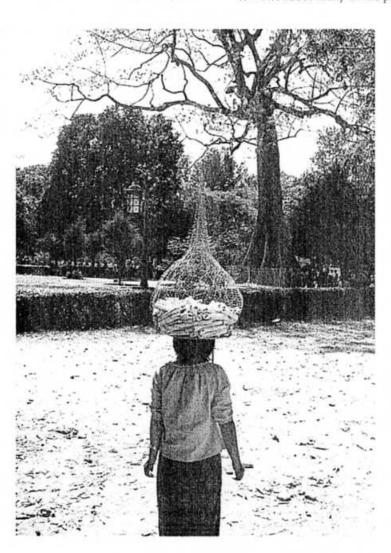
from a given project, to assess its weaknesses as well as its strengths. But it's also inevitable that as you write about a particular area of practice over time, you become more identified with it. And in all honesty, one of the things that led me to write about many of the projects in *Conversation Pieces* was a genuine respect and admiration for the practitioners themselves. Of course I have points of disagreement or difference with them, but I found their commitment, working against considerable resistance, really compelling. Good criticism, in my view, has to begin with a passionate attachment to a thing: a sense that the practice you're writing about matters in some way and isn't just a specimen awaiting dissection on the examination table of your intellect.

Wilson: Maybe we could dwell on that point a little. You are providing what is probably the most important critical treatment of a domain of practice, and you are doing it in a sustained way. At the same time you are becoming identified with that domain of practice and becoming cast, at least by others, in the role of champion. I'm wondering, given that you've built up relationships over the period of a decade or more with various practitioners (the Littoral group in the UK, Suzanne Lacy, or the Harrisons, for example), if those relationships have had some impact on your critical writing?

Kester: The immersive, sustained nature of these practices (many of which unfold over weeks, months, or even years) imposes different demands on the critic: a different sense of rhythm and duration in your relationship to the artist. I can't simply visit a museum or biennial and view a given sculpture or installation. I need to spend some time with the artist, ideally in the site of the actual project, talking to other participants and trying to gain a sense of its gestalt. Jay Koh and Chu Yuan's work in Myanmar, for example, has been going on for nearly seven years, and its meaning is produced through the gradual accretion of social exchanges, events, and interactions within and among a network of Burmese artists and writers.[3] A deeper involvement in the practice leads to a closer rapport with the practitioner. This can be equally true for historians or critics who write about more traditional practices, like painting and sculpture. At the same time, I don't plan to write about the same group of artists indefinitely. It's always necessary to maintain the relative autonomy of your ideas about the work. I'd also have to say that most of the artists and groups that I've written about have been very conscious of this, and I've never experienced a sense of resentment for the criticisms I've made. Most of them welcome criticism if it's coming from someone who has been willing to take the

Chu Yuan and Myanmar/Burmese collaborators, *Offering of Mind: Kachin Undergraduate*, performed photography on the campus of University of Rangoon, 2005 (artwork © Chu Yuan; photograph by Chu Yuan)

3. See the Networking and Initiatives for Culture and the Arts website at www.artstreammyanmar.net/cultural/nica/nica.htm. NICA was founded by Jay Koh and Chu Yuan in Yangon in 2003 to encourage cultural development and propagate knowledge. The *Offering of Mind* series shown here was produced by NICA.

time to learn about and from the work. Given the disparaging attitude that many mainstream critics and historians have toward activist or engaged art practice, they're happy to have an informed interlocutor. It was actually a challenge to get *Conversation Pieces* published because presses at the time felt there was no market for a theoretically informed book about activist art practice. This situation has changed since then, due in part to the success of Nicolas Bourriaud's work and the significant influence of biennials as privileged venues for mainstream art, and due to the fact that younger artists and groups continue to work in this way, quite often on the margins of the "official" art world.

Chu Yuan and Myanmar/Burmese collaborators, *Offering of Mind: Bamar Aspiring Entrepreneur*, performed photography in downtown Yangon/Rangoon, 2005 (artwork © Chu Yuan; photograph by Jay Koh)
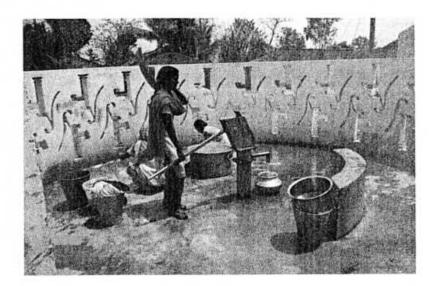
Chu Yuan writes, "The *Offering of Mind* series grew out of the Myanmar tradition of offering gold leaf for the decoration of *stupas* containing relics of the Buddha in the hope of gaining merit for one's next life. This belief has been used to teach submission to current conditions: for example, that the military rulers are in charge because they accumulated merit in past lives, and the people are poor or suppressed because of transgressions from past lives. The sculptural form worn on the head symbolizes a '*stupa* of the mind.' The concept encourages the cultivation of knowledge in the present. Participants wrote their most powerful thoughts on pieces of paper, which were placed into the mental stupa as 'offerings of mind.'"
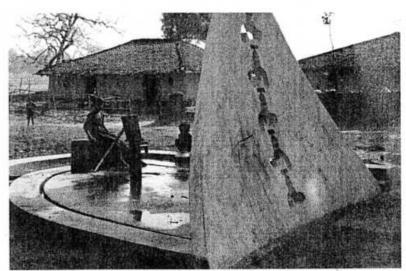
4. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (1998; Dijon, France: Presses du réel, 2002). Maria Lind is currently the Director of International Artists Studio Program in Sweden; www.iaspis.com/.

Wilson: It's important to note that the book has structured a whole series of conversations and debates, not just in English-speaking Europe but in the rest of Europe as well. Part of that impact has to do with the convergence or confluence of your work with parallel initiatives, most obviously the writing of Bourriaud, Maria Lind, and others.[4] To my mind there would be significant differences among these positions. Let me ask this question in two parts. First, what are the differences between your own position and that of someone like Bourriaud and relational aesthetics? And second, how do you account for the recent willingness of the mainstream art world to embrace some notion of the social, of the dialogical, of negotiated practice?
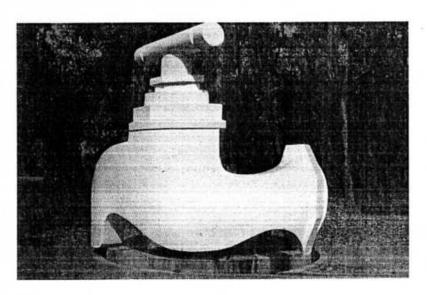
Kester: First off I should say I very much admire Bourriaud's writing. It's curious how frequently decisive interventions in art theory take place through modest gestures. *Relational Aesthetics* is short, barely a hundred pages, and yet the language has been extremely generative. It reminds me of the impact of Baudrillard's *Simulations* in the 1980s or Dave Hickey's *The Invisible Dragon* in the 1990s. Although I disagree with the underlying positions of Baudrillard and Hickey, they clearly struck a nerve in the art world. I also admire Bourriaud's ability to develop a descriptive system, to shift the terms of the debate away from object-based language into an event- or process-based language, even while retaining a sense of the linkages between the two. This is something I've struggled with myself, creating a language or terminology that can capture this shift in a compelling manner. There are several points of connection, in my mind, between what Bourriaud terms "relational" practice and the "dialogical" projects I describe in *Conversation Pieces*, relative to the attempt to address the formation of social networks as a mode of creative praxis. There are also differences. Many of the projects he discusses remain essentially choreographed or staged; they still

Navjot Altaf and Adivasi collaborators Raj
Kumar, Shantibai, and Gessuram, *Nalpar*
(Water Pump Sites), 2003, 2003, and 2004,
Kondagaon District, Bastar, Chhattisgarh,
India (artworks © Navjot Altaf, Raj Kumar,
Shantibai, and Gessuram; photographs by
Grant Kester)

operate within what I term a "textual" register, in which the work of art, whether it's an object, a space, or an event, is programmed ahead of time and then set in place before the viewer. I tend to write about works that involve a more open-ended form of participatory interaction, drawn out over extended periods of time. I'm thinking of projects like the water-pump sites and children's temples Navjot Altaf has helped organize in central India or Park Fiction's work in Hamburg.[5] These frequently use the workshop as a way to frame creative labor, or they involve the tactical mobilization of craft traditions. They also explicitly address the ethical relationship between the artist and his or her collaborators. One of the ways in which I'm trying to work through an evaluative model for these practices involves research at the interstices of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the tactical. This approach tends to be a taboo in art world, where open talk of ethics is anathema. I find this attitude intellectually disingenuous. The history of modern art is nothing if not an ongoing struggle to develop a compensatory cultural response to the dehumanizing effects of modernity, whether through the agency of a well-crafted object, paintings of bucolic Polynesians, or the therapeutic disruption of the viewer's perceptions. How is art not an expression of an ethical desire? Also, these projects don't rely as heavily on the epistemology of the "outside": in some cases they try to work productively within particular matrices of institutional power and cultural exchange. While the art world is very comfortable with ironic distance, it has a much more difficult time understanding sincerity as anything other than a sign of naiveté or intellectual weakness.

Second, Bourriaud has been anxious to maintain a conventional avant-garde genealogy for the practices he discusses. As a result he's attempted to sequester them from the traditions of activist and community-based practice, with which they actually have much in common. Bourriaud describes relational practice as an epiphenomenal expression of the shift from industrial forms of labor to a service economy. If the artist under industrial production had the job of creating complex or well-constructed objects as an antidote to mass-produced dreck, then the postindustrial artist must now create alternative models of sociality to challenge the instrumentalizing of human social interaction in a postindustrial system. I don't think that current changes in art practice can be transposed in such a simple way from economic transformations, and I also don't buy the underlying assumption that "immaterial" labor is the site of the most decisive rearticulation of political power. In fact, many of the projects that interest me involve struggles over very material forms of labor—relative to land redistribution, water rights, or working conditions in maquiladoras.

For me the proliferation of collaborative or collective practices suggests a certain exhaustion with some of the key points of tension that have traditionally defined and sustained avant-garde art—art versus kitsch, art versus activism, the artist versus the viewer, etc. Each of these oppositional pairs requires us to define art via distance and autonomy. In practice this tradition lends itself to a hygienic discourse, where the critic's job is to insulate approved avant-garde practice from contamination by other, degraded, cultural forms. I was discussing Park Fiction's work recently with a landscape designer who was dismayed by what she saw as the ugliness of the park they developed in conjunction with their Hafenstrasse neighbors. She described it as kitsch, which struck me as exactly right. Park

5. On Altaf's work see the catalogue for *Groundworks: Environmental Collaboration in Contemporary Art*, Regina Gouger Miller Gallery (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2005). See also Park Fiction's website at www.parkfiction.org/.

Fiction doesn't really care if their fake palm trees and flying-carpet lawns are seen as kitsch by a design professional: they are more concerned with the modes of interaction that the creation of the park set in motion. We've been well trained to this response as critics, going back at least to the nineteenth century when Realism or Impressionism were defined as the antithesis of the sterile, formulaic art of the Salon. This tendency to define art through defensive negation is less compelling for most of the groups I write about.

Of course modern art regularly undergoes these shifts; that's what makes it modern. Formerly transgressive modes of artistic practice achieve canonical status, only to be unsettled in their turn by a subsequent transgression. The recent proliferation of collaborative practices marks a cyclical shift within the field of art, even as the nature of this shift involves a rearticulation of aesthetic autonomy and an increasing permeability between art and other zones of symbolic production (architecture, ethnography, environmental activism, radical social work, etc.). I think aesthetic autonomy is being recoded or renegotiated in these projects. As the history of modernism has repeatedly demonstrated, the greatest potential for transforming and reenergizing artistic practice is often realized precisely at those moments when its established identity is most at risk. The point isn't to insist that this work be called "art" in some dogmatic way. It's simply a matter of recognizing the nodal points where the significant rearticulations of art are occurring. It is in the very nature of these moments, and these sites of practice, that there is slippage (art into activism, art into ethnography, art into social work, art into participatory planning). My response is to recognize the productivity of these practices, to accept them provisionally as art, and to then see where this line of thinking leads in a more heuristic manner.

Wilson: The concept of "community" functions as a master term in many recent discussions. In your book you critique Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of an "inoperable" community, but there is obviously a whole variety of attempts to rethink the political in terms of the concept of community.[6] I'm wondering if it really is possible for us to conceive of a nonagonistic version of community. Do we risk taking the struggle and the conflict out of community, or idealizing it as some kind of safe haven?

Kester: That's a useful reference to start the discussion with. The concept of agonistic democracy in Laclau and Mouffe's work came up recently in Claire Bishop's *October* essay.[7] We'd do well to remember the original meaning of the term *agon*, which is "a contest or its prize." The concept of agonistic democracy relies on a particular understanding of how we go about engaging with difference (represented by other subjects who have opinions at variance with our own). It implies a distinctly aggressive, even masculinist, model of identity, especially if we consider its relationship to *thumos* in Greek philosophy, the characteristics of the soldier class: quick to anger and indignation, and quick to defend its own idealized self-image against perceived threats. I suppose this correlation comes naturally to some because it mirrors the masculine self-assertion of the conventional artistic personality, confronting the viewer or imposing his will on resistant matter. It's precisely this sort of aggression, or the implied linkage between aggression and creativity, that is questioned in a lot of recent collaborative work. I also feel that there's a bit of a contradiction in the concept of an

6. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
7. Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 49–79. See also Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Artforum*, February 2006, 178–83.

WochenKlausur, *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women*, Zurich, 1994, black-and-white photograph (artwork © WochenKlausur)

WochenKlausur's website notes, "Since 1993 and on invitation from different art institutions, the artist group Wochen-Klausur develops concrete proposals aimed at small, but nevertheless effective improvements to socio-political deficiencies. Proceeding even further and invariably translating these proposals into action, artistic creativity is no longer seen as a formal act but as an intervention into society." Invited to Zurich to address the problems of drug-addicted prostitutes, each day for two weeks the group invited four different experts in drug issues to travel Lake Zurich in a boat, where they could discuss the issues frankly and without public scrutiny. After two weeks of discussions among politicians, attorneys, activists, journalists, police chiefs, and specialists from the fields of medicine, prevention, and therapy, solutions to some of the most pressing issues were crafted and put into effect. Notably, the discussions resulted in the creation of a shelter where the prostitutes could sleep and rest safely during the day. It operated for six years.

8. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London/New York: Verso, 1985); Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London/New York: Verso, 1993).

agonistic democracy itself. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the full promise of democracy must remain unrealized, via an eternally unresolved agonistic conflict.[8] But agonism is only possible among those who hold fixed positions and are defined in turn by a subjectivity that must be defended from co-optation by others. Why would you assume that the human tendency cultivated by this endless self-assertion would necessarily remain democratic? What is being "practiced" here is the will toward conflict, rather than a capacity for reconciliation.

This model fails to acknowledge the possibility that the process of intersubjective exchange itself, rather than merely transmitting preexisting opinion, could be generative and ontologically transformative. It's the promise of collaborative aesthetic experience to prefigure another set of possibilities, to enact change and not simply represent a priori positions. This is what I find interesting about some of the projects I discussed in *Conversation Pieces*: Mama Toro's work or WochenKlausur's use of conversational exchange in its Zurich project. They present a very different model of being together; a willingness to partially suspend self-assertion in the face of the Other. Is this the only way to work? Of course not, but looking around the current geopolitical scene, it's safe to say that we have plenty of examples of agonistic conflict but very few productive alternatives. The idea that democracy should continually expand its promise of freedom is fine. This has traditionally involved not agonism per se, but the implied threat of violence or systemic crisis. Certainly many of the significant improvements in the US polity over the last century have been driven by organized resistance from workers, unions, immigrants, suffragettes, and so on, as well as the threat of fiscal instability or urban disorder. Democracy expands when those standing "outside" demand to be included. I would agree with that, and I think there are some terrific collaborative projects that have been produced in conjunction with oppositional political movements. I'm just not sure what a Santiago Sierra installation at the Venice Biennale has to do with this kind of democracy.

On the basis of the agonistic paradigm, artists who work collaboratively or dialogically are cast as deluded, politically naive idealists who ignore the brute realities of democracy in action. This seems a bit unfair. I've always felt that the power of art rested in its ability to evoke utopian possibilities. I go to some

lengths in *Conversation Pieces* to lay out what I hope is a more nuanced model of community, but you continue to see critics invoking the ghost of a vulgarized Habermas to dismiss this practice out of hand. I have yet to encounter an artist who works in this manner who would claim that they are creating some sort of universal, immanent community that magically dissolves all differences. They tend to develop provisional "communities" through a shared, situational commitment. For critics weaned on [Emmanuel] Levinas or Nancy this skirts dangerously close to fascism. A lot of the misunderstanding comes from a tendency to collapse an analysis of community into a critique of hegemony, as if community or any collective formation can only ever be an expression of dominant power. We can't tolerate a concept of "immanent togetherness" based on the awful possibility that we might have something in common—not everything, just something. The only ethical basis for overcoming our tendency to bash each other in the head is for us to acknowledge the fact that we have nothing in common and then, by a curious cognitive sleight of hand, to take that condition of existential isolation as the foundation for a nonfascistic community. This last part is particularly unclear to me, since I can imagine a completely opposite response: to use this perceived isolation as a kind of psychic justification to instrumentalize the Other. It seems less a description of utopian community than a symptom of the extreme fear of predication in the poststructuralist tradition.

This quasi-evangelical attitude, what I call the postmodern "profession of faith" (or maybe faithlessness), is what allows for the synchronism between poststructuralist theory and the traditions of neoconceptual avant-garde art beginning in the 1980s. The artist is, to use Lacan's phrase, "the subject presumed to know," bringing the viewer into compliance with a properly de-essentialized mode of being through some sort of revelatory encounter. The purism comes through quite clearly; the viewers must be punished for their reliance on forms of identification or collectivity that don't pass theoretical muster; they must be made to feel "discomfort," and so on. Of course this sort of S & M co-dependence between the artist and the viewer has a venerable history, extending back at least to Courbet's slap-in-the-face with *The Stonebreakers*. Provocation can easily enough slide over into titillation and one might argue that, at this late stage, art audiences expect, even anticipate, the shock, dislocation, and discomfort that avant-garde art delivers. Seldom has a population been so relentlessly "disrupted," "challenged," and "destabilized" as the community of art cognoscenti who frequent biennials, Kunsthalles, and ICAs—and yet they keep coming back. This only seems odd if we ignore the rhetorical function of these provocations— something I tried to unpack a bit in the "Rhetorical Questions" essay.[9] That's why the work of someone like Sierra is so fascinating. The implied or ideal viewer for this work is clearly the art critic who is assigned the task of ventriloquizing the response that the viewer is "supposed" to have, while simultaneously standing with the artist, observing the benumbed viewer from a quasi-ethnographic remove. The relay of identifications and misidentifications that flow among the artist, the critic, and actual viewers of these works is quite complex, but it tends to be ignored. Instead we get the same credulous accounts of Sierra's installations as simple visual analogues for textual deconstruction, "revealing" or "exposing" the otherwise hidden operations of power.

This really leads us back to your first question. The rapprochement between

9. Grant Kester, "Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public" (1995), in *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. Kester (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 103–35.

avant-garde art and poststructuralist theory has opened up some really productive readings of contemporary art practice over the last decade or so. The difficulty with it, from my perspective, is that it has become something of a procrustean bed. There are certain practices for which it is quite appropriate, especially those that operate in the textual mode I described. It's less useful, in my opinion, for collaborative or collective projects. The essential point in many of these projects is not to simply admit the suppressed "truth" of our divided nature in some single, epiphanic moment, but rather to determine how we might negotiate our interactions with others, and otherness, in nonvirtual space. How do we relate to alterity even after we've acknowledged our ontic dependence? I think this is the question that drives a lot of recent art practices. They constitute experiments, both pragmatic and utopian, with new modes of being together through a sustained process of interaction that operates on multiple levels: speech, haptic experience, shared labor, the proximity of bodies in space, and so on.

Wilson: You mentioned Claire Bishop's piece in *October*, which has played an important role in setting up the terms of the debate over this work recently. In this text she suggests that there is something problematic in the convergence of a governmental rhetoric of social inclusion and the rhetoric of community-based or engaged art practice, which is something we see all across Europe. What is your take on this critique?

Kester: This critique tends to get rediscovered every several years. I developed a similar argument in "Aesthetic Evangelists"; we see it again in Hal Foster's "Artist as Ethnographer" essay and more recently in Miwon Kwon's *One Place after Another*. [10] I've been struck during my time in Belfast and Dublin by the level of anxiety artists are experiencing over state or public support, and especially over what they see as the appropriation of certain concepts of inclusion and access by state bureaucracies. My early career in the arts in the US was spent working with nonprofit arts organizations during the Culture Wars of the 1980s. I was teaching at the Corcoran when the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit was cancelled and then rescheduled by the Washington Project for the Arts, and I witnessed many of my friends and colleagues in the nonprofit sector, as we used to call it, losing their jobs. It's been twenty years now since there was any significant public funding of contemporary art [in the United States] and certainly nothing comparable to the levels of support you see in the UK through lottery funds and other mechanisms. The same is true for many of the projects I'm looking at in Africa, Asia, South America, or India; they frequently rely on funding from nonarts sources— NGOs, foundations, or the artists themselves. So the more recent versions of this critique tend to universalize the experience of artists working in a handful of European countries that continue to provide funding to contemporary artists working in public and community contexts. In my current book project I'm trying to map out the effects and implications of these differing forms of patronage, from NGOs to regeneration agencies to research universities.

One thing this appropriation has done is to clarify the stakes for artists seeking to develop a cultural politics. Historically, avant-garde art established its identity in large measure in opposition to the perceived banality of kitsch or consumer culture. So as art ventures into new fields of social action, it's probably inevitable that it discovers its antithetical counterpart (which would be the kind

10. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 171–204; Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

of awful, depoliticized, hierarchically imposed, state-sponsored "community" art that we see spreading in the UK). This is the basis for my criticism of earlier community-based practices, but it's clear that the question of patronage needs to be revisited. At this point I'm just trying to educate myself about the current situation in the UK and the rest of the EU, especially around regeneration projects of various kinds. I would note that the general trajectory of neoliberalism is clearly toward the ongoing erosion of this sort of state provision. The pressures on EU countries are already building, and one of the first things to go will likely be art funding, as it was in the US. Of course the neoliberal juggernaut is asynchronous. Some European countries still manage to retain remnants of the postwar social compact, subsidizing higher education, housing, the arts, health care, and so on. But their ability to maintain the standard of living of their middle classes is tenuous at best. Even now the nations of the EU find themselves increasingly reliant on the cheap labor of foreign immigrants, leading to the entirely predictable but no less depressing spectacle of anti-immigrant racism in historically tolerant cultures like those of Holland and Ireland. One of the chief goals of neoliberal orthodoxy is to eliminate any and all forms of collective resistance to the primacy of capital. Within this movement the state and civil society have taken on a central role as zones of contestation and targets of conquest by corporate power. There are significant battles to be waged in this struggle, which is why reductive analyses of patronage are so counterproductive. Of course public institutions are compromised, but they're more accountable, more vulnerable to external control, than the corporate sector. It simply takes time and patience. The far-right wing in the US took power over a period of two decades by building local organizations, first in congregations and school boards, then at the state level, and finally at the federal level. At this point the federal government has almost entirely abandoned any substantive regulative relationship to the private sector. The Bush administration literally invites corporate lobbyists to write the legislation that is intended to regulate their industries. Our government has effectively been taken over by corporate America. I'd like to think things haven't gotten quite this bad in Ireland or the UK, and I sincerely hope that my country doesn't set the precedent for Europe in this regard. But this means addressing the function of public institutions with some tactical and strategic sophistication, rather than throwing your hands up and dismissing all forms of funding outside the private art market or state-sponsored biennials as impure or hopelessly compromised.

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