

Art & the Public Sphere

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Performative tactics and the choreographic reinvention of public space

ABSTRACT

Recently a multitude of artists' endeavours to creatively engage with the public space have become more aligned with the temporal than the spatial. This shift away from traditional notions of public space has allowed for an increasingly elusive, radically dispersed number of events and intervals to occur. Projects incorporating site-specificity have also shown a greater preoccupation with so-called non-spaces and non-sites. Many such artworks can be characterized by their movement from the grandiose to the more intimate in scale. Practices rooted in institutional critique now foreground playfulness rather than pontificate, although nonetheless maintaining a concerted premeditated approach incorporating multiple angles, vantage points, and media. Much recent art has been involved with a choreographic turn as artists stage, configure, and orchestrate their creative actions. This article discusses a variety of these projects including artworks by Mark Boulos, Harrell Fletcher, Sharon Hayes, Toby Huddlestone, Tino Sehgal, Jane Tsong, and The Yes Men.

KEYWORDS

public art
site-specificity
live art
political art
performative
art interventions

Recently a multitude of artists' endeavours to creatively engage with various configurations of the 'public space' have become considerably more aligned with the temporal than the spatial. That is to say, the virtualization and near-atomization of a more traditional vision of public space – as exemplified by an

1. For a lively historical account of these developments, see Banes, Sally (1993), *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*, Durham: Duke University Press. For primary documents including interviews, see Sandford, Mariellen R. (ed.) (1995), *Happenings and Other Acts*, London: Routledge.

architecturally designed and structured common, park, square – has allowed for an increasingly elusive, radically dispersed number of intervals, moments, and events. Creative projects ostensibly related to ‘site-specificity’ – as in specifically situated, spatially oriented constructions – have equally turned toward a greater preoccupation with so-called non-spaces and non-sites. The paradoxical inability to pinpoint or specify exactly locatable sites of newer public artworks shifts the balance in favour of periodic broadcasts, developing occurrences, and an ensuing (and overwhelming) proliferation of variegated documentation. The space between and beyond sites becomes the nowhere, non-existent, the not-at-all, and perhaps the never-to-be-attained.

Thus a public space becomes reoriented towards a not quite here, not easily comprehended, nor unified entity. Also notable in many recent artworks investigating public presentation is a pronounced movement from the grandiose to the more intimate in scale. Practices rooted in institutional critique now tend to trade in playfulness rather than pontificate, although often seeking to maintain a shrewd and concertedly premeditated approach incorporating multiple angles, vantage points, and media. In addition to what has been referred to as the ‘performative turn’ or the ‘experiential turn’ in contemporary art practice, one could posit that much recent art has been involved with an explicitly ‘choreographic turn’ as artists are staging, configuring, and orchestrating gestural and participatory activities. This recalls and updates the era of early Fluxus and Happenings in which dancers, artists, writers, and musicians tended to collaborate on interdisciplinary event-related artworks.¹ In addition such developments might be seen to dull and mute the force of politically informed and invested creative approaches, as they offer up more deliberately ambiguous stances. Recently, the amount of direct agency and impact of any artist’s critique seems to have shifted substantially, if anything in the direction of retreat, though it often becomes a very entertaining approach, nonetheless.

It might be helpful at this point to recall that in art historian Miwon Kwon’s seminal 1997 essay, ‘One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,’ she writes:

the deterritorialization of the site has produced liberatory effects, displacing the strictures of fixed place-bound identities with the fluidity of a migratory model, introducing the possibilities for the production of multiple identities, allegiances, and meanings, based not on normative conformities but on the non-rational convergences forged by chance encounters and circumstances.

(Kwon 1997: 109)

More than a decade of creative production since that time has proven Kwon’s comments to be both relevant and prescient, as this model for the flow of artistic momentum proceeds onward without interruption.

In addition, one might argue that aspects of our ‘person-hood’ and our ‘place-hood’ have been eroding to the point of disappearing for a very long time; if, for example, one were to consult the historic critical writings of such public intellectuals as Herbert Marcuse, Ivan Illich, and Richard Sennett, among others.

The perceptible reinvigoration of performative practice in public settings also coincides with an increase in public spaces that have become more strictly controlled, aesthetically sterile, and, at times, eerily depopulated. In reference

to the burgeoning amount of private, gated communities under construction, in place of older style public neighbourhoods, the late historian Tony Judt argued that:

People who live in private spaces contribute actively to the dilution and corrosion of the public space. In other words, they exacerbate the circumstances which drove them to retreat in the first place. And by doing so, they pay a price.

(Judt 2010: 129)

Moreover, the anthropologist Marc Augé writes evocatively in his influential 1995 book *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space that cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places [...] where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces are developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral, offers the anthropologist (and others) a new object, whose unprecedented dimensions might usefully be measured before we start wondering to what sort of gaze it may be amenable.

(Augé 2000: 77–78)

In addition to the aforementioned writings, one could hasten to add that the artistic activities under review here have not occurred in any sort of art critical-theoretical vacuum, but in a period characterized by proliferating commentary and analysis of the state of public practice. Examples would include curator Claire Doherty's interest in art as situations: 'Fixed sites, itineraries which offer up works as points on a map and targeted constituencies are becoming redundant for the commissioning of situation-specific artworks because these formats no longer acknowledge the nature of place as an event-in-progress' (Doherty 2008: 10). Theorist Malcolm Miles also notes: 'I find another refusal of the dominant model of cultural production now in collaborative but not only non-gallery projects in which the boundary between art and social process is a site of creative tension, not a dividing line' (Miles 2007: 17). Moreover artist Mark Hutchinson has proposed a more generative vision of a

public art that potentially transforms itself; transforms its publics, allows itself to be transformed by its publics; and allows these relationships and definitions to be transformed, too. [...] Such art might, then, be hard to see and to judge because it will be transforming what counts as seeing and judging.

(Hutchinson 2002: 438)

Nevertheless, the very notion of 'criticality', in terms of what temporal and event-based public projects in the cultural field can actually muster, remains a difficult one to determine or sustain, without a substantive amount of

rethinking and revision. The goal for the following article is to consider a variety of examples of artists' projects, interventions, and actions that might serve to elucidate how myriad challenging questions relating to both public/private space and the art/life divide are being addressed and interrogated. Among the diverse range of creative projects relevant to this discussion are works by Mark Boulos, Harrell Fletcher, Sharon Hayes, Toby Huddleston, Tino Sehgal, Jane Tsong, and The Yes Men. Significantly, much of this work has occurred throughout the past decade and actively traverses national borders as a global phenomenon; it also corresponds to increasingly interdisciplinary and dispersed approaches to making art.

A body in a room: that is most of what Berlin-based artist Tino Sehgal's *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000) physically amounts to (the Bruce and Dan referenced here are the influential American artists Nauman and Graham respectively). A lone androgynous figure in everyday street dress (jeans, sneakers, a cardigan) is slowly inching – one might call it writhing, slinking, or stretching – her way from the centre of the room towards the adjacent wall, and back again. There is a mimetic yet non-specific connection with performance art antecedents yet the rather cryptic and lengthy title gives meagre assistance in nailing the particulars of the piece. A creeping, slowly turning dancer occupies the space, which is otherwise empty, but faces a large window onto the small street. Thus spectators are expected to watch a rather meticulously and intimately choreographed work of live art, that can also be observed by those who witness it while exterior to the gallery space proper, on the street, either in passing or with the intention of changing their vantage point.

A recent review of a group exhibition in Germany that included another staging of this specific artwork – or 'constructed situation' to use the artist's preferred term – comments that: 'Without any outspoken political references the work manages to convey a tone that acutely matches current political sentiments. The political content of the work is not so much stressed as transmitted through images of absurdity and despair'. The reviewer also mentions earlier on that the actor trained to carry out this choreographed piece 'seems to be crawling in pain, disturbing one's visit by silently agitating over an unknown cause' (Gritz 2009). In contrast to the preceding comments, it was the spare, highly aestheticized, slow-paced ambiguity of the artwork that I noticed. Perhaps this interpretation stems in part from some likely performative differences between the actions, gestures, and sounds of the German participant and the one I witnessed in Auckland, New Zealand, but this is difficult to verify, as Tino Sehgal explicitly prohibits any official images to be taken and disseminated to represent his prestigious and sought-after artworks.

In effect this prohibition has certainly helped to foster a certain intrigue and aura surrounding his work. Art historian Caroline A. Jones has noted: 'Sehgal's exquisitely careful management of the discourse about his work, marking his as the most intellectual approach within this experiential turn'. Arguments are to be made for the historicism of the work, its value as critique, and its timelessness. Sehgal plays the roles of ringmaster, prankster, interventionist, and interloper, while simultaneously seeming almost the opposite of these terms. Perhaps it is exactly this slightly slippery ideological quality to the work that

keeps it functioning, along with its considerable novelty and fastidious attention to detail. Jones, clearly playing along with Sehgal's games, remarks:

He does an elegant postmodern end run around the problems of any critique being easily co-opted by the museum and the market: he has the work aggressively acknowledge them both. Neither unprecedented [Andrea Fraser is the extraordinary magus of this manoeuvre] nor even surprising anymore, Sehgal's foregrounding of the market is nonetheless satisfyingly hilarious, performed in simple scripts (*This Is So Contemporary*, 2004, requires museum guards to sing the work's title and owner) or worked out with participants (*This Is Exchange*, 2003, requires museum staff to discuss market exchange with visitors, who then get a discount on their entry fees).

(Jones 2010)

Most significantly Sehgal's work touches upon many provocative notions relevant to the current moment: borders between public and private space; documentary and fictional approaches; references to historical precedents; material and immaterial components of a work of art; lived and scripted 'experiences'. Moreover, the work if turbulent *or* critical *or* political offers those potentialities in a quite calm, mannered, controlled, indeed specifically choreographed manner. That is not to say that productive tensions are not in place there, but it remains unclear what some of those productive tensions are and what they might tell us, particularly if read in tandem with a selection of other artworks and approaches.

Regarding such productive tensions in relation to the surge in art re-enactments, critic Sven Lütticken has noted:

Re-enactments are to a greater or lesser extent representations of the 'original' performances, but many artistic re-enactments try to transcend slavish reproduction and create a difference. Like other performances, re-enactments generate representations in the form of photos and videos. Is the fate of the re-enactment to become an image? And are such representations just part of a spectacle that breeds passivity, or can they in some sense be performative, active?

(Lütticken 2005: 5)

Intriguingly the Dan Graham piece that Sehgal's references most directly involves a roll of the artist while holding a camera, then the documentation of that very act photographically – that which we see here – so Graham's work, which so eloquently and consistently interrogated 'inter-subjectivity' via the use of mediations (mirrors, glass, screens, monitors, and architectonic structures and performative gestures), is glossed by Sehgal in this instance, albeit with the camera eye(s) essentially amputated, blinded, disappeared.

Another issue raised here is the very situation of a body, in (slow) motion, in a room, being watched by others as a paradigmatic structuring device of performance art; although this particular example was presented in about as calm and serene a viewing condition as one might hope for, and this was a quieter piece than many by the artist (most frequently involve a verbal exchange or series of exclamations). Sehgal, it should be noted, takes issue with the characterization of his work as performance, but herein we have some of the most crucial intersecting contradictions underlying his practice: that an artist schooled in dance and economics creates live, staged temporal

works he has called 'human sculpture' but which closely resemble, and are influenced by, canonical moments of performance art history.

Thus a body in a space, under controlled circumstances, which addresses largely art historically-directed questions can be posited in contrast to, for example, multiple bodies congregated in the street, under changeable circumstances, rapidly responding with political urgency to current events. The quietude of the gallery space in Auckland, for example, markedly differed from the images one could witness during the same period on the Internet, newspapers, and television depicting catastrophic occurrences in Thailand, Haiti, et. al.

Critic Marius Babias writes:

The problematic aspects of art intervention are obvious. Such projects can be charged with communitarianism, being a function of socio-political compensation and moral grandstanding. The often advanced advantage of irregularity, mobility and the value of a political programme, which follows Mao's notion of guerrilla warfare, do stabilise the groups on the inside but can only develop their 'revolutionary' forces to a certain degree – and then mostly as single gestures, marginal political improvements, communicative exchange services, object-fixated symbolics etc. The more fundamental problem is that capitalism, which produces social antagonisms as well as critical art practices, eludes radical transformations by way of co-optation and assimilation.

(Babias 2004)

On a strikingly similar note, albeit written half a decade earlier, art historian Francis Frascina concluded his richly detailed study on 'aspects of the art left in sixties America' with the following insights:

cultural and political amnesia enables the United States to police or manage dissent and at the same time to make a few more bucks by encouraging the production of commodities and media spectacles in the market of ideas. This market not only poses little actual threat to capitalism but also provides the system's guardians and cultural commissars with interesting information on what the actual and fantasized oppositions are thinking. For them there is nothing better than to encourage dissent, with its novel forms ripe for commodification, when its more troublesome manifestations are contained and fragmented.

(Frascina 1999: 229)

Thus, these two quotes examine intriguingly related notions concerning the management, cooptation, and containment of actions that earlier on had almost certainly envisioned and sought out thoroughly different outcomes. This furthermore highlights another important set of questions: whether given the many activist-style tactics imported into art world contexts, and the correspondingly artful tactics of many practitioners often read as activists, where the differences between these contexts e/merge, how they overlap, and to what end they 'succeed,' or achieve any stated/ unstated goals.

Furthermore, many contemporary artists are enacting and using the derivations of social organizing and historical protests, but reframed as artworks, the lengthy list would include: Sam Durant, Carsten Höller,

Jeremy Deller, Liam Gillick, and Gerard Byrne. So, in some odd way it is as if we are offered some bits of documentation of protest as artistic homeopathic remedies, keeping away large scale worries with incremental soft cures for our irritating and reoccurring ailments. 'Radicalism' is transformed into aestheticized and highly sophisticated repetitions, revisions, and reiterations. Activism, protests and strikes are thus reintroduced, transformed into the artistic idiom, as represented by play-acting, placards, and performative videos. We thus get a distanced, curated sense of an eclectic selection of issues, critiques, and worries of the past without the full throttle pain of being immersed, involved, and undermined by the inevitable risks of actual 'on the streets' activism.

A recent book-length manifesto by the writer David Shields proclaims a need for more reality-driven work rather than fantastical narratives. In his textual collage *Reality Hunger*, Shields argues that 'every artistic movement from the beginning of time is an attempt to figure out a way to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into the work of art' (Shields 2010: 3). Shields attempts to construct a list of potential characteristics of this burgeoning movement, and comes up with little that is absolutely groundbreaking, but cites 'a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and non-fiction, the lure and blur of the real' (Shields 2010: 5). It becomes thus similarly compelling to consider the fact that many of those involved in the creation of fictions are incorporating more and more factual material, and many involved in constructions of so-called realities – politicians, activists, journalists, essayists – are incorporating more outright fictional material into their ventures. And in such cases, live bodies and luminous spectres have become as interchangeable and malleable as the differences and hierarchies between public and private space, and the so-called political or formalist modes of practice.

Increasingly artists' projects are questioning these boundaries and modalities, mixing and mashing them up, so to speak. Portland, Oregon-based artist and educator Harrell Fletcher often analyses existing cultural texts and social settings via collaborative dialogue with others to forge an entirely new



Figure 1: Harrell Fletcher, *Blot out the Sun* (2002). Total running time: 00:22:13. Courtesy the artist and Jack Hanley Gallery, NYC.

2. *Blot out the Sun* can be viewed in its entirety at the Ubu website: <http://www.ubu.com/film/fletcher.html>.

contextual framing. For example in the 2002 work *Blot out the Sun*, Fletcher, in collaboration with Steve MacDougall, and the owner of 'Jay's Quick Gas,' Jay Dykman, created a film of Joyce's novel *Ulysses* using the clients and staff of the garage as active participants.² Fletcher related the following in an interview with artist Allan McCollum:

That's what was so fascinating to me about it, that there was this person I hadn't met yet [Jay], but I knew he wanted a film made at his gas station. I got the grant and then I went and talked to him. He said he had been waiting for me to show up for the last ten years. He wanted it to be filmed there, and screened on this big white wall that's attached to the gas station. I said, 'Okay, what should the film be like?' And he said, 'It's about all of the things that go on here,' because to him the gas station is the centre of the universe. And it was just so interesting to me, he's not an artist, he's not a film-maker, but how many people are there that don't fit into a category? You know, they're not like the person who wants to make a film. They're the person who wants a film made at their place. What is that? Can you go to school for it? Can you have a career of it? You can't. Most of these things slip through the cracks. And there is all of these people out there who have an idea, but they don't know how to go about it at all. He said the film should be like *Ulysses* by James Joyce. I hadn't read *Ulysses*, so he explained it to me. Later as I was reading the book I decided that I would use the text directly and have the people at the gas station speak the lines. I made postcards announcing the screening before it was actually shot, giving myself three weeks to do it. Then I had to figure out how I was going to make this thing. I wrote cue cards with lines from the book and had the people there read them, which allowed the mechanics to keep working on the cars, and let people who were pulling up for gas, who would only be there for a few minutes, still be in the project. They read their lines and then got a postcard to come to the screening.

(McCollum 2006)

Blot out the Sun becomes disarmingly captivating in its montaged multiplicity of voices and mini-soliloquies. Though situated in a particular place and time, it is the rapid passage of people through this series of quasi-improvised set pieces and moments – meanwhile checking oil, carrying on repairs in and under cars – that lends a formidable energy to this work. Although shot as a fractured documentary, and ostensibly dealing with one of the most complex texts of modern literature, the video's 'everydayness' vacillates between the comic and poignant. The film's contextual setting leads us back toward the original event, and it plays games with notions of class-based assumptions, and such questions as what is a 'proper' film, who are the 'actors' in this film, and what does it actually accomplish.

Fletcher's work, which could have pursued any number of potential directions from its starting point, managed to effectively highlight some key (and contradictory) aspects of both Joyce's modern text as inspiration, and current social practice in the wake of postmodernism. In a recent reappraisal of Joyce's novel, literary scholar Declan Kiberd writes:

It is time to reconnect *Ulysses* to the everyday lives of real people. The more snobbish modernists resorted to difficult techniques in order to protect their ideas against appropriation by the newly literate masses; but Joyce foresaw that the real need would be to defend his book and

those masses against the newly illiterate specialists and technocratic elites. Whereas other modernists feared the hydra-headed mob, Joyce used interior monologue to show how loveable, complex and affirmative was the mind of the ordinary citizen.

(Kiberd 2009)

3. <http://myriadsmallthings.org/>.

Fletcher's collaborative video project meanwhile re-routes *Ulysses* into the midst of one of the most 'ordinary' situations imaginable: the automotive garage with its ever-mysterious, but utterly prosaic, compressed air, gas pumps, and hydraulic lifts.

Another West Coast artist Jane Tsong investigates social space, both in terms of particular sites but far more importantly how those sites might initiate a playful, poetic, and incisive form of performative practice. In Tsong's project entitled *The Comfy City*, abandoned tree stumps lining the edges of Los Angeles residential streets were converted by the artist, in collaboration with Robert Powers, to seats, stools, chairs. The outcomes are most often rather rough-hewn but minimalist, although in a commissioned work, carried out in collaboration with local woodcarving artist Miguel Holek in Tijuana, one of Tsong's chairs becomes almost baroque configured with customized ornamentation. A 2003 statement by Tsong and Powers reads:

Please have a seat. Or make one. Our urban spaces could definitely benefit from more public seating and relaxation. How luxurious it will seem when we are able to rest our feet where we please once in a while. Let us know the location of other stumps in need of improvement. Or for the handy and brave, a chainsaw can do the job with two careful cuts. Ask your local tool rental shop for safety tips. Let us make the comfy city ours.³



Figure 2: Jane Tsong and Robert Powers, Swivel chair, Coronado Street, Los Angeles, from *Comfy City* (2003–6). Alteration of abandoned palm stump with hardware, 40" high. Friends Dan and Carmel test its swivel action. Courtesy the artists.

Thus the project revolves (sometimes literally as in a revolving stool) around an everyday but overlooked site that then becomes transformed via artistic intervention. This sets up a context for further performative actions, whether these be relatively calm – reading, relaxing – or playful – dancing, spinning. It is not about the work having a particular look, but setting into motion a sequence of (non-) events. And Tsong, similar to Fluxus forbearers, circulates the notional idea of creating these works in other, future iterations, which could eventually proliferate without the artist being directly involved at all.

Tsong's interest in creating a circuit of activity relates equally to her analyses via mapping, drawing, documents of water systems, wind patterns, native flora. For example the *World Savings Bank proposal* (2001–2002) was a study of the patterns of wind within the context of a bland, open corporate plaza in Los Angeles. Instead of analysing the relations between the people and architecture of the space, Tsong used the wind, which was causing a 'fountain' effect, and the assorted bits of detritus caught in its paths as 'performers'. A corporation's facade reduced to its exterior, non-monumental activities involving the randomized trajectories of cups, fast food wrappers, cellophane, and leaves.

Tsong's working methodology incorporates an active and attentive engagement with the reciprocity between art and life, and her investigations of public settings – however whimsical and poetic – become deceptively strong political statements. Her most recent project, which will be located at the Brightwater Wastewater Treatment Plant in Seattle, Washington (2011), will involve 'blessings' written by the poet Judith Roche, thus a 'grounded' site which treats water flow for the region initiates a release of an altogether performative, yet more indefinable and unquantifiable sort. Appropriately Tsong titles her website 'myriad small things' which in turn represents her focus upon taking things in small, deliberate steps to better investigate the scope of much larger (and often overlooked) phenomena.

When we witness larger-scale politicized agendas refracted through the artistic process, it's often as if such agendas become distant from us in terms of significance, though we are reassured by a kind of participation by proxy. Many so-called political artworks simply proclaim rather anodyne liberal bourgeois sloganeering, becoming an echo chamber for existing (sur-)real political events, also bringing to mind, in contrasting fashion, the committed artists and writers who generally separated their art and political endeavours, the abstract painter Ad Reinhardt being a historic case in point.

But of more interest in the immediate context is how some artworks are calling attention to their potential to fail simultaneously as artworks and in terms of political agency. Notably a 2007 piece by Sharon Hayes appropriates its title from a sixties-era protest sign: *Everything else has failed! Don't you think it's time for love?* In this work, Hayes performs a spoken monologue into a handheld microphone while standing in midtown Manhattan (6th Avenue and 51st Street) at midday.

Hayes begins: *My dear love, my sweet lover* (an address to an intimate audience of one.) *I am shaking a bit. I'm not sure exactly how to begin.* (A tentative beginning.) *I'm worried that my letters are not getting to you or that yours are not getting to me.* (Again alluding to some interpersonal conflict, yet then Hayes continues.) *I don't know what's happening and it's making me particularly anxious.* (Here this statement opens up a wider variety of readings: we, who are listening to or watching her performance, are likely anxious as well. Is Hayes' anxiety about a fraught personal relationship or a corrosive political situation?) *I was trying to see the war as a measure of time but I got lost. I remember the last phone call was before the US started arming Sunni insurgents. And it was before Bush said*



Figure 3: Sharon Hayes, *Everything Else Has Failed! Don't You Think It's Time For Love?* (2007) Photo: Andrea Geyer; performance for *'25 Years Later: Welcome to Art in General'*, United Bank of Switzerland, NYC, 17–21 Sept 2007. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin.

US troops would stay in Iraq like they stayed in Korea. (Thus a radical shift occurs as Hayes warps, weaves, meshes and intermingles personal/political contexts of her narrative.) *I am standing and people are passing behind and in front of me. I look at them and find traces of you.* (Suddenly emphasis changes toward Hayes' immediate surroundings, and she refers to them directly.) *Or that guy with one lip that's slightly redder than the other, although his is his bottom lip and yours your top. ... You're in all these strangers. But I don't have any new words to say to you. I'm suspended between silence and repetition. I can say nothing or I can repeat.* (Again another turn, Hayes adopts a more defiant, emphatic tone, such as that of a political address.) *My truth is I am a gay American. This is an intensely personal decision, not one typically meant for the public domain.* (Proceeding towards her conclusion.) *I march in the parade of freedom but as long as I love you, I am not free. ... I love you. I love you. There's no more to say. Be safe my love. (End.)*

In a recent interview Hayes spoke about her approach and the complexity of its tangled interrelations between past and present, event and documentation:

One of the lines that repeats in almost all of the texts is the line, 'I know that the ears are the only orifice that can't be closed'. Impacted largely, I believe, by my generational formation, I am unwilling to let go of hope. But I'm also not able to embrace it. Neither hopeful nor hopeless, I throw, literally project, words out into the space of the public. Like thousands of people have done before me, and like thousands of people will do after me. In the narrative of the text, it is in the hope that somehow my words will find their way to my lover. But in the works' reverberations, the hope is that somehow the words will find their way to a body public, to a body of people, that they might somehow find their way to political meaning or significance. It is not a commentary on the promise and limitation of political demonstrations today, it is, hopefully, a demonstration that

Martin Patrick

4. See the 'Apathy Archive' at <http://www.tobyhuddlestone.net/>.



Figure 4: Toby Huddlestone, *Protest Apathy*, an apathetic demonstration held in Trafalgar Square, London, 27 June 2009. Courtesy the artist.

makes the desires and disappointments that are provoked by such promises and/or limitations more transparent. It is a piece that, somewhat simply and sincerely, attempts to work in the space of emotion by trying to find precise intersections between desire, politics, and war.

(Buckingham and Hayes 2008)

Artist Toby Huddlestone entirely questions the efficacy of old style protests. If, for example, you could have the largest one-day demonstration in history on the eve of the Iraq war, which arguably made virtually no impact on the governmental decision-making process, what now? In a series of 'lecture apathy' talks and 'apathy protests' he acutely satirizes the current era of disaffection. In such events, notably one which took place in July of 2009 at Trafalgar Square, Huddlestone distributed a number of broadsheet newspaper-sized signs emblazoned with the following slogans: CARRY ON, NO REASON TO MOAN, EVERYTHING IS OK, NOTHING TO COMPLAIN ABOUT, IT'S NOT WORTH IT, NOTHING WRONG, IT'S ALL FINE, SAY YES TO EVERYTHING.⁴

Huddlestone comments that:

A lot is being discussed of temporal space as public space at the moment and has been for quite some time now – while this interests me I'm actually more interested in psychological space as public space, as it's inherently more political. ... this very much informed *Protest Apathy* – the idea of offering the apathetic banners ... to offer a new psyche to those present in



Figure 5: Mark Boulos, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (2008) 2-channel installation, HDV, colour, sound, 14' 20". Courtesy the artist.

the square on the day. Very simply, I wanted to invent and create a protest that could not be nullified by the authorities by seemingly suggesting that 'everything is OK' and that there is 'nothing to complain about' – puncturing the bubble from the inside rather than being overtly in opposition to authority, which simply does not work anymore (and hasn't worked since the mid-1990s). The sarcasm was obvious through the people proclaiming their apathy on the day – everyone knows everything is NOT OK and that there are one million things to complain about.

(Huddleston 2010)

In his performance *Lecture Apathy*, Huddleston offers a comically accelerated and condensed 'history of disobedience and dissent,' an itinerary which incorporates the Cuban revolution, Vietnam War protests, civil rights demonstrations, counterculture, beats, hippies, punks ('the Sex Pistols and a whole bunch of copycat wankers after them ...'), miner's strikes, and the collapse of the Berlin wall. ('This is new labour, this is new labour Bono ... Geldof shit! ... subsumed! ... Reality TV! The whole fucking country subsumed! The largest organized protest the world has ever seen *ever*. Did they work? We need a new line of attack! ... Be non-specific, be non-compliant, be non-political. There are too many things to protest about so protest about nothing but still protest. ... *VIVA APATHY!*') A mix between send-up and pointed critique, Huddleston's comic timing makes this satire move along briskly, perched on the edge of the media drenched abyss.

Works by artists Francis Alÿs and Mark Boulos both involve video recordings and a personalized approach that takes the documentary form as its point of departure, but ends up with outcomes that defy such rigid categorization. New discursive 'sites', in the form of video installations, emerge from the artists' engagement with their specific contextual endeavours.

5. Boulos' new project was exhibited at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC, Vancouver from 8 October–5 December 2010.

Mark Boulos' 2008 work, entitled *All that is solid melts into air*, is composed of dual screens onto which are projected conflicting but intertwined vignettes of global capitalism played out over the course of a compressed and harrowing quarter of an hour (although looping in a continuous cycle). 'Futures traders', speculating in an eerily immaterial manner, yell and gesticulate madly on one screen, as masked citizens of the Niger delta chant on the other, livid at the fact that their 'wealth' is siphoned off by big petroleum companies leaving the area utterly demoralized and impoverished. Of the former Boulos has commented:

The shouting traders are buying and selling these complex financial products called futures and derivatives. And I like the term 'futures': the money doesn't exist yet, the commodity doesn't exist yet: nothing exists yet. To me, it symbolizes the metaphysics of capitalism. The average liberal critique of capitalism is that it's too materialistic, and the Marxist critique is that it's not materialistic enough. Rather, it's metaphysics with a very tenuous relation to reality, which is precisely why it will collapse.

(Lyden 2010)

The Nigerian citizens shown in the video are participants in MEND – The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, a militant organization that dedicates itself toward fighting the highly exploitative multinational oil companies located in the region. As Boulos continues: 'I'm interviewing two fighters, who are explaining their relation to the War God Egbisu, who protects them and make them bullet proof in battles. Here, the religious beliefs make the revolution possible.'

Boulos' background experience as a documentarian has included work with the long-standing collective of grass-roots video-makers Paper Tiger Television (PTTV). Writer/artist Jesse Drew writes of PTTV:

The Paper Tiger collective evolved along with these multitudes of video organizations, moving beyond media criticism, away from reacting to the culture industry, toward determining its own agenda, its own aesthetics, its own relationship to technology. By the 1990s, The Paper Tiger collective had made some several hundred video programs, on a wide range of both social and artistic subjects, which sought to illuminate what was ignored by the culture industry. They did so with the now standard PTTV approach – a sense of humor and a decidedly low-tech DIY sensibility.

(Drew 2007)

Thus one very interesting aspect of Boulos' work is the notion of an individual artist making use of 'collectivist' tactics, more often than not out 'in the world' and then bringing it back to the gallery/art world. If this might appear a problematic ethnographic procedure, it *is* problematic, but responds in interesting ways to these problems by configuring novel aesthetic presentations and initiating discussions concerning its – sometimes jarringly different – component parts.

Most recently Boulos spent time living in the Philippine jungle to record *No Permanent Address*, a new project on the New People's Army, an armed Maoist group, considered terrorists by the US and the EU.⁵ As Boulos writes: 'They live nomadically, camping in the spaces between coconut fields in the



Figure 6: Francis Alijs, *The Green Line*, Jerusalem (2004) Video documentation of an action. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

semi-feudal countryside, moving every night to evade the military, always protected by their peasant hosts' (Boulos 2010). Although Boulos uses a documentarian's tactics and expertise, he also shifts and reorients this approach very intentionally. In his words:

I'm trying to develop an anti-journalistic documentary, basically anti-empirical, I'm starting from a philosophical point that's not empiricist but phenomenological ... taking a bunch of different phenomena

compositing them into something that looks real and then pulling them apart to show that it's a construction.

(Boulos 2008)

Francis Alÿs' work *Sometimes Doing Something Poetic can become Political and Sometimes Doing Something Political can become Poetic*, or, much more succinctly, *The Green Line* attempts to circumvent some of the clear liabilities of 'politicized' practice, by varying its strategies, perspectives, modes of address, and manifold implications for both the art world and the social world. The focal point of the project was a video that recorded Alÿs re-enacting a work from 1995 called *The Leak*, in which the artist walked along while a line of blue paint dripped out from a can carried by the artist. Yet the original work was a kind of meta-commentary on painting and individual identity, stylistic tropes, etc., which could be read as only 'poetic' to a degree.

In proceeding almost ten years later and dripping this (now-green) leak in a manner that incorporates wider historical narratives, Alÿs' artwork is reinvigorated by different connotations and radically transforms itself once again. The historical material in question is the carving up of Palestine in 1948 via a green line sketched with General Moshe Dayan's pencil. Beyond Alÿs' orchestrated spilling of 58 litres of paint over the course of a 24 kilometre long walk, he later spoke with various activists, intellectuals, and officials as they watched excerpts from the documentary footage. Alÿs conducted his interviews in a format loosely resembling that of a working journalist. This approach in turn replaced a singular voice with a more diverse, collective expression, especially when compared to the earlier version of the piece.

Rima Hammami, an anthropologist from Birzeit University in Jerusalem, responds to a query from Alÿs concerning whether cultural actions, artistic or poetic, can counter pragmatic situations:

Definitely, and it probably has more roles than you are conceiving. For Palestinians, anybody who comes and wants to look is already doing a great service. Anybody who wants to come and see beyond what they are supposed to see and what they are supposed to know is extremely important for us. And, also, the way other people see that what you're doing is not such a violent, dominant, regular way of representing what's happening. It's also really wonderful because sometimes we get locked into how we see. ... So it's also really wonderful to have somebody coming who is not coming to aggressively say who we are, or what things are, but is making an empathic act, and at the same time is pushing us to maybe see things or to think about doing things in different types of ways. ... Sometimes it just seems like it's such a powerful closed box, and no one can speak to it, and nobody can shake it, and nobody can even make a hole in it, and so a poetic act is a very powerful thing to do in that context, because it says, 'I refuse to serve the dominant ways of doing things'.

(Alÿs 2007)

Such considered and measured responses become wholly integral to the effect of Alÿs' work, and complete a much more intriguing view of the potentialities within public projects more generally, when addressed from varied perspectives.

For the 2005 Whitney Biennial exhibition entitled *Day for Night* the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija sought the collaboration of veteran sculptor Mark



Figure 7: *The Yes Men, The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009) Directed by Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno. 87 minutes. Courtesy the Yes Men.

Di Suvero to remake a version of the Peace Tower created decades ago by a variety of artists in Los Angeles as a protest against the Vietnam War. The work seemed perfectly apt in its timing: just two winters into the Iraq War with the morass escalating in its horror and increasing comparisons to Vietnam in the press. Many artists contributed to the re-visioning of the earlier piece, but in its placement in the outer terrace of the museum, it failed to generate much energy from its site, and its effort to reheat the caustic and timely critique of the earlier piece seemed to be drained off almost instantaneously. The interventionism of the 1966 version was now displaced and thwarted by the intervening time in between, as the 'now' had a very difficult time catching up with the 'then'. That is to say, it was increasingly ineffective, if not impossible, to swim in the waters of 1960s-style protest while immersed in the unreality of this new century (at least in uptown New York City).

A different intervention occurred on 12 November 2008, in a handful of cities spread across the United States, as over a million copies of a mock *New York Times* were freely distributed. The fourteen-page newspaper had been created and planned over the course of the eight months leading up to that date by The Yes Men, a collaborative group featured in a two widely circulated films.

The prank simulacrum featured a bold typeface headline proclaiming: 'IRAQ WAR ENDS'.⁶ Now, almost two years on, the recent announcement of the end of US 'combat operations' and acknowledgement that the Afghanistan war has lasted longer than the Vietnam War, further highlights The Yes Men's decision to distribute their paper in November of the general election year to urge president-elect Barack Obama to make good on his promises, as they said at the time: 'This was about showing people how much change we really want'.

6. <http://www.nytimes-se.com/>.

7. The key members are Igor Vamos (aka 'Mike Bonnano') an associate professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY and Jacques Servin (aka 'Andy Bichlbaum'), a former video game designer and programmer, and author of two books of short stories published by the experimental press FC2.

The Yes Men's action recalls the following quote from Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*: 'Ideas improve. The meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author's phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, and replaces it with the right idea' (Debord 1983). The Yes Man Mike Bonnano offers a similar perspective on the group's notion of 'identity correction':

We target people we see as criminals and try to steal their identity to try and make them more honest. We are trying to create public spectacles that in some kind of poetic way reveal something that's profoundly a problem.

(Ollman, Price and Smith 2003)

It's telling that Bonnano and Andy Bichlbaum previously worked in the fields of interactive video games and experimental fiction, and became known in small circles for their situationist-style *détournements* of existing media products: video games, children's dolls.⁷ The impulse behind much of this seems as indebted to surrealism as social activism, and this theme has carried through many of their projects, initially under the aegis of the collective RTMark and under The Yes Men 'brand.' Nonetheless, critique is the core of many of the political actions, with outrageous statements undermining the corporate pretensions and ubiquitous spin so prevalent in the highly controlled mainstream media.

The Yes Men's projects have often been 'unveiled' with their careful use of tactical media, such as press conferences, the mock newspaper, and the televised interview of 'official' spokespeople, most often 'Andy' using an assortment of different outlandish surnames and outfits. These intermittent broadcasts are like a seam that becomes apparent to the discerning eye when examining the fabric of the mainstream media. In addition, The Yes Men have contributed 'real' editorial commentary to 'real' newspapers as in a 2009 statement in the *Washington Post* which included the following self-description: 'We are The Yes Men, two guys who dress up as powerful businessmen, propose horrible things to audiences of actual powerful businesspeople and film them cheerfully applauding our most outrageous – and often illegal – ideas' (Servin and Vamos 2009). News channels seeking near-continuous material to feed through their cycles of bulletins, profiles, and updates, have been the most inclined to cover The Yes Men, both in terms of placing them within the context of the 'talking heads' style discussion and later stories that reveal the earlier hoaxes. To this end, The Yes Men have become extremely skilled in managing, reorienting, and choreographing media outlets to their advantage.

A major question plaguing much art with an ostensibly politicized or activist slant is its impotency in the face of an overwhelming onslaught of government sponsored and corporate media. If culture jamming was an approach emergent in the 1980s and 1990s it's entirely unclear how such activities can occur today with efficacy. On the brighter side, one could argue that there is a lot of valuable and relatively easily accessible political material 'out there' and it is up to the informed artist and spectator to bring that material into the aesthetic arena. Of course, a high level of didacticism is present in much work that seeks to inform the viewer of ethical, moral imperatives.

Despite so much considered reflection and self-consciousness, it remains vexing to figure out revised frameworks for the success or failure of artworks

with some interest in or commitment toward public intervention, whether coming from the activist/protest angle or the art/performative direction. This requires a rather nimble and constantly re-evaluated scale of queries concerning the changing shape of ongoing performative practices, methods, targets, and perhaps most importantly, desires.

Artists are reinventing and reconfiguring their approaches to the public arena, space, sphere, even as they are thwarted in defining what such 'public-ness' exactly consists of: currently it might even be located in the mirage-like confines of avatars, blogs, streaming video, virtual chats, or social networking sites, all of which are increasingly featured in problematic and hybridized ways in so many artworks. As a corresponding evacuation of more tangible public spaces occurs, a primary challenge to be addressed by artists is how to orient new senses of structure within a context of placeless-ness. Examining the present moment seems not entirely unlike describing a kind of waking dream-state, in which many eclectic aspects of fact and fiction, life and art, novelty and reiteration maintain a rather precarious but often surprisingly productive coexistence.

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