Jeremiah Day

A Kind of Imagination that has Nothing to Do with Fiction: Art in Public Life
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Drawn from Fred Dewey’s elaboration upon Hannah Arendt’s remark: “I am convinced that understanding is closely related to that faculty of imagination that Kant called *Einquickungskraft* and which has nothing in common with fictional ability.” “Reply to Eric Voegelin” in “The Portable Hannah Arendt”, edited by Peter Baehr, Penguin (New York: Penguin, 2000), pg 160.


And further in “Editor’s Afterword: Simone Forti’s Non-fictional Imagination” in “Oh, Tongue”, by Simone Forti (Los Angeles: Beyond Baroque Books, 2010), second edition, edited and designed by Fred Dewey.

See as follows in Part 2.
Indexes and Cast of Characters

Introduction: Methodology — 16
Prologue – Open Letter, June 2011 — 44

PART 1 — FIVE TALKS
Interlude: Not To Be Answered in Words — 50
Who Remembers Billy Woodberry — 58
The White Cube Inheritance / Is Art Public? — 64
PRAVDA II — 92
Proposal for a Performance in a Prison — 130
Letter to Turkey — 144

PART 2 — WHEREVER YOU GO, YOU SHALL BE A POLIS
Interlude: The Opposite of Fatalism — 154
“The Nonfictional Imagination” – Hannah Arendt and Fred Dewey’s
Culture of The Polis — 156
The 50th Anniversary Commemoration of Hannah Arendt’s
“The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance” — 196

PART 3 — AFTER GERICAULT
Interlude: Simone Forti’s Images: Subject Matter/Object Matter — 244
The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness — 248
If You Want Blood — 266

PART 4 — IF IT’S FOR THE PEOPLE, IT NEEDS TO BE BEAUTIFUL, SHE SAID
Interlude: Request for Proposal: Vito Acconci, For Example — 288
Response to Brief from Bristol Radical Historian — 292
The Commemoration of the Lowndes County Freedom Organisation — 308

Conclusion: Notations; Findings; A Case Study; A Manifesto — 329
Epilogue – Tea and Darkness — 382
Bibliography — 423
It's one of the hardest things for me to look and say: as I write words - and words can be powerful - but can they be powerful enough that I am able to tell my story the way I feel it?

Connected, part of, totally part of, the natural world and the natural world being a total part of me.

And feeling that to the depth that when somebody does ask me a question, I can't 'Yes' or 'No' it.

I have to tell you a story about it.

– Earl Mills, Chief Flying Eagle of the Mashpee Wampanoag

Sure, it's just pigment on canvas! Sure, it just hangs on the wall!

But it's not just pigment on canvas. It doesn't just hang on the wall.

– Luc Tuymans

I. SUMMARY INTRODUCTION

Is art practice capable of a role in public life? If so, how so? If not, why not?

Not private life. And not a value, or a function.

And the question is to be asked not (just) in words, and not as if the matter at hand were concepts, theories or intellectual objects. It is not a philosophy project in other words, nor social science, nor critical theory, nor design.

It is also not a political science or political activism project, which would be to reverse the terms - asking: is political activism capable of a role in the field of art? To which we would, on the basis of recent experiences of protests and pseudo-parliaments assembled in museums and galleries, “yes, of course, politics can take a role in the art context.” (Because, one would have to add, “after all, anything can appear to be meaningful once framed as art”)

No, it is an art project, and thus inadequate, faltering, reeking of vanity, transparently revealing its pretensions, and more importantly, a highly personal affair that unfolds over time, resulting in discrete, coherent objects and episodes, but ultimately aiming to transcend any particular functionalization with the goal of pulling some kind of vocabulary together, or what some people used to call an oeuvre.

And from that more-or-less traditional approach to art practice, could one’s work have a role in public life? Again: if so, how so? If not, why not?

The project has been held together with key organizing principles, to serve as a guideline and framework:

Theory and practice are not essential distinctions.

It is not a linear process resulting in a synthetic end product.

It is made up of PUBLIC projects (field work, not lab work.)

The projects are essentially PERFORMATIVE, either literally performances or time-based events, or fabricated as a mode of address.
The projects are all COMMEMORATIONS, marking or sparking or harkening to the possibility of memory.

And the project has been established with two guiding lights, two exemplary practitioners, one an artist concerned with the status of art in the world, and the other a political theorist for whom art was foundational: Allan Kaprow and Hannah Arendt. Later I will elaborate how Kaprow dropped away as an active topic (though his work remained essential to the ethos), and why Hannah Arendt came, amongst all other thinkers, to so dominate my thinking, that at times the project has risked seeming evangelical in its convictions.

So, why a book, in the end? How public or political is that, how artistic is that? To be fair, this book is not made up entirely of cold written text, nor produced in studious contemplation. With the exception of this introduction, almost all the words that appear in this book are transcribed from public events, as live events themselves (warm, occasionally excellent, sometimes weak, usually poorly attended, always public and thus held amongst others) constitute the main form of articulation of the project.

While not aiming for a synthesis (in which the process would disappear into the product), the project has to have a conclusion to be meaningful (it had a beginning, after all) and this conclusion must be essentially a kind of show-and-tell. This is what I did, and this is the result. Not just the results of a particular public effort – the exhibition of a video of a performance made crossing a street, for example – but rather the cumulative results, and the insights and sober(ing) conclusions to be drawn from them.

When invited by the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design to produce a book of her work, Simone Forti could only imagine it as a “Handbook in Motion” – something that goes back into the embodied world, to be carried along, and comes from, is concerned with that embodied world. About her work as a mover, in the world, condensed and then sent back out into the world, to be at-hand, an accompaniment for others’ movements.

At one point in this process, I started working towards editing a book about Hannah Arendt and culture, and an old colleague, Praneet Soi, said:

“Honestly, Jeremiah, I don’t need a book from you about that. If I want to read Hannah Arendt, I’ll just read her, really. And you’re no theorist, anyhow.

What I want is to know what the hell you’ve been doing these years! What you’ve been busy with and how it went.

Did you get anywhere with it?

That’s a book I want to see.”

Well, this one’s for you Praneet, it should be said. So, not a Handbook in Motion but rather a field book - documentation of experiments made in Western European art (and politics) in 2010-2015, undertaken by an expatriated American, in the capacity of Doctoral researcher - offering guide points in the shared landscape.

What follows of this introduction will serve as a key (like those symbols set aside in the box of the map) to these documentations, elaborating the essential motivation, framework, methodology, anchor and clarification of the system of the book itself.

II. MOTIVATION; THE EXPERIENCE OF IRRELEVANCE

Ten or so years ago there was a truly excellent exhibition of contemporary art organized around the theme of war, and not war as a trope, or concept, or sociological phenomenon, but as “a first-hand experience.”

I was proud to have my work in this project, and there were fantastic other works in the exhibition: Anri Sala’s video in which the sounds of bombs is imitated awkwardly and increasingly painfully. Renzo Martens’s early (and my favorite) work: the artist wanders the ruins of a city, discovers a family with a teenage girl, asks coldly through the interpreter: “Ask her if she finds me attractive,” and then, “Ask her mother how she would feel if we got married.” The mother says she would be happy because to marry a man from Western Europe would mean the daughter would get out of the endless nightmare of the bombed city. That is what the word Grozny means to me – the family Martens encountered and their plain, flat and utterly reasonable utter despera-
tion. When I think today of Damascus I think of that family. It helps me imagine this world, or at least I think it does. Other great works: the Godard film in which poets wander bombed landscapes. Later he shows photographs of completely devastated landscapes. It’s a kind of discussion and people guess — is it Palestine? No, Godard says, it is Pennsylvania from the US Civil War. In other words, the show was, in my judgment, powerful, inspiring, and well done.

Only later, did I ask myself: in 2005, in the Netherlands, did war have any meaning, not as a subject for intellectual debate or drama, but as of concrete pressing importance? Was the Netherlands at war, or involved in military activity in any consequential way? In a democracy or a republic such questions ought to have importance for people in their capacity as citizens.

And the answer was yes, indeed, war was an important issue in 2005. One of the defining issues of the time was the two year old invasion of Iraq and subsequent occupation. A crucial issue was still whether or not the Netherlands was or was not part of the “coalition of the willing.” Interestingly this could not be answered by a simple “yes” or “no,” as the political establishment had decided to somehow have it both ways — not fully supporting the effort but offering select tactical and symbolic support. And as time went on this “having it both ways” because more and more scandalous, could not simply be left behind to fade away, and so a parliamentary investigation was held which led ultimately to the dissolution of a government, and launched into power a right-wing populist and radical free market coalition which has since transformed the country.

As I write the ripples from that period, the consequences of decisions made in 2002-6, seem to have grown into waves: the wide acceptance in the corridors of power of torture and assassination as the practices of statecraft, a financial crisis that justified crippling attacks on what used to be called the “European social model,” and a civil war in Iraq’s neighboring Syria which now sends multitudes of refugees and along with them a crisis in a European body politic which has never really given up on race-nationalism. A contradictory situation in which charity is combined with racism and temporary living permits — not citizenship — is what greets those who have fled what are clearly the consequences of “our” actions — that of the US, the NATO alliance, and Western Europe. In Sweden alone is the question dared to even be asked explicitly: can we form a multi-racial society with political equality? Elsewhere the question is not even bothered to be raised (because the answer is “no”)

and the USA, whose citizens bear so much responsibility, the refugees just don’t even appear, ironically.

This was all to follow but it was all in the air in 2005, not just as seeds of potential but again as visible ripples of global violence that even then one could sense would not stop, and were to only grow into waves. More importantly, in the preparation of the Iraq War, literally the entire globe was animated in a day of shared worldwide protest, with the gathering of three million in Rome being the largest political gathering in the history of the world (see PRAVDA II for elaboration.) In 2005, then, many people had been hearing about and thinking about war quite a great deal, and people as citizens in the Netherlands had still many important decisions to make and actions to take.

So, did this exhibition have anything to contribute to these deliberations, of the citizens? Not really. From this point of view, the show was basically irrelevant. It is important to stress again: the show was extremely successful by all the usual standards of measure. What was revealed then was a problem with the standards of measure. A great art show, with an extensive program of live events, dealt movingly, inspired thoughts and feelings, and did so in a way that had nothing to do with how the matter at hand could have political relevance in any direct way. Following a line of Hannah Arendt, it was as if war was happening “on the moon.” (Proposal for a Performance in a Prison) Not amongst us, and certainly not as the question of responsibility. None of the artists, the organizers or the contributors to the live events forced the issue. (It is perhaps even more revealing to look back and think: in 2005, was anyone of prominence in the visual arts dealing with the Iraq War or even “the War on Terror”? Almost none.)

Thinking back now, I realize that the first time I came upon this uncanny disconnection was teaching in an art school in Amsterdam with a young Nigerian artist in the class. We were discussing political art in the Netherlands and the way politics appeared in Western European art, and I had to reflect that it was much more common for Dutch Artists to deal with Argentina or another far away land than with the actions of Royal Dutch Shell in Nigeria. In all my discussions of politics in the Netherlands, the death of Ken Saro Wiwa simply never came up, never again (on the subject of being a citizen in a state that commits crimes, see The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness)

"Almost none." Paul McCarthy’s 2004 exhibition in London featured Bush and bin Laden chasing each other around, moving Luz Typhdrive to write a short piece in Flash Art, March/April 2004, pg 120.

Ken Saro Wiwa
Nigerian poet and activist, born 1941 executed 1995. The day before the trial against Royal Dutch Shell for culpability in his death and that of eight others was to begin, Shell settled out of court for 2.5 million dollars, under the terms that the payment was not an admission of responsibility.
A question:

What are these standards in which a show can deal excellently with a political subject in a way that has no meaning for the public, as citizens, in their capacities to act and responsibilities?

But this descriptive and analytic work is actually primarily important as a preliminary effort, setting the stage for:

Could one come up with other practices, and other structures of evaluating, prioritizing and thus directing our activity?

In this case, critical reflection is not about critique, or the production of a hierarchy of taste. “We do need history like the idlers in the garden of knowledge,” as Nietzsche put it, because the matter at hand is not an intellectual one (on the subject of how “the lay of the land looks different when you have to chart your way through it” see Request for Proposal: Vito Acconci, For Example). Thus there is a certain myopia to my project, as critical reflections are raised in relationship to a practical experimentation, not for their own sake. If there is a certain responsibility to the panorama of great thinkers to test one’s own thought, then I have failed it, and no superficial consideration of Adorno can patch over that hole. There is occasionally a circular logic to artists’ discussions—I do this because I think this, and I think this because of what I do. This project accepts that as fair enough, in a way. (And certainly part of the motivation for a collaborative, plural reading of Hannah Arendt’s text on culture, see as documented later, was to draw my own reading out into the open, if not to substantiate it academically than to test it publicly.)

Over the course of the project, there was another test applied, that will perhaps be the basis for the conclusion of this publication, which is not that of correctness or logical consistency, but rather the question raised by Praneet Soi: “did you get anywhere with it?” And Soi did not mean professionally. So, when The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness project was made public at the Pompidou Centre and then people asked “how did it go?” what they really were asking was “did the museum buy the work,” or did more professional short-term opportunities come in response? “How did it go?” most often refers to professional achievement in this context. What Soi meant was something entirely different. In the case of that piece shown in Paris, it would mean to ask: so you made a work that wrestles with the issue of the secret services and surveillance and showed it very publicly, was there any resonance with the public, in any sense at all? And so the reckoning, the responsibility to some kind of intellectual consistency is to ask those kinds of questions and then consider the answers, even when they are awkward, and even when they are inconclusive, leading only to further speculations, descriptions, and another round of experimentation.

When I met Allan Kaprow in his studio in Encinitas in 1998, his walls were covered with paintings that looked more than a bit like Bonnard. Kaprow told me they were his own early work and he still liked them, and that Bonnard was still one of his favorite artists. Just because he dedicated fifty or so years to exploring art’s capacities outside of the studio, outside of any framework you could name for that matter, it didn’t meant that he somehow hated that work, or wanted to prescribe people to avoid making it. Similarly, the point of this project is not to dictate any prescriptions that all art making must be political to be relevant but rather to say if one would want to deal with art and citizenship, how would one do it?

Perhaps the question is better asked to curators, or Museum directors, figures who do have some kind of explicit, commonly recognized civic role. But that is somehow irrelevant, to me. I find myself in too deep to jump shoes so quick. I had to ask this in my own minor but actual role as a maker.

And, to go back to the example of the Iraq War, to pull on that thread a bit further and see what unwinds, perhaps there is good reason that the issue of responsibility or agency was not raised, even amidst so many consequential decisions. Perhaps it is because the people themselves—organizers, artists, attendees, journalists alike—felt that they had no agency, and thus no responsibility. After all, the government’s bizarre half-in, half-out strategy revealed a fundamental disconnect between the political system and the citizenry. It was as if the political system—the party leaders, members of parliament, academics, key journalists, business leaders—were playing a game on the citizens, trying to mislead them. In that context, the 2005 art exhibition about war takes on another light and on the one hand we can let everyone off the hook—after all, no one felt capable of changing anything anyways. But on the other hand, another question is raised: what is the role of culture in the public of a representative democracy that, as in the case of the Netherlands’ role in Iraq, on key issues does not represent the populace?

"as Nietzsche put it"

III. FRAMEWORK 1: WHY KAPROW?

The question then is raised: how could one explore this terrain not just abstractly in the field of art or “cultural production,” but as (primarily, at least) a maker? To begin with an open mind, one must not take such a premise for granted or lightly. In this way, Allan Kaprow’s example is foundational for the effort enclosed in this publication in four ways:

1. the production of a body of work alongside a body of writing in which neither instrumentalise nor illustrate the other but support and compliment each other in a two-track activity

2. his willingness and courage to “go public” with his concerns, to pull his thoughts together in order to share them with other people and encourage them to address the problems that he and others recognized. Rather than reaching back to the model of the artist issuing manifestos, he rather took on the role of the artist as public intellectual. It is in this spirit that the project took shape.

3. his concerns and ambitions for art never functionalized art, and in fact were based in a resistance to art’s reduction to a social function.

4. Kaprow’s work was essentially an ongoing practice of testing art’s capacities in which the work of art, despite appearances, remained central and the work’s capacity for public meaning was a defining concern.

1) Kaprow, writer and maker

Kaprow almost finished his PHD in art history, but gave up in the process of finishing the dissertation because his extreme dyslexia made tackling the goal of a book-length piece of writing had to be set aside. He told me that some of the texts of his, often only a few pages long, took years to produce because of this disability. However, this perhaps gave those texts the incredible condensation and intensity that marks them, and gives them a synthetic wholeness so that each one really feels like “a work,” not just an aside or meditation.

Kaprow’s first and last major texts – The Legacy of Jackson Pollock from 1958 and The Real Experiment from 1983 – form bookends encapsulating his major concerns about art. The first insists that the resonating meaning of Pollock’s work is that art is primarily about action, and that the object is secondary. Kaprow concludes the piece with an incredibly prescient passage that essentially charts the next twenty years of development in Western art:

Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, rooms, or if need be, the vastness of Forty-second street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sigh, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint chairs, food, electric and neon lights… a thousand other things will be discovered by the present generation of artists… they will disclose entire unheard-of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies… a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano; three taps on the front door, a scratch, a sigh, or a voice lecturing endlessly, a blinding staccato flash, a bouler hat – all will become materials for this new concrete art.

Young artists of today need no longer say, “I am a painter” or “a poet” or “a dancer.” They are simple “artists.” All of life will be open to them. … People will be delighted or horrified, critics will be confused or amused, but these, I am certain will be the alchemies of the 1960’s.

In this tumble we can hear Jack Kerouac – the spontaneity, the concreteness, the intoxication with description, but most importantly the inspiration that is itself inspiring. It was Kerouac who had gone to the mountain in Dharma Bums where a spirit told him he was “empowered to remind people that they are utterly free” and this embrace of expansive possibility remained central to Kaprow’s ethos, writing, oeuvre. Perhaps he should be known as more of figure of the Beats than of the world of Meyer Schapiro and “performance art”: part of broader cultural project with political and social implications, not just punctuating the hierarchy of art history.

What is crucial here, and why the text deserves such extensive quotation, is that Kaprow here is certainly not “interpreting” Pollack’s work.
nor “explaining” his own, though the text of course helps us understand both. Writing as a form of fabrication here has a place alongside other modes of fabrication, essentially equally, or even ignoring the distinction. For my project, which requires sharing some reflections in words (besides the reliance upon words to compose art), Kaprow then was crucial. Unlike Robert Smithson, for whom writing seems to have at times been more important and his sculptures requiring those writings to unfurl their potential significance, or, for example Gerhard Richter, whose writings are essentially footnotes to his studio practice, in Kaprow we find that making “pieces” and writing texts proceed in parallel, somehow independent but complimentary parts of a whole effort. This need to find an appropriate place for words is of course motivated by the insistence that art, in order to be effective, cannot resort too much to explanation which at a certain robs the work of any powers to convince us at all. “Show, don’t tell,” was Hemingway’s prescription. For Kerouac, when one got stuck one should not look for words but “try to see the picture better.” Or as the filmmaker Stanley Kubrick once praised the collaborations of Krystof Kieslowski and his writing partner Krzysztof Piesiewicz:

“They have the very rare ability to dramatize their ideas rather than just talking about them. By making their points through the dramatic action of the story they gain the added power of allowing the audience to discover what’s really going on rather than being told. They do this with such dazzling skill, you never see the ideas coming and don’t realize until much later how profoundly they have reached your heart.”

Perhaps this should be followed by Matisse’s rumored suggestion to his students that they should pretend to have cut out their tongues. Somehow Kaprow found a way to write alongside art that neither deprived his artworks of their capacity to move, nor serve as mere afterthoughts. As in this passage of “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” Kaprow found writing to be a kind of parallel activity of thinking about art, one that shared his sense of the landscape and thus illuminated both it and the underlying preoccupations of his work.

2) Kaprow as public intellectual

Kaprow did not hesitate to take a stand. The title of the 1983 essay “The Real Experiment” of course implies that they are less valid modes of experimentation, and indeed Kaprow made clear distinctions and hierarchies, on the basis of his own taste and interests (not on any claim to be right or for the “greater good”), but hierarchies none the less. And the clarity and rigor of his thinking was persuasive to many, granting him a kind of real authority.

I had seen Kaprow on a panel speaking, but that was not preparation for his evening lecture at the UCLA Graduate Studios in 1996 or 97, when we arrived to find no screen or slide projector but the chairs gathered in a circle and Kaprow seated patiently waiting for people to arrive. He had taken his power to violate and interrupt the standard format, and indeed it was disruptive. But what he had used his hierarchical position to do then de-hierarchized the set-up for the evening, taking us out of the role of empty vessel students and into equals, at least in the organization of the room.

This promise of liberation, amongst other things, occasionally gave Kaprow the quality of a guru, and this was distasteful and problematic for many people. It went along with Kaprow’s increasing interest in sharing participation with the public. As Benjamin Buchloh saw it, the “major” “misconception” in Kaprow’s text on Pollock (though it is fair to extend it to his whole oeuvre) was his focus on “ritualistic dimension of aesthetic experience (what Walter Benjamin had called the ‘parasitical dependence of art upon the magic ritual’) as a stable and transhistorical, universally accessible condition that could be reconstituted at all times by merely altering the exhausted stylistic means and obsolete artistic procedures, by innovating … modes of production.”

This fragment comes from Buchloh’s major text on Andy Warhol, and his extended comparison between Kaprow and “Andy,” narrating the two artists as rival positions in a shared territory, is itself revealing. Warhol after all, represents one dramatic model for the artist’s role in society, and pairing him with Kaprow shows by contrast the nature of Kaprow’s own public role: that he took a stand about what art should be, elaborated it’s meaning in his writing and demonstrated it’s potential in his work.
3) Kaprow’s resistance to the frame but insistence on the artwork

The frame marking inside and outside of the work, the border of beginning and ending in time, the division between maker and receiver, the limit of the work itself and its own context: all and each of these were subject to a methodical interrogation and disruption by Kaprow in which he was perfectly willing to give up any claims to be an artist or for his activity to be art. In fact, as time went on Kaprow began to argue for the role of the “un-artist” who keeps the question of “is it art?” deliberately unresolved as a way of producing meaning.

And yet, almost always the works have very clear titles and dates and more importantly structures, internal compositional principles that give each Happening [and later Doing] a coherence and integrity. Kaprow’s method was to produce works that were not dependent upon any of those socially constructed frames of art, but still here indeed works, pieces. Underlying this strategy we have to consider the generalized distaste for instrumentalisation amongst American artists in this period. Michael Asher’s brutal critique of the “light and space” movement as mere decoration; Robert Smithson’s withdrawal from Documents with the comment that it was “better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom,” and Lucy Lippard’s insistence (in words and actions) that the dematerialization of art was essentially against the reduction of art to economic functions – all of these and more are manifestations of the same basic instinct, to preserve what Donald Judd called the “openness” of art, or the non-instrumentalisation of the artwork.

In this way, Kaprow’s critique of the art field as an extended social habit, one so repetitive that it not only lost its meaning but robbed the works within it of the capacity for meaningfulness, and then his desire to test what “real experimentation” would be like form a kind of model for my own effort in this project.

And not coincidentally Kaprow’s critique of the art field – not a political critique of the art institutions connection to the public realm, nor an economic critique of the structure of the art market – is a critique of the social instrumentalisation of art, precisely what Hannah Arendt focused on.

Fred Dewey first emerged in the New York scene around Semiotext(e), and after working in Hollywood, worked directly at the intersection of culture and public life through his tenure as director Beyond Baroque Literary / Arts Center (1990–2010), where I was artist in residence 1998 – 1999, attending his Arendt reading group, working together on programming and co-initiating an interdisciplinary art “working group.”

Dewey’s work on Arendt has recently begun to come to more attention. See for example the 2016 piece by Barry Schwabisky on “Fred Dewey’s ‘from an apparent contradiction in Arendt’” (in Hyperallergic, online publication, posted September 4, 2016) and the review of Dewey’s 2014 book “The School of Public Life” in Bomb Magazine (issue 134, Winter 2016). “The School of Public Life” details Dewey’s successful effort to establish Neighborhood Councils in Los Angeles city law (a clear development from his work on Arendt’s writings on council politics). Ahmad Al-Azay’s review explores how theoretical work on Arendt leads to practical political work, and then vice-versa, back again.

4) Kaprow as public artist

What was at stake in Kaprow’s experimental probing, his pushing of art past any social function, was an insistence upon the work’s ability to achieve meaning outside of the institution coding or framing, and often outside of any institution altogether. In this way, Kaprow was pursuing the capacity for public meaning. Though his fundamentally abstract vocabulary is very different from my own, my project is clearly another version of this pursuit.

IV. FRAMEWORK 2: WHY HANNAH ARENDT?

The work of Arendt and my approach to it through the work of Fred Dewey form the basis for an entire chapter, but for now rather than to dive deeply, it is crucial to sketch the broad contours. Almost all of what follows dealing with Arendt is an elaboration upon Dewey’s unique vision of her body of writings and her human example, crucially, as he taught me, in a kind of scholarship of enactment. The goal was not expert knowledge but embodiment and practice in public life. In this sense Arendt, as Dewey introduced me to her, exists as a poetic and political figure more than a theoretical one, and what partly distinguishes this project from a theoretical Doctoral effort is that such a scholarship is one of human working relationships, and oral exchange in the midst of that work – Dewey’s reading groups, collaboration and friendship most of all - a highly sophisticated and productive reflection, even if not oriented towards the production of academic knowledge.

So, if not always the engine of the train of the project, than Arendt’s work (as revealed through working with Dewey) has been perhaps the tracks and even the compass used to lay them down. Arendt’s example, as I came to consider it with Dewey, forms the intellectual framework for the project because:

1) Arendt offers an ultimately affirmative understanding of and argument for political life

2) Arendt positions art, in the broadest sense, at the center of the human world, not at the periphery.
3) Arendt’s own work itself has an artistic aspect which I have then appropriated

4) there has been relatively little work done on the intersection between Arendt and contemporary art, and so taking this as a point of departure has in practice meant a wide field in which to maneuver

1) Arendt’s affirmation of politics has several dimensions:

Not-Marxist
As a preliminary, to frame the importance and unique advantages Arendt offers, one has to recall the way in which the work of Karl Marx still undergirds so much of the discourse around culture and politics, even the term “critical theory” is itself historically linked to a project of Marxism. And this is important because for Marx, class struggle is always the “prime mover” or most important causal force for all human affairs. The consequence is that even conversationally, amongst the most non-ideological minds, there is a tendency to see political events as merely a manifestation of underlying economic forces. Elections, parties, constitutions and even wars are understood in this framework as functions of capitalist development.

Arendt disagrees, and the consequence of her disagreement is to open the door to a vast potential of possible re-imaginings, understandings and even actions. This is precisely what first struck me and led me to invest in a study of her work – coming from the radical pessimism of the French thinkers who had become fashionable in the US twenty years ago – Arendt’s fundamental axiom that political events had meaning in and of themselves, not as part of a process of development, was revelatory and made possible a whole reconsideration of current affairs, site, and memory. At the risk of sounding resentful, one only has to look to the dominant intellectual organs of the visual arts like October and Text zur Kunst and ask how much priority do they give to actual political events like the war in Iraq, or the conflict between Greece and Germany in recent years? Let alone elections or what the Germans-left used to call “extra-parliamentary” politics like the spontaneous campaigns of civil disobedience in the US in recent years? (This contrast also is a good way to frame my project, as concrete political events form the entire texture of it.)

Further, at the risk of oversimplification, this distinction between Arendt’s approach and the Marxist framework can be compared to Nietzsche’s distinction between passive and active nihilism. The passive nihilist had an endless critical apparatus to dissect the world in front of him or her, the active nihilist comes up with new approaches, values, capacities for action. In the absence of concrete links to the project of “the emancipation of the proletariat,” Marxist thought has become largely disconnected from activity and thus any cultural or artistic work structured by it is almost by definition, like fruit from the tree, always distanced from the concrete and lived, and thus artistically stunted.

Citizenship
This word is actually not key for Arendt, but has become a shorthand I use to refer to that whole range of activities and capacities that go with our formal belonging to a body politic, and even further – Arendt followed Jaspers and Kant in asserting a kind of world citizenship based on human solidarity not just national constructions.

In practice this means that the public and private are bound together, not as in “the personal is the political” in US Feminist discourse, but rather that in taking the democracy and republicanism seriously the scale of individual citizens is foundational. The implication of this is an elevation of questions of conscience and ethics – because they are linked with events and action, not just philosophizing – and second of all a flood of poetic potential that breaks open once the small scale experiences of politics are linked to capital lettered World History.

Last, it also takes it for granted that one’s own capacity to act is meaningful, even (as is often the case) in the experience of being thwarted. This essential meaningfulness – apart from any means/ends relationship or focus on results – then also effectively validates and invigorates small scale politics, in terms of what we normally call “activism,” but also our participation in the structures we occupy all the time – work place, institutions, neighborhoods, communities. For reasons too myriad to explore here, we all have had experiences of bad-faith, corruption and futility that motivates any sensible person to withdraw into private affairs, but Arendt not only encourages us to re-explore our capacities in the public world, her focus of the meaningfulness of action helps reveal the drama and intensity of being defeated and vanquished from the field of public affairs. From her text on Brecht to her reflections on student activists on the 1960’s, Arendt not only theoretically validates political action, she practices that validation by ennobling the actors with serious consideration, giving meaning to their efforts, regardless of outcome.
**Artist-Citizen**

In this way, Arendt also opens the door to a model of the artist-citizen. This model is different from that wherein the artist engages in the public realm directly, but in a way that is totally distinct from his or her artistic practice. The efforts of Barnett Newman, Norman Mailer in New York, or even more recently the singer-songwriter Rodriguez in Detroit to run for Mayor of their cities is the best demonstration of this model. All three of course had political aspects to their artistic work that informed their candidacies, but the two remained as separate as “apples and oranges.” When Barnett Newman became concerned about politics in New York, he did not depict the issues in his paintings, rather he took on the role of citizen in a highly active way – running for office.

Arendt’s approach to public affairs would have had Rodriguez ask himself: what is the role of a singer and songwriter in Detroit, now? And perhaps this would have led him to more directly engage the political organization of the city within his songs, to chronicle not just social despair but his own political frustration with party machinery that blocked him out. Or perhaps he would have started to organize the public aspect of his work as a musician according to his understanding of the city: rather than trying to “make it” through commercial record sales, perhaps his role could have been to contribute to his own community through chronicling their stories. The point being that by infusing action with meaning then would open the territory for a new consideration of how to link artistic production and citizenship.

Crucially, Arendt’s model is also different from what we now call as a shorthand “institutional critique.” Superficially, institutional critique follows Arendt in finding meaning in concrete details and through a consideration of the roles and positions of power and how they are materialized. But institutional critique, as the name implies, is focused on the art institutions themselves, and not their role in the public realm. The assumption is that by making visible the underlying structures of the museum, one might establish a critical reflection capable of extending out of the art space and into society, but in practice the result seems blocked him out. Or perhaps he would have started to organize the public aspect of his work as a musician according to his understanding of the city: rather than trying to “make it” through commercial record sales, perhaps his role could have been to contribute to his own community through chronicling their stories. The point being that by infusing action with meaning then would open the territory for a new consideration of how to link artistic production and citizenship.

The model of the artist-citizen that this project has followed takes up Arendt’s work as he took on the role of citizen in a highly active way – running for office.

Lastly, following Arendt’s valorization of public activity, one could have suggested to Barnett Newman that he clarify not only the classical ambition of his paintings (by referencing the Stations of the Cross) but make more explicit that his key reference points were Hiroshima and the Holocaust, ie to signal the potential relevancy of his work to his fellow citizens. Newman took great care to frame his work artistically, but what could have been accomplished by framing it politically, not just in a few interviews, but structurally, publicly?

**2) the artwork as foundational, not peripheral, to public life**

Let’s continue with example of Newman – crucially investing his energy to link his work to the traditions of the Catholic church to emphasize his ambition to be understood as part of art history, but never taking any steps outside of writing to clarify that his work was deeply motivated by political events. There has been recent scholarship on abstract painting and the Holocaust, but what if we imagine the Guggenheim in 1970 making an exhibition on the existential, psychological and civic effects of living under the threat of nuclear annihilation? This is much closer to how Arendt sees art.

Because for Arendt artworks form the foundations for public life. Going back to the Greeks, Arendt asserts that for them the polis consisted of “action+memory,” and that memory’s necessary concrete form was art. In this way art, for Arendt, is somehow necessary for politics. She taught a class “Political Experience in the 20th Century” in which the only texts were literature, advising her students that the kind of understanding related to politics was better accessed through wrestling with art than with theories and concepts. One only has to look to the conclusion of On Revolution in which she locates the key insights into political action in a series of cryptic aphorisms by the French surrealist poet Rene Char. Arendt’s focus on art and politics is not only based on what we might call “content” — as if Picasso’s Guernica was deemed to be his only work — but rather on a broader framework linking culture to the public realm. As for Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and others, Franz Kafka was a key figure for Arendt, and if we take Kafka as our model of a political artist — and our entire vocabulary of politics is de-
pendent on his fantastical works – then we can extrapolate that even a fantasy landscape can be so infused with realism that it illuminates our shared world for a century later.

Ultimately, this is part of Arendt’s essential classicism: where would the Greeks be without Homer? Story-telling here is the glue of an entire civilization, and Arendt later suggests that the enduring import of Greek civilization was the close inter-connection between art and political life. Both art and politics, need public space to appear, and so have a sometimes rivalry in the occupation of that space, but both need each other to defend the space as well.

In addition, as will be explored further, late in her life Arendt increasingly speculated on the link between aesthetics and political judgment. Drawing from Kant on the way imagination, fantasy, memory and judgment are linked, Arendt postulated a whole other political role of art, wherein taste was not just a matter of chocolate or vanilla, but helps navigate the kind of ethical quandaries one finds oneself in.

3) Arendt’s own poetics – exemplification

Arendt’s focus on episodes, events, actions and people (as opposed to theory, structure, concepts and ideas) in practice led Arendt to rely on exemplification as the crux of her thinking and argumentation. Exemplification – the focus on concrete things which then can be held up for exploration, questioning and speculation (a strategy indebted no doubt to Walter Benjamin) - relies upon the poetic traditions of metaphor, metonymy and allegory to spark broader understanding while grounding and testing such illuminations against and within specific events. This process is ultimately one of a kind of fractured storytelling between poetic and expository modes of thinking, and this has become the essence of the vocabulary of my own work.

4) the unexplored aspects of Arendt and culture

With the exception of a few asides, the main figure to have developed a cultural practice based upon a reading of Hannah Arendt’s work is my mentor Fred Dewey (see the chapter dedicated to this) and with the exception of one volume of edited works, there has not been much scholarly work done on Arendt’s focus on culture in her own writings. So in comparison with other intellectual figures, like her colleague Walter Benjamin, for example, there is relatively very little existing work done on Arendt and contemporary art. And this offers space to maneuver, with the promise of some novel results and horizons.

But these maneuverings, it should be said as an introduction, are something irresponsible. At the outset of this project I anticipated that I would at some point make myself into more of a scholar, and make some kind of remedial study of phenomenology and the Frankfurt School, an ambition which never became really urgent and thus was pursued haphazardly and unsystematically. This is no defense for what at points must seem like a casual and short-hand approach to the history of thought, but rather an acknowledgement from the outset of the role of Arendt’s work: clutched tightly like a thin but essential blanket on a seemingly endless night that is much colder than anticipated. Or, in other words, in a way that is more poetic than scientific.

V. ANCHOR / METHODOLOGY

The kite image:

There is an image that Simone Forti uses to describe improvising from a structure. The connection back to the subject matter, she says, is like the string of a kite. The kite can go in every direction, up and down and all over, but what holds it up is the link back to the ground – the string. The subject matter is the string. The work is the kite and it can go anywhere, but it stays defined by that link, that anchor.

For twelve years the anchor to my practice has been the example of the painting Raft of The Medusa by Gericault, somehow a proof of art’s capacities.

The point of departure of the painting was a well-known recent event – a ship had been abandoned at sea and the survivors left to their fates due to incompetence and indifference from the central government. Images of the raft of survivors were common in the press and were widely understood as a kind of critical symbol of the state of affairs under Napoleon III and the distance of the period from the promise of the revolution. Despite the general familiarity with the theme, and ultimately the competition with a huge panoramic painting of the same motif, Gericault seized upon the event, shaving his head in preparation for a period of almost monastic focus on the work. The eventual product,
though not as spectacular or popular as the panoramic painting, quickly became iconic, and the critical symbolism of the work deepened into a kind of compressed epic portrait. In other words the painting was intended and received as a kind of dramatization of a political argument.

But unlike most art that is made to send a message, Gericault's work achieved enduring iconic status, appearing in press in the Paris Commune of 1870 and then on the cover of the proto-situationist journal Potlatch in the early 1960's. Like Arendt's understanding of Homer's role for the ancient Greeks, in some ways Gericault's painting encapsulates and makes transmissible some essential aspect of the period, which is of enduring significance. Undoubtedly this is because of its remarkable dramatization: the composition of the raft seems to break off the picture plane, a painting-within-a-painting that seems like it may tip on to you, with a pyramid composition that balances agony, desperation, hope, and forlorn wonder through the different figures.

So often in visual art exhibitions today, one needs to read the press release to “get” the work, to link between the visible material and the “back story.” One consequence of this mechanism is that the assembling the work's meaning depends largely upon a pre-existing framework of knowledge within which we then situate the two elements – the visual one and the text. More troublingly, it often means that the artworks themselves have little self-evident meaning without being assisted by the supposedly “true” accompanying text upon which they depend to signify. In Raft of the Medusa, the effect is the opposite – rather than depending upon knowledge of Napoleon III to be effective, the human drama of the work is so compelling that it actually leads one to inquire and want to learn more, giving meaning to a history that would largely be forgotten.

I was directed toward the painting by Luc Tuymans, an artist who on occasion certainly relies upon accompanying texts to unlock the meaning of his works. Somehow I’d developed a rich education in art after abstract expressionism, but knowledge dimmed as I went backwards in time from that point. Tuymans recognized the underlying ambition in some of the works I was making at the Rijksakademie and directed me to look at French History painting.

The issue of the endurance of the work was crucial to me – not so much that the work should physically last – after all, already a central part of my work was performance – but rather the ambition that the work could maintain a power to convey itself in other times and places, not just to be wed to circumstance. In the late 1990's I made a series of projects about local history in key sites in which video screenings were then the successful basis for open discussion, crucially proving to me that artworks could be the ground for structuring a "town meeting"-like open discussion (a principle that my work continues to draw upon). However, I discovered afterwards that the videos themselves had no real power for anyone who was not from that place. The videos had exhausted themselves, and perhaps were more like props than actual artworks, or more like design. This was problematic because if the fabricated object was so bound to it's initial public, than it apparently could not reach out to others. It was as if my ambition for the work to have meaning in the world through a specific time and place was achievable at the cost of the worldliness of the work, and thus my portrayal of these places was in a broader sense lost before it was completed.

So, the ambition to craft a thing that could shift between modes of address – engaged in it's own moment and yet enduring – defined my approach to production. Even in works that were strictly performance, the aim was always that in the form of trace or documentation it would maintain some power to convey itself.

Thus, the period of experimentation chronicled here moved forward with strict parameters. The ambition to engage must be tempered with some kind of universalizing transformation, making the particular and the local accessible, but without recourse to abstracting concepts. No social design, no participatory works. Even the performances themselves relied on the classic “disinterested contemplation” as the mode of apprehension. And like Gericault’s example, the work should be shown in the conventional art spaces. Rather than pursue the public by intervening in places they did not expect the artist’s hand, I would approach them on the agreed mutual territory of the art institution. Even when outdoor works or performances were undertaken (see for example the 2014 work for The Promise at Arnolfini), it was always in dialogue with the conventional format. Because what I wanted to test was indeed the potential capacity of the conventional format.

The other key aspect of this project was an explication, elaboration and exemplification of Hannah Arendt’s work on culture. This project was undertaken in the spirit of the artist-citizen as described above.

The book unfolds in chapters: key episodes which unfold onto the next, some of which are art works some of which talks. Interrupting these major sections are a series of interludes, short fragmentary pieces which further stage the themes to come. The focus on the artist-talk as the main mode of reflection was further
in the spirit of working from within the conventional roles and formats. Without recourse to claiming validation from some other mode of discourse, and without risking producing a strange persona of discourse, the artist’s talk seemed a reliable tradition to draw upon to produce essentially expository texts reflecting on the speculations, observations and experiments along the way. The talks explored different modes of public address – ranging from explicitly performances, to more straight-forward lectures, to somewhere in-between – and for different models of institutions: major public art centers, a closed-down project room, the gallery that represents my work, a memorial service for an artist and an international radio broadcast.

Though the transcripts have been edited, the essential flow has been preserved, and so the book is structured with side-notes to support and notate the main texts. The publication makes use of three fonts - one for material that originally appeared orally or spoke, another for material that appeared as text, and a third that is the books' notational structure.

Looking back through my old files I discovered the talk I gave in 2009 about my proposed plan for Doctorate in Art. It contained images of Gericault’s Raft of Medusa and quotes from Hannah Arendt. It was at a conference organized by the European Artistic Research Network and in one of the discussions Mick Wilson, then living in Dublin, made the distinction between “research based practice” and “practice based research.” The former might consist, for example, of an artwork that required finding material in an archive as part of the production. The latter might consist of asking a question whose only meaningful method of framing would be to do something, like the anthropologist who becomes a boxer to understand boxing. For better or worse, I have not kept that distinction very clean in these projects, as my method involved both the production of art works with a strong emphasis on non-fictional subject matter requiring research, and that the presentation and making public of those works was a form of experimentation.

Hypothesis: if you make an (at least decently) good artwork about an important current event, and then show it under (fairly effective) display conditions before a (more or less broad) public, can the artwork concretely contribute to public life or civil society?

VI. CONCLUSION; THE POLEMICAL

Nobody's fighting
Because nobody knows what to save

— Gil Scott Heron

Between the emancipation from slavery in 1865 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act on 1965, African Americans lived in a formal status of second-class citizenship. An entire political order was organized (and constantly renewed) that in name was a democracy and a republic, but in practice denied the right to vote, the right to privacy, assembly, freedom of speech, even the right to equality in the market-place and property. And this denial was enforced with an explicit regime of legalized violence in collaboration with tacit support for extra-legal terrorism. In this period, there was no need to labor over any theoretical analysis to develop a political goal or critique: the goal was first-class citizenship, and if that required radically re-shaping the republic (and it did) than so be it. There were clear conceptual poles for organizing representation, be it an art project or any other kind: how it is and how it should be, and crossing the distance between the two.

The leitmotif in African American art is freedom, I’ve heard said over the years. And this crossing between how it is and how it should be is exactly why African-American culture manages to maintain a clear argumentation without being polemical, and focus on transmission without being didactic. The Revolution Will Not Be Televised by Gil Scott Heron (1971), with its title drawn from activist shorthand and its form being the breakthrough in what would come to be the global phenomenon of hip-hop, is a portrait of an affirmative social and political order by dramatizing the status quo in negative. The foundation of this critical portrayal is not simply a demonization of the world’s injustices but rather a renewal of the capacity for action. The song begins “You will not be able to stay home... You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out / You will not be able to lose yourself on skag / And skip...
out for beer during commercials,” in other words you will have to leave the private realm, you will have to face the difficult circumstances and take responsibility, you will have to face yourself without running away. From this beginning, Heron then goes on to satirize the whole landscape of consumer society, including the political elites, but crucially the point of departure is a portrait of political action by dramatizing all the ways one runs away from the capacity to act, which for a drug-addict like Gil Scott Heron, is the fantasy of enough courage to break the habits of escapism and face the public realm and one’s place in it. But say you were to leave your home and your private pursuits and try to challenge the broader circumstances, how is that possible, in practice?

The Constitution
A noble piece of paper
With free society
Struggled but it died in vain
And now Democracy is ragtime on the corner
Hoping for some rain
And I see the robins
Perched in barren treetops
Watching last-ditch racists marching across the floor
But just like the peace sign that vanished in our dreams
Never had a chance to grow
Never had a chance to grow
And now it’s winter
It's winter in America
And all of the healers have been killed
Or been betrayed
Yeah, but the people know, people know
It’s winter. Lord knows
It’s winter in America
And ain’t nobody fighting
Cause nobody knows what to save
Save your souls
From Winter in America

And now it’s winter
Winter in America
And all of the healers done been killed or sent away
Yeah, and the people know, people know
It’s winter

Winter in America
And ain’t nobody fighting
Cause nobody knows what to save

In Gil Scott Heron’s later piece Winter in America we see the flip side of this strategy, journey back from idealism to the practical realities, taking the seeming futility of political struggle, the confusion and lack of clarity and defeats (the failure of the peace movement to change the direction of US foreign policies, the failure of the civil rights movement to end systematic racism) as points of departure, reflection and dramatization. From the how it is to how it should be and back again, this oscillation between the two poles is the underlying compositional dynamic in mainstream films like Boyz N The Hood to the work of Amiri Baraka, in whose work the ambition for a political revolution is not just a motif but a totally explicit and organizing principle (for a reflection on Baraka’s work, see Not To Be Answered in Words).

I have appropriated this compositional strategy in this project, both within individual art pieces and in the overall framework. While Baraka’s analysis and prescription were drawn from third-world Marxism and his own experience of the Black Freedom Struggle, I am drawing from Hannah Arendt in the tradition of civil society activism. It is through this political-art tradition that epic histories (like the aftermath of the Cold War, as in If You Want Blood) and lofty political science prescriptions (like Hannah Arendt’s argument for council democracy, as in Letter To Turkey) are grasped through small scale observations and gestures, and how vast historical information can be compressed into portrait (as in The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness), without recourse to one-sided argument and (hopefully) without being didactic.

“Ah, it didn’t go well.
Hmm.
Did you have it too worked out in advance?”

This line was Simone Forti’s response to hearing I’d had a somehow clunky and ineffective performance, and it is revealing of her method. Having something “too worked out in advance” poses risks in this method, because it means that the performance would lose its aspect of improvisation, which is also often better called “real time composition.” My developments upon Forti’s improvised moving-talking method were at the foundation of my practice over the course of this project precisely because through improvisation political subject matter can be explored.
in a shared unfolding. Focusing on the questions rather than answers, and associative speculation rather than deductive reasoning alone, narrativity appears as part of a collage aesthetic, and I perform the act of piecing things together with the public is along for the ride. The piece is not prepared in advance to be disseminated, but rather takes shape live, with the public gathered not as passive receptacles to consume but shared stake holders reflecting on something of common concern.

“Nobody is fighting, because nobody knows what to save,” Heron observes, as if to suggest that problem of judgment leads to passivity, which leads to losing more ground. By not only acknowledging this problem of confusion, but making it central to his portrayal, Scott Heron critiques the status quo but does not offer any easy remedies, nor “cop out” into fatalism (like the TV version of social critique, see notes in The Opposite of Fatalism). So much political art either dramatizes a factual tragedy as if responsibility and causality were not an issue, thus reducing it to a kind of aesthetic pleasure, or it concludes with a vague call-to-arms, as if anyone knows so clearly what to do, or how to do it (it feels as if much political art documents malnutrition and then tells us to eat some fantastic fruit that we’ve never seen as a remedy – if not bad faith, than just an exercise in frustration.)

The advantage of Forti’s method is it miraculously allows content and subject matter to appear, not from any false authority, instead as an exploration. The risk is that the world appears as a function of individual interest, a kind of sentimentalism (see Proposal for A Performance in a Prison and If You Want Blood), and in this way the photographic work serves as a counterpoint, a kind of non-narrated, open-ended demonstration that the performance/research/collage is not referring to my private trauma but rather to something outside, public. More importantly, to speak of bloody crimes in a cold measured tone is sometimes not as appropriate as banging one’s head on the floor – the implication of the body language is another form of insistence of shared implication and responsibility.

But this simplistic language of “fighting” and even more so the idea that there could be objective victories or defeats is somehow a foreign tongue to the debates around the visual arts. I’m reminded of the photographer Wolfgang Tilmans’ appreciative comment that Andy Warhol taught him how to “say ‘yes’ to the world.” For Tilmans, coming of age in the German squat scene and it’s moral denunciations of the status quo, the power of Warhol’s “yes to the world” must have been liberating. But returning to the initial motivation for this project – the art show about war – the underlying framework of how contemporary culture approaches the political is so fundamentally affirmative of the status quo that it doesn’t even acknowledge how contingent that status quo is. Belgium after all did not participate in the Iraq War, despite their deep ties to NATO. If indeed we take Heron seriously in his observation that the people’s capacity to act is blocked by not knowing how to judge (“what to save”) then perhaps this Warhol-ian affirmativeness is part of the basic irrelevancy of contemporary art to public affairs?

As part of the Tea and Darkness series with Aaron Hughes, we hosted an open forum at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in December 2015 (this series seems to make a kind of end-point for the overall project documented here, see Epilogue), and we raised the question: what does it mean, after fourteen years of the Global War on Terror, for our community to continue to be neutral? In crucial moments in this project, I not only made the question of judgment central, I have taken positions, and in this way, giving up the position of neutrality has been part of the strategy of the project. Giving up neutrality might perhaps be a pre-condition for an art practice to take a role in public life.

A collage, fractured narrative in which non-fictional material is dramatized through speculative questioning, resulting in concrete works - public commemorative gestures: the book that follows takes the same approach as the project itself. The answer to Praneet’s question: “did it get anywhere?” will be partly disclosed by way of demonstration, with various materials offered not as illustrations but to be judged on their own terms. The conclusion that follows then highlights key findings, and summarizes the implications that emerge from them into the traditional form for artists wrestling with such concerns: the manifesto.
Prologue: Open Letter, June 2011

— Connecting the dots between facts-on-the-ground (cuts to culture in Netherlands) and my Arendt research, a mass email to friends turned into a formal open letter which attracted co-signers and being read aloud at meetings and protests.
Fifty years ago, against the backdrop of war and a growing consumer society, Hannah Arendt wrote “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance.” Seeing the cultural realm disappearing, Arendt sought to defend it on the grounds that culture, through the practice of honoring the past and present to preserve our judgment and taste, offered the capacity for an “enlarged mentality” (Kant) — to see the world through another’s eyes, and so to build up the imagination and the capacity to think. For Arendt, this was strengthening the foundation of public life. She believed it was precisely the absence of this foundation, thinking in the place of another, that allowed totalitarianism to take over so much of Europe, to permit people to turn in their neighbors in cities everywhere, and so to plunge the civilized world into barbarism.

This argument is not new - in fact the entire European post-war framework - a humanism defined by commitment to liberty, social justice, and a vibrant public life - was guided by this fundamentally conservative insight. This was precisely the rationale for the now established tradition of public support for culture all over western Europe.

From this perspective, the recent attack on public support for culture in the Netherlands - while often seen as coming from the “right” - is certainly not conservative. It represents a profoundly anti-conservative program. While the planned financial cuts are severe, the ideological cut is far deeper. Terms from management and marketplace cannot obscure that what is being attacked, what is being abandoned, are the lived traditions and practices, the guiding principles, of post-war European humanism. Given that the Netherlands has historically been a leader in the political dimension of the European project, and has enjoyed the peace and prosperity this project has produced, for an active participant in European and Dutch cultural life to see this anti-conservative program gaining momentum is confusing.

The idea that this could be done in response to a relatively minor budget problem, and in the name of the public good is radical. As the Archbishop in England recently commented, to use budgetary policy as a cover for widespread ideological changes to national institutions is fundamentally undemocratic as well as a betrayal of the tax payer’s money. Damaging the infrastructure of the European humanist project, by cutting back and closing cultural institutions, raising the VAT for theater and art in the Netherlands, while keeping subsidies for movies and football is not what the majority of people voted for. No doubt even cinema and football lovers can see that this is unfair and puts in question a great deal.

The contemporary cultural realm of the Netherlands might have many failures and wants, but this space of living practice is one of the crucial stages for raising questions and critical reflections in a public realm threatened with the loss of thinking and judgment. Or, in the case of recent debates on immigration, the capacity to see the world through someone else’s eyes, especially when they are our neighbors.

At the time of this writing, those who practice and support culture have been roused in anticipation of immanent plans to radically withdraw public support. It is constructive to defend cultural space, good working conditions, and even particular institutions, but it is crucial to put these issues into a broader context. The withdrawal of public support is not a matter of fiscal priorities or shared sacrifice, but a profound attack on tradition, one that has served the Netherlands well for seventy years. Indeed, one of the origins of the post-war policy of public support for culture in the Netherlands was recognition of the contribution of artists and writers in the Dutch resistance to Nazi occupation. Public institutions of all sizes, dedicated primarily to culture, are in turn some of the foremost organs of contemporary civil society and true anchors of public life.

It is barbaric to justify their destruction in the name of the public good, for no public good is served by this attack.
PART 1
FIVE TALKS
At the date of this writing, the internet address above can direct one to an archive of audio recordings of Amiri Baraka's 1980's lectures at Naropa University. 

There is a tension in them, as you hear Baraka - famous for having broken with the Beatniks and turned towards a practice of political engagement with art and otherwise, first through the Black Arts Movement he founded and in many other forms in the decades later - speak to the students of Naropa, itself one of the most important institutions formed to cohere and disseminate the legacy and principles of the Beatniks, the 1950's cultural movement that paved the way in the US for the developments of the 1960's. The students were almost all white one must suspect, and you can sense Baraka struggle with the situation, at moments seeming frustrated and chiding the students for their lack of political instincts, and at other moments wooing them, drawing them into his path of understanding, to sharing his commitments.

Weaving together insights drawn from his study of the Western canon and figures like Shakespeare, Joyce and Brecht, along with Langston Hughes and other lesser-known figures of the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude, Baraka continually insists on testing questions of culture against practical political issues. He reminds them of the effectiveness of Stevie Wonder’s song ‘Happy Birthday’ to move the people behind the efforts to make Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday a national holiday, for instance - breaking into song “Happy birthday, ha-aappy birthday to you!” - and also the way political realities make themselves felt on the level of our private lives, candidly discussing the loss of his sister to murder. Perhaps it is precisely because Baraka found himself in the position to reach out to those who might not intuitively understand his approach or share in his assumptions that these lectures form such a substantial and substantive record, demonstrating as well organized and coherent cultural position as that of Brecht, or Godard.

But, perhaps due to racism, or the effects of several organized efforts at character assassination, (perpetrated at times by counter-insurgency political organizations and at other times by the US cultural establishment itself, which clearly guards the line between acceptable critique and unacceptable dissidence), Baraka remains a kind of “underground” figure, more widely known for controversy than for his work itself. Some of these controversies are of his own making - recently suggesting that the World Trade Center attacks were possibly a conspiracy - but most damaging has been the stain of some inflammatory poems written in his Black Nationalist period in which he slurs Whites, Gays, Jews and Blacks who work with the existing system, like policemen. Despite later renunciations and apologies, these works are usually the only thing quoted by those who seek to dismiss him and what and who he represents. And these dismissals have been fairly effective at discouraging more widespread study of Baraka’s thought, writings and strategies for cultural practice. In another context, Hannah Arendt once commented on the “tragedy” when passes “no mind to inherit and to question, to think about and to remember,” and this certainly comes to mind when considering these audio fragments, jarring, gripping, abandoned.

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“Who is your work for?!”

The question reoccurs in these recordings, like a punctuation mark amidst Baraka rolling out his formidable argument. For rhythm, for content, for the struggle of the people (with disenfranchisement, dispossession, disrespect) and for freedom and justice for Black people everywhere. Against formalism, against abstraction, against the academic canon, against white supremacy and against the USA money-war-emprise-police machinery from the top in DC to the cop on the street. He covers Mao, Brecht and the Marxist classics, Joyce, Shakespeare and draws upon George Thompson (who helped develop Irish as a written language, and whose work was crucial to my project on the Blasket Islands) to argue that the division between art and life is a modern fashion adopted as part of the larger disenfranchisement of the people.

“Boom. Boom. Boom,” he says, “your heart beat, that’s the beginning of poetry, it’s rhythm, it’s the drum, the African drum.”

“Who is your work for?” Baraka asserts it is a formative question, one that structures and prepares the ground for others. He has to get the students to break out of the binary relationship between themselves and their work, to open up and consider the work’s status in the broader world. “Who, in particular, in concrete practical terms, is your work for?”

Are you aiming to be published? Where, who reads those publications? He says, you want a publisher? Meet Mr. Xerox machine. Get it out there, get it on the street.

What is the status of one’s work in the public realm, and how does that inform one’s practice?

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Makes me think of the curator Denys Zacharopoulos, who was making an appearance at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and because the studio visits had all gotten too crammed he made extra time in the evening for further discussion. Some kind of question about art came up and he started to answer, and then broke off, saying (roughly):

“You can’t answer that with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no.’
It’s like if you ask: ‘Do you love your wife?’...
No, I’ll make it even simpler: ‘Do you love your dog?!’
What do you say? It doesn’t matter so much what you say.
You answer it every day.
In what you do, how you do. Do you care for the dog, feed it, beat it?
Do you kick your dog? If you do, what do you say to if after?”

Some questions, Zacharopoulos suggested, are not to be answered in words alone, but in practice.

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The performance is an action
the action is to make an image
the image is a question

I wrote this in a notebook a few years ago, about my work, and the only change I’m tempted to make would be to add “in public” and make it:

the performance is an action in public

In 2004, I made my first slide-show performance Maquis for a specific situation, for a “squat” in Amsterdam which was the home for the Contact-Improvisation Jam that I went to regularly. They also had a room full of pinball machines in the basement and I’d go down there sometimes with my friend, the room dark except for the fluttering colored lights of all the machines, slightly damp as the building was on a canal.

Basically hanging around there, at some point in a conversation one of the organizers of the place mentioned he’d managed to get some invitations to the reception for start of the Netherlands’ Presidency of the European Union, and I asked if I could come, launching into my whole idea about the European Union and the importance of the European Constitution (which would soon be rejected by the Netherlands as well as France). So I went with them to this highly boring reception and told them later I would make some kind of presentation and discussion evening about the constitution at the squat - leading to the work Maquis, which shows sites and landscapes of the French Resistance with words exploring the connection and disconnection between that original moment of European Federalism and strange situation today. It all unfolded nicely and I then went on to present the work in many other contexts, at first awkwardly and then easily, and now am busy trying to make the slideshow into a video installation so that it can be part of a public collection in France where the work will hopefully have some kind of future life. While originally the work was made as a basis for discussion, and I’ve sometimes framed it that way, I also have presented it without suggesting that there be any discussion, because often such public discussions are so flattening. As my friend the artist Mieke van der Voort said to me after the first showing of Maquis in 2004: “the discussion I was having in my head was more interesting than the discussion in the room which then interrupted it.”

The second time I showed this work it was at the Rijksakademie at a moment of formal presentation, and of course it had a different feeling. There was no discussion and one could sense that the terms of reception were different - was this work any good? Did I show promise? A very smart and clever artist who was at the Rijksakademie with me, Dustin Larson, commented that part of why the piece “worked” was its “social
aspect,” that it made a social situation by gathering people around to watch and listen, and that by doing this explicitly it was actively engaging what had become an underlying theme in the visual arts, that the work itself should be somehow connected to a broader community or relate to some kind of social subtext to be understood. This of course a murky insight but it rings true to me, precisely because in the arts we have all come to work within a context we distrust but tacitly accept.

The causes for this distrust and bad-faith are varied. Even at the highest level - the recent Documenta, for example - claims to reflect on our contemporary situation are made by engaging a faraway land like Afghanistan, but there is no reckoning or even mention of the ongoing occupation and military conflict that is paid for by the same taxpayers who fund Documenta itself, thus mirroring the propaganda line taken by NATO within the supposed home of critical discourse. And grants must be written in terms that justify projects in terms of the greater good, and so because culture is not supported on its own terms, many people are forced into bad-faith manipulations and cynical games in order to fund their working conditions. In the background always is the art market, and when contemporary art is covered in the newspaper it is rarely about the substance or meaning of the work, but more often about auction results. And always all participants - gallerists, curators, artists, civil servants - continually are dealing with things (artworks) they themselves could not afford to possess, further contributing to a general alienation that seems to haunt the whole visual arts scene.

Perhaps this is part of the new appeal of performance that we discussed in Stuttgart. With a few exceptions, performance really does not enter the marketplace, and proposes that it be evaluated and judged in real-time, not by some absent taste-maker. If only because of avoiding the generally discredited and half-convincing routes, performance is felt to have some kind of integrity. It is for us.

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For us: the work was more of a question, a shared exploration, trying to work on what I thought to be a shared problem, not so concerned with being "good."

I only noticed this distinction because I had come to see that there simply was one strain in my work that was stronger than the other, and having thought it through, discovered it was the work I was making under the heading of “for us,” produced in more peer-oriented, community contexts than in the glare of the spotlight under judging eyes.

Ironically, “us and them” would have very different associations for Baraka. One might think “us” would refer to the African-Americans and “them” the European-American power system. But actually, for Baraka, when he broke with the Beatniks to go engage “them” it meant to try to speak to that part of the public who are largely ignored by cultural institutions and practitioners – the disenfranchised majority. In Baraka’s case this meant going first to Harlem and then back to Newark, New Jersey. To no longer focus on a dialogue with his peers (“us”), nor to chase the attention of the professional taste-makers (“them”), but to pursue a completely different other - that of his original neighborhood, his father’s peers, and later his children’s peers. In other words, to insist that his work address - practically, conceptually, in subject matter and attitude - the people in general, to resist any clique of any kind.

When I dive and crawl across the street in the snow, trying to unfold a story and a song, I am probably not truly reaching out to the ‘man in the street,’ even though we share the same physical space. In a sense I am dealing with this issue of a broader public, although more poetically than practically. But in Stuttgart, one could imagine that someone might stop and watch (as some passer-bys did) and as the piece moved indoors for it's second part, conceivably someone could have joined us and come in too. It was possible for that to happen. It could have happened. Maybe it did and no one noticed, or thought to introduce themselves or welcome the stranger in.

The second half of my performance in Stuttgart took place back in the theater, and who is to say which is more public - the sidewalk or the theater? There is an argument to be made, after all, that “intervention” - a form of violent interruption - is not a actually respectful mode of address to one’s fellow citizens, that culture can inhabit a part of the public sphere precisely through its classical institutions.
So there’s another resonance with Baraka and our debates last December in Stuttgart about the white cube and the black box, the art fair and the off-space. In his text reflecting on this move to Harlem and the Black Arts Movement, Baraka noted that trying to defend the gains made in this period has been a sisyphian task, and one of the crucial mistakes was not recognizing the importance of the small independent cultural spaces that they’d built up, to maintain and defend independent magazines, galleries, theaters. If the new strains of performance emerging in the visual arts are to avoid being subsumed as entertainment, or info-tainment, this is something to remember: where else will these questions be raised, not as bloodless theorisms, but as embodied and human possibilities? Which “us”s and “them”s do our art institutions (both the top-down museums and the bottom-up project rooms) address?

Ten or eleven years ago I was more busy trying to make presentations of my work outside of “the art world,” but these gestures eventually felt more and more like a form of design - customized to specific places and communities, and of not much enduring interest to anyone else later or elsewhere. It seemed to me then that the tradition of the white cube might offer a position of strength to work from, to take advantage of that freedom and its compromised but real access to the public realm. I’m not sure, now. This is also difficult to answer in words - to evaluate the success or the failure of these experiments with publicness - but there is clear sense of results, to be reckoned with and to inform the work ahead.

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My favorite book of Amiri Baraka’s is Eulogies, consisting only of talks given at funerals and poems written for those passed away. There are some people he’s never met but felt a strong connection to - John Coltrane, and the Jamaican poet Mikey Smith - and some for peers, writers who he’d worked with, but many are for his neighbors and people he came to know through local political struggles, battles might be a better word. A local gangster turned political advisor in their efforts to elect the city’s first Black Mayor; the librarian who established the city library’s Afro-American Room (from Aids, which in the 1980’s Baraka amongst others called a form of murder by the state); his (Jewish) lawyer; a twenty-one year old woman shot down on the street for no good reason.

Apparently these families invited Baraka to speak at the funerals. It was recognized that he had something to contribute with his thought and words, could be trusted to not violate the occasion, that Baraka’s participation would be appreciated. (The Jewish and Gay communities invited him too, it should be noted.) I can imagine him, this not-tall man with his beard, in the front of the church, the first words of his talk saying goodbye to a former boxer who later did community work: “All of what I want to say arrives in torrents, of emotion, memory, felt history.” The texts are part poem, part analysis, grounding a portrait of a person against the backdrop of history and politics.

Often, in the visual arts, we question the status of culture in the public realm. These invitations made to Baraka form one kind of concrete answer, and a question as well, at the same time: could such an invitation ever be made to a visual artist?

How and what would have to happen before that could occur?
Who Remembers Billy Woodberry

— Remembering an artist (Sekula) by pointing out the way he crucially (constructively) remembered other artists, but (following MoMA’s style) not the names of those who he portrayed. The political capacity of his work (for it to be shown where it might resonate most deeply, San Pedro, for example) an unresolved task, potentially to be taken up by those who follow him. A eulogy (= praise for the fallen + lessons for the living), following Abraham Lincoln: “it is not for us to dedicate, but to be dedicated.”
Charles Burnett, Julie Dash...

Charles Burnett and the others listed were part of a community at the University of California Los Angeles often referred to in the "L.A. Rebellion." Both Gerima and Gabriel had emigrated from Ethiopia, and brought with them the background of post-colonialism as a theory, political struggle and aesthetic. Gabriel later went on to theorize this aesthetic as "Third Way Cinema", which he and Sekula liked to point out that when the photograph got sent to the world and agents, they were connected to sisters and paychecks and organs that get cancer.

And he said
"well you know
things are changing all the time anyways"

the public laughs

When artists die things happen to them and their friends take on a certain role when artists die, like Sekula did for Woodberry only it happened when Woodberry was alive, Woodberry got to make a film in the 2000's because of Sekula, Sekula was given the chance to commission some films from the construction of the concert hall and so Woodberry made his first film I guess in a long time.

When Allan Kaprow died his friends decided it would be better if the estate went to some people in Zurich, some people in Zurich could manage it and that would be the right thing to do. They thought it would be better for his family. Kaprow arrived at UC San Diego in 1974, exiled from CalArts, the same year Sekula left San Diego and there's a piece that Kaprow made, one of the last solo shows he got in America in the 1990's, so he got a solo show at a gallery and the piece was to invite the gallery, he said that the gallerist should stand in front and water the street, the sidewalk in front of the gallery all day.

With a hose, standing and watering the sidewalk all day
And I don't think the gallery in Zurich is going to remake that one
And that's not censorship but its something like that
It's a kind of shaping of things and that's – Kaprow liked to quote Duchamp and he said "posterity is the only artist" Duchamp arranged everything to be in Philadelphia Kaprow's friends thought they were doing the right thing for all those things to end up in Zurich with those guys

And the world is changing

And I had this image of a machine with wheels
And they say that gears have teeth
They say that gears have teeth and for Sekula the teeth were connected to heads
were connected to clavicles
were connected to chest bones
were connected to sisters and paychecks
and organs
that get cancer

in the same talk he talked about Eddie Carmel
who remembers Billy Woodberry? Who remembers Eddie Carmel?

Eddie Carmel is – that picture of him
that Diane Arbus picture of him “A Jewish Giant At Home In Brooklyn”
and Sekula liked to point out that when the photograph got sent to the
Museum of Modern Art they cut off his name, they insisted that Eddie Carmel's name be removed from the title and that this cutting was part of what happened when documentary became art.

this cutting off of names

and what is lost?

What did Eddie Carmel lose in that? What changed, then? Well Eddie Carmel was also in a movie, and no one would know that – “The Man With Two Brains” – he played a science fiction monster so no one would know that.

But Sekula somehow agreed with this.

That women in Kassel that woman in Kassel, she’s just, she’s a mother she doesn’t get a name those kids in Seattle, they don’t get names

the woman in Seattle and she’s there and she’s kneeling and her boyfriend, well I don’t know its her boyfriend i just assume its her boyfriend and she’s kneeling and he’s touching her and she’s praying or she’s like this, she’s making herself vulnerable before the contestation

And Sekula doesn’t ask her name, Sekula doesn’t give us her name it’s not a defensive position its an acceptance it’s a making herself vulnerable before the confrontation, her partner there, stroking her, those photos with Alexander Cockburn’s writings, Alexander Cockburn’s dead now too,

Sekula was also waiting for the tear gas I have this feeling that in his acceptance – he critiqued the loss of Eddie Carmel’s name, he critiqued this loss this effacement but I have a feeling that he accepted it, that he agreed that that was part of art.

That part of art was this erasure this separation this sense of loss. Back to where it came from that the work would not go back to San Pedro, would not get shown there maybe now. It depends on his friends.
In a defunct self-organized art space, gathering the community. Two stories and lessons from them: culture cuts in the Netherlands and the Based in Berlin controversy. In principle, these exhibition spaces should be connected to the public realm – here’s why, here’s how, from where it derives – and here was some practical experiences of that connection, from public action to showing one’s work, to reflection upon the contemporary forms of censorship.

Edited transcript of public talk given at Essays and Observations, October 1, 2014.

The White Cube Inheritance / Is Art Public?

Inheritance / Is Art Public?

— In a defunct self-organized art space, gathering the community. Two stories and lessons from them: culture cuts in the Netherlands and the Based in Berlin controversy. In principle, these exhibition spaces should be connected to the public realm – here’s why, here’s how, from where it derives – and here was some practical experiences of that connection, from public action to showing one’s work, to reflection upon the contemporary forms of censorship.
I. The White Cube Inheritance

In an interview about Earthworks, Robert Morris was once asked:

Well, how do you think the conventional institutions are going to deal with this new kind of work? How is your gallery or how are the museums going to deal with the Earthworks that you’re making?

Morris almost dismisses the question:

Oh well, you know I don’t think that’s so important because there’s going to be new kinds of institutions.

There’s new kind of works that are being developed so there will be new institutions which will emerge to support this kind of work.

And what’s important is that this did not happen. New forms of institutions did not emerge in the last fifty years. Rather Earthworks, also sometimes called land reclamation sculpture, was a form of art with the potential for being simultaneously “abstract, advanced, and public, non-elitist” as Morris put it, has basically disappeared as a contemporary mode, along with mail-art, Happenings, and the other experimental modes of linking production and presentation that emerged in that period.

Instead we have experienced a geometric expansion of what was once widely understood to be an outdated convention: the white cube.

In the past I have found in that quote a kind of prescription for experimenting with new models of institutions, to try and keep developing institutions that would be responsive to and supportive of the changes in artistic practice. ‘ere are a few examples of such institutions, of course - PS1 for a long time was an example, Skulpturen Projekte Muenster - but what I am interested in tonight, is to go a different way with this Morris quote, and his incorrect assumption that new institutions would emerge in place of the white cube. Because, indeed, Morris’ speculation that there would be an expansion of new modes of institutions to support the new modes of practice has been shown to be far off the mark.

What has happened instead is that white cube model has flourished, expanded radically and globally. First of all and most obviously in the form of a commercial art world, which has grown dramatically in the last 50 years.

And then the biennial culture which some people associate with the emergence of liberal democracies in post-dictatorship societies like Turkey, South Africa, Korea.

The budget was announced

“Culture Cuts Start Next Year,”
November 20, 2011. Details 100 Million Euro cuts in 2012 by local and regional governments and 25% nationally in 2013, plus 15.5% cuts in national museums to be made up through private fundraising. The number and variety of institutions that closed is wide, from the Institut Neerlandais promoting Dutch culture in France, to established Amsterdam visual art institutions like SMART Project Space and mid-size institutions in smaller cities like Lokaal 01 in Breda. That more cuts and closures are ongoing as of this writing five years after the initial announcement reveals that this shift in policy in 2011 was not a temporary saving measure but rather a shift in structural priorities.

“cutting it to zero”
Dutch Arts Scene Is Under Siege;
NINA SEGAL; JAN. 30, 2015; International Herald Tribune.

II. Netherlands 2011, The Open Letter

In 2011, I wrote an open letter as an engagement with the changes of cultural policy of the Netherlands. These changes took the form of budget cuts but the motivations and implications were broader.

The budget was announced in June, and the plan was for a reduction of roughly 25% for culture at the national level and another 100 Million Euros at the local and regional level, focused on the performing arts and contemporary visual arts.

Some of the decisions were particularly dramatic: the theatre museum in the Netherlands which had its budget cut from 40 million to zero, firing all staff, closing and endangering the collection. By cutting it to zero that also meant that the collection itself that the museum had accumulated over 50 years, there was no budget to even manage the transition into storage. So there was a period where it looked like maybe they were going to have to throw half of it away, until they came upon the idea of auctioning off the gems of the...
collection to pay for the storage. This episode seems to reveal the underlying diminishment of the public realm, in which the choice treasures of history and cultural accomplishment had to be offered up as collectibles to secure the rest.

Something like 15 smaller contemporary art institutions closed. The main institution for public art in the Netherlands called Skor was closed, and that the institution most explicitly dedicated towards working (in theory and practice) between the citizenry and the artists was first to be shuttered also seemed to be a form of message-making by the new government.

These cuts were made in an atmosphere of budget hysteria, with constant references to “becoming another Greece” and “the crisis.” Funding was cut to national defense, nurses, psychiatric support, and also at the same time income tax cuts and capital-gains tax cuts, so rather than just responding to a situation, in fact what was happening a restructuring of the economy and the whole society really, you could say, away from a more Scandinavian model towards more of an Anglo-Saxon model.

Against the backdrop of these events I was simultaneously developing an international project exploring the intersection between the work of Hannah Arendt and contemporary cultural practices, starting in London, then Berlin, and then in Holland.

The project around Arendt had a very particular form. Being neither a philosopher nor a theorist, I felt that I should pursue this exploration not through writing, but in a way somehow consistent with my own work. It should be a public event, but not a conference – first of all because a philosopher nor a theorist, I felt that I should pursue this exploration not through writing, but in a way somehow consistent with my own work. It should be a public event, but not a conference – first of all because a public event, but not a conference – first of all because a conference is made to gather and disseminate knowledge, and I believed that what was happening a restructuring of the economy and the whole society really, you could say, away from a more Scandinavian model towards more of an Anglo-Saxon model...

Fifty years ago, against the backdrop of war and a growing consumer society, Hannah Arendt wrote “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance.” Seeing the cultural realm disappearing, Arendt sought to defend it on the grounds that culture, through the practice of honoring the past and present to preserve our judgment and taste, offered the capacity for an “enlarged mentality” (Kant) – to see the world through another’s eyes, and so to build up the imagination and the capacity to think. For Arendt, this was strengthening the foundation of public life. She believed it was precisely the absence of this foundation, thinking in the place of another, that allowed totalitarianism to take over so much of Europe, to permit people to turn in their neighbors in cities everywhere, and so to plunge the civilized world into barbarism.

This argument is not new - in fact the entire European post-war framework - a humanism defined by commitment to liberty, social justice, and a vibrant public life - was guided by this fundamentally conservative insight. This was precisely the rationale for the now established tradition of public support for culture all over western Europe.

From this perspective, the recent attack on public support for culture in the Netherlands - while often seen as coming from the “right” - is certainly not conservative. It represents a profoundly anti-conservative program. While the planned financial cuts are severe, the ideological cut is far deeper. Terms from management and marketplace cannot obscure that what is being attacked, what is being abandoned, are the lived traditions and practices, the guiding principles, of post-war European humanism. Given that the Netherlands has historically been a leader in the political dimension of the European project, and has enjoyed the peace and prosperity this project has produced, for an active participant in European and Dutch cultural life to see this anti-conservative program gaining momentum is confusing.

The idea that this could be done in response to a relatively minor budget problem, and in the name of the public good is radical. As the Archbishop in England recently commented, to use budgetary policy as a cover for widespread ideological changes to national institutions is fundamentally undemocratic as well as a betrayal of the tax payer's money. Damaging the infrastructure of the European humanist project, by cutting back and closing cultural institutions, raising the VAT for theater and art in the Netherlands, while keeping subsidies for movies and football is not what the majority of people voted for. No doubt even cinema and football lovers can see that this is unfair and puts in question a great deal.
The contemporary cultural realm of the Netherlands might have many failures and wants, but this space of living practice is one of the crucial stages for raising questions and critical reflections in a public realm threatened with the loss of thinking and judgment. Or, in the case of recent debates on immigration, the capacity to see the world through someone else’s eyes, especially when they are our neighbors.

At the time of this writing, those who practice and support culture have been roused in anticipation of imminent plans to radically withdraw public support. It is constructive to defend cultural space, good working conditions, and even particular institutions, but it is crucial to put these issues into a broader context. The withdrawal of public support is not a matter of fiscal priorities or shared sacrifice, but a profound attack on tradition, one that has served the Netherlands well for seventy years. Indeed, one of the origins of the post-war policy of public support for culture in the Netherlands was recognition of the contribution of artists and writers in the Dutch resistance to Nazi occupation. Public institutions of all sizes, dedicated primarily to culture, are in turn some of the foremost organs of contemporary civil society and true anchors of public life. It is barbaric to justify their destruction in the name of the public good, for no public good is served by this attack.

III. Aftermath Part 1: Budgets Are Moral Documents

Originally it was just a mass email I sent out, but after dialogue with Ansuya Blum and others, and then working on the text a bit with the help of Fred Dewey, it became an open letter with many co-signers and read in several public gatherings around the country – now seem somehow passive, or acquiescent. Because the management of perception is itself a political tool there is some lessons from this chapter, and one of which is perhaps that those who appear strident and confrontational are sometimes having a more appropriate response: we were indeed in the middle of a confrontation, after all.

"an open letter"

"chained to the Van Gogh Museum" at that time this suggestion seemed dramatic. And yet, in the end, the thing that really stood out about the letter project, which became clearer and clearer as things evolved, was that the letter took an affirmative argument.

And yet, I think the letter, and brief momentum around it, did have one effect: it re-framed the discussion from the narrow focus on budgets towards ideological, political and social questions. It’s hard to over-state the way that management language about deficits blocked out any substantive discussion of what was being proposed and what the consequences could be. In this context, the letter did contribute a vocabulary to describe what has occurring. Only later did I come across Martin Luther King’s assertion that “budgets are moral documents,” but I was fumbling towards a similar point, or trying to gesture towards a similar kind of re-framing of the issue.

But, in the end, the thing that really stood out about the letter project, which became clearer and clearer as things evolved, was that the letter took an affirmative argument.

In other words, while there were many voices against the cuts, it seemed none actively defended what was about to be lost. To put it plainly, few had any answers to the question seemingly at hand: why should culture get public funding, ie tax money?

IV. Aftermath Part 2: The Absence of Affirmative Argument

“Do Not Go Gentle”


“So you can’t cure the patient by amputation,” one person protested – but this of course assumes that the generous support for culture in the Netherlands was an illness, a problem. Or “Do Not Go Gentle…” one widely respected museum director instructed – suggesting the cuts were like the physical aging in Dylan Thomas’ poem – something natural and unavoidable. In other words, no real defense at all, in that it takes the underlying necessity or inevitability of the cuts for granted, and somehow only takes issue with the scale of that attack.

And the absence of an affirmative language to defend culture left those politicians who actually were defending institutions like the Rijksakademie, for example, this absence left them in a difficult position because they had no idea how to argue against the cuts. Apparently they themselves did not know what to say, and then they looked towards those active in culture to supply them with some language, some arguments.

So the phrase that was latched onto by Rijksakademie and other institutions was that funding for contemporary art was “talent development.” And this, again, doesn’t defend culture, per se. Even amongst those with the most to lose, it was apparently impossible to suggest that culture might have its own status or be a priority, even in a time maybe of shared sacrifice financially. Instead the phrase “talent development” suggests that culture should be
understood really within the broader framework of what was happening in the Netherlands, which was that anything everything could only be justified through direct applicability to the market.

It is of course perversely ironic to focus on the market as the ultimate measure and guide, as it was “market fundamentalism” (as it has come to be called) that was exactly the cause of the crisis in the first place. After all, it was the de-regulation of the financial services industry in the United States and the political movement behind the argument that “markets are self-regulating” that had just been shown to be spectacularly false, and that “self-regulation” was in practice a recipe for indifference to the common good and outright criminality, from the heads of banks at the top to those cheating on forms for new home loans at the bottom. Somehow this incredible irrationality was impossible to point out in any resonating way (“exactly what reveals it to be ideological,” Fred Dewey commented at the time), rather than focus on the nature of the steamroller, let’s look at the weakness of the structure that collapsed. Because unlike the nurses or the tank drivers, it was those of us in culture who found ourselves somehow unable to defend ourselves, to justify our own place on the public agenda. After all, hadn’t organizations like Skor focused more and more on discourse? Weren’t there writers and thinkers involved with De Ateliers? How ironic, then, that a visual art scene more and more defined by an emphasis critical theory and discussion than by the classical modes of “wordless apprehension” would find itself totally tongue-tied when asked to explain “well, what’s the point exactly?”

In this way, to blame “neo-liberalism” is an evasion and a distortion. The defining moment of the attack on culture in the Netherlands – which was clearly part of a broader shift in the public realm in Western Europe, in general – was not that there existed a radical free market party in power, but rather that in the political process, that unlike the nurses and tank-drivers, those in culture with the education and international experience could not even come up with language to defend what they presumably were dedicated to, and had to resort to the confusing weak tea of “talent development.”

Obviously at some point in the past the importance of culture (not as some subset of business, but a category of its own) had been understandable, or else no one would paid for it, which is only after all one form of making something a priority. What had that understanding been, and where had it gone, along with the people who would be willing to fight for it? This was the main lingering question from the whole episode.

V. Aftermath Part 3:
Tactical Insights

The letter took a strategic approach, which at the time I imagined might be akin to an idealized Christian Democratic point of view, the perspective that there is something worth preserving in the post-war European project. And while this connection to the “European Project” would become more important for my thinking later on, reaching out to this broader history in the letter, embracing the word “conservative” was extremely problematic for some people. In particular, the positive reference to the Archbishop of Canterbury in England - who was I think the first person that I heard of to argue that the austerity program in Europe was undemocratic because no one voted for it – this positive relationship to the Church was so problematic that several people refused to sign unless I would remove that mention of the Archbishop.

Second of all the use of the word “barbarism,” and the reference to the Second World War. Originally, there was more of this in the letter, but a Belgian friend of mine he said “you know you’ve got to cut that out. You can’t have anything that sounds like it’s an insult in it.” And I said, well why is that? And he said well it’s important - because in Belgium they’ve had a race nationalist right wing very strong, especially in Flanders they’ve had a race nationalist party for a long time and so people who are involved in public life, the academy, publishing, anybody at any level has had to deal with these kinds of people and these kinds of struggles for a long time in Belgium. He said “No, no - if you insult them the first thing they will do is play the victim and use that to change the subject.” And that’s actually exactly what happened at Parliament during the meetings, so the cultural minister came out and he said you know people have been accusing me of being a Nazi and that’s outside of democratic discourse and it’s unacceptable and I don’t understand how we can continue to have a discussion with people who would violate the terms of discourse like this. So basically reshuffled the entire discussion and so I think that effectively the debate, this debate which could be more broadly like the post, what is the nature of the post war European model, these kind of substantial things, what kind of society and body politic we are having, these kinds of debates just never really happened in the Netherlands, they were steered away.

VI. Aftermath Part 3:
PVDA + MoMA, The Campaign Against Culture’s Civic Role

The last insight emerged from a townhall meeting held at the Stedelijk Museum. The Stedelijk at that point was about to reopen with a new building, and Museum is interesting in that it is actually owned by the citizens of Amsterdam.
This somehow never came up, and was not what motivated the open meeting, but rather it was the personal effort of the museum’s director Anne Goldstein. Anne Goldstein intuitively recognized the seriousness of the situation and so organized this town hall meeting but it was problematic for several reasons. First of all there was a movement afoot to strike, to create a cultural strike, so all the institutions should close, but the main tourist institutions refused to participate—the Van Gogh Museum and the Rijksmuseum wouldn’t participate which then meant that the Stedelijk felt like they somehow shouldn’t participate. So the Stedelijk while hosting the town hall meeting was somehow actually also blocking the strike. Second of all, Anne Goldstein had been brought in to bring the American model of philanthropic fundraising to the Netherlands, so actually her arrival was already part of the demolition of the cultural project of the Netherlands. So she was in this kind of mixed position, while personally she might be against the cuts, structurally her position was part of the demolition that was underway.

During the forum, one person who’d been involved in setting national cultural policy said:

“You know, two weeks ago we were in New York City and we were talking with Glenn Lowry and we discussed all this, you know.

And I said, we decided, that we would need ten years to change the culture landscape in the Netherlands. And it is outrageous because here with this budget they’ve only given us two years.”

And what he was referring to was something that I found out about a little bit later, was that there was a meeting hosted by Social Democratic Party of the Netherlands in the United States, how the Netherlands could learn from the Unites States, that happened on the same day that the budget was announced in the Netherlands.

At that meeting Glenn Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, explained how the civic role for museums in his understanding was no longer relevant. Practically speaking, that was no longer what he was doing and the Museum of Modern art was not involved in this Enlightenment project of culture’s connection to civil society but had embraced its position in the marketplace. It was apparently explicitly discussed that to shift the Dutch art world from a financial model based on public support to private support would take a decade.

This image of the PVDA hosting Glen Lowry, widely respected director of what is considered perhaps the famous visual arts institution, arguing against the civic role of culture, and thus essentially justifying the cuts in the Netherlands, this image became seemed like a crucial discovery.

Politically, it showed the broader structures and actors at play at that moment, the scale and the stakes. Could it have been a coincidence that the supposed defenders of the “social model” in the Netherlands—the PVDA—were organizing on that day a discussion with the results so clearly arranged in advance? After all there was no one on the program standing up to defend culture’s place in the tradition of social democracy. So on literally the same day the axe drops, the traditional supporters of cultural funding are hosting an event that essentially justified and legitimized the cuts!

This means that, apparently, the shift away from the “enlightenment model” which had been actively re-animated in post-war Europe, that this shift was not an accident or a freak act of nature, but rather was part of a coordinated campaign. Defending that model would have required a coordinated campaign in response.

II. Bread, Circuses, Art Museums

What does it mean for an art institutions “embrace the position in the marketplace?” What position is that?

It seemed to bring up the question of art and entertainment, which was actually a crucial part of the Arendt text on culture.

Arendt argues that to be against entertainment is to be a snob, that everybody needs entertainment to “while-away the time,” but entertainment is a different kind of category than culture, and she says: the thing about “bread and circuses” is bread and circuses go together. “Both must be produced anew or they rot.” And you could kind of think about trying to watch old episodes of “Friends” or something. It doesn’t have the same feeling the second time around, it doesn’t have this ability to captivate us.

Mathew Burbidge: Do you do that? Do you watch “Friends”? Sure, I watch lots of TV. But what I mean is that even a show that really entertains, doesn’t really hold up a second time.

Mathew Burbidge: Well, you could try, maybe.

There’s a passage where Hemmingway talks about being trapped in a ski chalet and the only thing there to read are these detective novels by Simenon. He says they were fantastic but the only problem is then you couldn’t read them twice.
So you get them all once, but then there’s nothing there after. Arendt argues that this question of endurance is central to the distinction between culture and entertainment. Arendt had this aside where she says well when you hear when freshness and novelty become a evaluative criteria, when that becomes the way people talk about what’s important, you realize you’ve left culture and you’ve entered entertainment.

Matthew Burbidge: buy isn’t that freshness completely bound up with the commercial as we see it now in the novelty of the art-market? Sorry, am I going too far?

No, I think that’s the kind of question that the observation provokes. Which is simply to ask to what extent have we largely moved into something that is about that is ultimately entertainment and not cultural.

VIII. Entertainment vs Culture, Whitney Biennial vs Documenta, US vs Europe

This distinction also helps unpack the difference between the way the white cube tradition has taken shape in the US versus Western Europe:

If one takes Documenta and the Whitney Biennial as points of comparison – the most important exhibition of contemporary art in Europe and the US, respectively – it is revealing. The difference is not that one is more or less “commercial” than the other – both events are equally intertwined with the network of dealers and buyers that surround art’s status as a collectible.

The difference is that with Documenta – from the taxi driver who picks you up at the station, to the curator, to the artists participating to the designers – pretty much everyone involved thinks that what is happening with the exhibition is something of substance and import to people in general, some space of reflection about the world or encounter with points of view on the world. Or at least that it should be and if doesn’t deliver on that then it would be a failure.

Whereas the Whitney Biennial never has that, there is no argument, there is no question. No one would expect the Whitney Biennial to contribute to discussions about history, philosophy, current events, politics, society, or anything like that. The focus is very different. As was later said about the project “Based in Berlin” (which I will come to in a minute), the Whitney Biennial is a “discovery show” a survey of what’s happening, to log and cohere the more remarkable recent artistic work, but perhaps more importantly it is a kind of “fresh faces” show.

This principle of cultural production of course became quite explicit in the development of exhibitions like “Greater New York” and then “Younger Than Jesus” (where I remember someone noting that the focus on youth had become prurient and abusive, “like child pornography”): what’s new, what’s fresh and hot? Here Arendt’s elaboration of bread and circuses as clarifying the nature of entertainment is further clarifying. While the focus on artists’ biographical age is of course partly do to the art market’s reliance on “buy low, sell hi” business model, when comparing the Whitney Biennial to Documenta what becomes clear is that the Western European model of contemporary art is structurally distinct from that of the US and that this distinction fundamentally rests on the difference between culture and entertainment.

In some ways this is of course not surprising. The backdrop of Arendt’s reflection on culture was a critical awareness of the European “educated philistine” a creature that still barely exists in the United States. “Old Europe” as Donald Rumsfeld once dismissed Western Europe is indeed structurally invested in culture, tradition and heritage, at the very least as the basis for a massive tourism industry.

IX. Emmen Quarry; Art’s Role

This model – the post-war European relationship to culture – can’t be dismissed as just pure exploitation or instrumentalisation. The commitment of resources for artistic experimentation was not just part of some narrow cost-benefit analysis. The facts don’t support this kind of dismissal.

The example that jarred this awareness in me was a trip ten years ago to see Robert Smithson’s work Broken Circle/Spiral Hill in the North of Holland. Since being built in the 70’s, the local business owners who owned the land that the sculpture is on have kept the work preserved and maintained. They would pay to have it restored every ten or 15 years so it has basically looked the same since 1971. Whereas Spiral Jetty was left to rot for 30 years – no one really took much interest in it until the Dia Foundation got involved in 1999. So on the one hand, one of the most iconic works of American art, connected with one of the best funded private institutions, was not preserved or attended to in the US, while with no fanfare or hubbub local citizens in a small town in the Netherlands cared for and kept up a work for decades.

So one of the things at stake in this funding shift was in fact the loss of one model in which culture – even experimental contemporary art – was embraced both from the top-down and bottom up as part of a broader public vision. In its place then would be a model in which culture was privatized and instrumentalised. The Robert Smithson work in Emmen has had a role.
It has had a place. It did not, strictly speaking, have a function. (And in Smithson's vision of culture, function and art were opposed.)

In the new model culture is functionalized and needs to be justified not on its own terms but on other ones. To sum it up, at the risk of over-simplification, in the Netherlands (and Western Europe, in general) there was a post-war agreement that culture had a role to play, even when it demanded attention and work and didn’t give back much in terms of economy or education. This agreement seems to no longer to hold.

One way to tell that this underlying consensus had given way was that moment at the Stedelijk when it became clear that much of the leading figures in culture agreed with the goal (if not the methods) of the budget cuts: to restructure culture in the Netherlands. Another sign was the way that institutions actually undermined the efforts at protest – for instance the major art schools had scheduled exams on the same day as the largest protest in front of parliament and when it was suggested the exam date be changed to allow the students to participate, the schools ignored the request.

The last way was the attitude of the artists themselves, many of whom already fully identified with a kind of dog-eat-dog mentality, and so I remember at one moment someone said “well you know this won’t really effect us” somehow meaning that people who were like, good, would not be effected (and in one aspect this is kind of true in that they’ve performatised the money so that the motto now is “more money for less people.”)

Besides the closing of institutions, the loss of jobs, the brutal dislocation and personal suffering, what has been lost was also the working conditions that were allowed by this previous model: a shift from working in orientation to a shared and mutual exploitation and instrumentalization.

X. Mutual Instrumentalisation vs. Mutual Support

Mutual exploitation and instrumentalization: this model is one I saw a lot of living in Los Angeles, as it defines the working conditions of the entertainment industry.

I always use the example of the “Flintstones 2.” “Flintstones 2” is the sequel to the Flintstones movie, based on the cartoon, and nobody who was involved in that project could possibly have thought it was a good idea. It’s just not possible, it’s a terrible film, but everyone who was in it thought it was good for them personally. So it’s all good for their private interests, everybody was working it to get something out of it, but the actual shared thing was terrible and had no meaning, and you could say in the long run it was bad for them too because then they were associated with this terrible thing. This is the process of mutual instrumentalisation – the quality or meaning of the actual shared project, background conditions, results or even the people in the shared operation – all of this is basically unimportant in the face of advancing one’s private interest.

You could then contrast that for example, with the films of John Cassavetes, in which a small group of peers have a mutually supportive role that is also dedicated to the shared matter at hand, asking “what are we doing together here.” And I don’t mean to be so black and white about because in order to raise the money for those movies Cassavetes then went and did advertising jobs and acting jobs in these other movies that he didn’t care about, so its not like the two exist on different planets and one is the good planet and one is the bad planet.

But if so, if that shift to mutual exploitation was the first consequence of the cuts, the second was much greater, because it became clear that in this shift in the post-war Dutch public model that culture was just a preliminary stage to restructuring the whole country.

The was most vividly dramatized by the withdrawal of the Queen (an enemy of the far right and champion of the visual arts) and the ascension of her son who arrived with the pronouncement that the welfare state of the 20th century is over. Old people should be prepared to find a way to fend for themselves, the health care plans should be more financed by private contributions, basically the whole social project is over and people need to get used to it.

And so in this way the failure of the cultural scene to deal with it and to put up a better fight in a way set the stage for something much broader and uglier and which will of course effect those people who thought it wouldn’t effect them, because they won’t be able to afford child care, because their parents are going to have to move in with them when they get old, these other forms of mutual support.

XI. No Defenders, No Self-Defense; Buchloh in Münster

But the main thing that I thought about: well why were we so unprepared. This was because, I had to think, the way that our entire discourse, or the whole discussion that I’d been taught about art was based on critical theory. It was based on a critical analysis of the situation and not an affirmative analysis.
So there was no sense of what was to defend, and in fact I had been taught a whole rhetoric about debunking the supposed civic claims of these cultural institutions. And the example that came to mind was Benjamin Buchloh's review of Sculpturen Muenster 1997, which encapsulates the issue quite well. Sculpturen Muenster is entertainment for the bored middle classes of Europe, that’s what it is, Sculpturen Muenster. And the example that I thought of was that when the radical free market party of Germany comes to power in Muenster and they want to get rid of Sculpturen Muenster, they can call Benjamin Buchloh to testify to explain why Sculpturen Muenster is not important, it’s just entertainment, all those bigger claims are just not true. And if it was just entertainment then we mind as well spend the money on a bowling alley. In other words, not only was the critical framework excluding any affirmative position on culture that could be useful to defend cultural funding in a moment of crisis, in fact the critical thinking about contemporary art, often pursued through a new-Marxist economically deterministic language, dove-tailed nicely with the free market fundamentalism that had come to power in the Netherlands.

XII. Based in Berlin

And all this was on my mind going back and forth between the Netherlands and Berlin through 2011. And in Berlin there was another heated debate about art and the public and money. Interestingly, as opposed to the situation in the Netherlands which was really about less money, here it was the awarding of a huge amount of money but in a way that people somehow found problematic that had sparked a heated debate.

After years of saying that the Berlin budget crisis meant no support for culture, the city miraculously came up with a huge budget for a show that would essentially advertise a pet project of the Mayor’s: the construction of a new Kunsthalle in Berlin. This show – what would come to be called Based in Berlin – was clearly perceived as an attack on the art community in the city. Looking back, it begs the question, why? What was the fuss? Ultimately, it had to do with city politics, but because of Berlin’s unique historic and symbolic meaning, those city politics were extra-loaded with implication. The discontent was that city government, after years of saying the local art scene deserved no support, would make a flashy art show foregrounding young international artists “based in Berlin,” at exactly the moment that the real estate development policies – “gentrification” – was making the city basically unaffordable for many. So while the city was willing to put money into this single exhibition, it actually was part of an effort to integrate the visual arts into a city-branding and growth model that was quite destructive to the art scene.

So in Holland you have the state taking away money, and in Germany you have the state spending a lot of money, but in the both cases the artists, and I think this is accurate, felt like this was an attack on them.

Someone who participated in the Arendt project, Phillip Kleinmichel, he argued that the exhibition Based in Berlin was actually more directed at contributing to the public good than the protest movement opposed to it. The protest movement had organized itself around the private interests of people as a class, like a kind of an artist labor movement of something, and the show at least had some sort of aim of contribution to the greater good, even through economic development.

And, even though Based in Berlin was going to be a kind of spectacle, Kleinmichel's point was that in contemporary society that’s how you would deal with the public realm, you would deal with it through spectacle, and so this show itself would be a chance to address the public.

And furthermore there was this implicit question: well how much do all of these people who are involved in the Berlin art world really care about the public?

You could take the whole range of institutions in the city from Essays and Observations, to Sammlung Haubrok, to Kunstwerk, his question was well how many of these people really are thinking about the greater good anyways?

In this way, Based in Berlin, even with all of its problems, Kleinmichel seemed to be arguing could conceivably be civic minded than the community of artists who were organizing only to agitate for their private interests.

XIII. Solidarity with The Public

The opposition to Based in Berlin solidified through an open letter with hundreds of co-signers against the show and led to the formation of a new organization: Haben un Brauchen, To Have and To Need. Throughout 2011 they held open meetings about the cultural politics of the city.

I wrote them a public letter encouraging them to frame the issue in the broader context:

By even gathering in this way Haben und Brauchen makes a clear statement that visual art in Berlin is about more than throwing good parties and making one’s professional way. This statement must be developed into something more concrete and lead to something even more concrete still.
The European Project and the Rhineland model in particular produced a public realm in which contemporary art was central, not just a marginal affair of fashion or luxury collectibles. Contemporary art as an organ of civil society is best crystallized in institutions like Documenta, Sonsbeek or Skulpturen Muenster - all of which are understood by visitors and producers alike as charged with the mission to reflect, intervene and foster public life and dialogue.

Can this model be extended in Berlin, now? Can the self-organized, independent and spontaneous ethos meet the ultimately conservative and institutionalized models?

And the letter also repeated Kleinmichel’s defense of the civic potential of Based in Berlin and raised the issue of the arts community’s indifference to the broader body politic:

What went only implied but was even more consequential in Kleinmichel’s argument, was that the citizens of Berlin, at this point, do not really meet or engage with the city’s artists or their work.

And in this respect, the “international” art scene and the Berlin “project-room” scene (for lack of a better term) are more or less equivalent. Is Salon Populaire more of a public space than Perez Projects? Who is more connected to their neighbors - Haubrink Presents or After the Butcher? Is General Public really, in practice, open to the general public? The answer, I would say, is no.

In one of the initial invitations to a meeting about the show, emanating from [the project space] Basso, I believe, there was the idea of forming a counter-public. How could this be possible when Basso (and others) are not really part of the public at all, but rather a type of social club? And even an alliance of specialized social clubs is not a public realm, I think. What has been striking in the discourse around Haben und Brauchen has been the absence of this broader civic consciousness.

The focus on the private working conditions of the artists seems to me be almost entirely off the point in this respect. What is perhaps uncomfortable to acknowledge is the degree to which the project room scene has integrated social hierarchy (snobbery and tribalism, to put it bluntly) as a structural organizing principle in just the same way as the international commercial art world.

In this sense the Mayor, even if he was indeed attempting to instrumentalize the art scene, displayed more concern for the greater good than anyone else - the curators of the show, the artists in the show, and even those who protested. He was asking simply how can culture relate to the city and for him the answer was pro-growth, city branding, and real-estate development.

One may not like his answers but to avoid the question means to turn “cultural politics” into an organized form of self-advancement - a private affair, and thus of little or no political meaning.

At same open meeting that I distributed copies this letter, the absence of any consciousness of the broader civic realities was so kind of obvious and disturbing that then Alexander Koch from the gallery KOW stood up said well “what about the public?!”

We had been hearing from the art community for an hour: what about solidarity with us, with our health insurance situation, with out losing our studios, what about solidarity with the artists?

So Koch continued, “What about solidarity with the public?!”

I jumped to my feet and shouted, “I propose a Solidarity with the Public Working Group! Anyone who wants to join please meet me after.”

And so the short-lived Solidarity with the Public Working Group was launched. Alexander Koch, Matthew Burbidge from Essays and Observations, Jakob Shillingar who was one of the curator’s of Based in Berlin, the artist Libia Castro, Stella Veciana, Eva Seufert, Libia Castro, Martine Van Kampen and a few others who dropped into the meetings held throughout the fall of 2011.

It was a contradictory group with contradictory positions. One was that the artists should get more directly involved in the political struggles against austerity and join activist groups, or perhaps bring activist groups into the art spaces as a way of supporting them.

Another was the argument that cultural scene should develop an explicit affirmative argument to defend tax money for culture that we could then feed to politicians. Koch was saying things like:

“well politicians say to you ‘the only way we have to award money to these institutions is through attendance and head counts because we have no other way of measuring whether or not they are effective. Because you in the arts won’t give us an evaluative criteria, we can only deal with this evaluative criteria which we also recognize is also kind of dumb, but that’s what we’re gonna work with.”

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Following my experience in the Netherlands, this was an argument that I could get behind. Koch was proposing exactly what had been missing in the debates on budget cuts: working towards an affirmative language that could renew the claims for culture in the public realm.

Besides my support for Koch, my reaction to Based in Berlin was the conviction that art practice should be related to our neighbors somehow. I was working on a piece about a local site in the city, and I had a sense that the art scene in Berlin was associated with being on the side of the unpopular and unjust dislocations in the city. So while the artists felt like they were being pushed out, maybe the rest of the city felt like the artists were part of the people doing the pushing. Partly because of the way the visual arts – and this relates to the market – which I’ll talk about later, the way that the visual arts have unapologetically accepted our role as friends to high finance and the financial services industry. And so I thought there was a way to deal with that explicitly and make things that then would relate to neighbors and that became in some ways the motivation for then the piece “Autonomy” that I made here in Essays and Observations in November of 2011 which is documented in this little book that’s on the counter there.

The “Solidarity with the Public Working Group” blew apart for a very interesting reason, which was that we had a visit from someone from the Haben und Brauchen main group who brought us the proposal that artists should get in free into museums. So the idea was that artists shouldn’t have to pay for museum entry because they owe us, or because we need it to keep working.

And a few people at the “Solidarity with the Public Working Group” were like, “hey we are the public working group, hold it, why is that proposal coming to this working group. We’re the people not thinking about the artists interests, we’re the people thinking about how to relate to everyone else’s interests.”

And then the argument came up well the way for us to work for other people’s interests is to organize on our own behalf more effectively. To be some kind of like vanguard of labor movement or something, or to take a position of being very well organized so that other people, by demanding better conditions for themselves from the city politicians, other people will have better conditions.

And this effectively, this issue of whether or not that was correct, or whether or not that was the way for artists to relate to the public, that was basically what broke it up. Holding something together is always difficult but somehow that was the decisive conflict: should artists organize on their own behalf, almost like a labor union, with the idea that this will contribute to the greater good, or should artists focus more on the greater good, with the assumption that if general conditions would improve, they too would benefit.

We never met again after that.

XIV. The Greater Good

I heard a director of an art school in California demand:

“What about the greater good, aren’t we part of the greater good? Art schools deserve support.”

And I had to think, is the greater good an institutional priority of art schools in general?

Do art schools ever frame what they do by thinking about the greater good?

It was Renee Green, then Dean at the San Francisco Art Institute, whose had a long academic career with different institutions. I had to wonder: did she raise the issue of the greater good to her students at the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York? I’ve never heard anyone from there even mention that the greater good or any similar phrase, any similar articulation of contributing to something bigger than oneself.

Or, does the phrase the greater good and art’s relationship to the greater good only come up when our access to tax dollars in under threat? In which case, it’s not surprising that there is no broader support from the public.

However, with the case of Based in Berlin, I think on the basis of going there to the show at the Monbijou Park at like 9 o’clock on a Saturday night in the summer, that the broader public was really interested. The broader public I think took the underlying hopeful or possible claims of the project quite seriously and there were lots of people there who were very curious and very serious.

And I was left with the feeling that somehow they had been let down, they had been let down first of all by the organizers of the exhibition who had decided to make a kind of a fresh-faces show, as opposed to a show that had a point or made an argument or even tried to reflect the city. But they had also been let down by the protest. That there had been no counter exhibition. And I think they were also in a way, that the people who were invited to participated and said no out of protest, perhaps also let the public down.

The public had taken it all seriously and came out in good faith. There was a lesson in that too.
XV. Experiment #1: Is the Marketplace Public Space?

So that was the first section of the talk.

And the second part I’m going to talk in a very compressed way about a series of examples that I’ve had, with: let’s say that you actually can access civil society through art spaces. How would you do that?

This was an idea that was totally foreign to me until I moved to Europe. and I think it’s because, as I said, in Europe there is this space of the post-war European project that doesn’t exist in the United States. Particularly I was influenced by Luc Tuymans and Luc Tuymans’s work on the Belgian Congo which seemed to me did have an effect in Belgium or did have a place in the discussion in Belgium and Europe more broadly.

So the first two examples I’ll talk about are experiences of showing at art fairs. Why talk about art fairs?

Phillip Kleinmichael, who I mentioned earlier, he made the observation recently that if the broader public, if the main way they read about the visual art in newspapers is auction results, won’t that condition their ability to then receive visual art in general. More and more the public image of the visual arts is that of auctions and prices: won’t they understand the visual arts or associate it with a global class of UHNWI (Ultra-High-Net-Worth-Individuals)?

So the growth of the commercial art world can have in this way consequences for the capacity of art to reach the broader public. But, maybe more importantly, the ease with which the art scene accepts the status of art as a luxury commodity with less and less complaint also means that we are identified with our patrons – the financial services industry, who have a bad reputation.

I mean, even friends can criticize each other’s behavior, and at no point did anyone in the visual arts community criticize the financial services industry and way that they handled things in the last 5 years that I know of. I think that this is so pervasive that it’s worth looking at some of the dynamics that happen in art fairs because I think that they are then, it’s like the epicenter for looking at the broader situation.

So I once made a work that was about crime in Los Angeles and I heard that it was up for a prize and it didn’t get the prize because the corporate sponsor didn’t want to be associated with crime in Los Angeles. It was a beer company and they didn’t want beer associated with crime in Los Angeles, so my work didn’t get the prize.

So it’s interesting because it’s not censorship – they were not opposed to what I was doing – only that they didn’t want to support it because it was against their business interests. This is related to what I was saying about the private interests earlier and the implications when you’re in a situation where everyone is mobilized only by their private interests. So yes, it’s not convenient for the beer company, it’s an inconvenient thing and so they stop it. And then you have to wonder, so this is not censorship but does this condition the discussion in general? Is the discussion in general conditioned by people avoiding inconvenient things? When you have the cultural dialogue determined only by advancing of private interests, perhaps that dialogue will be steered implicitly away from anything that hinders powerful interests? That would be one question.

The second question is a bit more detailed. I made a work once about the Spanish Civil War. It was about a monument that was built and destroyed when Franco took Madrid, and then I thought oh what a good idea to exhibit this in an art fair in Spain. And it turned out that the anniversary of the destruction of monument was the weekend of the art fair, so it’s the 75th anniversary, and there were a lot of events in Madrid about this event. There would be a march to the site that I’d photographed and the story was in the press. So in some ways one might think this was a kind of opportune moment to show such a work, that it might have extra relevance or resonance.

So I asked the gallery – did anyone mention this connection? And it turns out no one mentioned it and no one asked. Of course – maybe they didn’t ask because it’s you know it’s busy at the fair or maybe the work wasn’t that good, but it struck me that I could have probably exhibited that work anywhere public place in the city of Madrid on that weekend and it would have somehow sparked something. The place where it was least likely to spark any kind of echo about what it referred to which was in this art fair. Why? I had to speculate.

Because of the way that the white cube created a kind of a disassociation from the local perhaps? Perhaps the work was too literal, and so everything that’s literal becomes metaphorical? I began to think that this dissociation of connoisseurship that is in the market, this “what’s hot what’s not,” also de-contextualizes the work from any particular meaning, any groundedness. Does the commercial art world turn us into connoisseurs, somehow, at the expense of some other capacities? Does it dis-locate us?
XVI. Experiment #2:  
The Unasked Question of Public Response

So for example, the last Documenta, which as I said I think does stand out as the one of the most serious or responsible or attempting to participate in this tradition of culture’s relationship to civil society. In the last Documenta there was this really explicit attempt to deal with Afghanistan, and to send artists to Afghanistan, to represent Afghanistan. They didn’t send artists to other countries and other countries didn’t get any similar kind of focus in the project.

But somehow it didn’t come up that effectively Germany is an occupying power in Afghanistan. The German military has been in Afghanistan for a decade.

And so there was a disconnect between what the actual relationship, somehow the actual relationship never appeared, and you wonder if the discussion that was happening there was part of disappearing the actual relationship.

So the second observation would be: does this dislocatedness of what happens in the contemporary art institutions, does the white cube actually block the capacity of artworks to connect to broader discussion and frameworks?

My own kind of personal “experiment > hypothesis > result” was that in fact in this case it really did block the capacity of those works to access the broader realities around the works.

So if I was ever going to find a moment in which my attempt to reach out or access the public realm would come back with something, this kind of would be it. And nothing came back – the work was exhibited, lots of people saw it, but there was really no feedback.

So it’s entirely inconclusive. Maybe it did spark something. I mean, the silence, there’s a lot of explanations for the silence. It’s possible that no one noticed. It’s possible that it wasn’t as good as I thought, it didn’t make it’s own point. On the other hand, sometimes people are actually silent when you’ve made a point really well.

I had to think back, one of the other things that came out of the “Solidarity with the Public Working Group” moment was a working that Mary Jo Outlawne, Michael Schulze and I worked towards quite intensely was a collaboration between General Public and the Berlinische Galerie. The Berlinische Galerie was going to take the archive of General Public, and the whole things was moving forward and then all of a sudden there were bigger possibilities. There were possibilities in collaborating on a major multi-year project - there was a lot of possibilities - and then the curator who we were working with left for a different job a better job and then the whole thing ended.

And in the same way, it’s not so much with this museum example, it’s not so much that anyone was against public debate, it’s rather that because the whole situation was so completely organized towards advancing private interests and the idea of arts capacity to be involved in public discussion was so marginal, that no one would ever even ask.

It seems none of these institutions have any capacity for looking at this. No one, the Dallas museum of art which has purchased the Omar Fast work about drones, is not going to do a lot of research about how that work relates to people’s understanding about drones. Even though of course it’s an extremely topical and pressing issue, it’s a very public presentation of the work, so the institutions themselves don’t really prioritize that.

So if I would say that’s my test case, public institution, public realm, try and make my own version of the Luc Tuymans historical political poetic metaphor, put it out there, it’s totally inconclusive. Which again, doesn’t mean either way, it’s inconclusive.

Respondent: Can I ask where it was?

It was in Paris.

XVII. Experiment #3:  
Invitation to Convene as Stake-Holders

The last example was a project that I did in May of 2012 at General Public with Fred Dewey and Wolfgang Heuer, and I think to me this was pretty successful, and what I had to think about what it means that it was successful or what I would get from that. How do we evaluate, really, and once one does evaluate, what does one do with those results?
So it was an event called “What Was The European Union?” held on the day of the elections in Greece in May of 2012, emerging from my Arendt research project in collaboration with Heuer and Dewey, who made the initial suggestion for such an event. Heuer supplied the title and I, through General Public, organized the practical framework.

I’ll just read a little bit of the press text and then I’ll talk a little bit about it and then that’s the end.

“This evening program attempts to intervene constructively in current discussions on the Euro-Crisis by focusing on the original and careful motivations of the European Union and the current political and economic crisis threatening it. A rupture of the Union and its founding principles looms. With this could come a return to ills it was built to combat. With a consideration of the roots of the European Project, and on the day of a crucial European election: what is at stake? And evening of discussion, performance, and reflection”

So I showed a slide show performance that I’d made that dealt with some issues of European history, there was an academic given a talk about the history of the European resistance and there was an open discussion.

And there was the brilliant suggestion of Fred Dewey to have the open discussion first, before the presentations. So, as opposed to a series of presentations and then everyone positioning themselves around it to then have their individual response to this thing, it started to a shared moment of how will people respond to what is a shared kind of problem. And it was an extremely urgent moment. And everything that was shown was really good.

And it felt like that somehow in this, that while the exhibition of such a kind of poetic political object is totally inconclusive, that something that happens in making events happen in these white cubes.

And I read yesterday just I happened upon this quote and I thought it was relevant, it’s from an artist Walead Beshty.

“If there is any lesson to be learned from Duchamp’s innovation of the ready-mad, it is that no object within an exhibition can be taken literally: in functional terms, making an exhibition is to work by analogy, to work via model. Exhibitions work as hypothesis.”

And so “What Was The European Union?” by staging a kind of a public space, somehow I wonder if, even though I don’t really agree with that understanding of art that’s in Duchamp, I do think a lot of people do, and I wonder if we were making a kind of “let’s pretend” moment happen. Like a

“let’s pretend this is a town hall meeting, let’s pretend we’re all involved in this together and we’re serious people and we’re going to deal with each other and take each other’s perspective seriously, and let’s think about this together.”

And that somehow in staging this moment of unfolding a public moment together, this might be actually in my experience where this white cube tradition can access the public realm.

Not by accessing it as if it the public realm was just out there, and would come right in and see and something can be fed into it.

But that somehow it could be constructed together in an unfolding that happens, together.

So let’s pretend: that we are all in a room, with white walls.

With a bunch of people, who are kind of serious and thinking about things

And then we could talk about them, about our shared concerns, and our experiences.

Like here.

Public laughs

So that’s the end, thank you.
— Originally delivered as an accompaniment to the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness, an attempt to sketch out the contemporary stakes of realism. Exploring Chomsky’s provocation that the Western (NATO) media functions similarly to Pravda’s old role in the Warsaw Pact. If so what are the implications for culture?
A few years ago I was asked to write a text about research – I guess we should get more chairs, because it’s going to be about 40 minutes - and so I wrote this text about research and the text’s focus was really on the way of relating research to the academy, but in the end I said that most of the relationship with art and investigation (or non-fictional art or investigatory poetics or creative non-fiction) that those academic questions at this point seem inconclusive.

But that what was more interesting was to think about what it might mean in terms of art’s relationship to the public or art’s relationship to the public realm. If art was going to take this focus on the nonfictional, or research, or how art is related to understanding. So this talk is more about that.

1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 4.

[whistling, then singing]

Did they tear it out
with talons of steel
and give you a shot
so that you wouldn’t feel
and wash it away
as if it wasn’t real?
It’s not a black-or-white issue, it’s not. It’s just an equality issue, it’s a people issue. It’s a citizen issue. Our motive isn’t trying to get somebody indicted or get somebody thrown in jail . . . We’re just striving for change. Almost like a civic duty.

We want people to know that we’re not oblivious to what is going on around us.

- Jarrett Jack of the Brooklyn Nets on organizing t-shirts for his teammates and opponents

“Die-In” Protest, Barclay’s Arena, Brooklyn, December 8, 2014.

“The epoch no longer simply demands a vague response to the question ‘What is to be done?’”

It is now a question, if one wants to remain in the present, of responding to this question almost every week: ‘What is happening?’

- Guy Debord, 1974
“The modern political lies deal efficiently with things that are not secrets at all but are known to practically everybody.

This is obvious in the case of rewriting contemporary history under the eyes of those who witnessed it, but it is equally true in image-making of all sorts, in which, again, every known and established fact can be denied or neglected if it is likely to hurt the image; for an image, unlike an old-fashioned portrait, is supposed not to flatter reality but to offer a full-fledged substitute for it.

And this substitute, because of modern techniques and the mass media, is of course much more in the public eye than the original ever was.”

“We are finally confronted with highly respected statesmen who, like de Gaulle and Adenauer, have been able to build their basic policies on such evident non-facts as that France belongs among the victors of the last war and hence is one of the great powers and “that the barbarism of National Socialism had effected only a small percentage of the country.”

All of these lies whether their authors know it or not, harbor an element of violence; organized lying always tends to destroy whatever it has decided to negate, although only totalitarian government have consciously adopted lying as the first step to murder.”

“the modern political lies”

“When Trotsky learned that he had never played a role in the Russian Revolution, he must have known that his death warrant had been signed. Clearly, it is easier to eliminate a public figure from the record of history if at the same time he can be eliminated from the world of the living. In other words, the difference between the traditional lie and the modern lie will more often than not amount to the difference between hiding and destroying.”

“What seems even more disturbing is that to the extent to which unwelcome factual truths are tolerated in free countries they are often, consciously or unconsciously, transformed into opinions – as though the fact of Germany’s support of Hitler or of France’s collapse before the German armies in 1940 or of Vatican policies during the Second World War were not a matter of historical record but a matter of opinion.

Since such factual truths concern issues of immediate political relevance, there is more at stake here than the perhaps inevitable tension between two ways of life within the framework of a common and commonly recognized reality.

What is at stake here is this common and factual reality itself, and this is indeed a political problem of the first order…

Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute. In other words, factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation.”

- This and previous quotes from ‘Truth and Politics’ by Hannah Arendt

Chomsky: Now if you read Pravda during the Afghan war, there would be critics and they’d say, “Look, too many Russian soldiers are dying. It’s not working. We should put in a different general.” That’s the way the Iraq war is going. I mean if you went back to Pravda in the 1980s, nobody would say that “It is wrong to invade Afghanistan”, or you know, “It’s a violation of international law”, and it would be all full of the, you know, benign intent: “We are not invading, we’re there at the request of the legitimate government, we are trying to help the people.”

Consider, for example, the invasion of Iraq. There was substantial public opposition, but virtually no principled opposition among the political class and media. Obama, for example, is praised by critics of the war for having taken a principled stand. That is false, which is a revealing illustration of the prevailing conformism to power, even among dissidents.
Obama regarded the war as a “strategic blunder.” One could have read the same in Pravda when Russia invaded Afghanistan. Nazi generals said the same about Hitler’s two-front war, after Stalingrad. There is nothing “principled” about such a stand. It is completely unprincipled.

That’s exactly what you read in the western press. People don’t even think about it. They’re so indoctrinated. They can’t think about it

Authentic opposition begins by applying to ourselves the same standards we apply to others.

It therefore would have condemned the war as a crime, in fact “the supreme international crime” that encompasses all the evil that follows, in the wording of the Nuremberg Tribunal. Much of the public did take that position, but it was, and remains, inexpressible in the media or the corridors of power.

– This and previous quotes from interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2005, 2009

So, if the February 15th, 2003 Iraq war protests were the biggest protests in world history...

Something I’m sure some people here participated in, something I participated in...

But something that I myself never really thought of as particularly important to have been involved in.

How did that happen?

The event was a global day of protest, gathering in capitols all over the world, with the three million people protesting in Rome, with just that one city counting as the largest political gathering ever recorded.

That one of the few things that I’ve been involved in that a hundred years from now that people will remember, that will have entered the historical record like this, how is it possible that I myself don’t really think of it as significant?

Here are the five mentions of the February 15th protests in the New York Times, which I think it is fair to say is the American newspaper that defines the historical record. Here are the five mentions in the week after the protests:

This first one – “THREATS AND RESPONSES” – is the only one that deals with the protest as a kind of a subject. It says “President Bush dismissed antiwar protests today as a factor in his plans for confronting Iraq and pressed ahead with a strategy to persuade reluctant allies that...

“Size of protest –
it’s like deciding, well, I’m going to decide foreign policy based on a focus group...” that was his comment. The subject of the story is not the protest itself, but rather Bush’s reaction.

The other four mentions of this – again, the largest political protest in the history of the world – the other four mentions of it are all commentary. They appeared in the editorial pages, the section that is there for opinion, not reporting of facts. There was no article giving the ‘behind-the-scenes’ or ‘back story’ to the protest. No profiles of participants or organizers.

Instead we got editorials. “Behind the Great Divide” by Paul Krugman, explaining that the difference between Europeans and is that Europeans have a different access to media than in the United States.

[A small group of people come late.]

Ok, so this is for the late-comers, so: starting with Noam Chomsky’s provocative comparison between the American coverage of the war in Afghanistan to the coverage of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by Pravda. Pravda, after all, we understand to be a kind of falsification of reality, a narrative that is very slanted to serve the political regime and in that way part of an apparatus of political repression.

Chomsky observes that Pravda did not publish total fantasy. They described that there was indeed a war happening, and that some aspects of the situation were discussed openly. But in Pravda they managed to disappear some of the key questions – Chomsky says some of the key questions would be: was it a crime, or not? In Pravda they managed to disappear that. And Chomsky argues that the Western press does as well, that the fundamental goals, principles and legalities of the NATO presence (occupation?) are avoided.

What’s interesting though is that Chomsky only raises this comparison as a provocation, but he doesn’t actually get into what’s behind it, what’s substantial in it. He gets close to it: “much of the public did take that position” against the war, “but it remained inexpressible in the media or in the corridors of power.”

But how technically is that possible? What are the mechanics of that? And what are the implications of the non-representation of broad sections of the public?

So, Chomsky makes the provocative comparison between the debate in the Western press about the war in Iraq to the debate in the Soviet press about the war in Afghanistan. And he makes this comparison mostly as a provo-
So then – here we have the five mentions in the New York Times in the week after the protest.

The first was the only one to describe the protest as an event directly.

The rest position the protests into a commentary, use them as an object as part of a broader argument. So, its Paul Krugman’s argument that the protests reveal something about the different relationship to media. This second is about focus groups – the whole article is about what focus groups. The next one is “European’s are Sissies,” an interview with Robert Kagan. Last: “Threats and Responses: the fracture of the Western alliance over Iraq are a reminder that there still maybe two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion,” and then goes onto an analysis as to what’s behind the anti-war sentiment.

Ten years later Time Magazine would report on the simple fact that the largest protest in the history of the world happened and was “ignored.”

The point being is that actually this kind of straightforward factual account which happened ten years later which would simply say this was the largest political event in the history of the world actually never appeared in 2003. There was no headline: BIGGEST PROTEST IN HISTORY AGAINST A PLAN THAT THE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP ALL AGREE ON.

With the Arendt quotes before - looking at the situation in post-war Europe, looking at Adenauer or looking at de Gaulle and the way that Adenauer and de Gaulle shaped the European discussion around non-facts – here we have in our time a kind of extension of her argument, with in our own time the way that the facts seem to be disappeared through commentary.

Somehow arguably the most historically impressive, probably the only Guinness book of records thing that I’ll ever be in, like in the Guinness book of records, just never appeared in and of itself with its own significance.

To go back to the Debord quote:

“The epoch no longer simply demands a vague response to the question ‘What is to be done?’

It is now a question, if one wants to remain in the present, of responding to this question almost every week: “What is happening?”

It’s a striking quote, in large part because it comes from Debord, who still has a kind of romantic élan, because gave up the space of being an art maker, of
making stuff to go into white cubes or poetry to go into poetry journals, and
gave it up to become a militant revolutionary writer and organizer, believing
that the space for transformation should not just be for material into artworks,
but that the transformation should be of the world itself. Here rather than
insist on political action, he takes up Lenin’s famous call to action “what is to be
done?” and instead of the historic call for militant engagement, his answer
is to try and respond to current events, to attend to the shifting situation of
the moment. I can almost imagine him sitting in a café puzzling over a news-
paper.

And this puzzling, questioning, responding Debord is also remarkable, be-
cause in The Society of the Spectacle there is little questioning or respond-
ing, only just laying out a confident master narrative, the story of the evolving
spectacle which appears over and over in the book as the subject of sen-
tences itself: “the Spectacle does this,” “the Spectacle does that.” This letter
is from 1974, the same period as Watergate and the resignation of President
Richard Nixon in the US, an event that later Debord suggested made him
question some of his thesis. This same cycle of events was what led Frank
Church to organize the investigations into the intelligence agencies and later
his own run for President.

In the same period, Hannah Arendt was also wrestling with the problem of
attending to political events, the superficial and underlying meanings of the
news. In 1976 Arendt gave an important public lecture titled “Home to Roost.” In
this talk she suggested that the United States was becoming a society of
organized lying. This was a political structure she had explored in her earlier
work on totalitarianism, and in “Home to Roost” she argued that the method
in the United States was of course different. While the totalitarian regimes
of Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany had been structured around organized
lying, the way they would disappear facts was that they would construct what
she calls “holes of oblivion,” they would just stuff everything in there including
massive numbers of people.

This strategy was of course discredited (and also revealed to not be so effec-
tive, in the end.) Arendt argued that instead in the US there was a different
model, focused on image-making. The production of an image to obscure
the underlying reality, and not the uni-vocal party line of a dictatorship, but a
shifting, renewing image, like the refresh rate of a monitor, the speedy re-acti-
vation of lights that convinces your eyes that it’s ever-present.

This is different in someway than what we would think of Debord’s analysis
of the spectacle or Baudrillard’s simulations, because in Baudrillard’s Simula-
tions he argues that the simulation actually disappears the reality and is there
in and of itself. The simulation or simulacrum is there and has it’s own reality,
there is hyper-reality. Arendt says, no – there’s a process that’s happening
where the image making keeps happening, it keeps having to be renewed be-
cause the underlying conditions are persistently real, and so new images “as
habit forming as drugs” keep arriving to cover things up. And this is different
from Debord for whom the image itself – “the spectacle” – is a causal agent
in it’s own right, whereas Arendt clearly sees the image-making apparatus
in politics as a non-reality, a lie that can bleed over into self-deception, but
in which the actors and agents are still the people who occupy the political
realm.

There’s a striking line in this 1976 talk where she comments upon the arrival
of Gerald Ford in Washington DC – Nixon’s replacement who it’s largely be-
lieve was awarded the position of Vice-President only after agreeing to par-
don Nixon, which Ford of course then did. She finds it incredible that public

*The epoch no longer simply demands a
vague response to the question ‘What is to be
done?’

It is now a question, if one wants to remain in
the present, of responding to this question
almost every week: ‘What is happening?’

- Guy Debord, 1974
intellectuals would greet this new regime like a man on a white horse, a cowboy coming to save the day. In contemporary political slang, one might say that Arendt was surprised by the “optics” or the “atmospherics” the new Ford regime was creating in collaboration with the press and intellectuals.

So she explicitly links it to cowboys and movie imagery, which four years later becomes very explicit again in the figure of Ronald Reagan, literally the man on the horse with the white hat. And one of the things that struck me about this idea of the renewal of the reformer: “there’s a new sheriff in town,” the outsider comes to town to clean up the rotten system. Because this public relations image that was fashioned to cloak Gerald Ford is then renewed by Reagan, and ultimately somehow becomes the structure for presidential politics in the United States for the next thirty years.

Looking at the winning campaign slogans from Presidential races from 1976 to now:

Jimmy Carter was “A Leader, For a Change.”
Ronald Reagan promised “Morning, Again,” a new beginning.
Bill Clinton often referred to himself as the “Man from Hope,” him being born apparently in the small town Hope, Arkansas.
Then George Bush said he was a “Reformer with Results.”
And now the figure whose image most defined by “Hope” and “Change,” the words in block letters always surrounding his face.

And I have a feeling that in some ways the narrative that Obama has offered us also represents – looking ahead to 2016 – a kind of end-point, or at least a bullet-point in this period.
Because I don’t think it’s possible – not to make predictions, but if indeed
we were to hypothetically end up with two people who had been related to
former Presidents - Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush – then this capacity for the
system to produce this sense of renewal or reform would seem to be lost.
Definitely the promise of Obama’s campaign is somehow the culmination, to
me, of this narrative.

What’s interesting about the narrative is that underneath it is a recognition
that must be appealed to, a widespread public recognition that the system is
rotten and needs to be reformed.

And that’s what wins, what wins is to say that the system is rotten and needs
to be reformed. And the political system re-produces these pretend-reform-
ers, and the postures and poses of reform, but the promise is constantly
betrayed. Bush promised less foreign intervention and for the government
to leave the people alone, they got wars, surveillance and tax cuts for the
wealthy while the economy imploded.

Obama promised to review the trade agreements, bring manufacturing back
to the US and strengthen the labor unions, none of which happened. He
promised an end to the Bush era Global War on Terror, and gave us regime
change in Libya and the new practice of assassination of US citizens, under
the discrete and delicate language of the "ongoing contingency operations."

So thisdisconnect between the image produced by the political system, and
the actual operation of the political system – is this is a fair basis for a com-
parison with the Soviet Union?

There is a risk of provocative over generalization of course. It almost makes
it sound like we’re in The Matrix, like there is a true world and there is a fake
world and the people who are running the show keep us in the fake world
and we need to break out of the fake world and get to the real world.

A large part of the power of those films and similar science-fiction narratives
is their appeal to an intuitive recognition that part of the structure of this
reality we’re in, there’s some aspect of it that is somehow contrived, manipu-
lated.

Maybe it’s not as explicit an organized lying as Pravda. But we feel a recog-
nition there, a resonance. And if we look back and think about the way that
the facts of the Iraq war protests were disappeared out from underneath us
by never really being appearing, or the way that in The New York Times the
facts were never aired or explored. Instead we got a shifting sequence of
commentary and framing that somehow stood in place of reckoning with the
substance of the events. What are the consequences for those of us who
participate in such things? Who strive to participate in public life, to seek a
redress of grievances, and in some ways as if there’s not even a reflection of
the attempt, even when the attempt is objectively substantial, like the largest
protest in the history of the world, for example?

Perhaps then to go back into the comparison to the Soviet Union can lead to
something.

So I’m going to look at two artists who worked in the Soviet Union and ex-
plore them very briefly:

A still from a film by Krzysztof Kieslowski called talking heads where he went
around and he interviewed people with two simple questions “who are you
and what do you want from life?”
And here is a quote by Kieslowski:

Perhaps we were the first postwar film generation—and I say ‘we’ because there were so many of us—who tried to describe the world as it was. We showed only micro-worlds. The titles suggest this: The School, The Factory, The Hospital, or The Office. If these mini-observations were pieced together, they would describe life in Poland.

Living in an undescribed world is hard. You have to try it to know what it feels like. It’s like having no identity. Your problems and suffering disappear; they disintegrate. To put it more radically: you feel completely cut off from other people. . . . We lived according to ideals: Fraternity, equality, and justice. But none of these things existed, least of all justice.

Kieslowski switched from making documentary to making fiction films because in making an early film The Hospital, he documented someone doing something that was slightly perhaps not correct. There was a sense that it might get this person in trouble. So Kieslowski thought that, or at least he later says this was part of his motivation, that by fictionalizing things he would not risk the people who he was trying to portray.

There was a necessity, a need—which was very exciting for us—to describe the world. The Communist world had described how it should be and not how it really was. We–there were a lot of us—tried to describe this world and it was fascinating to describe something which hadn’t been described yet.

It’s a feeling of bringing something to life, because it’s a bit like that. If something hasn’t been described than it doesn’t officially exist. So that if we start describing it, we bring it to life.

So to be more concrete: there was an official party line and there was an official description of the world. Everything had to be fitted to that narrative to be part the academic system, the legal system, the political system, the economic system. Things that could not conform to that narrative had to be repressed or ignored.

So Kieslowski and his friends—and he makes the point that there were a lot of people involved in this—they had this idea of describing things from the bottom up in which the reality of people’s conditions would appear. This had an element of challenging the “official reality” even if they weren’t done in such a way as to polemically contradict the party narrative.

This strategy then unfolded further in his fiction films.
This is from the scar, Kieslowski’s first fiction film. It’s about a guy who is very popular in his town and he climbs the ranks in the party leadership. He becomes involved in making decisions in the town and the party tells him the right thing to do is to build a chemical factory in town. So he goes ahead with building the chemical factory in the town and it’s a huge disaster. So the film is all about his struggle to deal with personal responsibility, his family, his community. His desire to climb the ladder against his sense of loyalty to the community which brought him the position he has.

This wrestling with contradictions of ethics, the exploration of the crisis at the intersection between the public and the private live of people – this is the underlying theme of all the Kieslowski fiction films made until 1989. All the films basic structure is to set up a situation in which to frame or to dramatize really fundamental ethical questions. The woman who is pregnant with the baby of a married man whose in a coma and if he’s going to live then she should have the baby and if he’s going to die he should have the abortion. And she goes to ask the doctor and the doctor says I can’t tell you if he’s going to live or die because I’m a doctor and I just have to try and help him live… The wandering ghost of a dead activist, watching how the consequences of his actions unfold after his passing.

Kieslowski puts you in this position, forces you to inhabit these very difficult questions, and I don’t even think they are actually really resolved. So, without confronting the official party logic directly they do build something - not just a space of reflection but a space for thinking around the kind of conditions that exist that are not described. Not just in terms of documenting factually, like this is a hospital and this is what happens in a hospital but what are the ethical issues the human issues that go into the hospital. Again, this was not in explicit opposition to the political arguments of the party, but rather the strategy was to build up a space that was an implicit challenge by insisting on the complex choices and paradoxes of action that existed. The challenge was there because the political order fundamentally insisted that these issues were simple, clear and people effectively had no power beyond that to be pursued in the channels of “the official reality.”

To my knowledge, no one has related Kieslowski’s work in this way to the political situation of Poland in the 1980s. If you think how one of the strategies of Solidarity in Gdansk was rather than to go into direct confrontation with the political system, they would instead build up an independent social space that over time would be strong enough to then make some fundamental claims on the political system, then perhaps we can find a parallel cultural strategy in the work of Kieslowksi and those around him. The challenge was there because the political order fundamentally insisted that these issues were simple, clear and people effectively had no power beyond that to be pursued in the channels of “the official reality.”

Solzenitsyn started off with a fictionalization of his own experience of the gulag in One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch, and the book comes out and then people start sending him material. Everywhere he goes people come up to him telling him these other accounts, and he starts to gather all this together, over time he ends up with all this material and that becomes the basis for this 1500 page tome, the three volume series of the Gulag Archipelago. This aspect is never really made explicit in any description of the Gulag Archipelago itself, but if you read through it, the books are so filled with quote from anonymous letters, from asides from when people came up to him, that actually the structure of the book is a kind of chorus of first-person accounts. Solzhenitsyn continually returns to other voices, even including plural perspectives on a specific issue, and with certain figures returning through the books.
Given the structure of organized lying and propaganda that was the context he worked in, Solzhenitsyn developed a focus on the first-person account, the voice of the person bearing witness to their own experience.

Fred Dewey in his text took up Solzhenitsyn’s principle to “break through the veil of the lie.” The idea is that one person cuts a tiny hole in the veil of the lie and that makes space for another until the hole gets bigger and bigger and then we’re all on the other side. This description is of course a kind of metaphor, but what partly gives it power is that it’s actually an accurate description of what happened with Solzhenitsyn and his attempt to chronicle the “un-official reality” of forced labor camps in the Soviet Union. He began from an account of his own experience in *Ivan Denisovich*, which inspired others and that group of plural voices became the basis for epic Gulag Archipelago, which in turn was hugely influential amongst Communists in Western Europe, forcing them to wrestle with the concrete conditions of communism in the Soviet Union with wide reaching consequences for the left in France and Italy in particular.

So, I’m going to back to the Debord quote, again. Here is a voice from our side, the so-called free societies of Western Europe and the US, and after considering the focus on description – the power that description can have under certain circumstances – perhaps it can put the quote into a different context. He answers Lenin’s call with a surprising suggestion for a process of attending to things and perhaps that the process of attending to things has a kind of political content.

Perhaps because in the West trying to figure out “what is happening?” can actually be extremely difficult.

“The epoch no longer simply demands a vague response to the question ‘What is to be done?’

It is now a question, if one wants to remain in the present, of responding to this question almost every week: ‘What is happening?’”

- Guy Debord, 1974
Ok, but it’s not as if the first operation had… that wasn’t an act of war there. There’s at least 20,000 Americans and I don’t know how many Dutch or German troops are there.

So, what does that mean for us, for us that are citizens of these countries that are involved, that we are paying for it and it is happening in our name. And people blame us. People think that we should be responsible for the consequences of our government’s actions and then they make problems for us, like they attack us for that.

Or, let’s say the entire structural re-adjustment of the funding for education in the Netherlands. What is really happening? I think it’s difficult to figure out – if you take a step back – what is going on in this situation. Why it’s happening, what are the causes, what are the goals, where is it going, what are the consequences? What is the nature of the social agreements that previously existed that are being renegotiated?

I think that one of the things of the production of the image of the reformer and the experience of identification with that. One has to remember that figures like Neil Young and Dennis Hopper were enthusiastic supporters of Reagan and his promise to support small scale self-government. The process of identification then of course must be broken and then is followed by a process of disillusionment.

Here Kevin Alexander Grey describes the period of Obama as “the Novocaine Presidency,” using this crucial quote by Malcolm X.

My suspicion is that – going back to that image of Stalin and the disappearance of the young man – that this kind of disappearance that happens with something like the Iraq War protests is something that happens to us. There is an experience of disembodiment of our own historical reality that we experience and so that’s why this quote is so effective to me is that it’s all about re-embodiment. It comes from trying to think about the way these political forces are something that is happening in your mouth.

This is an image of the dancer Simone Forti.

So I’m going to talk now about a few strategies that I think of as important for dealing with the situation that we’re in.
So Simone Forti is someone who comes from minimalist dance, who later developed an improvisational way of working with words and with stories, though it’s all very fractured, and at one point she started working with newspapers and the motivation actually was that her father had died and her father had been the daily news reader in the family and because he read the news everyday he knew the right moment to get out of Italy. They were Jews living in Florence in the 1930’s. He knew the right moment to get out – that if they waited too long they might not be able to get out, and if they left too soon maybe they’d have to leave with nothing and leave all their savings behind them. He figured out how to leave. So she thought that the death of her father meant that someone else in the family needed to take responsibility for figuring out what was going, but she said that she didn’t really know how to. So she decided to integrate reading the news into what she was doing already which was this improvisational moving and talking work.

When I first saw a video of one of these pieces – News Animations, she calls them – what was so striking was that it was a way of approaching content, non-fictional material that is somehow essentially didactic. It’s not like a lecture performance, for instance, where you would have a bunch of prepared material which you would then aestheticize. So the room could be painted a different color but basically I’m transmitting to you this thing that I’ve got. And basically the reason I think that people in general distrust political art because of this process which is “I’ve got it, and I’m going to give it to you” which in practice means either I’ll tell you about some alarming situation, which you haven’t been alarmed about but I’d like you to start being alarmed, that’s one way. Or I have an idea about how things ought to be and I’m going to tell you about it, that’s another one. There’s a cynicism to it, because actually nobody has such convincing answers, unless somebody really is or has a clear program of how to move forward. So if someone is acting like they can give you this clear argument directly, they’re going to make you upset about some tragedy some place, like from anywhere, from Ben Heider to Cambodia, they’re not going to make you upset about these great crimes that are happening, but they’re not actually going to propose to you anything that you can do about it. So it actually feels like a form of manipulation, like bad faith.

What I liked about Simone’s work was the point was not have an answer but to embody the question of what is going on. And embody this attentiveness and the shifting of scale between her own experience and then trying to imagine things that were happening in Iraq or some other far away place.

So this became very important for my practice as a way of thinking through material and working with material in a way that they weren’t just ideas. The photography in the work became important to as a way of attending to these places, so for me, Simone’s developed a research method that had to do with reading the news and thinking about the news and then performing that reading and thinking in a way, working it up through associative writing and other exercises.

I took this further because I’d always been doing historical research and so then this performance style became a way to try and transmit this stuff. And then the photographs then existed to preserve a connection to these places that is not so instrumentalized as words can be, and to attend to their reality – that they have a status that is not going to just be part of my narrative but I’m going to offer it up to you in a way that is almost mute. The experience of whether or not they’re beautiful is almost this responsibility to attend to the world.

Another person who is very important for strategies of description is the film-maker John Cassavetes, whose idea was that the films were like questions not like answers. And that they should ask you question that you’d never asked before. A lot of that is focused on inter-personal relationships but in the example like The Killing of a Chinese Bookie is about someone who gets into gambling problems and the way that he’s offered to get out of the debt is to kill someone. Whether or not it’s worth it for him to become a murderer is the question. In some ways you can see that this is a parallel to the work of Kieslowski, of zero-ing on these ethical questions that then as the art unfolds you are forced to confront these ethical questions for yourself. And there is a similar emphasis to Simone’s work to the embodiment of the question as opposed to an illustrational relationship. There’s a great story that the night that it came time to shoot the scene of the murder, whether or not Ben Gazzara
was going to kill the bookie or not, they stopped the shooting and Gazzara and Cassavetes go sit in this car and debate it for an hour and a half.

“Would you really do it?

No, really, would you do it?

What would it mean for you to take that on? What is enough to kill for? Your whole life? Your friends’ lives?”

In the contemporary visual arts there are other examples of people who are trying to do this kind of work.

A work by Annike Erriksen where she went and did oral histories with people who had been involved in the German student movement in the 1970’s and compiled them into a strange fictionalized text that is show as a monologue of a young man in an abandoned room talking about the experience of living with other people. It produces, through this shift to fictionalization, you somehow get access to a point that is deeper than surface of the narrative of the German Youth Movement.

This strategy that by losing track or by losing the thread of the explicit narrative actually allows you to get access to some of the underlying questions was key to the early work of Omer Fast. This is a still from Godville and at this part of the video the guy is talking to the camera and it’s very unclear. He’s an actor playing a slave who’s being interviewed about a political demonstration by the actors in a place that’s a live historical re-enactment site. And he’s talking to the camera and he says things like – “you come here, and you think…” and it’s unclear is he talking to us the public, is he talking to the camera person who is presumably the artist, is he talking in his role as a slave, is he talking as someone whose become a political activist working on the conditions of fake slaves? What’s interesting is that all the particularities don’t disappear and they don’t conflate but rather they become this shifting thing that somehow underneath it you get access to this other more human layer.

This is a work by David Hammons, How You Like Me Now? When you ask these questions in public – this is a billboard of the African American politician Jesse Jackson with blonde hair and blue eyes. The night that it was put up it was demolished, just knocked over. So Hammons moves the billboard to an indoor space and then presents it with a bunch of sledge-hammers, which relates I guess to the people who knocked it down and then the sledge hammers also have a package of cigarettes, a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes on them – a joke “lucky strike”.
To conclude: the images that I showed in the beginning of protests of the not the acquittal but the absence of any charges entirely for two police officers who killed two African Americans, a man in New York and a boy in Ferguson, Missouri. The protests didn’t emerge in response to the shootings themselves but rather to the absence of any criminal case against these police officers. It brings to mind the LA Riots of 1992 which didn’t happen when Rodney King was beaten but rather when the officers were then acquitted of any crime. It was the formalization of the injustice that people actually respond to.

It is a refusal of the people to acquiesce in their own disappearance from the image. Like the boy who disappears in that image with Stalin, only it is the people being erased or smothered. That is why, I think, that phrase ‘I can’t breathe’ could be picked up so broadly.

If a police officer feels physically threatened by somebody they have a right to shoot them. So you have a legal system in which the police have a right to shoot them. And you have an economic system in which it certainly seems like there people’s lives don’t matter as much as others lives. For instance Michael Brown’s body was left in the street for four hours – it’s inconceivable that a rich African American child would be left on the street dead for four hours. So we have an economic system that says that one person’s life matters more than another person’s life. Then we have a media system that actually validates this system, justifying the police officer’s decisions.

At the same time, the night after the decision not to prosecute the police officer who choked Eric Garner there were 179 cities with massive protests and many of those cities with the freeway and road system shut down through spontaneous solidarity protest of civil disobedience, based on principle, not based on economic conditions. And that phrase that became so popular – “I can’t breathe” – has to do with an embodiment and an identification with that position, and also that it becomes that the situation is so suffocating. It’s one thing for injustice to occur. It’s another thing for injustice to then be called justice.

And like the 2003 protests, there is no newspaper headline saying 170 cities erupt in spontaneous non-violent civil disobedience in protest of injust in the New York political system. So I think we are living through a situation where something is getting disappeared. And the experience of the disappearance is what people are protesting against. And that means that for people who want to deal with the “unofficial reality” there is a status for cultural work, a territory to work it.

I think it raises a bunch of difficult questions about the nature of our institutions. Do our institutions reach out to people who also go to protests? Not
just the institutions, but how are they structurally defined – the Stedelijk Mu-
seum is owned by the citizens of Amsterdam, but do they perform like they’re
owned by the citizens of Amsterdam? When the Stedelijk re-opened and
the Queen went in followed by the second VIP group of business people
and sponsors, and a 1000 people who were already the VIPs watched and
waited, and the citizens were never invited and no one mentioned that this
was possibly problematic. The entire arts community was participating in
the structural readjustment of the nature of the institution. That’s another
issue, and the subject of another talk for my PhD, but it brings it into focus
that there are lots of people who now recognize that the official narrative of
the way that this world is organized is not correct and they are really, I think,
interested in different ways of thinking about things.

There are moments of accountability, incredibly. There are people that are
interested in looking at what’s happening.

Going back to the Chomsky quote: Chomsky’s assertion is that in the corri-
dor’s of power the idea that the Iraq War was a war crime, was the crime of
aggression, that that’s inexpressible in the corridors of powers, but that the
people by and large agreed that it was a crime.

Again, it has to do with a power of description, or rather the power that de-
scription can have under certain circumstances. Our circumstances are of
course different – the almost unified voice of the mass media in the West,
endlessly repeating the same points and avoiding everything else, is still
only almost a unified field. Other voices appear, unlike in the Soviet system.
Like the basketball player said about making the ‘I can’t breathe’ t-shirts: he
wanted to show that he was not oblivious, in oblivion, to the world around.
Do we want to show that we are not in oblivion?

And all those people from 2003 who marched all of the world, like those kids
who marched in 179 cities last year – in principal, couldn’t they be the public
for art?
Proposal for a Performance in a Prison

— In which an unrealized idea becomes an outloud thought experiment, distributed over a wide geographic area via radio (23 cities, 16 countries). Does the freedom of the public matter, or have relevance, artistically?
Proposal for a performance in a prison:
Johnny Cash performed in a prison once.

[singing]
I shot a man in Reno
Just to watch him die

But Cash had been in prison. He had been in that prison.

Later he performed in San Quentin. He hadn’t been in San Quentin, but still you could say that the people who saw him were perhaps closer to him (or he was closer to them) than he was to the people who he performed in front of at Madison Square Garden. Or in Paris, or on television.

That, that was more – what? – his community?

It’s a question of context.

The question of context. It has a few parts.

Part 1 - the moon.

A quote from Hannah Arendt:

Let us suppose – to take one among many possible examples – that the historian is confronted with excessive poverty in a society of great wealth, such as the poverty of the British working classes during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution. The natural human reaction to such conditions is one of anger and indignation because these conditions are against the dignity of man. If I describe these conditions without permitting my indignation to interfere, I have lifted this particular phenomenon out of its context in human society and have thereby robbed it of part of its nature, deprived it of one of its important inherent qualities. For to arouse indignation is one of the qualities of excessive poverty insofar as poverty occurs among human beings.

This is a passage from a letter, a response to a critique. There had been a critique that the book’s tone or style was somehow “sentimental.” Other people had praised this quality as “passionate” but either way Arendt felt that there was a misunderstanding, that she had failed to make clear a methodological strategy she had been using.

So, she says she did not agree that the “emotionally existing” would overshadow the “essential”, because the “emotionally existing” would “form an integral part of the essential”.

She says:
This has nothing to do with sentimentality or moralizing, although of course, either can become a pitfall for the author. If I moralized or became sentimental. I simply did not do well what I was supposed to do, namely, to describe the totalitarian phenomenon as occurring, not on the moon, but in the midst of human society. To describe the concentration camps sine ira [without bitterness] is not to be “objective,” but to condone them and such condoning cannot be changed by a condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself.

To describe human phenomenon as if they “occurred on the moon,” out of human context, is in fact a distortion. From a scientific point of view – physics, math, geography – the moon could be “in context,” but for those things that depend upon their being “in human society” to exist at all, those things must be described within a human frame of reference, including emotion. This inclusion of emotion is not as a form of subjectivity or privatization but is really almost the opposite, to preserve the public meaning through avoiding the distortion of de-contextualisation.

And part of that distortion is to describe things without judgment - when judging them is an essential aspect of their nature.

To take such an abstracted point of view on a subject and then even at the end add a judgment, at the end add a condemnation like a decorative element on this other structure, is still “condoning,” Arendt says. And that this “duty bound” judgement that can be tacked on still doesn’t address this kind of distortion that can happen from de-contextualisation.

That’s the first part of context.

The second part of context is - thinking in a closed room.

Like in a closet.

Like in a cell.

For the Greeks it was like a joke that Socrates had a wife. Philosophers shouldn’t have wives. Philosophers shouldn’t have families because to philosophize requires a kind of distance, a kind of withdrawal.
And this withdrawal produces a thinking capable of depth and this is one kind of intellectual activity - the ivory tower.

While this distance allows a kind of depth to be produced, at the same time there is another kind of superficialization that comes along with it. Because the thinking project has been produced out of context, as if it came from the moon and maybe more importantly even would somehow go back to the moon in the end, there’s a kind of flattening out.

Because when you add the question of context – where will this work unfold, for whom, how so, practically speaking – a different kind of depth is possible. The practical realities of putting it into the world create a kind of methodological structure, because you’re constantly having to re-frame it in terms of making things public, and not just taking the existing structures of making things public for granted. When the questions of the human context of the work’s production and being made public are not dealt with, are not activated, it’s like a path of least resistance: the work will most likely unfold within the existing conventions, structures, whether they are appropriate or not, effective or not.

And this gets more important when you start to think about your work, your art, getting your art out there.

Johnny Cash performed in a prison.

I was trying to make things that had to do with the public, with public life. And the assumption was that you could find this public, that you could address them.

Let’s say we’re going to take an art space that is not a commercial space, because a commercial space by definition is private.

Let’s say we take a public one.

Let’s go further and let’s say we take one that is actually owned by the citizens of the city. The citizens legally own that art museum – the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam. There’s a history there and the history of the Stedelijk Museum is such that that the people of Amsterdam, the art community there doesn’t feel like passive consumers - they feel like stake-holders. They feel as if they have a share there.

So in this sense perhaps this would be a place to address the public.

That if one wanted to make art to try and deal with things that could be relevant to public life or civil society maybe this is the right place.

But somehow it’s not.

First of all, because the entire organization of the museum actually acts as if its not connected to the public.

Or rather when they think about the public realm they do so in the way that is dominant now in the Netherlands or perhaps you could say in Italy or perhaps in Europe in general, which they think of it in economic terms. They think about the museum of terms of tourism in terms of ticket sales or they think about it in terms of city-branding.

For the professionals who work at the museum they think about it in terms of their own careers. They think about how the museum functions into their own position within the hierarchy of the international art world, and how the museum itself is ranked and understood within that hierarchy. They almost never prioritize the museum’s meaning for the citizens who own it or the community who feels to be stake-holders there.

And so in this way in a moment of crisis the Stedelijk Museum called a town hall meeting a few years ago. But revealingly the town they referred to was not their neighborhood. It was not anyone who lived nearby the museum, or even the city of Amsterdam in general. They town they referred to was the members of the international art community who lived in Amsterdam.

The point being that even when the museum itself approaches the public or approaches public questions, it doesn’t do so from the classical standing of the public realm in general, or the neighborhood or the citizenry or civil society.

And even those people who go to the Stedelijk and think of themselves as stakeholders, perhaps they don’t necessarily think of themselves as related to the neighborhood either. It is possible that what they think of themselves as stakeholders in is a kind of social club, a kind of elevated, hierarchized place above society, a kind of aristocratic superiority of taste, perhaps.

It’s possible that even an active public enters the museum not to be part of the public realm, but to be part of something private, like a social club. This can happen even when the museum itself is factually a public resource, not just through some abstracted bureaucracy but concretely owned by the citizens of a city. So one could even a work in that set-up, a work whose intention and meaning would only unfold when considered in light of the life of the citizen, and somehow not that would just not work there.
How is this possible?

Recently the online magazine German Foreign Policy made an interesting observation.

They were discussing the way that the German government was dealing with Greece and one example in particular which was the claims of the descendants of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki. Until the Zionist movement in Palestine, Thessaloniki was the largest majority Jewish city in the world. The entire Jewish population was destroyed in the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust. The Jews were actually billed for their train tickets to the camps. So the Jewish community in Thessaloniki is suing for reparations – not for the crime in general but specifically for just the money for the train tickets paid to the German government – and the German government is now fighting this, fighting to not pay it back.

But what’s interesting is that at the exact same moment that they’re fighting this, that their trying not to pay the Jews of Thessaloniki, they are actually funding an art project that deals with the history of Jewish life in Thessaloniki.

And in the section of the article titled “Performance” German Foreign Policy magazine makes the following statement:

The foreign ministry systematically pursues a “culture of remembrance” based on aesthetical performance rather than material atonement.

Again:

The foreign ministry systematically pursues a “culture of remembrance” based on aesthetical performance rather than material atonement.

In other words: the government is actively supporting the dramatization of historic crimes that the continue to benefit from, and at the same time resisting efforts at restitution. The art project about Thessaloniki must of course be sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, and probably would not get funded if it was not effective at evoking sympathy.

But “remembrance” is being actively disconnected from responsibility. Was the tragedy the result of an accident, an act of nature? No, it was caused by people who were responsible and the money went to the German treasury which still has it, and they continue to want to hold the proceeds of the crime. A model of culture is being built up in which aesthetics is not linked to action and it's consequences, it's meaning and the potential to act now, but rather as part of framing human tragedy as something to be experienced aesthetically, not politically.

The foreign ministry systematically pursues a “culture of remembrance” based on aesthetical performance rather than material atonement.

But could we generalize further: not just the foreign ministry, but the government in general? Not just a culture of remembrance but culture more generally? And not just material atonement, but perhaps material politics?

Or, to say it in a different way:

The government pursues culture based on aesthetic performance rather than material action.

Is the tax money that goes to culture in the Netherlands or in Germany actually part of pursuing a culture of “aesthetical performance” rather than “material” and concrete political actions?

Perhaps this is linked to the sense that approaching the public realm through these white cube institutions, the sense that this simply isn’t working or doesn’t work that I’ve had, perhaps this is part of it.

Perhaps this cultural project of historical memory, or even the structure of “contemporary art” in Western Europe, while on the surface seems as if it’s an attempt to engage civil society, to contribute with this classical language of “de-barbarism” - the “de-barbarisation of post-fascist Europe” - but perhaps that’s at times kind of a façade.

And thinking about that is when I started thinking about performing in a prison.

It was the prison in Amsterdam.

You see it as you go by on the subway – the towers.

Supposedly it’s kind of a nice prison – they have TVs.

I proposed it to a curator – I had a project where I could make a work and we could pick which institution to approach and I said, “why don’t we do something in a prison?”

I think I didn’t understand what I was saying, at that point, because she didn’t understand. And so I let it sit and then later I thought about it, well, why would that be so crazy? I mean, is it so far fetched?

In fact I actually know someone who works in a jail – an old friend of mine who I grew up with, Paul Sullivan – he works in a jail I think someone told me in Bourne near Cape Cod. So I could get in touch with him, I mean it’s been a
long time but I could get in touch with him and I could say:

“Paul, you know I have this idea, you know - I'm an artist I make this stuff
and I'd like to show my stuff in the jail there.”

Let's say he says yes. He could even says hey you know that's fantastic we
have a great space we have a stage we have a lighting guy we have a video
documentation team we have a budget, we always do performances in prison.

Let's say it's really like that: let's say it was easy.

Then what? What would you do then?

There's a tradition of theater in prison.

But that of course is working with prisoners to perform themselves. More
importantly it involves a long-term engagement with the prison. What I had in
mind was more like 'hit it and quit it,' "pop in and pop out." Is that exploitation?

Would you really need to do it? Maybe it's better just as an idea, something
you could just talk about, to talk around, to talk around a proposal for a perfor-
mance in a prison.

After all this is art - it doesn't need to be true. You could just say you did it,
you could just lie.

Why would you really need to do it? What in particular, specifically, would be
achieved by actually doing it as opposed to talking about doing it?

And say you really do it - are you doing it to make a point? Are you treating
the people themselves (who are of course already trapped) are you treating
them like props? Are they a theater set to make some argument about art and
politics?

Or say me going there trying to understand something: it's part of my own
question. Which it is.

Say I go there and it's part of my own questioning.

Am I treating them like research subjects?

In other words, to go and do that is there a kind of a different obligation than to
perform on the street? For passersby?

I perform on the street sometimes and I like it because the people who come,
by staying by lingering and checking it out by being there they become
somehow different than audience, different than even witness. They actually
physically make the frame around the performance. They call attention to
themselves and they call attention to me and they actually somehow make space
inviting for other passersby to come and the passersby can come and see
and of course get bored and leave, or have somewhere else to go, or decide
that they're not interested or they don't like it and this whole aspect of choice
becomes an important dimension. The choice of the audience. Because then
the people who are there are really there. They're committed.

What is the opposite of that is performing in a prison, where they have no
choice. They would be told: “Tuesday morning at 11.00 Jeremiah Day is com-
ing to do a performance you have to be there.”

But there's this tradition, right? Like Johnny Cash.

[singing]

Well I woke up Sunday morning
With no way to hold my head that didn't hurt
And the beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad,
So I had one more for dessert
Then I fumbled in my closet through my clothes
And found my cleanest dirty shirt
Then I washed my face and combed my hair
And stumbled down the stairs to meet the day

On a Sunday morning sidewalk
I'm wishing Lord that I was stoned
Cause there's something about a Sunday
That makes a body feel alone

And there's nothing short of dying
That's half as lonesome as the sound
Of a sleeping city sidewalk
And Sunday mornin comin down

Johnny Cash performing in a prison, having been a criminal, to people who
have been convicted of a crime, even if they themselves are not criminals,
telling these outsider stories.

The outsider stories have a different meaning there. Watching videos of
prison performances, the prisoners – even this recent video of Metallica per-
forming in San Quentin - the prisoners are celebrating something somehow.
It's not just that there is a party or that they're getting to be on camera. It's

Sunday Morning Comin' Down
composed by Kris Kristofferson, 1969. Made famous by
Johnny Cash’s recording in 1970
kind of an affirmation of their own position, what’s happening is an affirmation or a validation of their own marginality because the musicians’ main content is about marginality.

Steve Earle, another country musician, he made another performance in a prison and it was part of his parole, part of the terms which got him out of prison.

He’d been in prison for drug use and Earle said he wanted to thank the judge for saving his life, that he would have died of drugs if he had not gone to prison.

So he’s on stage and he’s quit drugs, so he’s put on all this weight. He’s kind’ve balding at this point, big side burns, long hair, more on the sides than on top, but he’s got this enthusiasm, this shared intimate glee.

[singing]
I volunteered for the Army on my birthday
They draft the white trash first, round here anyway
I done two tours of duty in Vietnam
And I came home with a brand new plan
I take the seed from Colombia and Mexico
I plant it up the holler down Copperhead Road
Well the D.E.A.’s got a chopper in the air
I wake up screaming like I’m back over there
I learned a thing or two from Charlie don’t you know
So you better not come down Copperhead Road

It’s Copperhead Road

This song – Copperhead Road – about a Vietnam veteran who comes back to America and gets involved with the drug business and the police come to arrest him, and the song suggests that he’s going to fight them, to resist like he saw the Vietnamese resist, that there’s going to be violence with the police. You know when listening – this is not Steve Earle’s story – he didn’t go to Vietnam and he wasn’t a drug dealer. At the same time his appropriation of the pronoun I, it doesn’t feel false, there’s a tradition of that, the tradition of the bard. The tradition that he speak for others and we imagine this character. We know that it’s not really him that he’s taking on a role but at the same time it’s not total fantasy.

For him to do this, the story has to have a kind of, not even the story, the character, the tone has to have a kind of plausibility to be effective. It has to be a kind of non-fictional fantasy, somehow. So when Earle is performing these kinds of switches of persona in front of people who actually have experienced these things, it does validate them.

But like I said, Steve Earle had been in prison.

I’ve never been to prison. I don’t know what those people are like.

There’s a video of the band Fugazi playing in jail in Washington DC.

The guys in Fugazi – maybe they’re closer to me than to Steve Earle, or I’m closer to them than to Steve Earle. The guys in Fugazi had parents that were professionals. They’re white kids, punk rockers, and what’s interesting about watching them perform in the prison in DC is that the public in DC – Washington DC besides being the nation’s capitol is mostly an African American city - and so the public is this African American public and there are these white kids are coming in to play this kind of music that is not traditionally popular either.

Johnny Cash sold millions and millions of records for him to go into a prison is to offer something that people in general want. It has mass appeal. Fugazi doesn’t really have mass appeal, and in the video they’re playing one of the songs that they have that’s actually about crime.

[singing]
You hear something outside
It sounds like a gun
Stay away from that window, boy
It’s not anyone that we know only about ourselves and what we read in the paper
Don’t you know ink washes out easier than blood?
But you don’t have to try it and you don’t have to buy it
Repeater
Repeater
1,2,3
Go
And so - singing this song that’s about hearing about crime to people who have been convicted of crimes - there’s a disconnect.

The public – these young Black guys who are watching it – they’re all Black guys I think. They’re kind of into it but they kind of think it’s funny. The band is kind’ve performing with their usual earnestness but they’re also kind of embarrassed. But what they do is they just go and they do what they normally do.

They do their thing. They just do it in a different context.

In my case I have this fear that somehow… So much of what I do has to do with describing, I don’t know, ‘difficult’ historical facts.

You don’t need to go to a prison and tell people that the world’s unfair. It has to be… more complicated than that.

I think that those people understand that the world’s unfair. Maybe that’s true all the time. Maybe you don’t need to go and tell people that the world is unfair or by the way things are really unjust.

“Oh, you know that the powerful control things and that the people who aren’t so powerful have to suffer the consequences of those decisions.”

Maybe that’s the same outside of a prison.

On the train from Gatwick Airport to London Bridge once I looked around and I thought to myself:

“all of these people are moving under extremely prescribed routes. With video cameras surveilling them. They move from A to B to C because they have to.

And they’re rewarded – if you do certain things better, you have certain conditions for sure, you might have more responsibility, you might have more benefits.

You might even get time off for good behavior, to have enough benefits to leave town for a while or to go on a long holiday. You might be able to move around better in a car.”

I thought: this place is like a giant minimum security prison.

You have to ask: is this freedom?

Outside, on the streets of the city. Is this freedom?

"Feel Like A Number" composed and performed by Bob Seger, 1978.

[singing]
I take my card and I stand in line
To make a buck I work overtime
I work my back till it's racked with pain
The boss can't even recall my name

I feel like just another
Spoke in a great big wheel
Like a tiny blade of grass
In a great big field

To workers I'm just another drone
To Ma Bell I'm just another phone
I'm just another statistic on a sheet

To teachers I'm just another child
To IRS I'm just another file
I'm just another consensus on the street

Gonna cruise out of this city
Head down to the sea
Gonna shout out at the ocean
Hey it's me

And I feel like a number
Feel like a number
Feel like a stranger
A stranger in this land
I feel like a number
I'm not a number
I'm not a number
Damn I'm a man

Performance in a prison.

Maybe you have to go all the way to a prison to begin to talk about freedom.

To make a work for people who are not free – what’s involved in constructing a work for people who are not free?

Perhaps that’s the beginning of trying to talk about freedom.
Letter To Turkey (Townhall, Council, Forum, Räte, Soviet, Assemblea)

— Arendt’s Council Principle woven through Cape Cod and Istanbul; in the absence of a space for discussion a letter was suggested, here composed live. Can minotaurs be more real to us than our capacity for revolution?

Edited performance transcript; Paradox, Tilburg, February 21, 2016.
For Fred Dewey, Can Altay, and Ted Fitzelle
So down the hill.
There is a bakery on the top and then there is a bay
and the bay curves around
and the ferries come in they come out
and over there the ferry’s go to this island- it’s very popular with rich people
all these people who come through here

down the hill
at the bottom of the hill is this bar
and because so many people are coming through all the time it’s a very
profitable bar
and it’s been there a long time maybe a hundred years
and it was left from a guy to his son
and when he got the bar I guess it had like 300,000 dollars of equity in the
business
and the story was that he put all it up his nose

so they had to put a mortgage on the bar he took out a loan on the bar
and there’s this story that he got in this fight with his girlfriend
and that he was about to push her out of the window at the bar, the lee side
was
what it was called
and then she grabbed a hammer
and hit him in the back with the claw of the hammer
and then they made these t-shirts that said “I got hammered at the lee side,”
so it’s like this image of that claw of a hammer in his back
and so because it was such a desirable location because he ran out of
money he had the idea to sell it to McDonald’s
and McDonald’s wanted it because of the spot
this town had like a no fast food policy

and so down the hill there’s the bay
and then if you come over here there is like a community hall
and that’s like owned by the town and there’s town hall meetings there

and at the town hall meetings they heard about what was happening over
there
and they said “oh we don’t want to the bar to become a McDonald’s”
and McDonald’s is very powerful and how were they gonna stop them?

So they fought
and it took nine years

eventually McDonald’s gave up

I asked one of the guys who did it I said “well,
how do you do that, how do you
fight McDonald’s for nine years?”

he said the way that you do it is first
everybody gets to take a year off
everybody takes a year off
you don’t have that idea that everybody’s gonna be there all the time

and so you take a year off and then you can go back

somehow I don’t even know if he knew it but the town hall meeting was
somehow part of that
that they could go back, could stop and know it would keep going
and go back after a year
to keep fighting

and I thought about this I thought about telling this to people in Turkey
about a year off
I knew these people in Turkey

in Turkey there’s a hill and it also comes down and it comes down to a bay
and then you cross over
and that’s the Bosphorus
and there are these small islands here
which actually are not it’s not like owned by rich people it’s kind of a normal
towns on these islands

and you go up Istiklal
and you get to Taksim Square
and up here is where the protests are
they marched they marched
all the way up so that’s the rule of all the marches
all the way up to Taksim and they get here
and Taksim Square is this place that’s like has this kind of symbolic meaning
about Atatürk I guess

and so the government they didn’t want a McDonald’s, what they want is to
make a shopping mall and like an Islamic cultural center and a government
building
and so they had this fight
they had this fight and the fight so the kids would come up they would come up all the way up the hill to Taksim and then the police would beat them all the way back down and then they were dispersed into the city and go to all these different places and go different people and then the tear gas would come in to different places as it would come down the hill and so the people at Starbuck’s would be like “come in, come all in, get away from the tear gas” and then they were driven out from Taksim they were driven out from everyone went home the whole place got very quiet and so they would come out then and they would come to they decided if they couldn’t go to this park up here they would go to a different park so they would just come out to like a different area and they would sort of...they would all get together okay so we can’t resist the police so well get together over here and then they were all get together and they had these things called forums which is where they get together and then they would decide what to do next

The german-american philosopher Hannah Arendt she had this idea that if you, that there was a form to revolutions that if you looked at France 1870 1848 1780s America 1760s, 1770s - town hall meetings like that one the one with the bay and the McDonald’s Story that one over here has been going on established in 1700 or something like that and so she had this idea that the town hall meeting structure was this organic form of a revolution it so it happens in different places it happens it happens in Budapest in 1956 so there’s spontaneous worker’s councils soldiers councils neighborhood councils then they can delegate so it be like this group has these discussions and they send a representative and this group has discussions they send a representative and this forms a pyramid structure of delegates and councils this other structure Russia 1917 Argentina 2001 when the economy collapsed there was a they called them Asamblea this other structure two years ago and what Arendt says is that actually the reason that no one ever tried this as a form of government is because it’s like, it’s this thing that falls into your hand and you don’t even know what it is

you will have this experience that you wouldn’t be able to named and because you wouldn’t have a frame of reference for it it will disappear

at the end of the French resistance all of the fighters go back into normal life they go back to the academy or to parliament they go back to this kind of normal of politics and they recognized that what they are doing there is somehow not really freedom It’s a framework that no one remembers so I had this idea to go to Turkey and tell them, to tell them the story of the guys who would each take a year off and my friend who is in Istanbul said “do you think we could do this kind of an event together and I can tell this story” and he said “you’re crazy if you can think you can do that right now there’s no space for that now there’s no space for that” how do you make a space? you make a space with townhall you make a space with boats and bays Arendt says it’s like...as if...she says it’s like unicorns or minotaur like a unicorn is a thing you can imagine, like you take two things Kant says imagination has do do with memory so you take something we know we take a horse and then we take something with a horn a narwhale or like one single horn not like a moose horn and you put them together and we take a man and we put him together and that’s a minotaur and we take these things we know and we put them together and these things have a certain kind of reality because we have a frame of reference for them what are these things that happen they happen...they happen all the time they’re very concrete but we can’t really imagine them somehow so their capacity to be with us is somehow limited because we don’t really know what they are our capacity to trust them is somehow limited it’s like how is it that a unicorn is more real?
a unicorn is more stable then the capacity of people to form a town hall meeting
the capacity people have to form a town hall meeting
they had this super delicate thing it happened like in Istanbul like they had this thing they had, they called it forums
they had this structure around them to protect them who was solid you can google pictures of people gathering in this park to discuss what to do next and of course town hall meetings are boring also because you have to listen to everybody you have to wait your turn
and then the structure disappears and it’s like no one remembered it and so I thought what if you said if the problem is that there’s no there’s no memory
there’s no frame of reference
there’s no story of the guys from New England who fought the McDonald’s
they were Hippies they know they wanted something different
and then they found it in the structure of town hall meetings in New England

[holding up small broken piece of glass found on the floor]
and there’s this like tiny thing that they have
and then there is another thing and they put it together
and the guys in Turkey have lost it
but so Arendt suggests somehow that this could happen again
so I told my friend Can Altay I should give a talk about this stuff and he said:
"how you gonna... how you gonna give a talk about them?
you gonna get all these people in a room right now?
people who say critical things have problems now
what do you gonna do?
how is that gonna work?"
he said “maybe you should write a letter”
so this is the letter
he said “write a letter and then we’ll send it
write a letter and then we send it and we ask people to respond and maybe we can start that way”

so this is it
letter from Tilburg to Turkey
I’m gonna transcribe this and (gonna) make a little book
and I send it to these Turkish intellectuals
and then maybe they’ll send something back
what can they send back to here?
what can they send back to here?
someone told me that the guys from groen-links said “there are more volunteers in the netherlands than there are refugees coming in”
like a bullet can lodge in your skeleton it lodges it doesn’t...it’s not a comfortable
there’s a graveyard in Turkey also I read about, by the beach, with no names
I asked my friend I said “so which parties, which parties supports bombing Syria? which party is for, which party is for it” and she said “all of them”
the pictures of German tanks, the German tanks sold to the Saudis now sold to Bahrain these tanks they’re made to disperse protests crowd-dispersal tanks
with water cannons and rubber bullets but of course real bullets if you need it
I guess the Bahrainian government ordered two hundred
It’s really far away and then it comes back so if all the parties agree in Germany to sell the tanks all the parties agree everyone wanted the McDonald’s except for the people who live there everyone wanted the McDonald’s
Bart plays a game with his colleagues - how many borders between here and Damascus? Germany Austria Croatia
the letter will go that way, it’ll say, it’ll happen it’ll come back it’s like a web
like you stitch together these different things because they are together because somehow you’re in the middle of it how could you not be in the middle of it?
in Berlin now everybody is getting their bikes stolen and their wallets lifted how could you not be in the middle of it?
PART 2
WHEREVER YOU GO
YOU SHALL BE A POLIS
Edited transcript from performance,
Santa Monica Museum of Art,
May 1, 2014.
Concluding section of an evening
of improvisational performance,
Nonfictions – Jeremiah Day,
Simone Forti, Fred Dewey
Santa Monica Museum of Art,
May 1, 2014

Jeremiah Day: Fred – what is the opposite of fatalism?

Fred Dewey: Wait - I was supposed to ask you that.

What is the opposite of fatalism?

JD: Simone at first said “activism.” Later she said that was not really what she thought, but was something she thought people in general might believe.

What is the opposite of fatalism?

FD: The republic!

[the public stirs audibly]

Absolutely.

The republic is the opposite of fatalism.

JD: Like Plato’s Republic, the book?

FD: No. No, like A republic.

Like if we had one.

That would be the opposite of fatalism.

[long pause]

JD: What would Martin Luther King say would be the opposite of fatalism?

Performance documentation was later included in online project Out of Focus, accompanied by the following citation:

In very general terms, the Western genre addresses a burning American contradiction: between the values of competition and free enterprise and their inegalitarian consequences, and the egalitarian humanism which formed the core of the revolutionary Constitution. This tension, endemic to republicanism, is displaced onto an imaginary past...

...the contradictions between conservative and liberal explanations of crime, arising from the need to surround (“humanise”) a single criminal act in terms both of social disadvantage and moral lapse, can only be resolved by fatalism, the inability to escape from destiny...

...in most episodes, the explanation for a rampant drug problem hovers uncertainly between a generalized inner weakness on the part of individuals and external, sociological factors (the black ghetto, the “soft” treatment of juvenile delinquents) before scuttling the dilemma altogether in sheer fatalism.

[In Miami Vice] the use of poignant musical coloring transfixes the poses into a pervasive fatalism, a world resigned, buffeted by controllable events.

From The Avengers To Miami Vice: Form and Ideology in the Television Series by David Buxton, emphasis added.
The Nonfictional Imagination – Hannah Arendt and Fred Dewey’s Culture of The Polis

— Arendt > Shapiro > Dewey > this project. A genealogy of ‘remembering the republic,’ ie imagining the non-fantastic capacities for political action. "People, not concepts."
They discovered that he who “joined the Resistance, found himself”; that he ceased to be “in quest of [himself] without mastery, in naked unsatisfaction,” that he no longer suspected himself of “insincerity,” of being “a carping suspicious actor of life,” that he could afford “to go naked.”

In this nakedness, stripped of all masks – of those which society assigns to its members as well as those which the individual fabricates for himself in his psychological reactions against society -

they had been visited for the first time in their lives by an apparition of freedom, not, to be sure, because they acted against tyranny…

but because they had become ‘challengers,’ had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore…

had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear.

— Hannah Arendt, Preface to Between Past and Future

I. DOING READING (ARENDT) WITH FRED DEWEY, 1998 – 2016

In May of 2010 I was back in Los Angeles for two evening presentations with Fred Dewey and Simone Forti at The Box. It was one of a series that Fred came to call ‘The Trio’ and in the press text I wrote back then, it was intended as a “demonstration of the three’s shared ethos that culture has a role in public life and civil society.”

“We need to do some reading,” Fred said on the phone, insisting.

There had been a volcanic eruption in Iceland and so my return trip was delayed and when I asked if he wanted to hang out he said we had to meet and read.

“Do some reading” meant something very specific: to read together aloud short passages of Hannah Arendt and discuss them in detail for hours.

This is how I had first become close to Dewey in 1998 and we still gather like this on occasion as he hosts such ongoing reading groups in Berlin. It is a deceptively casual but actually highly refined approach that takes as its basis an enactment of the principles of Arendt’s work, not the production of expert knowledge. The principle of gathering as peers around a common thing – a shared table and common object upon it to be discussed – is drawn from Arendt’s elaboration of the polis, the Greek city-state form of government which enduringly defines and animates our own thinking and practice whenever we use that word politics.

From 1998 to 2002, I attended such a reading group Saturday mornings at Beyond Baroque Literary Art Center near the beach in Venice where Fred was then the Director, working out his premise that culture could defend public space. The group was usually three or four people, varying in composition of local poets, some other artist peers of mine – JP Munro, Keith Stern-Pirlot – and we mostly read sections from The Human Condition, often re-starting when a new person joined. I think we read over the puzzling Preface to the book a half-dozen times.

At one point in frustration I asserted that we should read not just fragments but an entire text, and we dove in to The Concept of History, but somehow the effort proved too much for the small group to bear: by the time we finished Arendt’s essay on historiography it was just Fred and I. It remained that way until I left Los Angeles for Europe. In this last period the reading group also became the basis for a different kind of work – attending to the launch of neighborhood council in Venice, but I’ll come back to this later.

So, back in LA, in 2010 for Fred and I to read a passage together was somehow a formal thing, and his urgency was both inviting and a bit intimidating. The passage he wanted to read was from Arendt’s essay on Rosa Luxemburg, a specific description of the German Social Democrats from the 1910’s. Arendt argued that the party had shifted focus from making concrete changes in the world to building up the party itself as a kind of world of its own, one filled with a sense of “moral superiority” over the world as it was. It was like a self-confirming, financially rewarding bubble. Luxemburg only discovered this later when she noticed the negative reaction of the party when she insisted in getting involved directly, on maintaining “friction” with the status quo.
For Arendt this distinction was the seed of the later break in which the social democrats would collaborate with the freie korps, a kind of band of mercenary veterans that were a crucial element in the formation of Nazi rule, in the murder of Luxemburg. For Arendt this episode, Luxemburg’s body dumped in a Berlin canal, was one root of the cell that was to metastasize into the “final solution.” So this was neither an abstract theorization nor an idle historical observation, but rather a life-and-death issue. This sense that the stakes of thinking about history or politics, making distinctions like that, are in fact life-and-death is key to Arendt’s work, and something that many people miss, but is on the other hand foundational to Fred’s work.

So, when we met in that café in LA, in 2010, Fred was trying to chew this over, to work something out. He was trying to elaborate a point he’d been making about the art world in an earlier conversation. He thought he’d found something important, something that would be helpful, not as an instrument, but as a kind of insight that might illuminate other situations.

Situations like the one I’d brought him into at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London in 2009 – the European milieu of culture professionals, and that subset in it that is involved in politics, or claims to want to be. This was the point: to elaborate on the difference between building an organization of self-legitimation that is essentially inward looking, where making challenges to the existing order was of course an issue, but the practice of challenging was not really the priority. For Luxemburg on the other hand, the practice of challenging was indeed the priority, both as something to do and something to think about.

We sat there and discussed: could this globalized professional art/political discourse scene be like a world-within-a-world, and like the SPD more concerned with developing their own position than with the principles they claimed to support? Yes.

II. ladder-clImBIng

This linking of political theory with an analysis of culture was second nature. We had met in 1998 in Los Angeles, which has the defining feature in that the entertainment industry dwarfs everything else and does so politically.

Going back to the earlier example, Luxemburg is most widely known for her critique of Leninism and her insistence at a crucial moment in the Russian Revolution that party dictatorship would lead to a repressive clique, using violence to promote itself, even against the people. In other words Luxemburg is known for her uncanny foresight for how Leninism could lead to Stalinism (which for Arendt are crucially distinct.)

Fred and I, living in LA, already knew that there was a kind of Leninist model for cultural practice, in Hollywood, where Fred had worked for years and I had come to know closely through living with a succession of actors, photographers, prop makers and models as room-mates. Just like Lenin argued that the goal was not to change the structure of the state but rather climb into the saddle of it, or pick up “the pistol of the state,”4 as he said, and so the organizing principle should be advancing to the point of taking over, this had an a resembling twin in the film business relationship to hierarchy, that one needed to be willing to sacrifice everything to make it to the top, where upon one would be free enough to do what one wanted. In other words, looking at Luxemburg was actually not studying “the German Revolution,” but rather trying to think through the very concrete choices, plans and projects that we each were already underway with.

And, living in LA, I had a lot of observations about this “climb the ladder to freedom” model as Fred called it. The film-maker John Cassavetes summed it up when he remarked that the Hollywood system supposed that one would sacrifice all integrity (creative, ethical, and every other kind) to reach a place where upon one would have creative freedom. Cassavetes observed however, that really once one got there you’d lost any capacity for freedom, having given up your own judgment.

Another famous example: F. Scott Fitzgerald early on had the practice of writing his stories and then changing the endings
afterword at the last minute to make them more commercially palatable. Hemingway heard this and told him he was destroying himself (this episode is detailed in *A Moveable Feast*). Hemingway’s strong reaction because of any anti-commercial impulse, but rather that in the practice of continuing to put out into the world that which was not the result of his own judgment, Hemingway believed Fitzgerald could not help but to lose track of that judgment, and that this loss would in turn cripple any ability to make new things.

While perhaps linking these two very different “ends-justify-the-means” practices – militant party building and commercial art – is perverse, it made total sense at the time.

So back in LA, in 2010, Fred was trying to help me understand where the lines were. We had done one event in Europe at the ICA and I’d helped get his work into the 2005 Cork Caucus Publication. And so this would be a guiding line, a helpful distinction to consider: are we involved in the production of a machine that is of course partly related to the world but mostly is involved in building it up itself and is defined by a sense of superiority to the world? Or is the activity one of friction with the existing order?

And in the last fifteen years the existing order has been, in the case of the US: the construction of a legalized torture system, summary assassination of citizens, an accumulating sense that the electoral process was being manipulated. On Europe’s side, in addition to the NATO actions, there was the Euro-Crisis in which it seemed that the principle of equal rights for all was getting buried underneath weirdly unreal economic machinery that ultimately turned out to have not legal status at all.

And in 2010 at that café, I had to think of the Istanbul Biennial of the fall before, with its focus on Brecht and Marxism, in a country where the police beat up the teenagers who sold the local communist party newspaper. Was that cultural production around those ideas about challenging actual power structures (or even reflecting their existence), or was it rather a world-within-a-world, part a shared and even global structure that looked down upon the existing order, but mostly was concerned with building itself up, and ultimately “did not want to make waves,” in one of Dewey’s favorite expressions?

III. CHALLENGING

Because we also of course had examples of artists who did “make waves” (just not many from the visual arts): Amiri Baraka was a writer who I’d been introduced to years before, but Fred brought him to LA for a reading, and Amiri certainly made waves.

Fugazi, the band from Washington DC, playing in front of the White House at a demonstration against the first Gulf War, with anthems that took awkward responsibility: “we are all bigots / so filled with hatred / we release our poison / like styrofoam” and insisted on defiance in the face of the broader repression:

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should be quiet tonight
but it’s not alright
cause they’re planning something
don’t you know
tings have settled down, down, down
but silence is a dangerous sound

we must we must we must
keep our eyes open

the tools they will be swinging
the tools they will be screaming
but we will not be beaten down

keep your eyes open
```

In other words, the idea of a cultural practice that dealt with political power – running straight into the teeth of the state, literally up to the white house gates and leading a community in dissent - was not utopian, but one filled with concrete examples.

Fugazi remains a defining exemplary practice for me – culturally and in pretty much every other way – in that the band and the Dischord Records project they are mexitically linked to combine a critical and emotional response to the social and political orders within an ethos that is constructive and experimental. “I’m a construction worker, not a destruction worker,” Ian Mackaye, singer of Fugazi and now The Evens, founder of Dischord, often comments. Their famous strategy of offering the albums by mail-order and lower
prices, cutting out the middle-men, did not mean that the albums would not appear at the stores. Just because they opposed much of the practices of the commercial music industry, did not mean they would define themselves in some narrow opposition. The point was to establish a working alternative model that would also foster and support others.

Similarly, Baraka for many years ran an independent cultural space in Newark, New Jersey and traveled to his readings with a suitcase of self-produced photocopy publications. Ultimately a similar ethos lay behind the work Fred and I were both doing, at Beyond Baroque and generally: to establish a parallel cultural working model, on the ground and with others, not oblivious to conventional institutional models of validation, but deliberately not pursuing them.

But in 2010, I had left this behind, this period of fostering a different cultural working practice. Moving to Europe and meeting Luc Tuymans at Rijksakademie in 2003 had convinced me to explore what potential there was within the (European) art world. That conviction, in turn, was the basis for this project’s ambition to formalize that exploration.

So, in 2010, considering the way quoting Brecht on the Istanbul street would be met with violence, while it was somehow permitted to do so in the Biennial, struck a chord into the assumptions I’d been working with since 2003. How to explain the cognitive dissonance without some sense of fraud?

And further, to never acknowledge the murderous police force of Istanbul in that cultural frame, while extolling the same ideas which got a person of lesser privilege and more direct public engagement beaten up, this actually seemed dangerous, maybe not to the organizers of the art exhibition but to the general situation. In retrospect, looking back upon that period in which civil society in Turkey had relatively strong leverage in comparison to today, the failure back then to address state violence – the failure to challenge or make waves over it – can seem like a wasted chance, or perhaps even a kind of unwitting complicity, a guilt by omission.

IV. “UNDERSTANDING EVIL IS NOT ENOUGH”

A few years ago, an episode occurred that helped illuminate an axiomatic assumption of Dewey’s work, and a crucial distinction with the main current of political discussion, even by those who dissent with the political status quo. It happened during one of the recent Israeli aggressions against Gaza. Noam Chomsky made a public critique of BDS – shorthand for the organizations that seek to use strategies of Boycotts Divestment and Sanctions to challenge the policies of Israel. It was a striking thing to do – at the exact moment when forces need to be assembled against Israeli aggression (which Chomsky himself opposed), Chomsky intervened with a critique of strategy, which of course shifted the focus away from the disproportionately one-sided violence, which many wanted to stop. Fred Dewey and I both were independently alarmed and as we discussed the situation Fred doggedly tried to tease out some underlying issue.

It was as if Chomsky wanted really to “be right, to insist on the correct analysis.” He linked Chomsky with an academic like David Harvey. “It’s as if they believe that understanding evil is the important thing, as if the struggle is to come up with the best understanding of the situation. When actually what is important is stopping evil, and the effort to do that, and how understanding can have a role in that,” Dewey said.

Fred’s sudden insight amidst this episode seemed to me to sum up an entire academic-political nexus: that rather than struggle with political conditions, the struggle became between competing theoretical apparatuses, jockeying for correctness or worse, a pose of more-radical-than-thou.

In a heated moment – with that heat palpable thousands of miles away from the bombing in Gaza – Chomsky’s instinct was to focus on what he believed was the incorrect strategic response, rather than on how to leverage his own voice as part of the broader effort to stop the bombs. This emphasis on “being more correct in understanding” was and is for Fred another example of the “world within a world” issue that Arendt outlined in the text on Luxemburg that Fred had insisted we read in 2010. “Being correct is not about action, and indeed when it came to action, Chomsky smashed it,” Fred noted.
V. PEOPLE, NOT THEORIES

Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and works, will kindle.  

What precisely made Arendt’s work such a revelation was an underlying affirmative aspect. Arendt was for something that one could actually do, witness, chronicles, and what she was for was not a theoretical argument, but rather a definitive opposition to theory as the dominant paradigm, focusing rather on people.

“Men in Dark Times,” from which the quote above is taken, consists of texts organized around people, their “lives and works.” Clearly not biographical texts in any conventional way, different figures are taken up as ways of understanding the world. It was to the Luxemburg essay in this collection that Dewey insisted we attend to, that I carve out four hours in a packed few days in Los Angeles to studiously chew over and think out. Very few Arendt scholars in any academic context would say that this was her major work, but for me it is the single most important, most instructive, most inspiring volume. Fred’s reading of the book was about Arendt’s use of exemplars for thinking, and that can only mean on people, specific and plural human lives. Through the text on the writer Isak Dineson she elaborates how the capacity for narrative, for cohering disparate events, tragedies, dimensions into story is the crucial method for humanizing the flux of the world. In Brecht we accompany her own wrestling with how to judge a figure she clearly sees as crucial, heroic, admirable, but later became an apologist for mass murder.

What is at stake in this focus on lived experience and not “theories or concepts,” a crucial part of how Arendt is rendered through Dewey’s work?

It seems somehow willfully obtuse – incoherent, unscientific. In Arendt’s body of work only one book can be seen as more philosophical – The Human Condition – with its explication of her elaborate (and difficult) distinctions between “the social” and “the political” (which are so often elsewhere used as synonyms), but the rest of her writing is fractured, episodic, inconclusive.

This antagonism to theory was formed in her biographical experience: the keenest theoretical minds in Germany had almost to a one been willingly complicit in organized criminality. In her late work Arendt would focus on “judgment,” and this is often taken as a way to integrate her work within discussions of philosophy, but her focus on judgment was much more concrete and practical, it was related to the “how could they?” question that was asked so often after the war, and again and again since then whenever civil society and the body politic supports criminal regimes. With her brutal education in how great minds could somehow overlook (or justify, or simply maneuver opportunistically around) the organization of mass murder, Arendt developed a fundamentally different methodology that focused on practice, and in form explored key questions of principle not in the abstract but through taking up people, both in singular, and also as part of a tapestry of events. On Revolution (1963) is suspended between tent-pole characters - Robespierre and Thomas Jefferson – with difficult principles are elaborated through works of literature: Stephen Melville’s Billy Budd and the French poet Rene Char’s notebooks from his time as a resistance fighter.

VI. THE STORY MAKER

This writerly, or artistic aspect, of Arendt, is under recognized, and her approach I suspect was crucially informed by another of Fred Dewey’s unique insights on Arendt’s work: the close connection between her and Walter Benjamin.

It is odd that before I met Fred I had never even noted this, because of course I like art students everywhere had read “The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in the widely distributed collection Illuminations. But I had somehow never noticed that this was edited and introduced by (and initiated by) Arendt. Recognizing this connection between the two forces re-evaluations that go both ways – on the one hand the Benjamin that appears in her introductory essay is hard to recognize for those who see Benjamin as a parallel figure to Adorn. On the other hand, Arendt’s anti-Stalinism and focus on political principles have added up to a sense that she somehow was a conservative, and thus it is a struggle to see her so close to one of the key proponents of a revolution by the proletariat.
Thesis on the Philosophy of History, the last substantial piece of writing by Benjamin before his death, was given to Arendt for safe-keeping as they both fled Europe. Benjamin’s proposal is for a historian who “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.” In order to approach this difficult term “Messianic,” one could perhaps take up both Thomas Jefferson and Hannah Arendt’s focus on “Jesus of Nazareth,” a historical figure who intervened into public life in his day with great words and deeds. In other words, Benjamin’s linking of the messianic with revolution is fortified by a tradition of seeing the Christian messiah as a kind of political figure. Even this gesture of grasping the past to establish a connection, or “constellation,” with the present – linking an ancient figure like Jesus to the modern tradition of revolutionary politics – this follows from Benjamin’s final text. The argument is that past events can be mobilized as a way of shedding light on the present precisely so that the contingency of the present is made palpable and concrete, thus insisting, establishing and fostering the capacity for change in this moment.

Arendt called Benjamin a “pearl diver,” going deep below to pull up the surface precious things to marvel over and inspire us to think, and it’s odd that only Fred Dewey has noted how programmatically Arendt took up this method, undoubtedly inspired the example of Benjamin. One of the consequences of this insight is that I came to see Arendt’s work as a kind of tool box, except one made not of immediately useful things, instead one of sparks to think and examples to ponder, with principles and distinctions that reverberate and resonate outwards, much as I described in this moment with the Luxemburg text in 2010.

Arendt’s work after The Human Condition is increasingly that of a storyteller. Even pieces with a philosophical title – The Concept of History, for example – consist almost entirely of narrative episodes, and following Nietzsche’s use of genealogy – going to historical root meanings of words in order to access their meanings – even “freedom” and “authority” are unpacked through a kind of sifting reflection on history. In The Concept of History, the principle of narrative’s transcendence of communication is exemplified in the moment in The Odyssey when Odysseus, in disguise, attends a storytelling of his own story, and he is moved to tears, not because there’s any “news” in it the story, but because producing a story of events is the way they become meaningful.

In this way then both meaning-making and action take on new aspects, characteristics, capacities. If one finds Arendt’s work convincing then it is as if a locked door opens, and the world of human affairs becomes rich with potential and significance. The still dominant left-over apparatus of Marxism – with the widespread focus on “capitalism” as the prime mover of human affairs – is at this point a kind of intellectual police force, insisting on some fantastic authentic engagement with the economic system, with all other modes of political reality just reduced to “symptoms.”

Arendt’s valorization of political struggle and public life, per se, imbues meaning upon a whole array of activities – but more importantly, the argument is that commemorating those actions is essential to the foundation of political life, and so the role of the meaning-maker and storyteller becomes infused with a fundamentally political capacity. (And this need not be so literal, although in my work, I have indeed focused on exploring and depicting actual political events and actors.)

VII. TIMES, EXAMINER, POST, MIRROR

The rippling re-evaluation of action: Fred Dewey reads three newspapers a day. The New York Times, The Financial Times and either The Los Angeles Times or The Guardian, depending on where he is.

Why? It is through hearing different sides of the same story that it becomes three dimensional, and the different predispositions, allegiances and habits of each storyteller are not just revealed but themselves revealing. In 2002, for instance, The Financial Times was the only place one could read in English that Dominique Villepain, the French Prime Minister, was working on establishing a free trade zone of the Mediterranean, including Europe, North Africa, Lebanon, Israel and indeed Palestine. The French ambition for global stature was being explored through a stabilizing soft power, that would indeed have wide-reaching consequences (on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example). The existence of this project was crucial for understanding the motivation of the French state to attempt to stand in the way of the formation of a “coalition of the willing” to invade Iraq.
I had worked for a while in newspapers, and after that I gave up reading them for many years. I saw them clearly as a form of organized lying, a kind of mass production of falseness, not only because of their political leanings but because a structural predisposition to gloss over, simplify and leave out anything too complicated, and indeed I had seen enough to know that things were indeed complicated.

I remember going at the Citadel military academy in 1997 to cover gender integration of the military, soon after the young Shannon Faulkner had been violently chased out. Confronted with a group of young men (perhaps four or five years younger than myself) who all said they’d opposed what had happened to Faulkner and who could not speak to anything at all without repeating the words “duty” and “honor,” I realized that the 500 word story that would see print would never even mention this almost unreal focus on doctrine and slogans in place of any reckoning with what had happened. This intensity of the place, the palpable violence and double-speak, the essence of the experience would never appear. Such things are not “fit to print,” as the saying goes.

But after reading Arendt, the newspaper itself, started to seem like an epic poem, if read properly. By reading properly I mean to acknowledge that the papers today are not so different from Pravda in the Soviet Union: if read correctly, one could start to recognize where the breaks in the façade might be, and where one could peer into the deeper reality. The Financial Times’ reporting of Villepain’s project was one such moment. Moreover, just as Pravda’s organized lie made space for a kind of politicized non-fiction like Samizdat, so the current political order’s version of truth in the US and Western Europe had its own horizon line, and on the other side of that was a world full of meaning and potential.

VIII. THE MEANING OF ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN THE LANDSCAPE OF PRACTICAL POLITICS

What is the consequence for culture if politics is something to be taken seriously? And not the politics of academic theories, but the political realities of local elections? The question not raised in principle, as potential, but in practice as an exploration and activity?
through years of attending events at other institutions and organizing city-wide festivals. The major “World Beyond” festival also was a chance for Fred to push his other strategy for bringing culture into confrontation with the public – crossing threads through programming juxtapositions. One evening’s headliner was Amiri Baraka, a landmark figure of post-war avant-garde poetry and a “third world Marxist-Leninist,” with Beyond Baroque suddenly a home for the African American community, and then the next night was the book launch for the memoir of Sonny Barger, former head of the Hells Angeles, introduced by Dennis Hopper, with the wide lawn in front of the building covered in motorcycles. Barger’s name had become famous from his portrayal in Hunter S. Thompson’s book “Hells Angels” and he was introduced by Dennis Hopper. Baraka and Barger were totally different but shared the quality of being widely embraced, almost iconic, figures of counter culture. No one else in the world would put these two on the same program and Fred had in essence established a plural space of dissident reflections which reinforced each other.

About his time at Beyond Baroque, Dewey wrote: “It is about people, not status, and strong articulated people, the public encountering them, seeing all the facets of public life and descriptions of the world. I was enacting Arendt’s use of literature. Poetry is (or was!) the best principle for this. The principle, that was my point, for public space.”

IX. THE TOOLBOX

What perhaps most distinguishes Dewey’s understanding of Arendt is that he takes for granted that within the work there is something to be enacted, as he puts it. This does not mean any of the writings contain instructions or concrete plans, but rather force you to wrestle (as with this passage we read in 2010) with key principles and distinctions that then illuminate paths and caution against others.

This leads to a certain counter-canon of Hannah Arendt. Because of course there is an academic consensus on what is and is not important in her work, and in Germany they refer knowingly to a “Hannah Arendt industry.” This academic canon is The Human Condition, Eichmann in Jerusalem and The Life of the Mind, with perhaps some of the essays from Between Past and Future like What is Authority? appearing now and again. For Fred the important books were Men in Dark Times, On Revolution and then for me Crisis of The Republic.

“I always kept thinking On Revolution could be a kind of toolbox,” Fred would say in equal measure frustration and optimism as we returned to another passage exploring the distinction between the French and American Revolution. This “toolbox” term Fred would later reject as wrong, too instrumentalist perhaps. But it stuck with me all the same. Later Fred’s Berlin reading group spent literally years slowly working their way through the book. And indeed it some ways it was a toolbox: On Revolution concludes with an unequivocal argument for something. It leads you through a journey of complicated distinctions and painful parsing of language to end up with: this is it! Councils are the thing, literally the “last best hope for mankind” to use the language of movie posters.

And what are councils?

X. COUNCIL, SOVIET, TOWN MEETING

At the end of her life, Arendt was working in parallel on two tracks, both in many way informed by her work Eichmann in Jerusalem. The first led to the posthumously published book The Life of The Mind. Here, Arendt’s key revelation from the Eichmann trial was that one crucial element that had enabled bureaucratic mass killing was a fundamental lack of thinking and judgment: everyone had been doing their own job, trying to climb the ladder, neither taking responsibility nor truly reflecting on what has happening. This led Arendt to dive deep into reflection on the nature of thought itself, and this work - her most abstract, most philosophical - was the collected after her death into the celebrated The Life of The Mind.

At the same time, Arendt was pursuing another track - which has been widely ignored. Also drawing from the Eichmann work, Arendt began to take a more active engagement with her own political situation - the US of the 1960’s and early 70’s. Through
public speaking and a body of writing clearly meant to contribute to broad public - not just scholarly - debate, Arendt tried to wrestle with the structure of organized lying that had developed in the United States (in the essays Truth and Politics, Lying and Politics and the 1976 talk Home to Roost), with the student movement and post-colonialism (Civil Disobedience and On Violence). Simultaneously her work began to establish itself in dialogue with Noam Chomsky and others actively dissenting with the status quo in the US. Perhaps because this work is not as scholarly, and while not pessimistic it certainly paints a dark portrait of the time, in any case this other final project of Arendt’s has hardly been unpacked. It is this period - in which Arendt, perhaps taking the question of responsibility very personally herself, turned to contribute to the heated debates of her own moment.

And it is in this work - particularly the last work Arendt published herself in her lifetime Crises of The Republic - that one finds an unambiguous and straightforward argument for a new form for organizing politics in contemporary mass societies: councils. The form itself is not new, and neither was Arendt’s interest in it - the subject forms the basis for the conclusion of her work On Revolution, where she links the revolutionary experience of town-hall meetings in colonial New England with that of the French Resistance in the Second World War and it appears throughout her work: the focus on Hungary in 1956, the Russian Soviets, Rosa Luxemburg and the Spartacists, the Raterepublik (which for Arendt were not historical events: her husband Heinrich Blucher had been with, or perhaps even a member of the Spartacists and her mother had been sympathetic to Luxemburg.)

The argument is straight-forward: in all of these key revolutionary moments, a spontaneous form of organizing emerged in which people gather together in councils to discuss and make decisions. The councils are formed at the neighborhood level, as well as amongst professions (soldier’s councils, writer’s councils) and then form another higher level of councils where delegates from the local councils are sent, and so on in a pyramid style structure.

If only ten of us are sitting around a table, each expressing his opinion, each hearing the opinion of others, then a rational formation of opinion can take place through the exchange of opinions. There, too, it will become clear which of us is best suited to present our view before the next higher council, were in turn our view will be clarified through the influence of other views, revised, or proven wrong. ...

In this fashion a self-selective process is possible that would draw together a true political elite in a country. Anyone who is not interested in public affairs will simply have to be satisfied with their being decided without him. But each person must be given the opportunity.

Arendt asks herself whether this form could be the basis for ongoing self-government.

In someway Arendt seems to have drawn confidence in this practical possibility based upon the lived reality of the Federalist Principle in the American experience (a connection Dewey would later sketch out further, linking post-war European Federalism, neighborhood councils, and his own research of the Federalist Principle).

But as early as 1961, Arendt recognized that the key problem with councils was that despite their reappearance and thus obvious importance, there was no real memory of them. This absence of coherent narrative prevented even those who would come to discover the form from taking it truly seriously. Here is Arendt’s explanation for why the French Resistance abandoned their self-organized, federalized political forms:

the treasure [of this mode of politics] was lost not because of historical circumstances and the adversity of reality but because no tradition had foreseen its appearance or its reality, because no testament had willed it for the future. The loss, at any rate, perhaps inevitable in terms of political reality, was consummated by oblivion, by a failure of memory, which befell not only the heirs but, as it were, the actors, the witnesses, those who for a fleeting moment had held the treasure in the palms of their hands, in short, the living themselves.

For remembrance, which is only one, though one of the most important, modes of thought, is helpless outside a pre-established framework of reference, and the human mind is only on the rarest occasions capable of retaining something which is altogether unconnected. Thus the first who failed to remember what the treasure was like were precisely those who had possessed it and found it so strange that they did not even know how to name it.
While this passage from the Preface to Between Past and Future effectively foreshadows her following work On Revolution, it is only ten years later in Crises of the Republic does Arendt make her argument explicit:

In this direction I see the possibility of forming a new concept of the state. A council-state of this sort, to which the principle of sovereignty would be wholly alien, would be admirably suited to federations of the most various kinds, especially because power would be constituted horizontally and not vertically. But if you ask me now what prospect it has of being realized, then I must say to you: Very slight, if at all. And yet perhaps, after all - in the wake of the next revolution.

These concluding words from Crises of the Republic are the last words of the last book Arendt published in her lifetime. Arendt’s commitment to councils had been galvanized by the 1956 Hungarian uprising, which Arendt sometimes called a revolution. She had understood the principle, but it was the appearance of a concrete example that seemed to cement councils in the foreground of her mind. In 2001, when the newspapers detailed that in the midst of the economic collapse in Argentina a spontaneous new political form had emerged – neighborhood councils across the country calling themselves the Assembleas – Fred Dewey and I both caught it. And when in Istanbul in 2014, I heard of the neighborhood mass meetings, I had to wonder: was this a new appearance of this form, another confirmation of the principle?

XI: H.R. SHAPIRO AND THE PUBLIC LIFE

First, it must be said, an alternative to the jobholder society exists, hard as it is these days to imagine it. The alternative was embodied in the very frame of the Republic. It holds that men are, by nature, political beings – not workers, or job holders, nor consumers, not ‘timid and industrious animals’, as Tocqueville once termed the state of men reduced to mere employment. In a Republic, men were to be, above all else, citizen. This was no honorific. The citizen is a political man; he enjoys by right the widest possible scope to speak and act in public in the management of public affairs. …

A Republic of self-governing citizens in the only possible alternative to the mass society. …

Politically what can make “The Republic” an actuality is, first, the profound wish and resolve to live the life of a citizen. Unless large numbers of men resolve that this is what they want and must have, there is no chance whatever for the Republic to live.

— H.R. Shapiro and Walter Karp, editors, The Public Life, 1969

Though Dewey introduced a whole history and its principles to me, Dewey had not come upon this line of thought entirely alone. He had also encountered it in the figure of H.R. Shapiro. In the 1960’s Arendt had a student who was so convinced by her evocation of Jefferson and his command to “divide the counties into wards” and establish town-hall government throughout the land that it became the basis of his life’s work, first as an activist and journalist, and then as an anti-academic historian – H.R. Shapiro.

Shapiro went from Arendt’s class and set out to put these principles into practice, establishing the Citizens for Local Democracy and (along with Walter Karp) the magazine The Public Life. Later Shapiro published several histories of the United States that are so packed with political history as to sometimes lose the forest for the trees, but with a methodical and systematic argument: the political party structure is opposed to the practice of republicanism, and the history of parties in the US is the history of the overthrow of the republic. This overthrow does not happen at once but is a constant process of appropriating, sideling, manipulating, defrauding and disenfranchising the citizenry.

The politics of a Republic, as James Madison once said, is the struggle ‘between enemies and friends to republican government.’ Principally, it is a contest between those who wish to ensure to the citizens and equal voice in their government and those who wish to wrest power from the citizenry and monopolize it for themselves. The contest is a perpetual one and so the history of the Republic is chiefly the history of that contest.

Yet the daily results of that struggle go untallied in the press; the chronicle of that struggle goes unrecognized in our history books. As a result we have reached the eighth decade of the 20th century.
not knowing where we are, how we got there or whom to trust. Our understanding of our own politics is dim and nothing obscures it more thoroughly than the commonly accepted account of the past 75 years of our history.

Shapiro’s efforts to establish neighborhood democracy in New York City were in vain (ultimately blocked by the teacher’s unions to whom de-centralization would have curtailed their power), but he continued on writing. As can be seen from the passage above, for Shapiro politics in a Republic has clear sides – and that willingness to judge makes his prose style initially off putting, as if he wants to push your mind around, or at times feels more like shouting than the political science posturings we’re used to. A section might lead with a headline in bold:

**HOW THE DEMOCRATIC BOSSES SAVED A CORRUPT PARTY SYSTEM**

But, following again the passage above, it is implicit that description is itself a political act within this framework. If the citizen’s capacity for self-government is being curtailed because of a false description of their own political landscape, then one constructive act is to describe that landscape, to tell the history of the “corrupt party system.”

It is not uninteresting to note that the one preceding (but not really a precedent, properly speaking) intersection between visual arts and this line of Arendtian-Republicanism is the connection between Donald Judd and Shapiro. Judd worked with Shapiro, raised money for Citizens for Local Democracy and even appropriated some of Shapiro’s key references into poster works, leading to a 2011 exhibition in Marfa titled *The Public Life*.

In a review, Arendt herself wrote:

> H.R. Shapiro’s essay [on the politics of the USA, 1896-1945], is the most important work written on American politics in the twentieth century. It is unique – and marvelous.

> The work of H.R. Shapiro goes back to the very foundations of the American Republic. It offers a new approach to political matters which is free of all ideological and party clichés. H.R. Shapiro’s work should be read by every independent citizen.

**XII: FRED DEWEY, POETRY, AND THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC LIFE**

It was through the Judd connection, Judd’s children in fact, that Fred met Shapiro, joining in casual reading groups that Shapiro was organizing in his home. (Perhaps Shapiro’s reading groups were based on how he’d worked with Hannah Arendt and there is some genealogy here Arendt > Shapiro > Dewey > this project).

When Dewey took over leadership at Beyond Baroque Literary Art Center, in the background was this problem of description or reflection that was implicit in Shapiro’s analysis of the way the US political system maintained a solid hand of control over a restive and essentially free citizenry. If the people’s capacity for citizenship was crippled by a lack of understanding their own situation, than culture had a crucial potential to support political freedom (and this project is in turn an extension of that underlying axiom).

At the same time, Dewey heard of a small group trying to introduce neighborhood councils into the structure of city government of Los Angeles. Naturally, he dove in headfirst. The following quote is from Dewey’s 2002 meditation on the status of what came to be called the Neighborhood Council Movement.

> What is the purpose of councils? The purpose is to give voice and power to all the people, not just the few or even the many.

> The neighborhood councils are not an arena for schemes of politicians and factions, bureaucrats, experts, parties or activists – all those quite sure they ‘know better.’ They don’t. Neighborhood councils, to have meaning, must lead, step by step, towards power for all the people. As we argued in 1993, at the beginning of a long fight, what matters is expansion of self-government. We cannot be still. We cannot be half-free if we want to be free.

Dewey ultimately succeeded and neighborhood councils are now the law of the land and an ongoing force in Los Angeles, as an advisory branch added on to the existing representative structure, but growing continually in importance in the last twenty years. The structure of self-government has been changed for millions of people in a city of unparalleled global influence. For Dewey this municipal political project was a combination of theory and practice, an
extension of his work at Beyond Baroque to “enact public space.” It was in essence an enactment of the work of Hannah Arendt, though one largely gone unrecognized as such.

XIII: PRESERVATION

When The Portable Hannah Arendt was published, Fred was delighted that there was a section titled “REVOLUTION AND PRESERVATION.” Linking preservation to revolution is not part of any left-wing or Marxist tradition, but a central insight that emerges from reading Arendt, and in the text above Dewey is subtly performing acts of preservation and recovery.

To say “we cannot be half free,” for any American with a sense of history, evokes the US Civil War of the 1860’s and President Abraham Lincoln’s line “a house divided cannot stand.”

And “power to all the people” harkens back to another crucial figure of American politics, Senator Robert LaFollette from Wisconsin. Elsewhere in Dewey’s book he quotes LaFollette:

Now is precisely the time when the country needs the counsel of all of its citizens.20

The focus on an expansion of self-government to all the people also is a re-statement of Arendt’s description of councils from On Revolution:

It is true enough that the members of the councils were not content to discuss and ‘enlighten themselves’ about measures that were taken by parties or assemblies; they consciously and explicitly desired the direct participation of every citizen in the public affairs of the country. 21

The title of Dewey’s book which chronicles this whole project is The School of Public Life (drawing upon his talk as part of the 2011 Crisis in Culture project that linked Shapiro, Benjamin and Luxemburg titled “Why Arendt: building the school of public life.” On one side this honors Shapiro’s magazine, on the other hand it goes deeper by harkening back to the (relatively) well-known passage by Rosa Luxemburg:

The only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralizes. …

Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule.22

This critique of Leninism returns us to where we began, with Dewey’s 2010 attempt to intervene in my career ambitions and remind me of the principle to not just build up an institution for its own sake (and in this sense an artistic practice could even be called a kind of institution) but to maintain friction with the status quo, as if a political system might change like the wind. In response to this description Dewey notes: “the notion of a school, of suggesting public life could educate us to some extent in the ‘life of the people,’ regardless of whether the system acknowledges it. And for the artists and writers, that we do public work and learn, not disseminate and reproduce. Bringing the life of the people to life, precipitating it, enacting it, spurring it.”

Digging up a genealogy of the Republic then in turn became central to my own art practice. My instincts had been trained, leading me to pursue threads that would take shape (on multiple ways of shaping: in my mind, in facts uncovered through research, materially through artworks, and in my own performances in which channeling of subject matter became itself a kind of content).

This memoir opens with a quote from Arendt’s Preface to Between Past and Future where she refers to the example of the French Resistance (the seed of my own work MAQUIS about the Resistance, which then came to be a crucial part of the What Was The European Union? project), and one point that the passage makes is that “taking the initiative” to “challenge” has its own rewards, regardless of outcome. Treating the public realm as something to be parried with, dodged, beaten by occasionally and at other times fed and nurtured by, and still at other times something one can pour energy into, can contribute to – this is a far cry from “critical theory.” In 2009, when I was given the chance to make a
publication out of the show I’d made with Simone Forti in Dublin the year before, I asked Fred to write a text, and he honored the importance for me of "taking the initiative" when he titled the piece Parfietns.

In that piece, trying to find language to unpack the potential he’d found in the strategies of description and depiction that we’d presented in our exhibition and performances and tried to foster while editing Simone’s writings, Fred had a breakthrough.

On this front neither Simone nor I were so helpful; she had developed the vivid term News Animations to describe her improvising with Newspapers, but when trying to put words to the approach overall she would refer back to examples like James Agee and Walker Evans Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and the somewhat bland phrase “creative non-fiction.” I, on the other hand, had no terminology for what I was doing because I was too busy trying to do it well to think of much else.

In a crucial letter Peter Baehr had dug up for The Portable Hannah Arendt Fred pulled out a way to build a new kind of bridge between politics and art, giving to imagination a new orientation:

“I am convinced that understanding is closely related to that faculty of imagination that Kant called Empfindskraft and which has nothing in common with fictional ability. Dewey’s notion of the “non-fictional imagination,” drew upon Arendt’s brief reference, and, as he puts it “overtures conventional notions of the imagination and, following Arendt, turns imagination into working towards actuality, events, and facts, rather than away from them, or revising them, or transforming them, as the well-grooved sense of imagination as fiction and fantasy has it. This opens the possibility of this different kind of imagination and relation also being art. A poetic relation to the world is the art. Imagination is dedicated to poeticizing the worldly.”

Here Fred reached back to the problems of description, understanding and memory that Shapiro had described as the background for his own work (and what he meant when he said that Arendt had “remembered the Republic”), and drove deeply through them to unearth a principle.

Here we can see the beginnings of a theory of imagination that is decisively linked to understanding and separated from the capacity for fiction and fiction-making. Arendt, who understood quite well the power of organizing fiction, making it the centerpiece of her analysis of the National Socialist movement’s takeover of Germany in the 1930’s and 40’s, felt the issue of imagination and understanding was central to the problems of political powerlessness and what she called ‘irreality’ in our era.

Earlier in the text Dewey had clarified what was at stake in this problem of “the real”:

“A widely cited description of America, posed by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard – that ‘Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest [of America] is real,’ from Simulations – has yet to be taken up by theorists or artists in any meaningful way.

It is of enormous importance that unreality has become the organization of life in America. This unreality is not trivial or entertaining. It has a highly consequential narrative and fictional structure to it. When nothing is stable and unreality is desirable, critique becomes unappetizing. Critique is trapped in academia and its animation by old ideological movements, the rule of bureaucracy, and a tradition utterly distinct from action and what is public.

The real comes to seem pointless and naïve, severing critique from the revolutionary potential of action and meaningful principles of public space. … That is why imagination is precisely what is at stake in the era of unreality. Fiction has so corroded imagination that we cannot see the potential of the space between us, of actualization and worldliness, and what it might be to be a partisan for the world.”

It’s a bold claim: that the United States is organized by fictions. But in the aftermath of a moment when the 70% of the citizenry believed that Saddam Hussein was “personally involved in the 9/11
attacks,” it cannot be said to be hyperbolic, even as it strains our minds and we perhaps recoil instinctively at the idea and its implications.

It was precisely this context of mass “irreality” that gave the “non-fictional” aspect of the work that I was doing with Simone a resonance with Dewey, and then later became the basis for the dozen or so evenings of performance and discussion that the three of us have organized together.

XV: IMAGINATION, ‘ENLARGED MENTALITY’ AND CULTURE

Fred’s proposed new “theory of imagination,” emerging from writing about art and in the midst of the activity of making a public institution for culture with all of the political work necessarily involved (i.e., practice) points to the broader connections between Arendt’s work, cultural and politics.

Wolfgang Heuer, a German political theorist who curated a 2006 exhibition of contemporary art in Berlin for the centenary of Arendt’s birth title Hannah Arendt Denkraum (Thinking-Room) (later part of the 2011-2 Arendt project detailed in the next section; Heuer came to co-organize and come up with the title for the What Was The European Union? project with Dewey and I, and Heuer and Dewey would co-teach a course on Arendt in Berlin).

In a paper published the year before, likely while working on the exhibition – titled “‘Imagination is the prerequisite of understanding’ (Arendt) - The bridge between thinking and judging” – Heuer wrote:

The literary texts and metaphorical images which we meet so often in Arendt’s texts are not mere aids to make complicated arguments more understandable but are images of experience of thinking, of imagination and understanding. Arendt uses this sort of thinking image to represent the perspectives of the others.

“Imagination is the prerequisite of understanding”, she wrote in her course notes in 1955. “You,” the students, “should imagine how the world looks from the different points of view where these people are located.”

Heuer goes on to suggest imagination is akin to “creative representation.” Heuer worked with an illuminating text - Arendt’s introductory notes to a 1965 course (the syllabus for the course is the opening illustration for this section – an homage to Dewey’s decades of linking literature, politics and Arendt). For this course, almost the entire reading list consisted of works of literature, not history or theory. Heuer begins with a quote from Arendt’s introductory remarks to the course:

“I could have called this course Exercises in Imagination. The only aim is to recapture Experiences,” [Arendt wrote in the course notes.] And it must be added that creative does not mean in an artistic sense the creation of something new but the representation of something which exists in the memory and is not accessible for perception, so that it can only be perceived indirectly.

Imagination as the prerequisite of understanding makes it possible to observe the world from different points of view, to represent real or possible points of view of others.

This connects with Arendt’s leap of insight that one key to a theory of political judgment lay in Immanuel Kant’s aesthetics, his theory of taste, in which taste is not just meant as the seemingly arbitrary sense (as a revulsion for blue cheese as I indeed have), but rather in the capacity to respond to the world, and how that capacity can then be basis for a discussion with others, and this is bound up with a mode of judging that is not just thinking for oneself but “which consisted of being able to ‘think in the place of everybody else’ and which he there for called an ‘enlarged mentality’ (eine erweiterte Denkungsart).” For Arendt this was political, not just as an abstract term, but concretely linked to the history of the Greek city state where:

In a sheer inexhaustible flow of arguments, as the Sophists presented them to the citizenry of Athens, the Greek learned to
exchange his own viewpoint, his own *opinion* – the way the world appeared and opened up to him (…) – with those of his fellow citizens.

Greeks learned to understand – not to understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from one another’s standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects.\(^{32}\)

Later, in Jerusalem, it was precisely this *enlarged mentality* that Arendt found Eichmann to be lacking. It was thoughtlessness more than malevolence that facilitated mass murder, she famously argued, leading to the so often misused catch-phrase *banality of evil*. And this, as noted above, motivated her deep dive into the question of judgment that led to her unfinished *The Life of The Mind*, and perhaps one could say as well the parallel efforts of speaking out on the political currents of her own time.

The link to culture is implicit here, and forms the potential that Dewey was exploring (both practically and theoretically) before we even met. As Heuer’s example of the course on “political experience” demonstrates, Arendt believed culture could offer a stronger basis for understanding “political experience” than anything else. The “enlarged mentality” which is central to politics is actually fostered by art.

But “the non-fictional imagination,” Dewey’s term, goes back to another inter-related part of Arendt’s work with Kant – the way that memory, creativity, imagination and judgment are all interlinked. From the *Imagination* section of Arendt’s *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*:\(^{33}\)

> To give the name “imagination” to this faculty of having present what is absent is natural enough. If I represent what is absent, I have an image in my mind – an image of something I have seen and now somehow can reproduce.

> (In the Critique of Judgment, Kant sometimes calls this faculty “reproductive” – I represent what I have seen – to distinguish it from the “productive” faculty – the artistic faculty that produces something it has never seen.)

But productive imagination is never entirely productive. It produces, for instance the centaur out of the given: the horse and the man.)

Here Arendt suggests that creativity has an aspect of not just adding, but of drawing upon experience. Perhaps this further illuminates the example of her course of political science taught through literature, including many works of fiction. Here even fiction can have a non-fictional aspect.

> This sounds as though we are dealing with memory. But for Kant, imagination is the condition for memory and a much more comprehensive faculty.

> In his Anthropology Kant puts memory, “the faculty to make present the past,” together with a “faculty divination,” which makes present the future.

> *Both are faculties of “association”…*

Imagination, after all, can be about speculating upon the future, making plans. We can imagine even things we cannot do, or to imagine ourselves doing things better than we possibly can. Athletes for example train themselves in imagination and visualization exercises: shooting the ball perfectly through the hoop every time in their mind to improve their capacity in practice, out on the floor. Arendt herself never explored this thoroughly, but one can sense the broad philosophical implications in Fred’s honing in on this phrase and developing the term.

It goes back to the use of examples, and forward to other wide potentials. As Ronald Beiner, editor of Arendt’s *Lectures of Kant* notes about this section: the connection between imagination and examples “supplies the basis for a conception of political science centered on *particulars* (stories, historical examples), not *universals* (the concept of historical process; general laws of history).”\(^{34}\)

The “laws of history” have been the basis for whole political movements: could not this new political science of stories – i.e. people - be the basis for organizing? This is what Dewey has been essentially proposing and enacting.
The philosophical and theoretical implications are wide, but they are not the focus here. Dewey’s “non-fictional imagination” binds together these insights and the potential ones not yet explored even in his own work, yet. But for me, Arendt’s line also always cut the other way: not just that I wanted to produce works of such an imagination, but that I wanted to work through a speculative imagining of the world apart from fantasies, theories and concepts. To have my own work exist in and navigate through the world that’s here, not a fantasy one.

XVI: LESS REAL TO US THAN UNICORNS

The history of revolutions – from the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest – which politically spells out the innermost story of the modern age, could be told in parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure which, under the most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions, as though it were a fata morgana.

There exist, indeed, many good reasons to believe that the treasure was never a reality but a mirage, that we deal here not with anything substantial but with an apparition, and the best of these reasons is that the treasure thus far has remained nameless.

Does something exist, not in outer space but in the world and the affairs of men on earth, which has not even a name? Unicorns and fairy queens seem to possess more reality than the lost treasure of the revolutions.

And yet, if we turn our eyes to the beginnings of this era, and especially to the decades preceding it, we may discover to our surprise that the eighteenth century possessed a name for this treasure… The name in America was “public happiness,” which with its overtones of “virtue” and “glory,” we understand hardly better than its French counterpart, “public freedom”; the difficulty for us is that in both instances the emphasis on “public…”

The history and practice of revolutions, then, has a basis in “public happiness” and “public freedom.” Could these be subject for artworks? Yes. Could a cultural practice involve this in form, not just in content? Yes.

Following Shapiro’s argument that the potential for republicanism exists (today) and is actively thwarted by the political machines of contemporary party bureaucracy and, following Dewey, the active promotion of organizing fictions, it is no surprise that fantastic “unicorns” are “more real” to us than our own capacity for political action.

The terrain was there, then, for an art practice exploring “public happiness,” which has been the basis for my work in the almost twenty years since I first encountered Dewey’s reading group at Beyond Baroque. You can only imagine the dawning excitement that I had in that time, with an expanding sense of potential for what I could do and be with art and as an artist.

And, indeed, this excitement formed the motivation for the focused and substantial investigation into the intersection between Arendt’s work and culture that I organized in 2011 and 2012.

XVI: INITIATIVE

The work with Fred Dewey is ongoing. As of this writing, Dewey has just announced a new series of reading group meetings in Berlin. Five days ago I organized a book presentation for The School of Public Life. We opened with a discussion around the question “what is the difference between culture and propaganda?” And I concluded with a new version of the Letter to Turkey performance that is presented earlier in this document. In other words, the practice is ongoing and so the snapshots of critical reflection here are not the studies of a cold and clear object, but rather that of the hot and murky experiment, in process. The scholarship of enactment that Dewey has developed and disseminated in reading groups in London, Oslo, Los Angeles, Berlin for twenty years.

In a discussion last night with Dewey about this memoir, he insisted that I make clear that the passage with which it begins was something I found and gravitated towards, was not led to it or taught it.
In 1998, I’d decided I wasn’t an artist. I’d decided that art was a fraud, and despite being completely absorbed with photography, conceptual art and a fledgling exploration of dance, I denied being an artist so vociferously that at the art bookstore I worked at a co-worked fashioned for me a little post-note and walked up to me and stuck it on my chest that read:

No, I’m not an artist.
No, I’m not.
Really.

I was emerging from a crashed-and-burned relationship, and had nothing but contempt for all that comes to mind with that odd phrase “the art world” and every experience of that so-called world.

It was that passage of Arendt that offered a hint, of something else. Resistance might be futile, as the Borg said in Star Trek, a line me and my friends’ repeated as the catchphrase of “the system” (even if I had not yet heard of Margaret Thatcher’s line “there is no alternative,”) but the notion that liberation might be in the practice of resistance, and that everything I had with me in my art practice could be a way of taking the initiative to challenge… It was liberating.

It was a kind of renewal to the sense of potential that had inspired me first to go to art school, to stay in school at all. In 1994 at UCLA, in the midst of what I saw as my last quarter of University before planning to drop out to pursue poetry (or making videos, I was not so clear on what might come next, just something other than University), I decided to sign up for a class in the Art Department. I’d seen Chris Burden’s retrospective in Boston when I was in high school and the idea of studying with him seemed like a good lark. Lucky for me Burden was not teaching the class, but I got Paul McCarthy instead.

Ten days or two weeks later, I called my mother on the phone and said I knew what I’d be doing for the next fifteen years of my life.

I had been studying Nietzsche (with Kerwin Klein a wild punk-rock history PHD researcher) and from there I went to Paul’s class, with found Paul a captivating and inspiring example: an endless open-ended process of critical reflection, one leading not just to papers, but to radio shows, sculpture, midnight performances in hotel parking lots, research projects in the history of Las Vegas. I was convinced of this route, but somehow only a few years later I’d become (almost) completely cynical, fueled by bad experiences in the commercial art world and an elaborated critical faculty fed on French theory. Despite continuing my practice I had become obnoxiously ambivalent.

In On Revolution, as part of the public happiness section (which Fred dedicated a month to in the reading group in 2014), Arendt distinguishes between private and public freedom: the freedom to pursue your own private affairs and the freedom to participate in the public realm. Part of my cynicism was the discovery that though I could pursue art privately in what Rosalind Krauss called the “expanded field” of endless experimentalism, the public conditions for culture were narrow (this reflection is narrated best in a text that follows in Part 4 “Request for Proposal: Vito Acconci, For Example).

Meeting Dewey was a chapter marker in my life. I began to see (through his example, teaching and working together) that “public freedom” was something indeed that could be struggled for, and that culture – and more importantly my own work – had some place in that struggle. Though it took years before I would properly read Shapiro, as I found his hyperbolic prose suspicious, Fred’s example convinced me not just of the personal value but of the practical effectiveness of that “profound wish and resolve to live the life of a citizen,” that “The Public Life” magazine consistently argued for as a primary step in re-establishing democratic and republican government. “Profound resolve” is a kind of action, in and of itself, and given that not so many people have that priority, let alone commitment, it sometimes makes one stand out, occasionally seeming like a ranting lunatic (the Frank Church project detailed later in the document, for instance, has originally taken as a kind of piece about my own psychology; only after the revelations of Edward Snowden did the piece become recognizable as an intervention into matters of shared concern). On the other hand, there are moments when standing out is actually “standing in:” standing in on behalf of the question of the greater good, standing in on behalf of the principles at stake.

In the months after September 11th, Fred Dewey and I eagerly witnessed the spontaneous formation of local groups resisting the new police powers that were being approved. These groups came to
be known as the Bill of Rights Defense Committee, and though this spontaneous action was not like the spontaneous councils, it was a moment of wide spread, shared, collaborative work to defend the laws, institutions and practices of the republic. It was not my project, but they were standing in for me, and continue to do so in their work.

Arendt quoted repeatedly the phrase that the Greeks said to those about to embark on a journey to a new place "wherever you go, you will be a polis" because it contained in it an assumption that the practices of political life can be enacted under any conditions, against any landscape.

When I first started attending Simone Forti's workshop, I was totally captivated by the improvisations that the other participants were making. It was the best art I could see in the city on a weekly basis, done for its own sake, with no public and no institutional trappings, and not even any materials. "This is something you could do in prison, I recall thinking. “This is something no one could ever take away from me.”

How could I not try to link art freedom with political freedom?

1 — Hannah Arendt, Preface: The Gap Between Part and Future, from In Between Past and Future, (New York: Penguin, 1961), p. 4. Line breaks added. The book collects a series of essays that address fundamental issues for politics– authority, freedom, culture, history, technology – that emerged originally as part of a planned sequel to The Human Condition that was intended to respond explicitly to Marxism.

2 — Reading group – Dewey prefers the term “working groups” and his practice of leading them dating back to 1995 has now been explored in a well-received pamphlet: “from an apparent contradiction in Arendt to a working group method”; re:public (Berlin, 2016.)

3 — Dewey's method was appropriated for my 2011-12 Crisis in Culture project. At the moment of wide spread, shared, collaborative work to defend the laws, institutions and practices of the republic, it was not my project, but they were standing in for me, and continue to do so in their work.

4 — a 1930’s short-hand for Lenin’s strategic vision, see for example Beevor, Anthony “The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939”; Orbis (London, 1982); Chapter 14.


6 — In June, 2015, when the Greek Finance Minister demanded a clarification of legal protocol by which he was being excluded from a crucial meeting, he was met with the following response: “the Eurogroup is an informal group. Thus it is not bound by Treaties or written regulations.” See for example “Fintan O’Toole: EU has taken decisive turn from democracy,” Irish Times, July 7, 2015.

7 — PR(Evens), short film, 2006. Produced as part of my post-Cork Caucus series of workshops the film shows an interview with Mackaye conducted by Timothy Furey with camera and editing by Mac Le Cain.


10 — in private correspondence with the author.


14 — Re-printed in American Library Association (ALA) Bulletin Vol 63, No. 2 (February 1969), pp. 165-167. Walter Karp and H.R. Shapiro were the “editors and primary contributors” to Public Life.


17 — H.R. Shapiro, op. cit., pg. 42.

18 — H.R. Shapiro, “USA: Total State”, Manhattan Communications (Santa Monica, 1986). “Quote from back cover.


20 — Fred Dewey, op. cit, Pg. 258.


25 — in private correspondence with the author.


27 — Fred Dewey, op. cit., pg. 83.

28 — “Poll: 70% believe Saddam, 9-11 link,” Associated Press as posted online by USA Today, September 6, 2003. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-09-06-poll-iraq_xchtm This dramatic example of how the political system and public discourse promote non-facts with clear practical implications is representative of general trends and features, not an exception. An equally consequent erroneous public belief is that the US economic system allows for class mobility, while in fact the US lags behind the Scandinavian social democracies in the potential for going from poor to rich in one generation.

29 — Wolfgang Heuer; “Imagination is the prerequisite of understanding” (Arendt)- The bridge between thinking and judging,” conference paper, 2005; pg. 8.
33 — Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 1982), edited and with an interpretive essay by Ronald Beiner; pg. 79-80. Line breaks added.
34 — op cit. pg. 79.
The 50th Anniversary Commemoration of Hannah Arendt’s
*The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance*

— Not a conference or symposium because those depend on gathering existing knowledge to be disseminated. Rather a structure by which something could be elaborated with the premise that academic work can foster public life.
I. EXPLAINING AN ALIENATION EFFECT

“To explicate, elaborate and exemplify” – this language was consistently used throughout the 2011 – 2012 project that wrestled through various means with Arendt’s only text dedicated to culture.

In November 2011, in Berlin I organized a kind of closing party for the year’s series of reading groups, lectures and the VU Amsterdam seminar I’d lead. The Graduate students from Amsterdam came and presented their projects, and for some of them there had been an extra-credit assignment: there exists several versions of Arendt’s text on culture and they were to compare and contrast them.

The Amsterdam researchers delivered their findings matter-of-factly: the main difference between the texts is that they had become increasingly convoluted in structure and difficult to understand. It was as if, Evelyn Austin speculated, Arendt wanted to make the text resistant to summarization, if not more complicated per se, than certainly slower to read and with less of a clear argumentation.

I had to recall that back in Los Angeles, when I first discovered the Arendt text on culture and suggested Fred Dewey and I read it together in his Hannah Arendt Working Group, he knew it well, “ah, that one is maddening. You think it’s simple and then it’s totally confounding.”

Later, in another reading group about another text, Fred suggested that Arendt’s texts were in some ways constructed to provoke, to stop you with a bold suggestion that would make you re-think assumptions, and to resist being turned into theoretical structures or concepts. Dewey suggested that Arendt had her own version of Bertolt Brecht’s alienation effect, in which the normal routes of communication are deliberately problematized to create a moment of self-reflection.

The VU researchers all shared the same conclusion that clearly Arendt must have purposefully decided on a less linear style in which exploring the meaning of examples is granted more important than any argument they might be employed to illustrate. They confirmed that there was a strategy at work here that was to deeply focus on episodes rather than any overall point. The final version of Arendt’s text is almost impossible to summarize, in fact.

What does it mean, then, to explicate, in this case?

If one were to force the issue, and try and beat the text into submitting into a clear series bullet points, would that actually clarify the nature of the text, or just obscure it?

Perhaps one needs to emulate and follow the example, to accept that wrestling with vivid fragments could be more enlightening than a list of bullet points.

One might have to accept a bit of disorientation as the price to pay for substantial reckoning with this work and its underlying issues, of which judgment itself – part of which certainly is linking the particular case to the general principle – forms a large part of the matter at hand.

II. LOCATION AND CHRONOLOGY

The commemoration of the Arendt's text took place in:

Arcade, London weekend seminar, April, 2011.
— The commercial gallery hosted the launch in April 2011, a weekend reading group of the text with guest speakers Celine Condorelli and Cally Spooner. Will Holder, Nadia Hebson, Catarina Riva, Elena Loizidou, Marina Stavrou and a few others attended.

General Public, Berlin weekly reading group and lecture series, May, 2011.
— This interdisciplinary project room hosted every Saturday in May of that year a morning reading group and then afternoon guest speakers. Guest speakers were Fred Dewey, Ines Schäfer, Judith Stagemund, Philipp Kliemichad, Michael Baers, Wolfgang Heuer, Gertrud Sandqvist and Mick Wilson. The morning reading groups were by reservation and the afternoon were open. Some of those who attended the morning reading groups: Megan Francis Sullivan, Laura Schluessner, Till Jessinghaus, Fred Dewey, Nikolai Franke with Michael Schultze of General Public who co-hosted the program.

Goleb, Amsterdam a bi-weekly reading group and lecture series throughout the fall, 2011.
— A newly founded collaboration of live/work studios with a shared project room on the Western edge of the city that hosted a series of
III. A SPHERE OF REFINED TALK WITH NO MEANING
("THAT ROOT" #1)

From The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance, Part I:

This escape from reality by means of art and culture is important, not only because it gave the physiognomy of the cultural or educated philistine its most distinctive marks, but also because it probably was the decisive factor in the rebellion of the artists against their newly found patrons; they smelled the danger of being expelled from reality into a sphere of refined talk where what they did would lose all meaning.

It was a rather dubious compliment to be recognized by a society which had grown so “polite” that, for instance, during the Irish potato famine, it would not debase itself or risk being associated with so unpleasant a reality by normal usage of the word, but...
would henceforth refer to that much eaten vegetable by saying “that root.” This anecdote contains as in a nutshell the definition of the cultured philistine.

First: for those gathered at the dinner table in Victorian England, why not just say, “pass the potatoes?” Why speak in euphemism, in code?

What is at stake in description and depiction?

A mass famine of people on the small island next to your small island.

You can’t change it anyways, so why bring it up unless it affects us directly, in our private circle. My mother is working on sex-trafficking activism, which can certainly kill a dinner table conversation.

But, the Irish potato famine was not just the result of bad weather, of a misfortune beyond human control, causation of responsibility: the mono-agriculture of total dependence on the potato crop was the result of the English stripping out everything else of any value.

It was not an accident. No “oops, I tripped and fell and reduced this population to desperate paupers so vulnerable that the failure of a single crop wiped them out in droves.”

In other words, the substitution of a more abstract phrase – “that root” – in place of the specific – potato – was linked to a consequence of the actions of the people sitting around that dinner table. To whatever extent Victorian England was democratic, it is precisely to that extent that individuals are responsible for the consequences of the actions of that government. The effect of that substitution was to change the subject, to move away from the painful and awkward situation, and the painful and awkward questions of how could this happen, what does it mean? Ultimately what has been neutralized is an aspect of responsibility.

If we reflect that amidst the English imperial conquest of Ireland, a centuries long brutal dominion, when the potato famine for certain was a direct result of English policies, that in Victorian London dinner parties the subject was so distasteful that they used a different word… Well, then we are dealing with a connection between language and power. “That root” is not a lie, or propaganda, but this historical example may resonate with the kind of manipulations of description that are so prevalent today. The was political managers use the word “optics” refers to how something looks to the public, how it appears and the kind sense it makes, and those professionals’ business is to control the sense that the public makes, using skills of public relations and marketing.

In this case what has happened is the use of language to obscure the situation through abstraction, and the use of abstraction to raise all involved out of any shared relationship to the world, to the potatoes they had and the Irish were dying without.

The opposite would be to deepen our shared relationship to the world, and the consequences of that would not be sentimentality, but rather responsibility.

Second of all:

The artists “smelled the danger of being expelled from reality into a sphere of refined talk where what they did would lose all meaning” – does that not sound like a passage from Allan Kaprow’s writings, and his sense that the white walls, fluorescent lights and cheap wine openings had become more important than the art? The precise motivation for experimenting with new frameworks was the sense that the social habituation around the visual arts had become more important than any particular content.

Isn’t that sense of meaninglessness exactly what makes art-fairs so painful, or conferences about research in the arts for that matter?

This section of The Crisis in Culture deals with the “educated philistine” who appeared in Europe and used art as a method to supposedly elevate himself out of the classical aristocratic “contempt for the vulgarity of sheer money-making.” What is controversial to us is the suggestion that there is a “proper mode of intercourse” with art. To our ears, trained that relativism is a crucial precondition for freedom of thought, such an assumption sounds like snobbery, or even patriarchal somehow in the willingness to be so normative.
indicated that “pursuit of perfection” which to Matthew Arnold was identical with the “pursuit of sweetness and light.”

The great works of art are no less misused when they serve purposes of self-education or self-perfection than when they serve any other purposes; it may be as useful and legitimate to look at a picture in order to perfect one’s knowledge of a given period as it is useful and legitimate to use a painting in order to hide a hole in the wall.”

And, not to seem jaded, but to buy a painting instead of paying income taxes?

IV. FRED DEWEY: WHY ARENDT? OR, THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC LIFE MAY 28, 2011, GENERAL PUBLIC, EXCERPT (“THAT ROOT” #2)

Society began to monopolize “culture” for its own purposes, such as social position and status. This had much to do with the socially inferior position of Europe’s middle classes, which found themselves—as soon as they had acquired the necessary wealth and leisure—in an uphill fight against the aristocracy in its contempt for the vulgarity of sheer moneymaking. In this fight for social position, culture began to play an enormous role as one of the weapons, if not the best-suited one, to advance oneself socially, and to “educate oneself” out of the lower regions, where supposedly reality was located, up into the higher, non-real regions, where beauty and spirit supposedly were at home. This escape from reality, by means of art and culture, is important, not only because it gave the physiognomy of the cultural or educated philistine its most distinctive marks, but also because it probably was the decisive factor in the rebellion of the artists against their newly found patrons; they smelled the danger of being expelled from reality into a sphere of refined talk where what they did would lose all its meaning. It was a rather dubious compliment to be recognized by the society, which had grown so “polite” that, for instance, during the Irish potato famine, it would not debase itself or risk being associated with so unpleasant a reality by normal usage of the word, but would henceforth refer to that much eaten vegetable by saying “that root”.

This exclusion and expelling of reality by society is a fundamental aspect of the crisis and it’s a fundamental aspect of the way in which the objects of our inheritance are lost.

I want to cite a little passage from Arendt’s review of a two-volume biography of Rosa Luxemburg, a person who played a great role here in Berlin and was deeply admired by both Arendt and her husband Heinrich Blucher. The biographer J.P. Nettl talks a little bit about what the condition of the Social Democratic party was and, how can one put it, why they were unprepared for WWI and by implication why the Socialists were no match for the Nazis.

Reading through the works of Nettl, she basically concludes that this failure to match the Nazis some years henceforth was indicated here. Luxemburg was murdered on the Landwerkanal in 1919, I believe, I think so, there’s a wonderful memorial there, to her, now. A deeply heroic woman. Twenty, let’s see fifteen years later, it wasn’t for another fourteen years, Arendt recounts, that the Freikorps who were responsible for her death, hired by the socialists to kill her, actually had massed into an entire form of government. Nettl writes about this and the pariah position of the SPD in Germany, she says, talking about Nettl: “Nettl holds an interesting position about the ‘pariah position’ of the SPD within German society and its failure to participate in government.” The SPD was refusing to be part of the government. “It seemed to its members that the Party could “provide within itself a superior alternative to corrupt capitalism.”’ So the SPD provides an environment in which we can critique and attack capitalism, and we feel safe from capitalism, to some extent. “In fact, by keeping “the defenses against society on all fronts intact,” it generated that spurious feeling of ‘togetherness,’ (as Nettl puts it) which the French socialists treated with great contempt. In any event, it was obvious that the more the Party increased in numbers, the more surely its radical élan”—its spirit—“was ‘organized out of existence.’ One could live very comfortably in the state within a state by avoiding friction with society at large, by enjoying feelings of moral superiority without any consequences.”

I think this is an extraordinarily apt description both of the politically minded members of the art world, of many dissident groups, of many party organizations, and in fact describes to a great extent the crisis of the culture and the crisis of where we’re at. Because this feeling of being superior, of being above what’s happening, of fighting it but being above it, of being morally superior to capitalism...not only is this a fatal, fatal belief, it leads in a political direction not only that describes something like the potato of the Irish famine as “that root,” but the social snobbery of the high society in England is actually directly related to the behavior and failure of the SPD around the time of WWI. That’s Arendt’s argument. I’m compressing a great
deal, but this is in essence the argument. The expulsion of reality and the feeling of being superior and apart from capitalism was a fatal, fatal mistake. Rosa Luxemburg dedicated her life to organizing the unorganized and got into, those of you that know a little bit about communist and Marxist history, a very, very consequential debate with Vladimir Lenin in Russia, critiquing the entire Leninist model of revolution as an avant-garde, I’m sorry, as a militaristic avant-gardism. I don’t want to get into the sectarian debates over the communists and all this kind of stuff, but Luxemburg’s argument was, you cannot have a revolution led by an avant-garde. It will not work. Why won’t it work? It won’t work because the revolution has to come from the people and the revolution has to do with the space in which we live, where we are, the public space, the space that we inhabit. All of us. Not just the twelve really smart, militant people who figured out how capitalism works and can lead the masses. A revolution in which the masses are not part of “the school of public life” is no revolution and it is a deformed revolution. There’s all kinds of stuff that can be discussed out of this, but it’s very important to Hannah Arendt.

Arendt’s entire book on the American revolution is based in this, in this insight of Rosa Luxemburg’s, especially the last section where Arendt talks about the townships and Jefferson’s proposed division of counties into wards. Let’s say Pankow here is divided up into countless areas or segments and each segment would have its own council that would govern. Now in German you’re familiar with this in terms of the word Ratte. The “soviets” of course were part of this initially. These are the things that get crushed in the way that revolution has been conducted basically since the French, that is, with the exception of the American Revolution. That’s a whole other debate so I’m not going to go down that path. But Luxemburg is an example for Arendt of what I’m calling, after her, the school of public life, and this leads to a republican program, which Lenin called no program at all and then led the Bolshevik revolution a few months later with no program except the seizure of power. Luxemburg’s republican program speaks specifically of maximum public life in every sector of society. This is the beginning of an outline of a true democratic republic, this is the outline of an empowered and energized and activated citizenry. In this case she’s speaking of the working class, naturally, but of course the thing that really got her into trouble was organizing the army and so trying to stop WWI. She was arrested and convicted for organizing a massive anti-war rally before anyone even knew the war was coming.

Luxemburg is an extraordinary, extraordinary figure and because of this program for maximum public life, I think she stands as a figure in our inheritance who has been wiped out, effectively excluded. She is not discussed among all of the figures that we hear about in contemporary art theory discourse, which is: Zizek on Lenin, Hegel, Lenin, Lenin, Badiou, Communism, Communism, Badiou—Badiou never really describes what this means—but it’s Communism, Communism, Communism. Negri, the multitude, the mass, the sort of faceless multitude of empire… I can’t figure that out, but he does not really believe in agency and Luxemburg plays no role in his thinking. Negri—somebody who is considered a theorist of the Italian autonomia movement. Luxemburg is written out of what we think of Communism and Marxism almost completely. As an example, I had a conversation with a very hard-core Marxist, actually a Stalinist, in San Francisco. He’s a poet and works with the homeless and we were having a discussion and he said: “But the Russian revolution, the Bolsheviks were surrounded by the whites and they were attacked by all the capitalist powers and of course they had to militarize, and of course they had to have a police state, and of course they had to do this and that and the other thing.” And I asked, “What about the republic, what about Luxemburg’s criticism of the avant-garde militarized leadership of the revolution?” And he said, “the republic, oh, you mean…Plato?”

I would like to choose a quotation from the [conclusion of the The Crisis in Culture,] the text we are reading, and it’s a quotation which is strange. It is saying—she’s quoting Cicero:

I prefer before heaven to go astray with Plato, rather than hold true views with his opponents.  

And then she is asking well, what does it mean? It means the matter of what you think is right is a matter of taste. Who would you like to prefer to be? Who would you like to hang around?

And she’s testing this, she’s saying, well this is an extremely bold statement. It would be saying that taste has something to do with how you choose your political allies.
It’s a quotation which is not so easy to resolve. You cannot really say ‘what is it’ that she’s saying. But what she seems to elaborate, in particular, well here too but particularly in the appendix, is when she’s testing the young Kant’s idea that taste, aesthetic taste, has something to do with the capacity to make ethical judgement.

So here, Kant is trying to say that, that by training your taste, you would be able to pass judgment on political or at least ethical matters. And Arendt seems to follow this and ask ‘but how is this possible’?

She is saying that taste is supposed to be the most private of the senses, or you don’t discuss taste, it’s a personal matter, personal taste etc. But, she says, quite on the contrary, Kant is developing- she says that taste is something that we have in common. We share, or we discuss, and refine, or we persuade people by comparing that have to do with taste. Then she says, Kant is saying that the taste aspect, the fact that you’re able to judge an aesthetic object makes it possible for you to develop something he calls the sensus communis. Common sense, or the feeling that we are belonging to a community.

And then she goes on, and she says well how is this possible? She is quoting Kant again, and saying that Kant is saying that it’s only art and human beings which doesn’t have a purpose. Human beings live because we live. Art is there because it’s there. But this was something extremely radical when Kant was formulating this. Today it would be a conservative position but normally with Hannah Arendt she doesn’t care where she’s supposed to be placed.

But then she says, well, this means that you cannot start, you cannot judge from a general rational situation, you have to judge from a particular example, the taste or capacity of judging aesthetically, it’s based on the capacity of judging specific cases. And then she says you be able to do that you have to leave the egoistic aspect. You cannot have a personal interest in it, then you will not be able to judge on an aesthetic level. You have to have the possibility of being able to discriminate, to be able to say this is good, this is not so good, and you have to be able to argue for it, at least to a certain level.

And then you need to have what she calls the enlarged mentality. Which means that you have to, you are able to put yourself in a position of somebody else. Which is saying that you train your taste to see something that, maybe from the beginning, you didn’t like or care about, that you trained, and then she’s going on to say that the opposite of the beautiful is not the ugly but the disgusting. Which I think is a very nice reference back to taste.

So all this is, to me, proposing that art is being put into the center of our public political society in a way that we maybe didn’t think it would from the beginning, because if art is helping us to make ethical judgments, that is one of the really important aspects that you are exercising as a citizen.

The capacity of making a judgment, an ethical judgment. And if that is trained by seeing the particular case, the non-egoistic aspect, the enlarged mentality and in particular the particularity, and look back again to this Cicero quotation:

I prefer before heaven to go astray with Plato, rather than hold true views with his opponents.

It is an incredibly challenging, to me, way of thinking around what role can be played by art in a society and why should art be there in the public, not in the private.

VI. MARINA STAVROU: NOTES

The Greek artist Marina Stavrou, a former student from MaHKU Utrecht, was the only person beside myself who attended sessions at all three of the sites – London in April, Amsterdam in Fall, and then I invited her to give a report on these two chapters as part of the November, 2011 closing at General Public. She read aloud from her notebook entries:

London
Disinterested joy (Kant) but are we ever free form concerns and status and position?
Labour and power- biological –related to thinking
No fabrication involved trouble and toil
A circle or force
Labour of our bodies
Necessity
Work
Utility
New birth
Aware of body its outside
Act

Choose and take responsibility, otherwise not free
Otherwise massive overwhelming consensus absorbing you
Individual judgment as freedom
Work –labour
Friendship
Correspondence

Being friend taking responsibility for this friend
Artists thinking always in terms with
means- ends- phedea-
artists shouldn’t vote
Action involved

Elisson time substracted
Looking without the concept of time
What is a friend walking together
Production of luxury collectables

[After Arendt’s death] They found in her typewriter a blank paper with the word “judgement .”
the last chapter of 3 themes she was interested at
Amsterdam

She produces active meaning
Old meaning of culture
She doesn’t say how it is now, you put those two pieces together, the before and the now.
Her last work—life of the mind
Willing thinking judgement
It is not clear,
What is the polemic of this article?
It main argument?
Nature of conflict
Between art and politics
Art objects must be protected against possessiveness of individuals
culture says art and politics are interrelated and mutually dependent
art can endure as long as beauty is bestowed on it
disenfranchised people
distraction from information
think ‘in place of everybody else”
enlarged mentality
hence judgement some validity but not universally valid
taste opposite of private feelings
judgement part of politics
negotiation of pleasure and agreement
taste is far from personal feelings
taste judges from top to bottom—aristocratic principle
of organization
how art relates to politics
truth is not important to me as taste—
from Cicero. go astray with plato.. than..
London reading group
Site: Arcade

The group showed an interest to be related with the text. Readers dove into it and intense was the effort to reach its depths. These efforts had different perceptible degrees; Some readers were trying to strip it, and outstrip it, exhibiting powerful language control, Others more doubtful used language as like walking on a tight rope.

All were looking to reach the idea, and were following the shift of meanings, From culture, to judgment, to politics, to art, to beauty, to friendship, to action, to taste.

Amsterdam reading group.
Site: Goleb, art space with studios.

Readers were looking for relations from their experience. There was defense of the word culture, for some moments it was as if seen autonomous from art. There was awe in front of the text from some others.

In both sessions there was ambiguity in the main polemic of the text, its main argument. Through various analyses and dialogue with streams of thought and pauses, The event seemed to evolve about the issue of taking a stance.
A small ‘agora’ where it was vital to form a view to keep the dialogue going.
The role of the artist was emerging through the text’s references.

Under the text’s consensus culture starts to exist when there is polis, a group of houses, and not just shelters, but organized in a sense. The artist seems to be part of this polis and also far from it.
But does someone have the right to distance from polis? Does polis permit that distance and what happens then—could it be that a polemic arises?

Do both parties experience the polemic in the same way? Could it also be that the role of the artist starts from the point that he or she starts to learn how to face this polemic?
And who can predict when this polemic will end.

VII. MAY 14, 2011 READING GROUP, GENERAL PUBLIC, EDITED TRANSCRIPT.

The point of the matter is that, as soon as the immortal works of the past became the object of social and individual refinement and the status accorded to it, they lost their most important and elemental quality, which is to grasp and move the reader or the spectator over the centuries.7

NIKOLAI FRANKE: Philistinism in my understanding is really quite the opposite of social and individual refinement. It is acquiring in order to gain something very material - which is social status which provides for me very material goods. Whereas working on self-education – Bildung - that is crucial at least in my history--

GERTRUD SANDQVIST: --that is why she’s so radical--

NIKOLAI FRANKE: --and this, that the entire Bilding is excluded. So it seems that contemplation is the opposite of Bildung. Bildung shaping myself, and shaping society is opposed to some sort of contemplation that doesn’t concern me, and it doesn’t influence me and I don’t become anything that I haven’t been before. That’s awfully strange.

GERTRUD SANDQVIST: We were talking about this yesterday night, if you use the late Foucault’s last writings, you remember, when he’s talking about the moral philosophers of the Roman time, what they were saying was that you have to cultivate yourself, and what one was supposed to do and in contrast to the surrounding society at that time, you cultivate your soul. You make sure that in calculating your soul, being able to exercise discipline and moral dignity, that is what Foucault is talking about. Now remember that this was being held up by the less than 1% of the society which was supposed to rule others--
JEREMIAH DAY: --in Rome or in Greece?

GERTRUD SANDQVIST: --in both Rome and Greece. So it meant that starting in Greece of course you have to act with moderation you have to discipline your pleasures, because the whole Stoic philosophy, and what Foucault is talking about is that the moral philosophers of the Roman empire, went over rather seamlessly to the moral philosophers of the empire and I would say that that way of calculating your soul, the Bildung aspect, is there because you’re supposed to be able to master yourself to master others.

FRED DEWEY: She’s going directly against the common assumption of the value and the meaning of refinement, in other words. This comes directly from her very very intense passion and love for the German tradition of Bildung and so she’s saying let’s look at refinement as to whether refinement is really cultural. Because our normal assumption is philistine here on one side refinement there on the other - that the philistine is the opposite of refinement. And the radicality of her argument, I think this is what Gertrude is saying, is that she’s actually saying refinement in the way that we conceive of it socially, this is very important, social politeness, refinement is actually philistine.

NIKOLAI FRANKE: But in this paragraph she doesn’t seem to be talking about the social display of individual refinement but about individual refinement itself.

GERTRUD SANDQVIST: I agree I think that’s precisely what she’s doing, and I think that she’s trying to solve a paradox that she has been struggling with, or she was struggling with for a great part of her life and that was how was it possible that this.. How is it possible that this German culture with it’s Bildung tradition that she loved so much was able to produce Nazis? And this is of course, she’s saying at some point, I don’t remember where, she’s actually saying refinement in the way that we conceive of it socially, this is very important, social politeness, refinement is actually philistine.

NIKOLAI FRANKE: I still don’t get a clear picture because Bildung, at least how the term was coined, meant precisely something fundamentally ethical and not the display of learned habits - Humbolt, etc, also Goethe, who by the way is also very political... So that the question seems to me to be: how did Bildung go from actual Bildung - which is construction a shelter a capacity to resist certain things - come in to decay and coming to a point where the capacity to savor the aesthetics of cruelty...

JEREMIAH DAY: I disagree with Nicolai in one sense, that I think, the pleasure in cruelty, the point, I mean this is the 50th anniversary of this text, it’s also the 50th anniversary of the Eichmann trial. The point was of course that Eichmann was not a sadist, the point that Eichmann was there quoting Kant, like a respectable -

[Everyone jumps in at once. Pause. Everyone laughs.]

JEREMIAH DAY: Ok, sorry I mentioned it.

NIKOLAI FRANKE: The question how does an apparent or an actual process of education lead into the most horrible crime ever committed - now that cannot be applied to Eichmann because he’s not--

JEREMIAH DAY: --because he’s not educated enough?

NIKOLAI FRANKE: It may apply to Frank, Bornon, these people, but certainly not to Eichmann.

JEREMIAH DAY: The example of Eichmann was not to refer only to Eichmann personally, but to say that the aestheticization of cruelty was not the issue.
NIKOLAI FRANKE: According to her it was.

[Everyone jumps in.]

FRED DEWEY [slowly]: This really radical gesture that has now happened to bring up Eichmann in an essay on culture is actually very relevant because the next part of the sentence is, she's talking about objects, she's talking about worldly things, and the point of this is not that the philistine is immoral, the point is not that the philistine actually in a certain sense has withdrawn from reality, the point is in an essay on culture what happens to the worldly, what happens to the object what happens to what is in front of us? So the point here as she then says, "as soon as the immortal works of the past became the object of social and individual refinement and the status accorded to it, they lost their most important and elemental quality." So that's the issue that I think.

NIKOLAI FRANKE: They lose their grasp on us.

FRED DEWEY: We lose a grasp on them! That we become concerned with the self, we become concerned with what you were emphasizing last night, the ego-centric, social climbing, etc. And the object, which after all is our concern with the culture, perhaps, is lost. Or not the object, but the fundamental important, the object's most important and elemental quality. And then of course then there's the next statement, that I think you were reacting to, which is to "grasp the reader over the centuries", so there's two really crucial very different monumental ideas imbedded in this one predicate, both the idea that the most fundamental quality of the object is lost and the most fundamental quality is to last over centuries, and that's the problem with philistinism and refinement. Not that it is against Bildung, I think, actually.

NIKOLAI FRANKE: Are you suggesting that philistinism and social refinement are two terms for the same thing?

FRED DEWEY: In her argument actually, yes.

NIKOLAI FRANKE: Hmm. Let's keep in mind that there's fundamental disagreement, I don't see that at all.

TILL JESINGHAUS: Social refinement is a species of philistinism, of philistinism as a use term relationship, philistinism is like the broader cultural malaise of an instrumental, exclusively instrumental approach to anything that can be in the realm of action or thinking.

NIKOLAI FRANKE: Yes of course but I don't see how self-education is instrumental.

FRED DEWEY: We probably will not be able to resolve that but Mick's point, what we can look at, is whether the object is properly grasped, that's the important thing here.

MICK WILSON: Bildung is not necessarily self-refinement as the philistine vice that Arendt describes. It's a mode a Bildung it becomes routinized. It becomes formulaic.

FRED DEWEY: --a cliché.

MICK WILSON: She's introducing a distinction between a proper intercourse with culture and an improper intercourse with culture and I'm not completely sure that I follow Gertrude's line, but I do think there's something in here.
where she is definitely honoring the tradition of German culture and at the same time she is struggling with what it produced.

GERTRUD SANDQVIST: I think that she is struggling because as we spoke about before, it turned out that it didn’t help, it didn’t prevent what actually was happening. I don’t think we could just take that experience away from her because it’s there all the time.

TILL JESINGHAUS: It’s informing her writing.

GERTRUD SANDQVIST: I think it’s absolutely necessary, I don’t think we could be ahistorical enough not to understand what kind of situation she was in when she was writing this. I think that’s very very important. And the other thing, which I think is very important, is that she’s all the time talking about the civilization, the community, as a place which you are born into. She’s always talking about it as a collective. And she’s talking then about a very important thing. I mean when she comes to the question of judgment for instance and that is very closely related to her idea of how you’re acting consciously, with conscience towards other people, how do you do your thinking for instance, then she is saying, this is a quality ALL people could have, not only those who have Bildung, special education and so on learning how to appreciate culture. I think that is crucial to her thinking, that this is not a very advanced thing that you get only from appreciating and sharing culture, it could be there for every person.

RAFAEL: I guess that’s what she’s saying. She criticizes the philistine approach to this refinement, lack of thinking, that this refinement is deprived of thinking. And she wrote in the lectures on Kant political philosophy, she quoted Kant who has this kind of distancing himself from those educated people who lack one crucial thing, so this kind of refinement, empty refinement, she criticizes that.

FRED DEWEY: Gertrude has raised a really important point directly relevant to that because her point in The Life of The Mind is that anyone can think, it has nothing to do whatsoever with your educational level. That thinking is not a matter of how many degrees you have or how you have expertise or anything. Well, what thinking is forms another discussion but I think Gertrude is saying that the critique here is, I hesitate to use the word elite, but I think she’s suggesting that maybe implicit in philistinism, the philistine view of refinement is that only some people can be refined or only some people can think or a certain strata of society is capable of being cultured.

TILL JESINGHAUS: You mentioned the Critique of Judgment earlier and Kant’s concept of the aesthetic. I think that there is a potential candidate for us, for this counter-intuitive understanding or this argument against self-refinement as crucially being anti-cultural could come from this. Because in the Critique of Judgment, Kant says one time that the typifying or the epitome of the aesthetic object we have to imagine as the free interplay of the productive imaginary powers without interference of categorical apparatus. So this points out – if the relation between the right intercourse towards the cultural realm or with object of art is to be seen in the light of that - we have a contradiction with the interests that are inherent to self-refinement because they are thoughtful, they have purposes and thus sort of are ruled out by a form of intercourse that rules out an instrumental form of thinking.

NIKOLAI FRANKE: Yeah, maybe that’s my mistake because that’s in my assumption self-refinement is exactly that, the loss of self and losing oneself to the object or to the experience and being totally purposeless is part of self-refinement. But maybe that’s my personal or too Frankfurt like way of thinking.

TILL JESINGHAUS: I don’t think its your personal stand point only, but if we could touch on the notion of being born into a world for instance, you would fetishize yourself as an art object which you would if you wanted to refine yourself in a way you wanted to fabricate something to produce, bring something in to being that can last and withstand consumption, you would be on the wrong track because you are mortal and can’t last...

GERTRUD SANDQVIST: This is so important this question of if we can become immortal or not.

TILL JESINGHAUS: But you can’t be immortal like Ovid became immortal, like he says I become immortal because I wrote this lengthy poem, Metamorphosis, and that’s where she drawing this from, this outlasting as culture, as culture. You can become immortal but only in the memory and fame that other people attribute to you and people worship you.

GERTRUD SANDQVIST: As you know this is even before Ovid: it’s the fundament of the Greek political society.

TILL JESINGHAUS: But the Greeks instead of art they revered and worshipped powerful politicians.
MICHAEL SCHULTZE: Exactly.

TILL JESINGHAUS: Socrates was mentioned before, look at Socrates, I think it’s in the Phaedon, where he basically, there’s this tension between the going on, like philosophizing, like living longer in order to philosophize and the problem of being killed. And there’s this argument given where he tries to bring together like the notion to reconcile fear of death and philosophy, or the loss of the fear of death and philosophy. Socrates, when you learn that he was sentenced to death by the public he conceded to that because that was his understanding what he was crucially what made him immortal and what was his work — something that’s played or was reflected was in the interaction with other people and was not this petty personal existence.

PP?: It was his political action, his conversation had a political meaning for … this is what he says in his defense

TILL JESINGHAUS: And the sense in which she’s using self refinement in terms of philistinism here is that you would only be interested in your own actions for self perpetuation or for I don’t know change in your social status to a better one.

FRED DEWEY: In the interests of the text itself I want to go back to a sentence on the very first page, ok? Popular, quote unquote, intellectualization of kitsch, this is very relevant, the very first paragraph of the essay, she says, “hence it’s culture, popular culture, cannot be left to the populace” ok?

GERTRUD SANDQVIST That’s a quote, right?

FRED DEWEY: Yeah, that’s a quote. So, so her argument about philistinism, her argument about all this stuff, the contrast that Till brought up, which you’ve been talking about, I think she’s positioning this as an issue of who gets to decide in a sense, or like who decides what culture is. Who decides what the people are. You know, popular culture cannot be left to the populace, this has its roots in philistinism. And the notion that certain people can decide what is popular, certain people can decide what is culture, and in fact in mass society you still have these forms, you have 3 television networks in the United States, or you have 4 publishing houses, you have one editor at each. Who decides what the people are really interested in, what their culture is? So this has enormous impact for the present, is why I’m bringing this up, because just to come back to the very beginning of the essay, this is how she framed the discussion.

Culture is being threatened when all worldly objects and things, produced by the present or the past, are treated as mere functions for the life process of society, as though they are there only to fulfill some need, and for this functionalization it is almost irrelevant whether the needs in question are of a high or a low order.

That the arts must be functional, that cathedrals fulfill a religious need of society, that a picture is born from the need for self-expression in the individual painter and that it is looked at because of a desire for self-perfection in the spectator, all these notions are so unconnected with art and historically so new that one is tempted simply to dismiss them as modern prejudices.

The cathedrals were built ad maiorem gloriæ Dei; while they as buildings certainly served the needs of the community, their elaborate beauty can never be explained by these needs, which could have been served quite as well by any nondescript building. Their beauty transcended all needs and made them last through the centuries; but while beauty, the beauty of a cathedral like the beauty of any secular building, transcends needs and functions, it never transcends the world, even if the content of the work happens to be religious.

On the contrary, it is the very beauty of religious art which transforms religious and other-worldly contents and concerns into tangible worldly realities; in this sense all art is secular, and the distinction of religious art is merely that it “secularizes” refines and transforms into an “objective,” tangible, worldly presence what had existed before outside the world, whereby it
is irrelevant whether we follow traditional religion and localize this “outside” in the beyond of a hereafter, or follow modern explanations and localize it in the innermost recesses of the human heart.  

Goleb is located in an area of Amsterdam that I had only been a few times before, an expansive planned community of modernist urban design and architecture that also appropriates elements of vernacular and traditional design leading to a somehow human scale experience of a modernist city. It was also a neighborhood with many Moroccan immigrants, which in the last twenty years has represented a painful and unresolved conflict with Dutch society, egalitarian and tolerant, but reluctant to embrace the multi-racial nature that country had taken on. Huge parts of neighborhood were scheduled to be demolished, but the financial crisis froze the plans as it was unclear who could raise the money for a massive new construction.

This was partly why Goleb was there – pursuing affordable working space. But one of the VU researchers in my seminar lived out there too, and he was not gentrifying or exploiting, he was in love with the place. He gave me this whole essay dedicated to the history of the neighborhood and the architects whose work made it up, leading to an analysis of the strategies the politicians and the real estate developers were using to push through the demolition plans. They quoted urban theorists of direct democracy in their pamphlets, informing citizens of how much more freedom they’d have after their neighborhood had been transformed from modernist urban space to a more low-density suburban model, which likely would not be able to accommodate everyone, but so be it. Roel Griffioen, the researcher, then concluded this epic chronicle of the world around him with a strange shift in the text to dealing with transparency, window design, the artist Dan Graham and a theoretically compelling argument that for me was never going to be as interesting as reading him think about his neighborhood.

This is academia, I thought when I read it. The place he lives and loves is getting destroyed and his vast understanding of the situation is mobilized into an analysis of window transparency, ie nowhere. By focusing on developing knowledge within the field as the main evaluative criteria, I’ve found that academia instrumentizes everything into the production of technical expertise, teaching people even in the middle of a heated situation to act like theorists and experts, not citizens or even human beings. Roel, faced with eminent destruction of his prized community, understanding everything behind it and at stake,
felt it necessary to channel all of that into a meta-debate that existed as minor contribution to an existing theoretical architecture.

My contact at Goleb was Taf Hassam (who is still in the building but now runs a separate space there named New Conditions, an homage to the 2010 pamphlet Fred Dewey produced as part of our presentations at The Box). I’d heard about Taf before I met him through our mutual friend Mieke van der Voort, with her saying she’d met a talented photographer who was dashing and charming. Indeed in his perpetually ragged black suit and anarchistic gleam in his eye, he brought an elan with him into his work at Goleb, which consisted of programming such high quality experimental music shows and parties that he would build a following devoted enough to come to cultural and political events like a weekend dedicated to Hannah Arendt, which is exactly what happened. The suicide of Mieke brought closer together, although it was not until years later that we discovered that we both shared the belief that the Amsterdam art scene, which had never given her the respect we felt like she deserved, had contributed to the conditions that led her to make such a decision.

Taf had largely given up on photography when I met him and in the way his contempt for the “art world” had dissuaded him from making art, focusing instead on organizing public events, he reminded me of myself.

Taf and Roel, through a process I was not witness to, connected and collaborated on a publication detailing the history of the neighborhood and the political context of its impending demolition, featuring photographs by Taf and a text by Roel.

In a 2014 meeting with the National Research Foundation (NWO) and the visual arts Mondrian Foundation, I brought a copy of this publication and projected pictures of it, saying it was the single most important outcome to date of my Doctoral project. Central to my project was the assertion that the academy itself could be an organ of public life, and I’d insisted the researchers I worked with develop projects that resolved themselves publicly – talks, screenings, publications, a walking tour – and not as academic papers.

Through my Arendt project, I’d introduced these two and the influence was clear: Taf had drawn Roel into a mode of production that was grounded in Taf’s aim for a public culture, and Roel’s fascination for the living design principle had inspired Taf to renew his photography with a sense of purpose that making art in a gallery could never give him. Taf
could produce beautiful images for a worldly purpose, just not an “art-worldly” purpose.

The American Barnett Newman insisted on the distinction “object matter / subject matter” instead of “form / content.” It was an attempt on his part to insist that even if his abstract paintings had no “content” they for sure had “subject matter.” In the case of my own work, often my work has a plethora of content, but that does necessarily equate to the work’s subject matter.

In this way, Taf and Roel’s book is about more than architecture or urban planning, and it has a validity that is compelling even to those with no interest in Amsterdam’s western edges. The book is beautiful and beautifully done in its understated interrogation of the meaning of site and local history for two different kinds of cultural producers in the midst of changing world they don’t seem to have much agency in.

[The cathedrals’] beauty transcended all needs and made them last through the centuries; but while beauty, the beauty of a cathedral like the beauty of any secular building, transcends needs and functions, it never transcends the world, even if the content of the work happens to be religious.

To take this further it is as if the beauty of Taf and Roel’s book transcends academic disciplines like urban theory or fine art criteria for photography, the book is more worldly than either those things. Oddly enough, just as the worldliness of the cathedrals make them available for those of us who don’t believe that Jesus Christ was the son of God and thus makes them available to us, this aspect of beauty is precisely what give their book a chance at resonating publicly.

**IX. FRESHNESS AND ENDURANCE**

Panis et circenses truly belong together; both are necessary for life, for its preservation and recuperation, and both vanish in the course of the life process – that is, both must constantly be produced anew and offered anew, lest this process cease entirely.

The standards by which both should be judged are freshness and novelty, and the extent to which we use these standards today to judge cultural and artistic objects as well, things which are supposed to remain in the world even after we have left it, indicates clearly the extent to which the need for entertainment has begun to threaten the cultural world.9 Just as the cathedrals transcend their religious function, so can works of entertainment transcend the disposability inherent in that cycle. John Coltrane, after all, spent most of his life playing in bars as an evening’s entertainment, but the music he developed so exceeded that framework that eventually a church was built around it.

Will anyone watch The Sopranos in a thousand years? If so we will know that within Arendt’s schema that it was culture, not just entertainment.

As Arendt elaborates, it is not the shift of works of entertainment into becoming cultural (ie, maintaining enduring meaning) that is alarming but the other way around – the emphasis on freshness and novelty in culture that is troublesome because the clear consequence can be as she suggests that in a world of mass consumerism, the space for culture itself endangered.

**X. WOLFGANG HEUER: HANNAH ARENDT THINKING SPACE**

In 2006, for the 100th anniversary of Arendt’s birth, the political scientist Wolfgang Heuer organized an exhibition of contemporary art dedicated to Arendt. His May 2011 talk at General Public, Berlin was based on his original notes for that exhibition. They are included here:
surprise: full of philosophical and poetical observations

Examples

„When somebody has decided: Where wood is chopped, splinters must fall, he is not accessible anymore for his friends, because he already had decided to have no one anymore, he had already sacrificed them. All splinters.“ (1950)

„Labor - thinking - love are the three modes of mere life from which will never arise a world and which therefore actually are hostile to the world, anti-political. ..... Love burns, strikes through the in-between like the lightning, i.e. the worldly space between men. This is only possible with two people. As soon as the third person appears the space reconstitutes itself immediately.“

We knew that Arendt’s essays are full of observations of that kind.

ROLE OF THINKING IN ARENDT

They are the consequences of three passions:

- passionate thinking
  - thinking was for her a „life necessity“, living without thinking is like being dead
  - her texts „thinking and moral consideration“, „The Life of the Mind“, dealt with the question how to tell right from wrong in a new world, where morale and habits cannot help anymore
  - the thoughtlessness of Eichmann: „The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.“ (49) Clichés. – Thinking and speaking belong unspeakably together
  - literature and life belong also inseparably together: „poetry is closest to thought“ (HC);

- the necessity to understand
  - her writings as results of thinking processes. Her aim is to understand, not to take affect. „To understand produces depth ... Politically speaking this is the same as to find a home in the world, to feel at home. It is the process of rootedness“. (DT 332)
  - again literature: our narrative identity: to tell the story of what happened. (Dinesen)

- to know how to judge the new, the unexperienced
  - The 3rd part of her last book „The Life of the Mind“, Judging, was never written, but the Kant lectures she gave comprehended her unwritten theory. This theory is based on Common Sense and Imagination: CS as judging together with others, and Imagination as the capacity to represent the standpoint of somebody else. Arendt used Kant’s aesthetic judgment because of its exemplary character to transform it into political judgment. To judge human reality and politics cannot be based on logical or subsuming judgment, this leads to utilitarian or totalitarian thinking; on the contrary reflective, Arendt talks about exemplary judgment. „Examples are the ‘go-carts’ of all judging activities, are also and especially the guideposts of all moral thought“.
  - This has nothing to do with empathy but with real or possible other standpoints, or other judgments. She mentions the example of a slum dwelling she is looking at and how she represents poverty and misery. „I arrive at this notion by representing to myself how I would feel if I had to live there, that is, I try to think in the place of the slum-dweller. The judgment I shall come up with will by no means necessarily be the same as that of the inhabitants whom time and hopelessness have dulled to the out-
rage of their condition... this does not mean that I conform in my judgment to theirs. I still speak with my own voice and I do not count noses in order to arrive at what I think is right. But my judgment is no longer subjective either."

- Finally: against the priority of reason which dominates our culture, Arendt resumes: „Now, the fact that not our reason bound to ourselves but the imagination makes it possible to think in the place of all others” it is not reason but imagination which forms the bond between men. Against the sense of oneself, the reason based on the ‘I think’ stands the sense of the world which lives from the others as common sense or imagination.” (570)

LANGUAGE IN HANNAH ARENDT

Like thoughtlessness and cliché correspond in Eichmann, the openness of the thinking in Arendt corresponds to her way of writing. Her thinking moves between experience and concepts, between the world of our senses and the inner world, her writing deals with

- distinctions (power is not violence, totalitarianism is not tyranny, knowledge is not understanding)
- thought images and metaphors
  - „all thinking is metaphorical" DT
  - „Analogies, metaphors and emblems are the threads with which the mind holds on to the world, even when, absent-mindedly, it has lost the direct contact with it, and they guarantee the unity of human experience.” (LM)

This thinking needs the form of essays
We find a lot of emotions:

- rage and agitation in her column This means you in Aufbau in the 40s
- irony in We Refugees
- could not write without ira et studio (to Eric Voeglin)
- laughter about Eichmann (Gaus interview), ironic tone in EJ

PERFORMANCE IN ARENDT

- politics as the space of appearance
- the persona who is acting
- the light of the public and the darkness of the private sphere
- world and worldliness, the loneliness of the people under totalitarian conditions

Exhibition

Project description
Whoever delves into the work of Hannah Arendt is struck not only by the actuality of her writings but also by the ravishing character of her language, filled as it is with images. ... Such thinking reveals the kind of experience that led Arendt to a concrete mode of thought during the crisis of the Weimar Republic, when she and others like Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht read reality against the grain of abstractions and wrote in protest at every sort of thoughtless commonplace.

The Hannah Arendt Thinking Space will make artistically visible a series of selected tropes so as to showcase not only Arendt’s thought but also a vital new method of thinking. Thus the thinking space will also offer the opportunity to critically confront images in contemporary political and cultural language.

To this end we propose focusing on three main aspects of philosophical and artistic work:

- Thought images (the life of the mind)
- The pictorial language of Arendt’s work (politics and critique)
- Images in our contemporary political language (thinking and thoughtlessness)

We made a reader for the artists with thought images

- The disclosure of „who“ through speech and the setting of a new beginning through action always fall into an already existing web. (The Human Condition)

- Binding oneself through promises, served to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men. (The Human Condition)

- If the factual territory has become an abyss, then the space one occupies if one pulls back from it is, so to speak, an empty space where there are no longer nations and peoples but only individuals for whom it is now not of much consequence what the majority of peoples, or even the majority of one’s own people, happen to think at any given moment. (The Hidden Tradition)

- If this (totalitarian) practice is compared with that of tyranny, it seems as if a way had been found to set the desert itself in motion, to let loose a sand storm that could cover all parts of the inhabited earth. (Origins of Totalitarianism)

- During the few minutes it took Kovner to tell of the help that had come from a German sergeant, a hush settled over the courtroom; it was as though the crowd had spontaneously decided to observe the usual two minutes of silence in honor of the man named Anton Schmidt. And in those two minutes, which were like a sudden burst of light in the midst of impenetrable, unfathomable darkness, a single thought stood out clearly, irrefutably, beyond question – how utterly different would be today in this courtroom, in Israel, in Germany, in all of Europe, and perhaps in all countries of the world, if only more such stories could have been told. (Eichmann in Jerusalem)

Washington

After American Taliban recruit John Walker Lindh was captured in Afghanistan, the office of Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld instructed military intelligence officers to “take the gloves off” in interrogating him. (...) War Crimes. Prison Interrogators’ Gloves Came Off Before Abu Ghraib, By Richard A. Serrano, Los Angeles Times, June 9, 2004

In October 2004, the New York Times Magazine, Suskind quotes a senior Bush advisor who dismissed reporters for living in the “the reality-based community.” The advisor said, “That’s not the way the world really works anymore. We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”

XI. PUBLICNESS (“THAT ROOT” #3)

The point of the matter is that the conflict, dividing the statesman and the artist in their respective activities, no longer applies when we turn our attention from the making of art to its products, to the things themselves which must find their place in the world.

These things obviously share with political “products,” words and deeds, the quality that they are in need of some public space where they can appear and be seen; they can fulfill their own being, which is appearance, only in a world which is common to all; in the concealment of private life and private possession, art objects cannot attain their own inherent validity,
they must, on the contrary, be protected against the possessiveness of individuals whereby it does not matter whether this protection takes the form of their being set up in holy places, in temples and churches, or placed in the care of museums and the keepers of monuments, although the place where we put them is characteristic of our “culture,” that is, of the mode of our intercourse with them. …

In other words, culture indicates that art and politics, their conflicts and tensions notwithstanding, are interrelated and even mutually dependent. …

The common element connecting art and politics is that they both are phenomena of the public world.10

The passage cited earlier at the beginning of this series of excerpts—“that root”—also telegraphs a compressed narrative of modern art, from the salon de’ refuse until then 1960’s or 1970’s, when artists “rebelled” against “good society.” Arendt also maintained that artists were the only members of modern society who preserved a sense of their own work as opposed to “making a living”: “the artist, who, strictly speaking is the only ‘worker’ in a laboring society.”11

To my estimation this is no longer the case—the artist as social designer, as researcher, as part of “creative industries,” as part of a global market of luxury collectibles—all of these models take for granted the professionalization of the role of the artist. What are the implications of this change? The integration of art practice into consumer society may mean the principle outlined in the passage above—that art and politics are “interrelated”—is now only a latent capacity.

But, often in politics the activation of underlying principles is a key strategy. The Solidarity movement in Poland for example reached back to the underlying principle of worker power that had been reduced to lip-service under the Soviets, but they used those principles as a kind of platform and armor to then insist on their rights. They reached backwards to a principle with one hand and with the other pushed outward against the opposition, and made space to appear. “Good laws, bad men” was a saying in the US Civil Rights Movement, using the “good laws” of the Constitution to support their attempt to overturn an entire social, economic, and political order, the work of those “bad men.”

In other words, if art’s access to the public realm exists now only as a principle, not a practice, then simply avoiding the “sphere of meaningless talk” could be insufficient. Perhaps, like other actors on the public stage, an organizing effort to reclaim that potential could be required. Some kind of struggle might be necessary.

So, Jeremiah picked these quotes and among them was one that begins with Arendt’s eulogy for Auden, which she actually reproduced in the German version of Men in Dark Times. One of the principles for the original English publication was that all of the people who were included be dead. When the English edition was published Auden was still alive, but by the time the German publication came out, Auden had died and so she included her essay for him there among the Men in Dark Times.

Auden, so much wiser, though by no means smarter than Brecht, knew early on that poetry makes nothing happen.

Auden was a very important poet for Arendt. They were friends and they had a very complicated relationship. Auden was of course gay but asked her to marry him after her husband Heinrich Blücher died, and she refused, ehm... [laughter]...

She was sort of horrified by the proposal, but after he died, she wrote a letter to Mary McCarthy in which she worried about her decision and said “I’m still thinking of Wyston, and how I refused to take him in when he came and asked for shelter. Homer says the gods spin evil things and unhappiness to human beings that they may be able to tell the tales and sing the songs.” Then she says, “Well, Auden was both the teller and the tale.”

And that quote, although without reference to their personal relationship, actually comes up again towards the conclusion of her eulogy. It’s a kind of a statement about poetry, and of what poetry is about, and I think it relates to the Anton Schmidt example that both Jeremiah brought up and the other day and that Wolfgang was talking about as well: how this extraordinary action is preserved in storytelling.
I wanted to situate this in a couple of quotes of Auden’s. They have to do with what I think is in some way one of the animating spirits of these wonderful reflections that Jeremiah has put together about the relationship of art to politics.

There are a lot of very famous questions about it, the key one maybe being for Arendt, Holderlin’s in “Bread and Wine”, which Heidegger of course quotes, “what are poets for in needy times?”

And Holderlin’s younger contemporary Shelley has an answer. He said, well “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”

And Auden, with really kind of biting sarcasm, you know, many years later wrote: “the unacknowledged legislators of the world’ describes the secret police, not the poets.”

And there’s just one more quote of Auden’s I’d like to add in this context: “the duties of a writer and citizen are not the same, the only duty that a writer has as a citizen is to defend language, because if language is corrupted, thought it corrupted.”

In Memory of W.B Yeats
by WH Auden

He disappeared in the dead of winter;
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
The snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.

What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,

The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,
A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.
What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

II

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

III

Earth, receive an honoured guest:
William Yeats is laid to rest.

Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptyed of its poetry.
Time that is intolerant,
of the brave and innocent
And indifferent in a week,
to a beautiful physique
Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives
Pardons cowardice, conceit
Lays its honors at their feet

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardon Kipling and his views
And will pardon Paul Claudel
Pardons him for writing well

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;
Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice.
With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress.
In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountains start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

XIII. TENDING; METHODOLOGY; RESULTS

The word “culture” derives from colere— to cultivate, to dwell,
to take care, to tend and preserve—and it relates primarily to
the intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating
and tending nature until it becomes fit for human
habitation.\textsuperscript{12}

Tending:
In Amsterdam, Fergal Gaynor asked: “And what of the gardener tending
Franco’s tomb? Is that culture, or politics?” He was implicitly
addressing the activity we were undertaking right there and then.

Methodology:
First of all, it was bottom-up and inside out. It was not big in scale, nor
in publicity, not in asserting any dramatic claim. I never posed as an
Arendt scholar, nor suggested I had the answers.

“Bottom-up and inside out” must have come from working for years on
the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. It was those Alabama
Panthers who never used the word “revolution” or had uniforms or
parades, but rather systematically tried to win elected office like coroner
or board of education. Not state representative, but rather those offices
that were “closest to the people.”

The slowness, the repetition, the multiple sites and systematic unfolding
of the project were essential to the organizing strategy.

I wanted:
— to start a conversation—it was lonely just talking to Fred Dewey
about Arendt, and it made me worry that I might be getting myopic
(stoner’s logic of self-referentiality—“dude, the lines on my hands look
like freeways!”—or “Arendt is THE crucial thinker!”) So I needed both
to share and to test my speculations about Arendt and culture, at the
same time.
— to advance an agenda that the visual arts should be more actively
involved in concrete politics, (my understanding of the implications of
Arendt’s work)
— to agitate for more consideration of Arendt’s work in the visual arts
in general
Somehow a slow unfolding, building made more sense to me. The other options would be to produce a piece of writing that would hopefully find a public, or to make a conference. Both of which would assume that there was some knowledge there to be shared, but what I had was mostly questions. An academic conference is structured around “dissemination” – I was interested in production – some kind of Arendtian Aesthetics that could be summed up in a ten point plan:

1. Nazism was possible because of thoughtlessness.
2. Culture is the space for the enlarged mentality, which counters that thoughtlessness.
3. What made culture an empty shell in Europe was the rise of the educated philistine who instrumentalized culture for social elevation.
4. After the war, mass society threatened culture through a mass consumerism that could reduce everything to entertainment.
5. Due to this consumer society’s development, culture is facing a new peril of instrumentalisation (as entertainment, luxury collectibles, as knowledge production.)
6. To defend public space those working in culture must reject instrumentalism (the false hustle of the art-market, the bad-faith appeals to the common good in grant writing, the I’ll scratch your back and you’ll scratch mine).
7. The other option is to follow Taf Hassam and produce our own spaces with actual publics, not solely as social clubs (through self-organized artist initiatives, for example.)
8. We could be entering a new stage of philistinism in which, despite digital resources, the capacity for cultura animi will be largely lost.
9. The consequences of the previous period of philistinism was two world wars.
10. Are we heading that way, today?

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1 — There are three distinct texts. An English translation of the first text appears under the title Culture and Politics in Hannah Arendt: Reflections on Literature and Culture, Stanford University Press (Stanford; 1997), edited and with an introduction by Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, pgs. 197-202. Gottlieb’s footnote on 202 details the publication history: “The original German essay was delivered as part of the commemoration of the 800th anniversary of the city of Munich, which included a forum on ‘culture-critique.’ An English version of this essay was prepared but never published. Arendt wrote a similar essay under the title Society and Culture, Dardelus 89 (1960), pgs. 279-87, which was then reworked as The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance.”
3 — Fred Dewey would differ: “responsibility is a moral issue, for Arendt the disappearance of the shared reality is an ontological one,” in conversation, June 2016.
4 — Arendt, op cit., pg. 198.
6 — Arendt, op cit., pg. 221.
7 — Arendt, op cit., pg. 199.
8 — Arendt, op cit., pg. 205. Line-breaks added.
PART 3
AFTER GERICAULT
“The idea he wishes to transmit” Barnett Newman, “The Plasmic Image” re-printed in “Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews”, Knopf (New York, 1991), pp. 164. Newman looked outside the canon, particularly at the art of the Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest, to theorize his aim of a non-literal but still communicative model, to elaborate how his work was not about “form” (see note below for elaboration). The original quote begins “the primitive artist’s preoccupation…” “Subject matter / object matter” is also a reference to Newman who liked to substitute this distinction in place of “form / content.”

Huddle
Judd’s rejection of part/whole composition – stressed, put in play we us many of us, into one, the one breaks one person over the top at a time a shape a picture an allegory a transmission an enactment an evocation

Fallers
a couple of years later, assemble at window, bodies fall by, from the balcony above to the balcony below body as denotative body as connotative glimpse identification recognition

“condensation” “The durability of a poem is produced through condensation, so that it is as though language spoke in utmost density and concentration were poetic in itself.” Arendt, “The Human Condition”, University of Chicago Press (Chicago, 1951), pg. 169.

See Wolfgang Heuer’s 2005 paper “Imagination is the prerequisite of understanding” (Arendt) – “the bridge between thinking and judging”. Arendt’s thought not only relies upon literature for understanding, her writing itself unfolds in poetic images: “Arendt not only used stories in the sense of thought images but also of scenes. They resemble short scenes on the stage which express the sense of events.” They “condense to images.”

“abstract like Newman” Newman withdrew to avoid a “distortion in the meaning of my work.” Later “Stations of the Cross” was subtitled with Jesus’s quote “[god] why have you forsaken me?” which Newman mobilized as a more general “cry of a man, of every man who is unable to understand what is being done to him,” (Newman, op. cit. pg. 221 and 187.)

“The inherent worldliness of the artist is of course not changed if a ‘non-objective art’ replaces the representation of things…” – Arendt, op.cit. pg. 323; Real Footnote of “The Human Condition”


Interlude: Simone Forti’s Images: Subject Matter / Object Matter

response responsibility condensation – Arendt’s word for poetry

Heur’s take on Arendt as image-maker synthesis into picture

Logomotion
Simone improvising, talking, speech shaping gesturing acting out the stories, then not from mime (explicit almost cliché recognizably movement) to abstract

Simone is sure if she feels like a spider embodies the spider, then they (the onlookers) will get something maybe they won’t get spider, but they’ll get something trust in visceral coherence even if not literal at all, evocative, and even abstract, but abstract like Barnett Newman, pulling his work out of the show on geometric art, insisting on naming his works after the bible, insisting on subject matter, the transmission of something, that idea addressed maybe with Newman you don’t get Hiroshima but you get something

News Animations
Simone, moving and talking about Iraq in 2002-3 it’s not just about Iraq, it’s about distance, proximity and responsibility

arriving with a pile of newspapers the classic - journalism and metaphysics like Arendt quoting Gris – if I am not in possession of the abstract with what am I to control the concrete? if I am not in possession of the concrete with that am I to control the abstract?

unfolding wrestle with the facts not reportage – nothing brought back from some place else
it’s right here, it’s happening here
communicare - sharing
trans-mission – sent across
example /
question:
would her father want her to go to the protest? (to whom are we responsible? Face in the mirror, remembering the blood):
would yours?

“the protest”
The 2002 demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq, repeatedly addressed in Forti’s “Oh, Tongue”, (Los Angeles: Beyond Baroque Books, 2010), second edition, edited, designed, and with an introduction by Fred Dewey.


“the protest” The 2002 demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq, repeatedly addressed in Forti’s “Oh, Tongue”, (Los Angeles: Beyond Baroque Books, 2010), second edition, edited, designed, and with an introduction by Fred Dewey.


— Apparently an effort to understand and wrestle with facts (the Church Committee) has proven of more enduring meaning than more oppositional and militant efforts; where does that effort come from, what bridge must be crossed to ask publicly the difficult question, and where does that go? The hundreds of thousands who voted for Church for President in 1976; an art project that meant one thing before, and another after Snowden; what before seemed psychological and obsessive later seemed matter of fact and poetic.
Church:
...
the CIA, the FBI. The purpose of this investigation is to conduct an inquiry. We are not seeking to undermine these organizations; we are seeking to understand what's been going on. Our ultimate objective is not to wreck them, but if necessary to reform them. In a free society, nothing is more crucial than to maintain intelligence activities and police activities in accordance with a very high and strict standard.

... Is a very delicate mission to determine how we must maintain that balance, because there is no more important goal than the preservation of freedom in this country.

JD:
The “Bad Jacket” is a verb. It's not a noun. As in to be “Bad Jacket-ed.” You put the “Bad Jacket” on someone.

For instance, Alex Rackley, New Haven, Connecticut. They put the “Bad Jacket” on him. Someone said he was working with the police and the people he was working with — he was in this political group and they were so worried about the police that they tied him up, they tied him up for days, three days and then poured boiling water him to try and get them to tell, get him to tell. And in the end they borrowed a car and they drove him out to a field and they shot him.
Or another version of the “Bad Jacket” would be these phone calls to Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King, Jr. would get these phone calls and they’d say, “You know we know – we have recordings. We know what you did. And there’s only thing to do now because we know and we’re going to tell everyone what you did with that woman – the only thing you can do now is you can, you can take your own life.” That’s another version of the bad jacket.

Nobody, no matter how highly placed he may be, in this government has the right to break the law. And I am amazed, if I may depart from my text, to say that I received this week a written answer to an interrogatory that we had sent to a former President, Mr. Nixon, and he said that when he was President that as sovereign he could break the law when he thought it was in the best interest of the country to do so. That’s the kind of doctrine – pernicious doctrine – that is alien to all the traditions of this republic that we have got to put down once and for all. I thought we fought a war 200 years ago to defeat George III – the President isn’t sovereign he’s a servant of the law just like the rest of us.

[singing]

You know you’ve always been a dreamer, can’t seem to settle down.
And I can’t find the door, can’t find it anywhere, but the dreams I’ve seen lately keep on turning back, turning back and turning back some more.
So put me on a highway, and show me a sign. Take it to the limit, one more time.

He won four states in the primaries: Oregon, Nebraska, Montana, Idaho. There was talk of him as a Vice-Presidential candidate.

But then rumors spread that the KGB had infiltrated his office, and that was the end of Frank Church for Vice-President.

You never know what’s going to find you - the movie would have to preserve that - the difference between searching and finding.

Because in fact Frank Church would find you as you were looking. You would be trying to find some documentation or some insight about something. Say about Yale in 1973 or Cambodia or Chile or Congo. This whole history that he built up. And the space exists of all those people and all those documents and then the space of him running for President and losing. Those two things intersect but they’re not the same, they’re not the same thing actually.
But actually if you were looking for Frank Church probably the place you would find would be here. This is the Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness. He had protected it as a park although I often somehow suspect it was named after this quote:

If this government ever became a tyranny, if a dictator ever took charge in this country, the technological capacity that the intelligence community has given the government could enable it to impose total tyranny, and there would be no way to fight back because the most careful effort to combine together in resistance to the government, no matter how privately it was done, is within the reach of the government to know. Such is the capability of this technology.

Now, why is this investigation important? I will tell you why. Because I don’t want to see this country ever go across the bridge. I know the capacity that is there to make tyranny total in America, and we must see to it that this agency and all agencies that possess this technology operate within the law and under proper supervision so that we never cross over that abyss. That is the abyss from which there is no return.

So I had to wonder did they name it the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness... Is there someone maybe who remember that quote? Is there someone who wanted to honor him. I wrote to wikipedia, maybe you should put that quote, and they said “it was always called the River of No Return – it’s a coincidence.” And I told somebody else and he said “that’s why they named it that, because Church went over the River of No Return - that’s the River of No Return, when you start talking about stuff like that.”
Details:
photographs in installation.
my grandfather worked high up at ITT, the company that helped the CIA overthrow Allende in Chile; Church’s investigation gives us all the facts we have on this. My other grandfather once told me “the point is to leave the world better than you found it.” I told this to someone recently and she laughed.

they let it burn – it’s so big they just let the fires burn out and new things grow – things that had never been seen before and the return of those which had been thought to be long gone

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL, RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT, CHURCH WOULD SAY “THE MEANS ARE IMPORTANT, AS IMPORTANT AS THE ENDS.”

Afterwords

At Goleb in 2012 Wolfgang Heuer reminded us of the example of Anton Schmidt and his story from a passage in Eichmann in Jerusalem where Arendt describes the story of the Nazi soldier who refused to participate in mass killings. They executed the soldier and it did not stop the shootings. In one sense, Arendt says, it was futile, “practically useless,” but in another sense not useless at all: stories of such non-participation in criminality are precisely what is required “for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.”

The example of Frank Church is bound up in this capacity of stories, and The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness became a both actual and conceptual landscape.

Frank = candid; Church = place of public assembly. River of No Return = the irrevocability of action; Wilderness = beyond our civilization: it was a found poem to refer to a found non-fictional epic.

When I exhibited this work at the Artissima art fair with Arcade and Ellen de Bruijne Projects, the neighbor of Christian Mooney, the gallery owner of Arcade, sent an impassioned email thanking him. The neighbor was from Chile and his family had suffered under the Pinochet regime: torture, exile. For him Frank Church was not a hero but something close to that: it was through Church’s work that the propaganda about Chile was disproved and the facts came out, facts that confirmed the criminality and injustices suffered by people like him and his family.

Most of Church’s story can be gleamed from an internet search: an independent minded Senator from Idaho, Church organized a series of investigations into corruption and government law breaking, culminating in the 1975 Committee hearings that dove into the activities of the secret services: domestic and international, repression and infiltration of civil rights groups, assassination of foreign leaders, more. Watergate had shown the possibility of some anti-republican imperial government structure, and Church then demonstrated it. And when one investigates such subjects, the reports that bear Church’s name are an island of facts in a sea of confusion. I would say oasis in the desert, but in fact the facts are so uncomfortable it is quite likely many would prefer confusion.

On the other hand, Church’s insistence of a government of laws,
protected dissent and respect for the rights of foreign nations was indeed popular. What is not so well known was that Church ran for President in 1976 on the basis of these arguments, on defending the republic against empire, and while he did not win, he did well enough to demonstrate the broad support for a government where “means [were] as important as end.”

When he died they named a vast forest after him, from which the title is drawn. I discovered a strange coincidental turn of phrase in a comment by Church about the capacities for surveillance that the government had developed: they might take us over the bridge of no return, a state able of blocking the citizen’s capacity for coming together in resistance.

In 2007 I corresponded briefly with Church’s widow about him and got my first copies of the maps of the Wilderness, and in 2008 wrote a text about Church for Can Altay’s journal Ahali. In 2011 I made a series of studio performances around the Church story and in 2012 got the idea to photograph the forest and to visit the archive, which I discovered was full of basically unknown audio/video material. All of this came together into an installation at the Stedelijk Museum in 2012.

In the meantime, since 2001 exactly what Church had predicted had occurred: the vast surveillance powers of the US government had been turned upon the citizenry. Out of the tens of thousands of people who worked on this illegal apparatus, a few tried to go public and the government went after them viciously, leading the young Edward Snowden to go public to Glen Greenwald, a journalist who had written about Frank Church, and whose book about Snowden is titled after the same Church quote that is central to my work.

The work details all this obliquely of course, with the prominent feature being the metaphoric forest, and the video component holding together the key narrative fragments. In the text on Arendt and Dewey, I used the phrase “story-maker” as opposed to “story-teller” to emphasis the quality of fabrication and construction. In this case though the artistry had to do with mobilizing an example for the past whose relevance is not even clear until later: in 2012 people thought that the work was somehow so specific as to be psychologically obsessive. In 2013 the focus on surveillance and repression seemed almost quotidian.
If You Want Blood

— ‘Spontaneous vegetation in the emptiness of the former death zone’ at the site where the Cold War ended. Checkpoint, opened permanently 1989, then used car lot, then ruin, now discount grocery store. Urban planners call the lowest-bidder development of former wall properties ‘the new death strip;’ each new construction bulldozes through the auralic ruins. The best version of the performance was in New York where dislocation and leaping amnesia are shared experiences and the Berlin wall story could play like an allegory.
Installation View
Arratia Beer, Berlin
"The Pursuit of Public Happiness"
July 8 – August 2, 2014
One, two, one, two, three four

You know, it’s like that. That’s how it is

And it’s like that and that’s how it is

No, I hear you, I hear you. I hear you buddy, I hear you, I hear you. No, it’s fucked up. It’s like that, but that’s the way it goes. That’s the way these things go. I hear you, I hear you man. I hear you. I know where you, I know

- No you don’t know -

No I know

- No you don’t know, you don’t know -

I hear you buddy, I hear you

She said, she said: you know this used to be a black city

I didn’t really understand

She said this used to be a punk city

Oh, I kind’ve understand

She said she said you shouldn’t complain about the weather

People who live here shouldn’t complain about the weather

She said wow it’s changed. These things change, these cities change. Yeah, yeah - I hear you buddy that’s the way it goes, and you want, in the midst of that, you want something to hold onto, right

You want, you want something to hold onto

Some structure, or some thing, some, but you hold onto these things and as you hold onto them they, you do something to them. You take this thing from the outside of you and you put it on the inside. And in that in that putting it from the outside to the inside, in that thing there’s this this change that happens. And that’s what sentimentality is, right - you hold it and you change it. In Berlin there was a checkpoint and people stood up there and they waited to cross and we met this young woman who had stood there and her boyfriend made fun of her and said she was waiting to get bananas because east germans didn’t have bananas and west germans think it’s really funny, they still think it’s really funny so he was making fun of her and she was waiting there and this place then it was then it wasn’t a checkpoint anymore.

Because there was no border anymore and there were, it was a used car lot then, all these checkpoints became used car lots somehow
But there’s still the lines on the ground and the numbers from people waiting
And the steps are still there or rather the steps were still there
Steps from a checkpoint or or from a or from a used car lot
Steps to a door that’s not there anymore
Then last year last year was the anniversary and last year they had to clean it
all up clean up this whole lot and so they went and they sent people and they
tidied the whole place up and they got rid of the steps for the anniversary of
the wall coming down because vaclav havel and lech walesa were gonna be
there
And you’d think somehow with this thing gone, with this thing gone, maybe it
would maybe it would make the space bigger, but somehow it just makes the
space smaller, and you need things to hold onto but you also have to have
things to let go of. And it’s like that and you get used to it. All these things
change. In one neighborhood there’s been an 85% change of population so
in that neighborhood where there’s been an 85% change of population - what
does that matter, right? You get used to it, that’s the way it goes, right
I hear you buddy. I hear you buddy
Rosa luxemburg platz - it’s the status quo right, and who remembers the idea,
who remembers who said “once and forever a mortal enemy of the status
quo”? I hear you buddy. No no no, you shouldn’t, you should not, you shouldn’t
take that, you shouldn’t take it you know what you know what there oughta be
a law there oughta be a law, there ought to be some laws
[singing]
   it’s criminal, yeah there oughta be a law criminals, living in a human zoo
   crimin-a-al, there oughta be a law
   - it’s criminal -
   all that shit they put you through
criminals, and if you want blood baby we’ve got it
   - the way it goes -
   If you want blood
   - I know that one -
   baby we’ve got it
   blood on the street blood on the rocks blood in the gutter every last drop
   - no that is how it is, that’s how it goes, I know that one. Dude, I know that
   one -
If you want blood

Another friend who grew up in that neighborhood, he takes it personally somehow. Because the buildings all of the buildings were, right. They were the peoples’, right?

And he was one of the peoples, so when they sold all the buildings they were selling kind’ve part of his building. He takes that personally right, he’s not very happy about it. He takes that home with him. He takes that to bed with him. He takes that to bed with him.
Dear Lidl,

I have just returned home from the former checkpoint at Bornholmerstrasse here in Berlin, and I see you have begun construction on your new store there. I’ve known for several years that a store was coming, and have been meaning to get in touch, but I suppose I got used to the endless deferral, seeing the store not being built and assuming it would come at some point in the more distant future, and so I now fear that I may be too late in communicating with your company.

I am an American artist (my German language skills are poor so I’ve asked a friend to translate), and I’ve lived part-time in Berlin since 2007. In that year I first came upon the site at Bornholmerstrasse and made the photographs attached with this email. I first glimpsed the site out the window of passing tram and it somehow beckoned me. I returned to photograph the site and only later learned of its historical significance as the first Checkpoint to be widely crossed in the fall of 1989. Learning this history somehow confirmed my instinct that the place was special and in the years that have followed I have contemplated extensively how to relate to this site, either through performing a sculptural intervention there, or through narrating its shifting history, from Checkpoint to the first used Car Lot in East Berlin, and the stairs in the attached image I believe are ruins of the latter, not the former, although part of their charm is not being sure which.

A few months ago some of these ideas came together in a new performance work that I initially titled ‘Something To Hold Onto’ which was first presented in Berlin and then in New York in December. (I can send you a DVD of these performances if you’re interested.) And recently I have been considering rebuilding the steps in the image attached – they were removed in the fall of 2009 to clean up the site for the 20th anniversary of the wall’s fall. I can’t help but think that the anniversary and then the subsequent completion of the wall memorial on the other side of Bornholmerstrasse is somehow linked to your decision to move forward with building. My original intention was to get in touch to ask if I could have these steps, but I was not sure if that was the best solution, so I waited until it was too late. In addition I also thought to write about the trees on the site, and I hope that it is not too late to mention these trees and their status to you.

In the official report of the Berlin Senate (translated in English as Wall Traces/Wall Remnants) such trees are described as Spontaneous Vegetation in the Emptiness of the Former Death Strip, and this refers to the plant life that has sprung up throughout the corridors of the city when previously there was the wall and its security zone. This plant life that has sprung up has a special status, not as a relic of history, but as something which has been made possible by the transition from one system to another. Both literally and symbolically, both metaphoric and actual, the trees are a manifestation of the experience of potential and possibility that came into existence with the shift of political structures in Berlin.

Even more poetically at the Bornholmerstrasse there were once apple trees, and it was quite unique to go and gather wild apples from this iconic site of such lasting import for world history. These trees have been largely destroyed through your construction efforts and I myself feel responsible as I’d planned to call their existence to your attention years ago. I had considered asking your company to preserve them as a symbolic gesture – alongside the apples sold in your store there would be a chance to gather wild apples in season, a preservation of this wild streak that runs through the center of Berlin. Though smaller all the time it is still there, animating and defining the city, and I suspect a part of the attraction the city still holds for those all over the world.

Sometimes preservation is necessary and decisions for the future have to

unschlagbar. Ob dieselbe bedeute lange wibe, warte ich so lange, bis es so spät wär. #Schneewittchen #Gartenanlage #bei_diesem_Wetter #Kürbis #Kürbisse #es_ist_nicht_schon_sozu_sagen #die_Sonne_Wir_kommen_Dem_Kartoffelchen_Leben_Lieben #Kürbis #das_Name #der_zeit

Aspects of the past. At the Bornholmerstrasse site there is of course also a large bunker, built during or before the second world war. Its precise function is not known to me, but it still conditions the physical possibilities for the site and I can see that you have avoided this bunker in your plan for redevelopment. This compromise was not strictly necessary, but once you took over ownership of this former public land you accepted certain realities that came with it. I would propose to you that the remaining trees on the site are also a reality that needs to be negotiated with, and not just destroyed. The bunker is preserved because it is easier to do so, and perhaps the preserving these trees - the Spontaneous Vegetation in the Emptiness of the Former Death Strip - will take a bit of work, but I believe that this too was part of the reality of the public land when you took ownership of it. I'm only sorry I did not bring this to your attention earlier, in enough time to save the apple trees.

I think alongside the trees a small plaque would be nice, indicating that they are living relics, not of the Second World War or of the Cold War, but of Berlin of the twenty years after the wall, when a space for spontaneity to take root flourished in the heart of the city. If you would like help with the text or design of such a plaque I am happy to contribute my energy. It also occurs to me that perhaps it is interesting for you to rebuild the steps – my imagined sculpture – somewhere on the site of the new store, or even perhaps my performance could be made at the site, narrating the shifting political and poetic realities there. In any case, please don’t hesitate to get in touch, and as I said before, my sincere apologies in not calling these matters to your attention sooner.

Thanks, Jeremiah

Afterwords

All that needed recording was the fact that a sort of geological tremor had apparently taken place. The phenomenon was duly noted, dated and deemed sufficiently well understood; a very simple sign, "the fall of the Berlin Wall," repeated over and over again, immediately attained the incontestability of all the other signs of democracy.

— Guy Debord, 1992

Art perhaps is a way of making a home in the world for things that would otherwise be homeless.

— Phrase from one of the 2012 Crisis in Culture discussions at Goleb – an impromptu response by Susannah Gottlieb when asked what art might mean for Hannah Arendt.

In 2007 from the window of a passing street car a concrete plateau punctuated with concrete steps impressed itself upon me. Later I discovered it had been the site where in 1989 the Berlin Wall had first opened, and I was transfixed between these two modes of meaning, one from historical narrative and the other wordless apprehension of a landscape.

After photographing the site and the steps a half dozen times, bringing people out to the site to discuss it, and all sorts of other speculations (I discovered the supermarket chain Lidl owned the site, should I try to buy the steps from them?) that unfolded in the background of other works and lines of thought, the steps themselves, the main focus for my fascination, were removed. It was 2009, the 20th anniversary of the wall falling and I went to the site to see the ceremony. The press tent, I noticed, was right where my steps had been. The next day I returned to discover them gone, removed to make space for the tripods and cameras.

The next year I made a performance loosely narrating the history of the site in New York. Jeff Perkins, a gifted video maker and artist from the Fluxus community, was there and documented it.
In 2011, I was invited to participate in Based in Berlin a contentious art show, and proposed to resolve this work with a site-specific piece at the site itself: making a copy of the steps.

Out of solidarity with an organized campaign against the exhibition, I withdrew.

Visiting the site to investigate the possibility that I might continue independent of any invitation, I discovered that the long awaited construction of the Lidl had begun and the site for my possible sculpture was now buried in rubble. That morning I wrote the note to Lidl.

Lidl responded and I met several times with representatives at the site and they seemed open, but when I finally sent them my proposal to make a performance and re-build the steps on the site, they never responded to that, and I understood that this was to be the end of our communication.

In the fall of I rented a billboard next to the site with the plan to show the photos of the steps. You rent the signs for a week at a time, and two weeks before it was my turn, I visited the site and the billboard I had reserved had been removed from the site. I called the billboard company and they insisted that this was impossible, but eventually they clarified that indeed Lidl owned the property and had decided to get rid of the signs because it obscured the view of the store.

All along, there had been some idea to make the steps into a public artwork elsewhere, a kind of narrative monument, and Christian Mooney from the gallery Arcade, tried to develop this for a courtyard near the gallery in London, but when this too failed he pushed to make the steps inside the gallery as the basis for an installation, which led to the installation documented here.

Partly I had been struggling with a contemporary version of the classical problem of trying to paint a sunset – working from an experience of marvel to try and transmit that experience - but equally it was due to the problem Debord points out in the quote above. While the site may offer fragmentary access to a defining historical event, that event had already been turned into a false icon, one blocking insight rather than offering illumination.

The “fall of The Berlin Wall” is an enduring cliché which is clearly part of a post-cold war propaganda effort to obscure the foundational issues
all surrounding it: if the cold war is over and freedom reigns, how do
we justify bringing new nuclear bombs to Europe, as NATO is presently
doing? For that matter, why does NATO still exist?

If the problem with the Warsaw Pact was political repression and a lack
of respect for human rights, how are we to understand our own even
more pervasive government surveillance and the use of extra-judicial
execution as now an accepted policy tool? And more to the heart of the
matter, if everyone in Berlin appreciates the affordable child care model
that was held over from the DDR, what are to make of the German
government’s insistence that half of Europe be deprived of such basic
family support because of a “debt crisis” that they perpetuate?

As Debord saw at the time it happened, the “fall of the Berlin Wall”
became a mantra to drown out of the historical and contemporary
questions of war and peace in Europe, the role of the US internationally,
and the difference between radical free market fundamentalists and the
institutions of social democracy.

There is a classical artistic strategy of focusing on the mechanics of a
structure to break open its underlying meanings. In my case I could
pick up pieces of “the wall” but they themselves were somehow empty,
at best reflecting all the ideological manipulations around them.

The work then ended up being more an ode to transformation and loss
than about transmitting historical memory. The use of two voices in
the performance “I here you buddy, I understand / no, no you don’t
understand” was a way to dramatize a private struggle. The video, with
Perkin’s excellent camera work, is the animating glue of the installation
because that 2010 performance was so resonant, and this was partly
because it was done in New York City, where the underlying themes of
frustration of dislocation are almost universal.

If You Want Blood, the title drawn from the AC/DC song that I sing
by way of Mark Kozelek’s cover version in the performance, ultimately
came together because of the push by my commercial gallery, a private
place and a private business, to develop a work he’d been hearing about
since 2007, that remains unsold and hard to sell. The crucial ingredient
to resolving my wrestling with a public space and public life was a pri-
vately established white cube, with a place in the market, but a personal
dedication to the work that exceeded any strictly instrumentalist logic.

This experience re-confirmed my instinct that the white cube was a
space worth defending, if only because apparently I really needed it.

Dear Lidl,
Clearly our talks over collaborating at the site on Bornholmerstrasse have
broken down. The former border-checkpoint (1961-1989 - where the wall
first fell) and then former used-car-lot (1990 - 1993 - first in East
Germany) is also a good location for groceries and your business there is
flourishing. So I too am moving forward, though in other direction.

Next week in London I will be making an exhibition. There will be an
opening reception on Thursday the 17th and I will make a performance
then as well. Anyone from your organisation is very welcome.

In this absence of communication, I’ve often thought of Gunter Grass’
thoughts on German reunification from 1990:

We should learn from our compatriots in the G.D.R. for they were not
given freedom as a gift, as were citizens of the Federal Republic, but had to
wrest their freedom from an all-embracing system. They have had to
struggle to achieve it on their own, while here we stand amidst our riches,
poor by comparison.

Kindly,
Jeremiah
PART 4
IF IT'S FOR THE PEOPLE, IT NEEDS TO BE BEAUTIFUL, SHE SAID
Vito Acconci is one of those figures you encounter on your way out of the art world, passing by the name like a landmark, or proverb. The sign lists “those who have traveled this way before.”

If you studied in Southern California, Acconci would be up there with Helen and Newton Harrison, Raivo Puusemp, or some ex-student of Allan Kaprow’s whose name has been forgotten as examples of those who tried to establish a practice outside the social construct that the term “art world” refers to. Descriptions of such efforts often use language like “escaping from” or “breaking out of,” as if a prison were involved. Paths, routes, planned destinations and the ultimate actual points of arrival. “There was this woman, she’d worked with Michael Asher and then…” As if art students could go underground. Slow burnouts, quick flameouts, temporary counter-movements. I once asked Paul McCarthy what happened, in the end, to such people who gave up on art. After a pause to recollect (or perhaps come up with a good-sounding lie), he replied “local politics,” and after another pause, “or working with children.”

More often such stories are inconclusive. Like an escape attempt from Alcatraz Island – “no one knows, they never found him, maybe he drowned and was taken away by the savage currents. Or maybe…”

And later you hear it differently, that someone made it out alive and is living in some small city, on the margins of town. Like the guy whose credit card debt got so bad he left New York to go home but then started making projects in the neighborhood around his grandmother’s house. It’s a kind of illicit knowledge, spread amongst those who not only cultivate critique and complaint but who look to hatch a plan, to make a run for it. Faces light up with the disclosure of a newly revealed possible path, others listen attentively with eyes blank, focus inward, logging the details, looking over the angles, calculating odds.

For example: having decided not to pursue an MFA at Columbia or CalArts, having become a reporter (or something similar) and then quitting that, one might decide to take a seminar on Public Art at the local branch of the state university. The goal of the workshop would be quite practical – to teach people how to move into the world of making pieces for public commissions by responding to Request For Proposals (RFPs), designing and presenting public art projects that would secure public funding and get built.

This parallel economy, discourse and situation for making artworks is rather large in the US, where in many states a percentage of the construction costs of any new building must be spent by the builders on public art that should be connected with the architecture in some way. Also, local governments often look to take advantage of such “percent for art” programs to fund improvements in local infrastructure.

Such a seminar, titled “Public Art: Designing the Urban Hardscape” or something like that, could hold a very large appeal. It is hard now to accurately describe this appeal. Perhaps if one can imagine, on the one hand, all the sense of possibility that is contained in starting to make art seriously in school, having been inspired to consider the vast terrain available to work in, subjects to approach, strategies to pursue. And then on the other hand, the dawning realizations emerging when confronted with the practical reality of the institutions of contemporary art, the practical details with “being an artist” – galleries, curators, studio visits, trying to meet people. Someone talks to you but looks over your shoulder to see who’d they rather talk to.

The contraction from expansive possibility to narrowness: one can’t help but think “there has to be some other way.” And, “aha!” – public art, you think! You will make interesting things in the city, deal with politicians and community groups, perhaps make a modest living negotiating these different priorities and demands, with the economic and social functions up front and explicit, candid and direct.

Of course such a two-week seminar is more than enough time to demonstrate that this route would not be so promising, or at least
not without its own risks. One of the co-leaders often refers to the example of an artist who made flowers out of razor wire (like barbed wire, only with razors), which then lined the perimeter of the corporate office. This is, within the terms of the seminar, deemed a highly successful project, combining practical function, formal elegance and innovation. The terms of this game, too, turn out to be not to one’s liking.

Several important public artists are invited, people who don’t have catalogues but are in their way very successful. During a Q&A, a project by Acconci comes up – “Acconci?!” – there is a shared laugh of recognition, but with warmth.

It turns out the panel of successful public artists all know Acconci because he is often in the final round of competitions. He is invited to come and make a full-scale presentation with models and visuals and a speech, but is known for “always coming in third place.” First place means they build your project; second means you get a fee for the proposal; third means that at best they cover the material and travel expenses. The panel of successful public artists don’t know about Acconci’s poetry, actions or videos, to them he is the funny character with the interesting (strange) but unrealized proposals. Interesting enough to have him come in and explain, but basically unrealizable within the terms of the Request For Proposal.

And hearing this at first you let go of public art, or rather hearing this is part of letting go of the plan of working in this way, having understood that Acconci had gone before and tried this route out, and you imagine all the frustration of those meetings, of making models and dioramas and graphics to explain visual gestures and concepts. The way those rooms look where you present your work and yourself to town managers and the historical society and maybe even a local art history professor or director of an ethnic art center. The way the coffee tastes in those buildings with fluorescent lights and carpets and powdered creamer. And the brutal discipline required to pursue that path, in the face of knowing and understanding a broader context, foregoing a place where one has achieved at least a modest reputation and success for a relentlessly difficult chore of trying to make a project work that would exist in the world of libraries, banks, town halls, new roadways and shopping districts, schools and clinics.

To be laughed at by people who are ignorant of one’s face on the cover of Avalanche magazine. The lesson is that this escape attempt is not for you: the trials too great, the cliffs too steep, the fall too violent.

And in terms of considering Vito Acconci, as an example, and the decades spent trying to make such public projects, at first, it seems like a bad joke, a shame. These pieces are often so over-literal, obvious, somehow boneheaded. But then when you think about the friction produced at all those meetings – the heat of it – the testing and stressing of the fundamental aims and claims of bureaucrats who are supposed to administer the citizens’ culture and public life; the confrontation involved in that.

Looking back, from now, from having abandoned the idea of escaping from the art world, having resigned oneself to it. Having had a thing like a morning spent at an art fair building up a presentation of one’s work, or working on “your PDF” so that it is “better,” or negotiating an artist fee with “left-wing curators.”

Well, then the clear candid cutting friction and sting of Acconci offering himself up for mockery, but perhaps at least starting a conversation or two, provoking a debate, amongst the elected representatives and guardians of the public realm, and even once or twice making one of these public projects... It looks a bit different. The light starts to turn and his image in it gains a different character. After all, escapees are caught years later, having failed at their new paths or simply for lack of vigilance. Others betray themselves, re-captured out of conscious and not-so-conscious longing for the familiar routine and structure. And who’s to say it’s better outside, in the end? But, in any case, some still calculate odds and gambits, plots yet to be hatched, examples, proposals. And for sure they must extrapolate, struggle in imagination. The lay of the land looks different when you have to chart your way through it. Sometimes envisioning scenarios is necessary: judging the choices deferred and the ones (and that there are ones) yet to be made.
Response to Bristol Radical Historian

— Not a public artwork inasmuch as the result of taking the public (people) seriously (even when they’ve nicknamed the Arnolfini the Anal-Phony). Models of monumentality are counter-posed – pre-historical and post-historical evocation of forces seemingly beyond our control. In which I heard: “for God’s sake, if you’re going to make a piece at that place, just don’t make it sad. If it’s for the people it has to be beautiful.”

REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK AND RESPONSE


The thinking behind this work was the speculation that bringing together such words and pictures and this specific site through the installation of the lithographs here might have a kind of meaning or effect, evoke a feeling or critical reflection. Furthermore there was the hope that the work might contribute to a discussion or consciousness of memory, public space and the forces that shape the landscape.

Arnolfini would like to hear from you, and your views on the project.

There has been some interaction with the work and in particular we’d like to hear from anyone who engaged with the work on some level – if it called to mind thoughts, or suggested one look further into it, for example – but we’d also be interested to hear from those who didn’t appreciate
Installation view,
underpass M32 freeway, Bristol,
as part of “The Promise”
July 18 – November 10th, 2014
progress — used to live near a motor way, rent was cheaper. The big freeways that cut through Los Angeles seem to have been routed neighborhoods of the poor. Some people fought, some routes were changed. (If you ask the people who lost if they regret fighting, I bet... well, I don't know.)

The 105 – 5 lanes each way goes to the airport through South-Central LA - there was a scam: turns out the graveyards were selling grave plots twice, digging up the bodies that no one visited and then re-using the space for a new one. They sold the dirt to the freeway people, with the bodies in it, and it was used for the embankment – the whole road is a tomb.

When I told my wife I wanted to deal with this site she said: “for God’s sake don’t try and tell the people their own story of hardship, if it’s for the people it needs to be beautiful.”

absent chronologies: (would they even be of help? names, dates, faces of?)
pre-historical post-historical
first idea for the “the promie” an anti-slavery memorial Bob Marley monument (could you be loved?)
homage to Banksy brief from a Radical Historian Bristol – hey could you be loved
Wall text:
architecture? Does that even exist, really? For sure there are people – living places, with each other buildings, fabrications, memorials and kitchens, and fact-tories, helping and imposing. Enduring decisions, the consequences of decisions, you live with that, we live that. When you’re lucky, it’s the legacy of your own decision – having a kid or other paths taken irrevocably, doors close and doors open but we also endure other plans, other paths imposed on us, on our heads or our beds, on our kids or... “The Fight For Bristol” – book found doing... “research” – Axel had said it would be about a city in a place I don’t know, don’t understand and names matter, friends matters, abstractions don’t help sometimes, when... “You can’t stick a knife in a man’s back, and then pull it out half-way and then say ‘sorry,’” Malcolm X said. “Fight For Bristol” – I wanted to know, where did the people go who lived there before, did people want those big shapes cutting into the city, (or is a democratic, or res-publica even imaginable?)
(But, because: the past is not just an imposition, also a gift - magna carta, grandparents. Conversation with Yazan, artist from Palestine working on an archive of non-violent resistance:
“But, isn’t the role of the artist to synthesize? To tell the people’s story of struggle?” “No, no,” he said, “the role of the artist is to make a space, the space for the people to tell their own story, stories...”

Afterwords

There is a mode of art making that takes the invitations from art institutions as a point of departure to consider, reflect or intervene in sites around the institutions themselves. As a rule, I avoid this approach as it reduces the artwork to a kind of responsive design, with the result that the piece is often interesting to consider as a gesture, but cannot properly stand alone. More importantly, the sites I am appropriating and wrestling with are one’s defined by my sense of their almost allegorical significance, not their proximity to an institution.

In 2014, however I broke this rule to produce “Awake and You’re Moving (Brief from a Radical Historian).”

Invited by the Arnolfini in Bristol, UK for an exhibition to deal with modern architecture and the city’s love/hate relationship to the brutalist urban planning that defines Bristol, I commissioned to produce a new work. On a “site-visit” I was introduced to the Bristol Radical History Group, a loose-knit, self-organized group of thinkers, activists, researchers and intellectuals who produce tours and pamphlet style publications dealing with the political history of the Bristol area in the vein of “history from the bottom up,” focusing on political struggle.

In my own research I had discovered that there was substantial opposition to the developments of the 1960’s, and the Radical History Group filled in my picture of the history. Apparently the wealthy neighborhoods had successfully fought back most of the new urban planning, but the poor neighborhoods had failed, with the most dramatic result being the construction of a major roadway through the middle of a working class neighborhood. This roadway – the M32 – remained as a kind of scar and barrier, with people having to cross over and under it to get key infrastructure like schools, grocery stores and health care. The bridges over it were poorly lit and famous for sites of robbery and crime. The underpasses had few stop-lights and so people had to run across in front of on and off-ramps for the highway, with a prevalence of accidents.

I was inspired by the practice and example of the Radical History Group and invited them to be part of the exhibition – an invitation that was not mine to make, as I was not a curator – but I thought I
could make it happen. Their response was to suggest that the exhibition itself take place under the M32, to narrate directly back to the people reflections on what had happened to the place they resided. It was a bold and appropriately radical response. It’s important to note that through the BRHG I first heard that the Arnolfini had a nickname in the city: “the Anal Phony.” The BRHG ignored any possible professional or networking opportunities that were on offer, and rather than be assimilated by an institution they regarded as a fake, they gave a counter-offer: if you want to make a public reflection on our shared conditions, do it in a way that counts, where the friction with the status quo would be boldly legible. At first I thought they were calling my bluff, so to speak, and testing the depth of my interest in these sites, but then I realized they were just being entirely consistent and the suggestion was made in simple good faith. After all for a group of unprofessional thinkers dedicated to asking questions of significance for their neighbors, knowing that the much of the working class community of the city would simply never attend an exhibition at the art center, it was obvious that the project should address those people directly and that this would be the appropriate point of departure for any serious attempt to grasp the issues.

So, I broke my own rule and made a temporary site-specific work under the freeway.

I knew I would never be able to convince the Arnolfini to bring part of the exhibition there, but I knew I could indeed do something there. This required breaking with my usual methodology and making a work “to-order” so to speak, but I had asked, after all, for how the BRHG could be involved, and they had responded with a counter invitation. Had I been serious in the first place? If so, how could I not take their invitation seriously?

My original ambition was to essentially bring the white cube to the site, to build an exhibition display architecture. This proved unfeasible because of safety requirements (to totally prevent the structure from blowing away into traffic would have required digging a foundation for it) and so lithographs were applied directly to the architecture of the site.

The works were not vandalized, but over the course of the exhibition, the lithographs were stolen several times and had to be replaced. At the end of the exhibition period, they were actually taken down and re-hung in different positions.

REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK AND RESPONSE

From 19 July to 9 November 2014, a series of lithographs appeared here under the M32. Titled “Awake and You’re in Motion (Response to Brief from Bristol Radical Historian)” the project by Jeremiah Day was part of the Arnolfini exhibition “The Promise.”

The thinking behind this work was the speculation that bringing together such words and pictures and this specific site through the installation of the lithograph here might have a kind of meaning or effect, evoke a feeling or critical reflection. Furthermore there was the hope that the work might contribute to a discussion or consciousness of memory, public space and the forces that shape the landscape.

Arnolfini would like to hear from you, and your views on the project.

There has been some interaction with the work and in particular we’d like to hear from anyone who engaged with the work on some level — if it called to mind thoughts, or suggested one look further into it, for example — but we’d also be interested to hear from those who didn’t appreciate the project or were indifferent.

Please send your email to boxoffice@arnolfini.org.uk. Your response will become part of the record of the project and a selection will be published online.

The Promise is an exhibition project that focuses on the relationship between a city’s design and the hopes and ambitions of its residents. Exhibitions and events took place at Arnolfini and across Bristol throughout the summer.
Bristol is the home of the artist Banksy, who still periodically makes spontaneous interventions in the city. The public is widely aware of Banksy, and also that his anonymous works when left behind can later be sold, which perhaps partly explains the frequent theft of the lithographs. The rearranging seemed altogether different and when the exhibition was over I asked the Arnolfini to post a sign asking for feedback. No one ever responded. Can Altay, a colleague, commented that the act of physically peeling and scraping off the lithographs, carefully enough to not damage them and then remounting them with wheat paste, all this might be communicative enough.

Alisa Margolis, the painter and my wife, when I discussed with her this plan to work directly in such a site, argued that to merely narrate the history of brutal urban planning back to the people who lived daily with the consequences of that kind of top-down decision making. They likely did not need an outsider’s elucidation or explication of the issues of power and landscape, because they lived with them in intimate relation.

It reminded me of talks Fred Dewey and I used to have about Jean Rouch (whom Dewey had known), the film-maker who’d gone from making works about Africa to be shown back in Paris, and then shifted to making works about Africa that were formulated to speak to Africans. The destination of the message was no longer the academy or the archive but back out in the world, where the meaning of documentation and memory shifted: now preservation was public, and, given the colonial battles of identity, it was political.

It is a mode of address that refers not to some faraway world, but the one the producer, subject and public all share. Within such a mode of address, Margolis (having grown up in Queens next to a vast, loud, dominating motorway) seemed to be prescribing that the artist’s role cannot be merely to inform, even crucial details, even in a sophisticated way. Beauty, in this sense harkens back to the classical ambition of art to transform the anecdotal into the epic, fragments into monuments. There is a mantra she and I have about my work: “Remember,” she says, “I don’t care. You have to make me care.”

“Tell me something I don’t know”: I can imagine someone’s response to hearing that the powerful determine how the powerless live. The beautiful in this case is that which goes beyond our (entirely reasonable) indifference, and makes us care, and thus grants us back some small measure of that which we require to take action.

The problem of course, is that to solicit such a response - to go back to caring about the world in which we find ourselves - can be hurtful. That indifference is not for nothing. Some balm must be offered instead, maybe even a fake balm, or a magic one. Not even necessarily any specific way how to fix a problem, but at least an allusion to the possibility that people can act, can organize together to change things; such phenomenon occur, it has been known to happen. The beautiful, in this mode of address, must include the political.
The Commemoration of the Lowndes County Freedom Organisation

— The quotidian landscape (of struggle) behind the icon of revolutionary politics – the original Panthers; a dozen inadequate attempts at description – performance, photography and installation; a jerky and unfinished process of marking the spot; the potential and limits of one’s own initiative; the relationships without which there would be nothing.
"Lowndes County Idea" selected installation views:
Bottom left: Smart Museum, University of Chicago, 2009
Top right: Ellen de Bruijin Projects, FIAC Booth, Paris, 2009
Bottom right: Freymond Guth, Zurich, 2010
Lowndes County: Prologue
Performance, Berlin, 2008
– camera by Erik Smith.

Begins with a reading of
"Understanding Readiness" by Amiri Baraka.

So, Stokley Carmichael had a friend, in Lowndes County.
He had a friend who also changed his name.
And his name before was Rap, H. Rap Brown and he got the name Rap
because the way he talked. And actually the word Rap was invented after him.
And, who is he? Who is Rap Brown who is, who is he to me? Who is he now? I mean, if Stokley Carmichael was, if Kwame Ture was... a
comrade - Baraka asks, he asks, “well, what is it - those who are still alive...”
and so Rap Brown who is he to us now? Jamil Al Amin - he became a
muslim in prison in the 70's.

In 2000, in Lowndes County -- he, he kept going back. Rap Brown, he
kept going back, and in 2000 in Lowndes County he was running, he was,
there were dogs and they were chasing him with dogs in the woods. And he
was running.

Who? Who is he? Who is Rap Brown who is, who is he to us? Who is he to
me?
Who is he now? I mean, if Stokley Carmichael was, if Kwame Ture was... a
comrade - Baraka asks, he asks, “well, what is it - those who are still alive...”
and so Rap Brown who is he to us now? Jamil Al Amin - he became a
muslim in prison in the 70's.

He got, arrested in 2000 in Lowndes County. (Turns slide projector on)
He got arrested here in 2000 in Lowndes County.

In 1966, he was arrested. In 1966 he stood in Cambridge Maryland and he
said that “if America would not come around we were gonna burn it down”
and they shot him in the shoulder and then they arrested him and he went to
jail and he was in the hospital in jail in handcuffs and then he went into hiding and people thought he was in Africa and then in '71 they arrested him again but people said it was a trumped charge then he spends the 70's in jail and he comes out of jail in 1980, Imam Jamil Al Amin.

And then in the 1990's the Clinton administration, the attorney general under the Clinton administration tries to frame him, the try to lock him up. It's documented, they pressured evidence they pressured witnesses they fake evidence - he's living in Atlanta. In 1999 - so he keeps going back here he keeps going back to Alabama to Lowndes County. And in 1999 in Alabama - no 1999 in Atlanta - but he keeps going back to Alabama because the thing about what happened in Lowndes County is that they won, in Lowndes County. That somehow the people, the people won and so the Mayor of the town it's his friend so it's their friend so Stokley Carmichael has to leave he hast to go Africa, and Jamil Al Amin he's in prison so in the mean time in Alabama all these farmers they win - they take over. They become the government it was kind of revolution and so because their the government - he comes out of prison 1980 - I'm coming around there, I'm gonna get there - he comes out of prison and they make him a honorary sheriff. They give him a badge so he's got this honorary sheriffs badge from the Lowndes County Police Department.

In Atlanta in 1999 they pull him over and they see the badge and the Atlanta police department says the badge can't be real it's gotta be a fake badge so they arrest him for impersonating an officer even though it's a real badge. They come to his house to serve the warrant a police officer gets killed a black police officer gets killed he flees back to Lowndes County and he is running who is he then a muslim running and there are dogs and the dogs when I think about the dogs the scary thing is well I don't know if it's scary or not the dogs are happy you know their happy they're chasing the dogs like it they like chasing they don't care what their chasing they like it and they move fast they move faster than me I mean I'm like slow motion compared to how the dogs are moving they're just [pow] their going fast and so he fled there because he thought because he thought that he'd had a chance there that maybe if he surrendered I mean he was hiding but still he surrendered if he gave himself up to his friends if he went back to his friends and he gave himself up to his friends he would have a chance to survive and they put him in prison for the rest of his life and he said it was a government conspiracy and he killed a black police officer or he was convicted of killing a black police officer and that was in 2000 and since then he's in prison. First in Georgia.

A few months ago he gave an interview I heard it on the radio. I think he gave an interview that transferred him to the supermax prison in Colorado - it's the
one with the Unabomber and the guy who tried to blow up the world trade center in 2000 no in the 90’s.. In the interview which.. I don’t know maybe that’s not why they transferred him in the interview he’s interviewed by Fred Hampton Jr. Fred Hampton was a black panther who was killed Fred Hampton junior was in his mother’s belly when his father was killed so Fred Hampton Jr., he’s interviewing him, and he says: “I think about all them and they got you-”

And Jamil Al Amin, who was Rap Brown, and who had another name before that, he said: “They ain’t got me - I got them”

And Fred Hampton Jr. kept talking, he’s like “blablabla” and Jamil Al Amin says “No, you gotta listen - for real man they ain’t got me I got them. Cause that’s how it is. Cause this ain’t no game.”
Barbara Evans: Now, the story differs from whoever tells it, and Ruby Sales always tells the story of how they said - Tom Coleman came across the street with a shot gun saying “you black bitch” and Jonathan pushed her to the ground and took the shotgun blast.

But I have always deeply suspected that Jonathan was the target as was Father Richard Morrisroe, another white guy.

Jeremiah Day: And in Selma, wasn’t there also James Reeb, another white priest who was killed?

BE: Yes, because being a race mixer myself…

JD: Yes

BE: I have seen the indescribable hatred whites have for other whites who are race mixers. It’s almost (I don’t know if it seems right to say this but…) , it’s almost worse than what the blacks get, because these white people who fancy themselves superior to blacks.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries: And when you interject this idea of the African American freedom struggle wasn’t merely a non-violent struggle, but it was non-violent struggle that depended in part upon the willingness of African Americans to defend themselves. Then you say: “wait a minute, why does an African American have to, why would African Americans have to defend themselves against a water fountain?” because… you wouldn’t, you don’t defend yourself against the water fountain, right? I mean, you defend yourself against somebody who is trying to do you bodily harm. And so, even in the movement, they understood, even with the marches and stuff, those were dramatizations. Bloody Sunday resulted because it was a dramatization of how violent Jim Crow was. I mean it was just a snippet, it was just a snapshot of the everyday violence that African Americans had to face and deal with and live with.

BE: It was mentioned more in the outside of Lowndes County than ever is in the inside, let’s put it that way. It’s discussed by intellectuals, and by, you know, political people, people in organizations. It’s used as an example, as an organizing example everywhere else, you know, but it was not discussed here.

JD: Do you ever tell the story? Or, if you had to tell the story, how do you tell the story of what the Lowndes County Freedom Organization was?

BE: I start… it depends who’s the audience, but usually, you know, even at
the Okra Festival when people are in Annie Mae’s Place and I am explaining who people are, I say to them, “this county is the home of the first black independent political party in the United States. When the democrats did not represent the interest of black people, nor did the republicans, people here formed their own political party and eventually they got their candidates elected.” It’s huge! It’s huge.

Gwen Patton: Somehow I think that’s me.

JD: It could be you.

GP: And somehow I think that’s me.

JD: Are you familiar with that image.

GP: Yes, it’s in Carson’s book.

JD: Exactly.

GP: And it was about life and death, that was the motivation. These folks had life and death over us. You know, physically with the sheriff and the coroner, and emotionally for the whole community, and intellectually, mentally with our children. So how do we turn that around?

GP: The study books, I have a copy over if you want to see it, you know, to talk about, you know, political science, you know, what the coroner does, you know… and we were not interested in running for mayor, we were not interested in running for state representative, ok?

JD: And why not?

GP: We were interested in those elected positions which were closest to the people. The coroner because so many of our people would be arrested and end up dead, claiming suicide.

HKJ: So they talked about these very practical matters of politics, and then once those were sort of understood, right? And in addition to that, also the duties and obligations of office holders. So before we talk about what are the rights and responsibilities of a sheriff, they talked about what is the sheriff supposed to do, right? Just concretely, very matter-of-factly, and then once there was a common basic knowledge, then you can talk about the sort of high level of political theory, and they did in fact do that. What does it mean to have a representative government? What does it mean to be beholden to the citizens? And so it was creating this common basic knowledge, because you also have to remember that one of the ways in which political power was kept out of the hands of African Americans was by creating this sort of artificial barrier towards knowledge. Otherwise, how are you gonna contest the power or abuses of power in the sheriff’s office if you don’t even know what the sheriff can legally do or what he or she can’t do.

GP: Stokely already had in his mind that we were going to be the Black Cat, and then that evolved, and that evolved, and eventually we got to the panther. And the panther because it’s not aggressive, as an animal. Number 2: if you tree it or corner it, it will come out, especially if you mess with the children, the babies, it will come out ferociously.

GP: The black panther was an ordinary part of the black culture. You know, it was a big cat that was sweet.

JD: Because you know, the Oakland Panthers, then produced what are now the most iconic and well known images of activism and so when I say to people “I am doing some work on the original Black Panther Party”, they immediately know what I am talking about, but they don’t know what I am talking about.

GP: No.

JD: They think of Huey on the throne…
GP: Yes, Huey on the basket and all that, but no, because see, our whole movement was not to grab headlines, OK?

JD: OK, explain that

GP: To be in the paper. You know, we considered it just human, nothing extraordinary. We do know that we were making extraordinary gains because of the entrenched racism and Jim Crow, but for us, it was more like a religious... that's not a good term. You know - a feeling, you know when we got the party, when we got the Lowndes County Freedom Organization.

Mukasa - Willie Ricks from SNCC, he stayed with us too in Alabama, in Tuskegee - he said “Now, this is black power.” It was not even shouted. It was more like a – what do you call – introspection. You know, it was more contemplative. And Eldridge Cleaver came out here, he was writing for Ramparts Magazine, and he was fascinated! Absolutely fascinated with the black people in Lowndes County. That's how he went back to Oakland and started the Black Panther Party, which infuriated me, infuriated me. Now, they did some good things...

JD: Yes
Along with violent intimidation and economic sanction, a crucial tool of political repression in the Jim Crow south was a control of information about legal and political rights. The Freedom Primer was a crucial tool of political organizing.


Better known for the iconic Black Panthers they inspired, the original Lowndes County Freedom Organisation which took a snarling black panther as their symbol remains largely forgotten except by students of political activism. To such students, the brief chapter in Lowndes holds the promise of a model for how to achieve, in effect, a revolution.

Through mass meetings, public education campaigns and debates, and a focused interplay between abstract political principles and concrete local realities, the LCFO changed their own landscape: in a few short years a Black Sheriff was elected in a county where in 1965 political repression was so severe that not one African American could register to vote.

The skeleton of this history is available via wikipedia, and a full account is detailed in Stokley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton’s book Black Power (which has important resonance with the political theories of Hannah Arendt, but that story cannot be told in such a short space.) Since 2008 I have been exploring the legacy of the LCFO through a series of efforts that at times feel more like the splash of mud left behind by tires turning than the synthesized work of art that the subject calls for. The ultimate goal is the establishment of a permanent monument in Lowndes County.

In the Lowndes County: Scenario video, Gwen Patton, one of the original activists of the LCFO, comments that she opposed the “sensationalism” of the famous Panthers and their armed marches and staged photographs. The Alabama group wanted to stay out of the newspapers, and work towards winning the political offices that were “closest to the
people. “What form would a non-sensationalistic, close-to-the-people commemoration take? There is an echo here of the American Revolutionary leader (and eventual President) John Adams’ remark:

“Democracy has no monuments. It strikes no medallions. It does not bear the head of a man on its coins. Its true essence is iconoclasm.”

II. Notes, July 2016

The project keeps getting stuck, and unstuck. A breakthrough moment came in one of the Arendt reading groups: “the word “culture” derives from colere – to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend and preserve – and it relates primarily to the intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation.” Aha, I would make a community garden in Alabama! I worked up a whole proposal and fired it off down south, and no one responded. It took me weeks to realize that my proposal was totally unreal: who would pay for the construction of the garden, who would take responsibility for it? The desperately impoverished area can’t even sustain a decent grocery store (the discount Dollar General in Ft. Deposit closed because they kept getting robbed.)

Back to the drawing board, five years in. What is the sine qua non, the ‘without which there is nothing,’ the essential key and seed? It is the Freedom Primer, the comic book that was produced to show the importance of local political office: the way the coroner covers up murders, the way the school board controls your children, the way the tax office controls your land. All of those lessons apply equally today to a landscape of rich and poor, powerful and weak, even when many of the rich and powerful are now African American. The LCFO failed to transform politics, and instead racially integrated the local political machine, it seems.

Of course, there are exceptions: John Jackson, Mayor of White Hall, who convinced his father to let those civil rights worker students stay on the land back in 1963 and went on to found the municipal town of White Hall, where he drives the school bus every day. On his land, near that still standing house, I plan to take the Freedom Primer comic and print it on ceramic tiles. There is a hold-up over budget.

If nothing moves over the summer I’m just going to re-print the comic book and circulate it across Lowndes, literally the least I could do.
I. CRITERION: “DOES IT WORK?”

“It’s no fun to hit a home run every time. It’s not about that.”
— David Hammons

As stated in the introduction, there is an issue of criterion.

On what basis, principle, or standard can one distinguish and hierarchize? Having undertaken a period of focused experimentation, in what way do you look back upon it when in fact the issue is how to move forward from that point?

Of course the process of making distinctions and hierarchies is central to art, in theory and certainly in practice. While its awkward to share publicly one’s reflections about what one has done, on the other hand, the activity of judging one’s work for oneself is essential and commonplace for artists of all kinds.

But the point of departure for this project was quite specific, encapsulated in the example of the Concerning War exhibition at BAK in Utrecht in 2005. This was an example of how a thing – in this case an exhibition accompanied by a program of public events – can be at first look excellent under one criterion and fall flat entirely in another. The first success being in those commonplace ways we talk about art exhibitions, and the latter ‘falling flat’ in terms of the question: in the midst of the deepening Global War on Terror did the exhibition offer anything much that would contribute to the concrete questions and issues faced by the citizenry?

Admittedly an unspoken normative process is at work here: a demand for a certain timeliness, a certain relevance, a certain constructive role, but not, strictly speaking, a demand for usefulness, nor for direct applicability. One could even start to speculate a term: public meaning. Drawing upon the distinction between public happiness and private happiness, we could begin to ask if art’s meaning remains only for us in our private lives, and to raise as a different and distinct question if the work can contribute us citizens.

The problem with nailing this down is that in matters of art, any rule has a dozen exceptions and any prescription in expository words will be trumped by the poetic.

In the quote above David Hammons draws from the sport of baseball to make a point: that consistent unequivocal artistic success would actually defeat the purpose somehow. (And here we have a revelatory distinction between art and games: imagine offering a player a chance to score every time, would they turn it down? Games are organized around winning; art is about playing, so to speak.) Hammons points out that even when you establish criterion – the difference between a home run and a strike out and all the options in between – in art the point is not really to succeed at them. Even if I found the best way to have a role in public life with art-making I would likely want to play around with it a bit, to go back and re-open, to re-approach and contradict it.

At the same time, when Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner shared a studio together and saw each others progress daily, they had one main question for each other when asking for feedback: does it work? Putting into words why one Pollock or Krasner is more ‘working’ than another is very difficult, and they didn’t bother with that, but they certainly did know the difference. In boiling it down to a yes or no question, a shorthand which somehow functionalizes the process of making judgments: elaborating too much would defeat the purpose.

II. CRITERIA, PLURAL

The design and presentation of material in the publication has not been organized to illustrate an argument. On the contrary, the goal has been to make space for others to judge for themselves, with whatever criteria...
they desire and to demonstrate the efforts made as part of a focused period of work. In addition, judgment can be made against the question that was raised at the outset: is art practice capable of a role in public life? And the question is of course not definitive because in some cases the works or projects detailed here will have their most public presentation to date in this same here publication, and thus perhaps the reader and viewer judging for themselves will be part of the work’s public role.

At the same time, I have made my own conclusions. But to be clear there are two prevalent criterion that will not be explored: personal judgment and professional standing.

The first of these is certainly more fundamental than questions of art and public life. The space of artistic freedom is the sine qua non distinguishing art from instrumental activities such as design. John Baldessari’s decision to burn his early work was apparently crucial to his later development. On the other hand, we must be thankful that Franz Kafka’s friend refused to execute Kafka’s last wish that his writings be burned. Hemingway posited that that the author was the best judge of quality, judged on the excellence of all the material that was cut out, edited away. And in *Moveable Feast*, Hemingway’s memoir of his period Paris, there is a revealing example of the issue of the artist’s judgment: Hemingway was shocked when F. Scott Fitzgerald confessed that he has been changing the ending of his stories to make them more sellable. He’d write it as he liked it and then just change the end around. Hemingway writes that Fitzgerald was destroying his talent, because if you change your own work to fit some other judgment, how can you help but lose track of that judgment, and thus the ability to create.

So, I may judge that the photographs in *The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness* are too illustrational with too much of the meaning being produced by the video component of the installation, or I may judge that *Proposal for a Performance in a Prison* is a bit too much like the tradition of the artist’s monologue ala Spaulding Grey or Whoopi Goldberg, and so a bit on the edge of entertainment. On the other hand I may think that combination of archival footage and performance documentation in that *Frank Church* video represents a real breakthrough in terms of the structures of documentary, or that the shifting juxtapositions made under the M32 overpass in Bristol were very effective. But these kinds of question will not be explored further here.

Second of all, the question of professional standing: did it sell, did people write about it, do people take it seriously, do people want to show the work again, or invite you to produce a new work on the basis of that one? Are you in the collections of reputable museums or private collectors? How many biennials? There are indeed websites that track this information, offering a mathematical curve of an artist’s shifting “rank.” Apparently there are experiments being made to establish an algorithm to determine whose work will grow in financial value. Just as an actor strives to “make it” in Hollywood, when you greet a professional peer and ask how’s it going, it is understood to refer to the attention their work is getting, invitations, sales, academic positions.

Because this aspect is so fundamental to contemporary art practice, one cannot simply ignore it, even when the focus, as in this case, is distinctly different. If the works and projects undertaken over the course of this research were of no professional interest that would be merit mentioning. On the other hand, if one work in particular had achieved stellar heights of recognition that too would need to be mentioned. But, for better or for worse, in this period my career went “good enough”: decent invitations at decent places, a few works sold, and a few positive reviews in reputable journals. And, because this issue is not the primary concern here, it will be set aside.

So, conclusions will follow in three sections, to elaborate and highlight and the most consequential impressions, insights and reflections, followed by a declaration of results and final summary:

1) **Notations**
A series of compressed observations that emerged from particular projects and overtime came to serve as informal judgments, sometimes unconsciously at first.

2) **Findings**
I will here draw upon two revelatory episodes that illuminate the broader conditions against which cultural work is occurring.

3) **Case-Study**
Last I will dive in detail into what I experienced as the single most successful undertaking of the broader project. The final conclusion will unfold in dialogue with this success.
III. NOTATION 1: THE BARRIERS TO PUBLIC SPACE

My observation is that it is not possible for an individual artist to initiate a work in public space (in the sense of ‘art in the open air’). It is likely such works are, practically speaking, impossible without the support of cultural institutions.

Of course an ephemeral gesture, performance or “intervention” is not what I am referring to here. Even so, at first this seems like an impossibly broad statement, but what I have found was that without some existing institution organized to mediate with the public space, there were simply insurmountable difficulties. The failure to collaborate with the Lidl corporation was an unmistakable lesson. Not that Lidl failed me or censored my work, on the contrary they were to some degree motivated to explore collaboration, but the process simply stalled out: what I was proposing had no structure to support it in the company, it seems. I had initiated the contact on my own behalf, and got quite far that way, but apparently some other structure was required to mediate between their private property and business issues on the one hand, and my own practice. I had originally planned to pursue the collaboration as part of a large well-funded exhibition (Based in Berlin) and it seems very likely that I would have had more success with an experienced motivated team behind pushing to make it happen, following up on communication and adding legitimacy to my initiative.

My initiative to establish some kind of public marker or memorial for the Lowndes County Freedom Organization has moved along in fits and starts for literally years. Since beginning the PhD I believed that headway with this initiative in Lowndes was essential for my doctorate. In 2014 I finally seemed to created a workable, practically realizable proposal but in 2015 it became clear that there was no financial means to support such a project, and so developing it will require that I raise the funds, a daunting task I have yet to undertake. It was not realistic for the Van Abbe Museum, who supported my initial working period in Alabama, to commit to pay for a public art work in a little known corner of a far away land. Due to political conditions in Alabama, there is no infrastructure there to support such a project on a cultural level (and in practice, establishing deadlines is also a form of support). What I have depended upon then is the motivation and sympathy of people in Alabama, and they are, like me, simply very busy with taking care of their own main affairs to then take this on. This single project may require become my single and only task for a long period in order to move forward, a lesson that I’ve been reluctant to learn.

The conclusion can only be that when those Biennials support experimental public projects, or in those rare cases of institutions like Sculpturen Muenster, or when institutions like the Arnolfini make projects like The Promise, they are performing an essential role.

IV. NOTATION 2: GALLERY FREEDOM

It’s helpful here to return to Hannah Arendt’s distinction between private freedom and public freedom. The first is your ability to be free from the constraints of the political realm, and the second would be free to participate in politics or change the conditions of the public realm.

Having been shut down by Lidl, I could resolve If You Want Blood as a gallery show. Technically, I could possibly have developed this shift in the studio and then brought it to some other public art institution, but practically speaking this would have been unlikely. Because Christian Mooney had been attending to the meandering process of this project since 2007, visiting the site with me then, he was convinced of its importance regardless of its vague status and propel me to complete it. It is important to note that the two commercial gallerists I work with – Christian Mooney from Arcade and Ellen at Ellen de Bruijne Projects – do not have a narrow approach but rather treat their role as expansive supporters of artistic practice in which selling art is a defining but not exclusive aim. That said, I think many artists experience that the commitment and support of a commercial gallery is, in the long run, more nourishing than working with curators and institutions. A collaboration with a gallery can develop literally over decades, while the collaboration with curators usually is limited to weeks or months.

On the other hand, the commercial gallery is not part of the public realm, practically speaking. Besides the general cultivation of exclusivity and social hierarchy, commercial art galleries are also authorial. As someone joked years ago: “it used to be the galleries showed the artists, now the artists show the gallery.” In other words, the name and signature style of the gallery is crucial to its success, even at the risk of using artists to build up a kind of aesthetic/market position, when traditionally it was the other way around.

I had been anticipating showing If You Want Blood, a work which takes contemporary Berlin as a point of departure, in the city itself and in
2014 it was presented at the Berlin gallery Arratia Beer as part of a group exhibition Public Happiness curated by Christine Wuermell, with the title drawn from Arendt’s private and public happiness distinction as Christine had picked it up from Fred Dewey’s reading group. The exhibition was reviewed well in Frieze magazine and I was invited to make a solo exhibition at the gallery so by most conventional measures the exhibition was a success. But the meaning of the project seemed somehow blunted. I was certain that if a wider public would attend that the local resonance of the piece would be felt, but in the context of a commercial gallery this was lost, and not only because of the narrow cross section of the visual arts community who attended the exhibition. No one ever commented on the subject matter of the work – neither the surface narrative of the historic site turned discount store nor the themes that underpinned this non-fiction allegory: displacement, loss, the ragged seam between the private and the public dimensions and the Berlin wall as lofty symbol and quotidian materiality.

Like the example of Roel Griffioen, who theorized around the eminent destruction of his own home as if it was a problem happening to someone else, it seemed as if my community was also somehow happily disassociated from our own situation. It called to mind my experience of being a spectator and nothing more of what is happening around the Berlin wall. And this links to the other example mentioned in Is Art Public? the title drawn from Arendt’s private and public happiness distinction as Christine had picked it up from Fred Dewey’s reading group. The exhibition was reviewed well in Frieze magazine and I was invited to make a solo exhibition at the gallery so by most conventional measures the exhibition was a success. But the meaning of the project seemed somehow blunted. I was certain that if a wider public would attend that the local resonance of the piece would be felt, but in the context of a commercial gallery this was lost, and not only because of the narrow cross section of the visual arts community who attended the exhibition. No one ever commented on the subject matter of the work – neither the surface narrative of the historic site turned discount store nor the themes that underpinned this non-fiction allegory: displacement, loss, the ragged seam between the private and the public dimensions and the Berlin wall as lofty symbol and quotidian materiality.

The art fair is of course an extreme example, except that in another way its not: as anyone involved in the visual arts in the last fifteen years would attest in wonder, it is the art fair that has come to dominate the field and the discourse above all else. Possibly in Madrid the work was not so strong, possibly the wealthy Spaniards (and art fairs are for those who come to buy, primarily) were more sympathetic to Franco than I’d like to admit, perhaps the gallerist had not communicated the subtext of the photos clearly in conversations, but for certain that art fair felt a million miles away from the world outside the doorway. It was if the capacity for art to transform material and absorb our perceptions had been mobilized fully as part of a social sculpture, drawing us into the equivalent of wine-testing festival, which is a very different thing than a party, or for that matter, the wine in a Catholic Mass. But unlike most wine-tastings, it as if we’d been invited to taste wine that was for most people completely unaffordable.

There are many issues raised by the way the visual arts have to be, above all else, a form of tradable luxury collectible, most of which are obvious, but oddly the apparently uncontroversial partnership with one social class also has the consequence of identifying with the perspective of that class, if not their values. An example: the objective economic function of jazz musicians in the early 1960’s was not pure at all, they did not fill concert halls or receive support for their artistic work per se. The main economic structure around jazz was playing bars that made their money from selling drinks. But of course Eric Dolphy and John Coltrane did not head backstage and then discuss the relative sales of vodka vs. rum, beer vs. cocktails. They had to participate in that economic structure, and certainly they took it seriously as a practical thing, but they did not identify with the value system of that structure, which is of course exactly what has happened in the visual arts. In the art magazines there has for years been a section of photographs documenting social gatherings, who was where and how they were dressed. But it is as if the mentality of those pages has overtaken the editorial vision of the entire magazine, as if the gossip + business shoptalk had overwhelmed any other priorities.

And this links to the other example mentioned in Is Art Public? the 2011 solo exhibition of LA Homicide at an art fair, in which (as I understand it) the jury planned to award the work a prize but the corporate sponsor intervened. The beer company behind the prize did not want to be associated with violent crime in Los Angeles. That was not the image it wanted to project and so the jury deferred. I would postulate that this would have been unthinkable thirty years ago, that in an earlier period someone would have resigned rather than participate in what could only be the reduction of the prize apparatus to a kind of...
advertisement, and what would supposed to be a business interest supporting art was revealed to be precisely the reverse arrangement. But in whose interest would it be to resist this? More importantly, many people now would sympathize with the beer company and find it acceptable that they would ruthlessly pursue their private interest, even under the cover of patronage, because after all everyone is only ruthlessly pursuing their own interest. This is how the art market, more than the dominance of the so-called “1%”, actually distorts and diminishes culture. Artworks are meant to last, and culture is something broader than any individual, but we have been taught and are teaching each other to accept a logic of radical self interest, a kind of social Darwinism that even the cold blooded financiers would blanche at, because so few are rewarded.

In the discussion after the Is Art Public? talk, I tentatively raised the question: “is the art market a form of political repression?” And an experienced older woman jumped in: “Yes! It is censorship!” A bit shocked, I later raised the question to Ellen de Bruijne: “does the commercial art world repress the political aspect of art?” And she too responded, “Yes, of course.”

A friend had returned from a strange kind of conference, one hosted by a London art gallery, gathering critics, curators and a designer around the work of an artist in order to work together and make a new publication about the artist. “The commercial art world offers opportunities to work,” he commented. And it is not black-and-white of course, but the commercial art gallery, the defining institution of contemporary visual arts, allows for the artists’ private freedom but in many ways blocks and represses public freedom to the point that this principle seems to have become unrecognizable, in our community even more than the wider public.

V. NOTATION 3: THE WHITE CUBE AS PUBLIC SPACE

Are contemporary art institutions part of civil society?

In some contexts, of course, organized forums for discussion and reflection on matters of public concern, cannot be taken for granted. In the United States for example, it seems as if civil society is something that requires enactment and struggle, to be fought for and defended in a Sisyphean process that disappears and reappears, fugitively. If I recall exhibitions that I saw at Boston’s Institute for Contemporary Art when I was a teenager – Chris Burden’s retrospective, Gerhard Richter’s Baader Meinhof series, and then the controversial David Wojnarowicz retrospective – clearly the ICA in this period was fostering an informed public. But was this public merely culturally sophisticated, or did those works – Wojnarowicz work was interwoven with activist work dealing with the AIDS crisis, for example – ripple out further and inform public discourse? Can the white cube be a space that reaches out to the public, or even within which the capacity for a public realm can be fostered?

The results I received on this front are inconclusive, crucially, critically.

On the one hand the Centre Pompidou did not hesitate to show The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness with its explicit reference to difficult subjects like state crimes and the illegal actions of the US intelligence agencies. On the other hand, against the backdrop of the Edward Snowden revelations, did this presentation reach anyone or contribute meaningfully to public reflection and understanding? After all, the work had been given a prominent place in a renowned exhibition in a group exhibition that was attended by tens of thousands. In other words, this was for me and my own work the ideal test to explore this question.

So I posed this question very explicitly to the Pompidou team that I worked with and they simply had no idea, at all. Did the reference to NSA eavesdropping connect with anyone? Or the deeper issues of how individuals wrestle with their place in the larger political order? This was in France, after all, where some aspect of republicanism is widely identified with. If the answer was no, it would necessarily mean that people had not cared: perhaps the work was too meditative, too lyrical. But the answer was not yes or no, it was a kind of blank stare. They did not know precisely because it would never occur to them to ask. In other words, even under the best of circumstances, with a context of urgency and in a prominent respected context, it is simply hard to know; because in cultural institutions there is no apparatus in place that is in meaningful dialogue with the public. There are exceptions to this of course, but for the most part, when public institutions think of public outreach they mean “target audiences” – children, racial minorities, etc. - not reaching out to make communication into a two-way dialogue.
Later that year I took this a step further and following my temporary site-specific exhibition in Bristol, I asked the Arnolfini to post a note asking for feedback. None was ever received. But on the other hand, some motivated person had not just removed my lithographs, but removed and replaced them in new configurations, changing the work around. This active direct dialogue seemed to confirm that the work had at least resonated with somebody, but yet between the absent feedback and the active engagement I was left with a similarly unclear feeling.

So given the inconclusive nature of my own experience of this question, I have cast about for other examples and settled upon one in particular in my teaching, I’ve found myself coming back to the example of the work of the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans as someone asserting the civic capacity of the art object. I made this point to someone in New York recently who responded dryly that he’d always understood Tuymans to be a kind of big time commercial painter who used the trappings of politics to legitimate his commercial ambition. I must have made a face of shock because he said, “what, did I miss something?”

And I was about to explain that Tuymans’ series dealing with imagery from the independence of the Congo had contributed to a broader discussion about colonialism, when I was reminded that someone in Belgium had characterized Tuymans in precisely the same way: as someone who had dropped into the struggle for historical memory in Belgium at the last minute to “cash in” on the subject. This is the distinctly negative take on Tuymans and the Congo debates, and I mention it now to temper any kind of over-rosy picture that might emerge in the following passage.

My first glimmer of the affirmative take on Tuymans’ work came in a bar in Antwerp in 2004, where after seeing some works of Tuymans I dismissed him: “he’ll be known as a footnote to Gerhard Richter,” I said. What I meant was that Tuymans, as he himself has made clear, observed the controversy that Richter’s Baader-Meinhof paintings caused in Germany, and in particular that Richter’s reticence, his indifference to being “for” or “against” the Red Army Faction had somehow been incredibly constructive. He then self-consciously drew upon this principle in his own work, addressing political issues through imagery while maintaining a reticence and understatement, with the strategy being that this ambivalence actually provoked judgment and discussion. In this sense, I when I provocatively referred to Tuymans as a “footnote to Richter” I was saying that Tuymans was not really bringing anything new into the discussion.

At the table was the Dutch painter Rezi van Lankveld who responded, “No, I think Tuymans is much more important than Richter!” Lankveld argued that while Richter’s unparalleled smorgasbord production was super human and almost alien, Tuymans practice was human scaled. With his small, modest paintings Tuymans had found a way to enter public debate and contribute to the discussion. In other words, Tuymans demonstrated the capacity for a humble solitary artist with the most conventional means and forms – art studio, commercial gallery, Biennial, museum – to address in convincing fashion dauntingly huge subjects and even reach out to the public with those works.

Later, this exchanged continued to echo within my thoughts and I increasingly saw Tuymans’ Mwana Kitoko, his series dealing with the Belgian Congo, as a proof of some potential: that art could have indeed have a role in public life, and than an artist could make that happen as part of their approach and craft.

In the Spring of 2015, as I had to soberly reflect on the inconclusive nature of my own experience, I traveled to Luc Tuyman’s Antwerp studio to interview him precisely on these questions, but most importantly to ask for concrete details about the exact ripples and responses to his Congo work, to detail what I had come to see as a story of an effective political artwork.

First of all, Tuymans clarified that the work, following its appearance in the Venice Biennial, sparked controversy more in other parts of Europe than in Belgium. In France, Switzerland and Austria in particular, the history of the murdered Congo independence leader Lumumba was apparently not widely known, as so the paintings became the basis for journalists to dive into this history, and not just in the parts of the media normally reserved for covering art or culture, but a broader group of journalists and given a more prominent position in the media.

In terms of Belgium, Tuymans noted that the paintings came on the scene in roughly the same period as other projects dealing with the same story – a well researched book, a theater play and eventually a kind of informal commission formed trying to clarify the history and force the Belgian public to take responsibility for the murder of Lumumba in particular and the historic crimes Belgium committed against Africa, in general. Tuymans’ work’s emerging as part of an essentially shared production was super human and almost alien, Tuymans practice was human scaled. With his small, modest paintings Tuymans had found a way to enter public debate and contribute to the discussion. In other words, Tuymans demonstrated the capacity for a humble solitary artist with the most conventional means and forms – art studio, commercial gallery, Biennial, museum – to address in convincing fashion dauntingly huge subjects and even reach out to the public with those works.
necessarily so controversial given how much other material was being produced on the difficult and indeed grisly subject of Lumumba’s murder.

This aspect of the work emerging in a plurality of efforts intrigued me further: could Tuymans’ work have emerged without the efforts of others, or on the other hand, was part of the work’s public resonance in Belgium (and abroad) essentially building upon, or following, or having been fostered by the work of others? Regardless of Tuymans own narrative, I came to believe that in many ways the phenomenon of those paintings was only possible as part of broader tapestry of activity. Furthermore, can we imagine the bold attempts to wrestle with Belgian responsibility for great crimes except as part of the effort to deal with the rise of race nationalism in Belgium in the 1990’s? In this period, Belgium, unlike Holland ten years later, agreed upon what came to be known as a cordon sanitaire, the agreement that other parties would not work with the race nationalists. This struggle must certainly have been linked to the cultural, academic, civil society effort to wrestle with the crimes of Belgian imperialism.

In other words, Rezi van Lankveld’s analysis of Tuymans had to be amended. Tuymans could still be cast in an ennobling light, but what was lost in what I learned from the interview was the sense that his effort was a solitary one. His work was still the solitary work of an artist alone, but the art’s public role was certainly part of a broader plural activity by and with others. Perhaps even that activity had fostered his solitary activity, or on the other hand, part of his solitary activity might have been that craft of judging and guiding how his paintings would go out into the world, with the sensitivity towards context, community, and effect. Tuymans could keep the almost heroic aura that he had come to have in my mind, but what I had to remove was the whole construct and tradition of the genius solo-act.

I think one of the reasons why Jean-Michel [Basquiat] died is because he didn’t have people around him. He tried to do it alone, fight the whole art world, without any cushioning, nothing, no team spirit. ‘Watch my back’ as we say. I’m not coming in this without other people, I’m not trying to deal with this art world without an orchestra, a quartet, or an octet or something. Because it’s too dangerous for me to do a piece with my name on it. It’s not necessary to do that, plus with other people I can get much richer thoughts, much richer ideas. They can give me ideas that would make the piece much stronger.

— David Hammons

The “this” Hammons was referring to was the vibrant and tenacious apparatus of commercial exploitation that has developed in the visual arts, but perhaps his insight can be extended. Tuymans’ Congo paintings indeed had friends and allies, even if the artist himself might not see it that way. Could it be that my presentation of The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness was too lonely out there by itself? Even Snowden’s revelations, Glenn Greenwald’s writings, and Laura Poitras’ film were themselves all together far on the margin. Awarding Citizen 4 the Academy Award certainly did not mean that there would be a mainstream opposition to criminal surveillance of citizens, actually. Perhaps the potential for artworks to have a role in public life had less to do with institutional context than with a more general human context? This question will be explored further below.

But, for now, it is sufficient and necessary to note that even if in practice it is hard to conclude that presenting art in a contemporary art institution is a way of contributing to civil society, the potential is there, definitively.

The last notation to be made deals with the experience of working in the context of artist’s initiatives, and this will be explored shortly in the key case study below.

VI. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS – THE PRESENT POLITICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURE

But before moving on to this affirmative example and its potential to serve as a model, there two other findings that should be prudently unpacked that illuminate the political context in which such projects take place.

For example, right now trying to sketch a connection between the post-Gezi park gatherings in Istanbul and Hannah Arendt’s council principle (as detailed in Letter to Turkey), the answer is clear that the political space in Turkey is too closed for free public discourse on such a heated subject. Not that the police would beat on anyone’s door, but rather that police have beaten on so many people’s doors already for dissenting against the political order, that asking people to have a measured and essentially intellectual discussion with a foreigner (who will promptly turn around and leave), is simply perverse.
But this is of course a dramatic example, and easy to harp upon because it is not the conditions under which this project took place. The conditions in the Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States – which all formed background for different components for this project – are of course quite different, but more importantly those were the contexts in which the work was presented to (more or less) free citizens.

However, the conditions of civil society have certainly undergone a shift over the course of this project, and while there are no easy conclusions to be drawn from these changes, they need to be detailed with two crucial findings that emerged over the course of this project, both of which have been mentioned already but merit being detailed and elaborated upon.

First of all, there was the crucial discovery that on the exact day the initial cuts that marked the new program for culture were announced, the PvDA, the party of the workers and historic champion of culture in political life, hosted a public hearing in New York City that essentially simultaneously justified those budget cuts. The logical conclusion from this is that the organized attack on culture in the Netherlands had no opposition within the political leadership.

That the PVDA, the traditional backers of public support for culture (taking the form of tax money but this is of course only a manifestation of a broader political project) would organize in New York an event that positively contrasted the US philanthropic model with the Dutch model occurring on the same day as the announcement of a radical shift in public policy cannot be understood as mere coincidence. Even if the timing was not consciously planned, which is almost certainly was, it is not much of a difference: the main backers of what had been a well established European social model which of course has a cultural component would announce publicly that they want to go the center of the free market fundamentalism movement New York sent an unmistakable signal. Whatever public support remains in the Netherlands is there to support a transition to a new model, which is consistent with the broader shift in the government of the country, made most explicit with the King’s 2013 speech and it’s pronouncement that the Netherlands had left behind what used to be call the “European social model.”

If we are to tentatively accept this argument, what would the implications be? First of all, considering that there was massive opposition amongst the populace against the shift in policy, one question emerges: exactly how democratic is the government of the Netherlands?

For years many have suggested that the Netherlands was run more like a technocratic management scheme than a republic of free citizens – what if that is more true than those in culture would like to admit? What does it mean to work under those conditions, to refer to them, or more importantly to not refer to the question at all? In this way the capacity of the Dutch cultural system to support culture that deals with politics in far away lands reveals little, as indeed none of those projects question the political realities of the last decade and the radical transformations that the King’s speech merely noted, not dictated.

This pairs with the second, equally jarring factual finding: the example drawn from German Foreign Policy magazine (which I was referred to by Fred Dewey) that documents the strategy of the German government for funding cultural projects which on the surface promote causes that the German state in practice opposes.

There has been widespread suspicion of the so-called critical art discourse over the last years in exactly this direction, but the episode of the Thessaloniki radio piece seems to confirm what only the most cynical had been arguing.

This episode is detailed in Proposal for a Performance in a Prison, but given the wide ranging material explored there, it bears worth revisiting it in detail. For simplicity’s sake I will just quote the transcript of Proposal for a Performance in a Prison:

"Urgent Appeal", German Foreign Policy; April 22, 2015. Thanks to Fred Dewey for seizing upon and sharing this crucial fact.

Recently the online magazine German Foreign Policy made an interesting observation.

They were discussing the way that the German government was dealing with Greece and one example in particular which was the claims of the descendants of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki. Until the Zionist movement in Palestine, Thessaloniki was the largest majority Jewish city in the world. And the entire Jewish population was destroyed in the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust. And the Jews were actually billed for their train tickets to the camps. So the Jewish community in Thessaloniki is suing for reparations - not for the crime in general but specifically for just the money for the train tickets paid to the German government – and
the German government is now fighting this, fighting to not pay it back.

But what's interesting is that at the exact same moment that they're fighting this, that their trying not to pay the Jews of Thessaloniki, they are actually funding an art project that deals with the history of Jewish life in Thessaloniki.

And in the section of the article titled “Performance” German Foreign Policy magazine makes the following statement:

The foreign ministry systematically pursues a “culture of remembrance” based on aesthetical performance rather than material atonement.

Again:

The foreign ministry systematically pursues a “culture of remembrance” based on aesthetical performance rather than material atonement.

In other words: the government is actively supporting the dramatization of historic crimes that the continue to benefit from, and at the same time resisting efforts at restitution. The art project about Thessaloniki must of course be sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, and probably would not get funded if it was not effective at evoking sympathy.

But “remembrance” is being actively disconnected from responsibility. Was the tragedy the result of an accident, an act of nature? No, it was caused by people who were responsible and the money went to the German treasury which still has it, and they continue to want to hold the proceeds of the crime. A model of culture is being built up in which aesthetics is not linked to action and its consequences, its meaning and the potential to act now, but rather as part of framing human tragedy as something to be experienced aesthetically, not politically.

The foreign ministry systematically pursues a “culture of remembrance” based on aesthetical performance rather than material atonement.

But could we generalize further: not just the foreign ministry, but the government in general? Not just a culture of remembrance but culture more generally? And not just material atonement, but perhaps material politics?

Or, to say it in a different way:

The government pursues culture based on aesthetic performance rather than material action.

Is the tax money that goes to culture in the Netherlands or in Germany actually part of pursuing a culture of “aesthetical performance” rather than “material” and concrete political actions?

Perhaps this is linked to the sense that approaching the public realm through these white cube institutions, the sense that this simply isn’t working or doesn’t work that I’ve had, perhaps this is part of it.

Perhaps this cultural project of historical memory, or even the structure of “contemporary art” in Western Europe, while on the surface seems as if it’s an attempt to engage civil society, to contribute with this classical language of “de-barbarism” - the “de-barbarization of post-fascist Europe” - but perhaps that’s at times kind of a façade.

And thinking about that is when I started thinking about performing in a prison.

As I mentioned before, the idea that the state-supported cultural structures of Western Europe might have a political function as a façade has certainly been argued for a while. I vividly recall my shock when I moved to Europe and Keith Stern-Pirlot, an old colleague from Los Angeles who’d lived in Europe for many years, referred to the cultural space as that of a “pre-emptive false critique,” a space in which critique can be aired but only “correct” ones, and made public in such a way to practically-speaking block any dissent within the population.

The problem with this analysis is that it is simply too black and white: first of all, who can say what the “correct critique” would be right now, and second of all, as we know from more repressive structures, the promotion of critical discourse in one corner certainly inspires discourse in another, as long as the discourse is more-or-less open.

Yet what is detailed in this German Foreign Policy example goes exactly to that point: how open or free is the space at all? Here is the full passage:

Handy-App
Currently, the German foreign ministry is trying to obliterate and - even to invert - the historical relationship of the German state, as debtor, and the Greek victims, as creditors. A “German-
Greek Future Fund,” established unilaterally by Berlin is claiming titular co-sponsorship of Greek civil society, which knew nothing of this “Future Fund” until the German foreign ministry began attracting unemployed Greeks to participate in “projects” at the lowest possible remuneration. (german-foreignpolicy.com reported.) These macabre foreign ministry’s “Future Fund”-financed “projects” include the development of a cell phone app for tourists to search for the remnants of Thessaloniki’s Jewish community. This is how the German state stands aloof of Germany’s crimes, virtually dissipating and relegating them to history, without ever having settled the debt they left behind. This is why Thessaloniki’s Jewish community must take Berlin to court.

Performance
The cell phone app is neither an isolated case nor an aberration. The foreign ministry systematically pursues a “culture of remembrance” based on aesthetical performance rather than material atonement. From the “Future Fund” the foreign ministry pays fees for jazz tours. The “Songs for Kommeno,” a martyred Greek village, is meant to impress the local population and demonstrate German compassion. According to the foreign ministry’s webpage, Berlin promotes artistic activities aimed at “coming to grips with the horrors of the war” - always following the same pattern: Berlin refuses to pay for the concrete crimes committed during the war, which dissipate as abstract horror or in a cell phone app. To pursue this strategy as smoothly as possible, the foreign ministry is financing opinion-forming milieus of both countries and the well-intentioned cultural contributions are being appropriated by the state. They serve to neutralize the victims’ legal claims. Opposition politicians in Germany are also campaigning for “foundations,” such as the state financed “Future funds”, which promotes a future without paying for the past.

What is suggested here is rather a practice of “dissipating” crimes through an aesthetic construction of “abstract horror.” In other words, it is not a false critique that is being played out but an active manipulation of public understanding through culture.

All of this would be jarring and thought provoking enough, were not the implications so clear. When the editors refer to “financing opinion-forming milieus of both countries” there is an obvious link to the upcoming 2017 Documenta that will take place partly in Athens, and several smaller additional plans in Germany already underway for cultural projects dealing with Greek-German dialogue.

A word should be mentioned to clarify how Documenta must be recognized as distinct than other biennials or international contemporary art exhibitions. Emerging literally from the rubble of post-war Germany, the original show was a small scale effort to present some of the art that had been repressed in the years of National Socialism. Since then and cultivating in the Documentas of the last twenty years, the project has emerged as the most substantive context in which to present and see contemporary visual arts within a broader humanistic frame.

But presently, one cannot help but to notice how this purist space for culture is explicitly being used to obscure the underlying political realities. As preparations unfold, one can see articles in the new Documenta magazine about debt forgiveness in Africa, but no mention of the brutal measures in place to add more unpayable debt upon Greece. It is as if “capitalism” or some force of nature had imposed a quasi-legal scheme upon the land, not the representatives of a group of countries with Germany firmly in the leadership role. It is suggested the editors implicitly sympathize with debt forgiveness by mentioning the case of African debt relief, but to sympathize without any kind of assistance to one’s brutalized hosts reveals that this sympathy is in fact a paper thin cover over the political actions taken barely a year before. It is as if Documenta itself – the most respectable institution in the visual arts – has now been mobilized to disappear the consequences of Germany’s actions into a theory-moralist posture. In recent months it is not uncommon to hear some in the European art world pronounce Documenta’s solidarity with Greece in flaps of language not unlike a company like Uber’s explanations that the drivers are not really employees. Any mention of solidarity must be met with a thorough reckoning with the question: will Documenta help Greece and the Greeks at all? They certainly aren’t bringing money for culture and there’s even disturbing rumors that having soaked up European money meant for Greek culture, and Greek national budgets for culture, Documenta has gone to the private collectors and philanthropists for more assistance.
In other words, the German strategy of manipulation via cultural projects that are detailed in this article are then extended to cover up the consequences of recent political decisions and neutralize any resistance in the midst of an ongoing conflict. First of all, the intellectual corruption involved is breathtaking, and the perversity of claiming to be acting in solidarity is dumb founding. But equally important in this context, it is not only the Greek people - and by extension the European Project that depends on equal rights for all Europeans - that are being squeezed by this maneuver, it is the institution of contemporary culture that emerged in post-war Europe that is being utilized as way of repressing political conflict, and I believe will ultimately be destroyed by this misuse.

In this case, there has been no hint that Germany or even Europe needs to take any meaningful responsibility for what has happened to their crippled partner, Greece.

To return to the prologue and the open letter, I was arguing for conserving what I believe is a factual provable tradition of culture and civil society in Western Europe. After all, the artistic community globally is nurtured by this international art scene fostered in Europe. The California art scene in which I emerged was bottle-fed by European public and private support for decades while New York ignored those artists entirely. It is no coincidence that the great Earthwork sculptures that exist are almost all in Holland, and Belgium (and to a lesser extent, Germany and Italy.)

And now political leadership of the two countries that developed this model the furthest with institutions like Sonsbeek, Muenster and Documenta and with citizen owned or supported public museums like the Stedelijk Amsterdam and the German Kunstverien structure, that leadership has changed direction, in both cases as part of broader political transitions. In the Netherlands, the shift is economically from a social democratic model to more of an Anglo-Saxon style structure, with the political shifts to be seen in the wholehearted embrace of NATO and socially the simplest way to demarcate the transformation is to recall the landscape of ‘squats’ – self organized initiatives which defined social space in the country for twenty five years and were abolished with the stroke of a pen. In Germany the shift is from a pro-European position to a resurgent nationalism, with all of the historical implications are instantly recognized, consciously or unconsciously, all over Europe.

It is important to detail these broader shifts in order to avoid any kind of myopia around art and culture, any kind of sense of victimization or of being singled out. Once one positions the implications of the shifting cultural realm within the tapestry of each countries national politics (and the fact that these are national shifts reveals to what extent the European project has been crippled), there can perhaps be a bit of comfort in knowing that indeed, like our fellow citizens, we’re all in this together.

The difficulty is that the solidarity that such a knowledge would encourage is effectively blocked by the professional roles available for artists under the new regimes. In Berlin last summer I heard of many people travelling already to Athens to work on “collateral projects” to next year’s Documenta: the exhibition - which I believe must be recognized as a state funded perception management scheme – is for sure accompanied by great prestige and professional opportunities. (I know others who of course recognize the danger of the situation, but organizing a boycott is out of the question because it would mean explicitly opposing the entire social and professional hierarchy of the European visual art community.)

The letter that I wrote in 2011 is perhaps appropriate only as a snapshot from a certain decisive moment. That tradition has been broken and it cannot be preserved, but only renewed, and that renewal would involve explicit conflict with the forces that broke it in the first place. In other words, I’m not sure I would write such a text again today. In 2011 the letter was met with a mix of reactions – part appreciation for offering illuminating language, part admiration for the forthrightness of the position, but also some trepidation as people could sense already which way things would go and were not sure if they wanted to be associated with what they could foresee would be a losing side of the argument.

As of this writing the prospects for an art practice capable of a role in public life seem less than they did at the outset. Perhaps in Europe we will be reduced to the situation that exists in the United States: producing for a community of like-minded peers because the door to the public realm seems impossible to find, producing for one’s own judgment and posterity, or taking the responsibility to foster some underground connection to public life. This was what was at stake in the tacit acceptance of the PVDA's New York maneuvering. Bringing Glen Lowry on board to explain that any classical enlightenment role of the museum is no longer desirable is quite clear, in a way.
Announcement for What Was The European Union? June, 2012

What Was The European Union?

On The Occasion Of The Elections In Greece

An evening of discussion, performance, and reflection on the following theme: By moving the center of gravity to the community and shifting emphasis from the 'European Project' to the new Greek government. What are the key events on the radar? How are the political forces shaping the scenario? What is the role of Greece in the broader European context? How can Greece move forward and what role can Europe play in supporting Greek democracy?

Thursday May 10th 2012

351350

Announcement for What Was The European Union? Part 2, April, 2013

What Was The European Union? Part 2

Raise A Glass For Stéphane Hessel

(1917, Berlin - 2013, Paris)

Friday April 12, 19:30
bournesew@lenastrasse 20 / 12049 berlin (Kreuzbühl)

Following last June’s event at General Public (stringent) in Greve, Jeremiah Day, Fred Dewey, and Wolfgang Hauer offer a second evening of constructive intervention around core, founding principles of the European Project and in particular how they have been affected by "the crisis."

Tonight, we gather to raise a glass to Stéphane Hessel, who passed away after achieving unprecedented fame for publication of his 100 of the best-selling pamphlet (translated into 47 languages) with over 10 million sales. The pamphlet is a call for resistance, boldly risking the original goals and principles of the French and European Resistance to contemporary disruptions, neglect of liberal democracy, the economic model, injustices, and the destruction of social and political protections.

Hessel's biography is intertwined with critical events of the last hundred years. After his birth in 1913, Hessel encountered a POW camp during the war to fight the French Resistance, signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and helped inspire a constellation of activities on multiple continents, from the Maginot movement to ways to calls for solidarity that divided us. What does its extraordinary courage mean?

Over drinks, in discussion and informal presentations, we'll brief Hessel and discuss what is left with the intersection. With Europe's founding principles, born in the Resistance of "economic and social democracy," a balanced, federal Europe, and "harmonious presence"—under assault from financial agents and political leaders, what might the "change" mean for Europe, for peace, and for our shared future?

Jeremiah Day graduated from the art department of the University of California at Los Angeles, where he studied painting and sculpture. His work has been shown recently by the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and the Museum für Gegenwart Kunst, Bruins, and Berlin. He is an artist, writer, publisher, editor, critic, activist, and thinker. The School of Public Life, a book of interventions, is forthcoming from downtown/center.

Wolfgang Hauer teaches political philosophy at Free University, Berlin, founder of Vorträge.net and - with curator of the Hannah Arendt Denkforum, Berlin.

Friday April 12, 19:30 — bournesew@lenastrasse 20 / 12049 berlin (Kreuxbühl)
Part 1: Summary Introduction

I suspect it was precisely this interweaving of conflicts that gave What Was The European Union? such resonance. To detail that resonance and what can be learned from it, it is necessary to give some clear accounting of the project, its origins, structure and dimensions. But first, why hierarchize so radically and elevate a single evening’s program above all other activities? As was related briefly in Is Art Public? I experienced this single event as confirmation of the capacity for art to have a role in public life, more distinctly than anything else, and thus it merits not just a recounting but a re-examination in detail.

What Was The European Union? has been the title for two evenings (with more possibly to follow) presenting the work of Fred Dewey, Wolfgang Heuer and myself, organized collaboratively. I will focus exclusively on the first evening, held on the occasion of the 2012 Greek national parliamentary elections, for which the announcement stated:

This evening program attempts to intervene constructively in current discussions on the Euro-Crisis by focusing on the original and careful motivations of the European Union and the current political and economic crisis threatening it. A rupture of the Union and its founding principles looms. With this could come a return to ills it was built to combat. With a consideration of the roots of the European Project, and on the day of a crucial European election: what is at stake, for Berliners, for Germany and for artists, citizens and observers alike?

Jeremiah Day
MAQUIS

“This war will drag on beyond any platonc armistace.”
— Rene Char

Maquis, a slide-show performance, was made in 2004 to contribute to the dialogue around the European Constitution and the 2004 Dutch Presidency of the European Union. Originally presented at an Amsterdam squat to serve as the basis for a public discussion, the work poses political questions through art, speaking and moving, taking as its point of departure the literal and metaphoric landscapes of the French Resistance.

Wolfgang Heuer
THE NAMELESS HERITAGE OF THE RÉSISTANCE

What are the foundations of modern Europe: No more war, free mobility? Or the hidden history of the European resistance movements with their ideas of federation and spontaneous action - central elements of new politics of common responsibility which Stéphane Hessel in his pamphlet “Indignez-vous!” calls the “heritage of the Résistance” which was forgotten under the domination of neoliberal anti-politics.

Fred Dewey
THE LOOMING PERIL, THE PEOPLE, AND THE FEDERAL PRINCIPLE

Dewey will attempt to put the federal principle, born in Europe of the French and European resistance, into context beside lessons from the EU and the USA, where states, localities, and continental power were to be balanced to free the people of tyranny, war, and imperialism. Without the EU, a crucial global potential will die, and with it, all face a potential return to nationalism, disintegration, totalitarianism, and war. What core principles must be recovered?

VIII. CASE STUDY PART 2: BACKGROUND

The project had its roots in my 2011-12 project around the work of Hannah Arendt, through which Fred Dewey and I met Wolfgang Heuer, but the actual precipitating incident was when, in preparation for the 2012 gathering around Arendt and culture at Goleb, Susannah Gottlieb kept insisting that I show some of my own artwork as part of the program. I thought “wearing too many hats,” or taking on multiple roles in the same event was problematic, but she insisted and so I presented the work I’d made that was most explicitly related to Arendt, the slide-show performance MAQUIS.
In 2012-2013 in response to the 'Euro-crisis' the work was brought out from retirement and performed across Europe.
As described in *Not To Be Answered In Words*, MAQUIS emerged from the occasion of the Dutch presidency of the European Union, and was inspired by two short texts Arendt had written right after the end of the Second World War in which she elaborated how a vision of European federalism emerged clearly across Europe from the resistance movements.

In France, a country of mature republican traditions, the repudiation of old centralized forms of government, which left very little responsibility to the individual citizen, is gaining ground; the search for some new form, giving the citizen more of the duties as well as the rights and honors of public life, is characteristic of all factions.

The cardinal principle of French resistance was liberer et federer; and by federation was meant a federated structure of the Fourth Republic (in opposition to the “centralist State which is bound to become totalitarian”) integrated in a European Federation. It is in almost identical terms that the French, Czech, Italian, Norwegian, and Dutch underground papers insist on this as the primary condition of a lasting peace — although, so far as I know, only the French underground has gone so far as to state that a federative structure of Europe must be based on similarly federated structures in the constituent states.

Equally universal, though not equally new, are the demands of a social and economic nature. All want a change in the economic system, control of wealth, nationalization, and public ownership of basic resources and major industries. Here again, the French have some ideas of their own. As Louis Saillant put it, they do not want “a rehash of socialist or other kind of program,” for they are mainly concerned with “the defense of that human dignity for which the men of the Resistance fought and sacrificed.”

— Hannah Arendt, Approaches to the ‘German Problem’, 1945

This Arendt quote contains much to be unpacked: linking European Federalism back to the Resistance (and in turn back to French Republicanism), the international experience of the Resistance as the historic background for the decidedly less heroic seeming activities of the international organizations in Brussels, and, crucially, the roots of the social welfare structure not in Keynesian-ism or Social Democracy but as a continuation of the project of Resistance, ie the defense of “human dignity” against Nazi-ism.

This rich stew was the basis for my 2004 MAQUIS, and moments after I completed the performance at Goleb in 2012, Wolfgang Heuer, Fred Dewey and I gathered in the hallway and Heuer responded that he himself had undertaken a whole body of research along similar lines. Dewey jumped in that we should show it together, and everything followed from there.

**IX. CASE STUDY PART 3: PLURAL REFLECTIONS**

I have asked Fred Dewey and Wolfgang Heuer to share brief reflections on that first *What Was The European Union?*

Fred Dewey:

Jeremiah and I, either together in Berlin or across the Atlantic, frequently discussed indifference towards the EU and especially the left arguing the EU was always a neo-liberal project. The latter is simply not true. My idea was to get at this, to undo and rebuild assumptions, in a public way, through works of art and thinking made by each of us, separately and prior to the event, to expose Berliners to the early resistance history of the EU, but also to make clear everyone’s vibrant lives in Berlin rested on this, the Germans especially. The EU founders’ mission - using these words loosely - was to block national, economic, cultural, and political domination through what, following Hannah Arendt, I like to call the “federal principle”—a principle of limits to protect and build political equality as a matter of survival, blocking destruction by nationalism and war. The EU ingeniously aimed for this through structure, but from a distinctly contemporary perspective, learning from catastrophe. Learning to care, for us, meant people sensing this as a shared past, present, and future, seeing why this amazing Berlin experiment, for a while truly a European city, could even happen. For a moment, in a public space people entertained this rather than being entertained by it. Conferences, panels, curatorial projects of works, museums and universities produce contemplation and social jockeying. This is a political problem. What is the relation of works of art and thought to public life? “What Was the EU”
showed a new relationship was possible and could be created, for a moment—where imagination and history, through works and putting the discussion of the topic first, really could activate what I call “a polis of things and people.” What made this so extraordinary for me, and so encouraging, was that the event was self-reflexive that way: the federal principle at the micro level, made real, demonstrated, felt by all there. Did those there make the connections? Who knows. But they will remember this moment.

Wolfgang Heuer:

Our first What was the EU? in General Public was a big success. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon with elections in Greece, and in spite of this there were a lot of interested participants - about 25? The first part with the question to the participants: what does the EU mean for you? was unusual - people expect some talk and the discussion, if any, later. This part showed how little we are used to talk about the EU- evidently it means more than to live were you want and not to change money at the border - but what? That this part lasted longer than expected was a good result, thanks to Fred’s great skills as moderator, to open a space for thinking and talking together. Your show and my talk about resistance monuments and the European resistance underlined the political and historical dimension. Also when the session as over, people went on to talk about the Greek/European crisis. My impression is, that this event with its unusual form of three different means and aspects created a space of reflection and responsibility.

X. CASE STUDY PART 4: STRUCTURE

The evening consisted of a reading of my MAQUIS, Heuer’s paper, and then a concluding talk by Fred, but with the unusual strategy of having an open discussion before any of the presentations. This was Fred’s idea and with a strong opening question “what is this thing called Europe?” and a moderation style of drawing out dialogue Fred began:

I think part of the intervention was to see if it’s possible to give it a little more concrete sensory aspect like, what is this thing called Europe. It’s a big question but I just wanted to throw that out there as a kind of a starting question, like what is Europe to each of us, if anything at all, what has it contributed to our lives here in Berlin and in Europe. And finally the question which I think tonight is hoping to pose: what would it mean to lose Europe?

So I thought I would just throw those out there. So does anybody have any feeling about Europe at all, apart form the abstraction, does anybody have any experience that they can describe or that they feel to make this concrete to us because it is as I said it is very abstract. Like what is this thing apart from a shopping bag? If anybody has any thoughts or feelings or frustrations or joys experiences they’ve had with this thing that is a post national construct.

Since then, with Dewey’s generous permission, I’ve often appropriated this strategy of starting with an open discussion and it is shocking every time. As Jan Verwoert commented after one such discussion, it changes the space of discussion that is usually reserved for interpretation to focus on clarifying the shared situation. In other words, the focus shifts from the object (art object or lecture, or screening) to the people in the room, as self-conscious participants in something yet bigger. It effectively insists that the public is not an audience, nor are consumers, but are something like peers, stakeholders, or even citizens.

SPEAKER 5: My father for example was a representative in European Parliament and for me always Europe was a very important idea, way of living. But I say for myself in the movement of students (through Erasmus) there was no idea of Europe. We had solidarity with the Spanish resistance but we didn’t think about the EU. So we got, our generation had less ideas of Europe than they did before

FRED: So you think there has already been a change of some kind, not the last six months but since the student movements of the sixties there’s been a change?

5: There’s a new change after ‘89 - to think about Europe in another kind of situation. Its about ‘89 a new change, a new question, what about Europe? And not only west all Europe and now with the crisis its different because it takes the question of economic in the first level, but before
that there was the question what is Europe? Where are the frontiers?

FRED: so in terms of your personal experience it really began with a sense of Spain.

5: No

FRED: No?

5: No, for the older generation the experience of the 2nd war and they had the idea of peace.

FRED: Because, when you mentioned peace, this is a concept that no one really thinks about so much. I mean, does anyone really think of the EU as being a construct to protect peace?

5: First it was.

FRED: Does anybody else feel that way?

6: Definitely.

FRED: Well, you were nodding your head.

7: Yeah I also feel that was because I also I was thinking about, I didn’t think about Europe that way from the beginning on. I started thinking about the EU as an aspect of peace when I was thinking about what could happen if the EU disappears in the way we know it.

FRED: So you already were thinking of those two in a relationship

7: About what?

FRED: Peace and if Europe went away.

In this way, my subsequent presentation of projected analog images, stories and a short song (MAQUIS), and the Wolfgang Heuer’s reading of his paper became additional voices in a plural conversation, a shared reflection.

XI. CASE STUDY PART 5: SITE

General Public (GP) is an artist run space which from 2005 to 2013 was housed in Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin, the loss of that space produced a crisis that GP is still resolving and is presently in a kind of limbo. It was always structurally strongly linked Club Transmedial that runs the annual Transmedial festival – an interdisciplinary cultural event including music, visual art and media art. Club Transmedial had the contract for the whole building and offered an informal bureaucratic structure that housed GP within it. GP emerged in response to the loss of several other such “project rooms” and brought together several artists who had in different ways earlier organized such spaces: Discoteca Flaming Star (the collaborative of Cristina Gomez Barrio and Wolfgang Mayer), Heimo Lattner, Michael Schultze, Fluctuating Images (a media collective) and Marie-Jose Outilane were the most active members in this period, and my main contact was through Discoteca Flaming Star, whose combination of organizational efficiency, studious kindness and self-conscious solidarity was the crucial glue for GP.

What distinguished GP from all other spaces was its intense plurality of practices and attitudes, and its commitment to spontaneity. GP was organized with the principle of minimizing paperwork and no grant-writing or budgets offered in order to preserve a space of spontaneity. The goal was always that a friend from out of town could on a few days notice give a talk about their work or even make a small exhibition. One only had to check the calendar and possibly negotiate an arrangement with whoever had made a plan. Because of this ease, and the various background and practices of the members, it meant that General Public has been home to hundreds of cultural projects – from one night exhibitions by internationally well established figures, to concerts by students of contemporary musical composition, to film programs based on 1970’s US independent film, to my own 2011 Hannah Arendt project. This gave General Public the unique quality of being embraced by the communities of experimental music, visual art and performance (though not so much dance or architecture) and by both the more professionalized and the more underground (for lack of a better word) parts of the community.

And because Berlin in this period had become a true international hub, with people passing through for various lengths of time and engagement, it meant that despite the informality and ‘no-budget’ policy, GP had hosted not just many events, but events from many kinds
of artists from all over the world, and they and their own friends had a peer relationship to General Public, partly a sense of being a stakeholder in a public project, and partly a sense of being at home in a kind of clubhouse, but not just for kids, as most of GP’s members were born around 1970 or earlier.

While clarifying General Public as a context for What Was The European Union? it is important to briefly not the broader context that General Public emerged from: the post-wall 1990’s Berlin and its role within the broader “squat” and “autonomia” political movements of Europe. The matrix of both East and West German student/artist/political activist communities came together in Berlin in the 1990’s and exploited the landscape of empty buildings to establish their own world through squatting buildings, often with government and community support. The anarchists who later fought the police in Friedrickschain had been invited there by one of the Priests whose church had been the center of DDR opposition, I’ve heard. And the role of artists was a crucial part of the tapestry of this activity, with K77 (around the corner from GP, and whose dance studio I study, practice and teach in) being originally occupied in the spirit of Josef Beuys’ “Social Sculpture,” as the most vivid example. This DIY (do-it-yourself) public realm would be short-lived, as the city government’s turn to an aggressive push for free market development (partly motivated to create construction jobs to meet the still present problem of massive unemployment) has come to snuff out almost all of these efforts, leaving only small islands. General Public emerged amidst this change as a recognizable bastion of this tradition. In this way General Public, almost alone in Europe, offered a meeting point between the professionalized art world of Professorships and art-fairs and that evolving strand of post-1968 political action that came to be focused on squatting and “autonomia.”

The meant that General Public’s mailing list - over 10,000 people – cut across social contexts, artistic tendencies with both a local and international reach to active peers who approached General Public as stakeholders. So when our announcement went out, with just a few days notice, for What Was The European Union? We could draw a specific crowd not just from Wolfgang Heuer’s students, or Fred Dewey’s reading groups, or those following my own work, but from this very unique plural body.

In Fred Dewey’s writing on Simone Forti’s improvisational practice, he draws upon a political principle that was crucial for Arendt: the way that at certain moments speech can be a form of action (and we should recall that speech can be used broadly, not just literally – for example, in legal terms the public capacity of art is protected as free speech). In the polis, Arendt argued:

speech and action were considered to be coeval and coequal, of the same rank and the same kind; and this originally meant not only that most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words, but more fundamentally that finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information or communication they may convey, is action.

To host a cultural event the night of an election is to issue a specific kind of invitation, and in its own way is a kind of aesthetic statement. By making a public forum on the night of the Greek elections, with the already clear threats (emanating strongly from Germany) against the Greeks if they dared to vote for a Syriza government, the public was of course a kind of self-selected group of those pre-engaged with those events and what was bound up in them.

On the other hand, the evening that was presented was not journalistic. The presentations (a moderated open forum; a performance; the reading of an academic paper; an improvised talk pulling the threads together) were distinct, challenging modes of description and reflection that drew more from political theory than anything else. In other words the evening drew upon current events for inspiration (and motivation), but then offered a much broader perspective on the day’s occurrences which served to almost exemplify that Greek election as part of a larger constellation of issues and stories. In other words, this self-organized curatorial gesture itself drew upon those strategies Walter Benjamin (as elaborated earlier in part VI of The Nonfictional Imagination) in which a sense of occasion actually becomes part of fabrication of narrative.

Because indeed, on that night “European Federalism” was not a heady idea or a matter of bureaucratic paperwork. On that night people were worried and the issue was urgent, and so the context we offered could reach people deeply. In retrospect, perhaps we offered some
confirmation, some solidarity with those who felt that these events in Greece were serious. Perhaps there were two arts at work: a curatorial art that the three of us worked on together as well as my own individual art piece. But for certain, that night it was clear that a fundamentally artistic reflection (in this case a slideshow performance), had a place and a role. Buttressed by all those other circumstances, the strange bird call song that concludes MAQUIS had a public meaning, not as an illustration or instrument, but rather as a crucial mode of accessing the world in which both mute feeling and steely minded intellect were at home, one in which the indexical language of a series of photos offered a sense of place, not just of the world that they depicted but that such a world exists in this one that was shared that night in Berlin.

Curate, after all comes from care. In choosing to organize an evening that night we were taking care, of both the material that we were presenting, but also of the shared context. And we were thus able to reach people in a place that was not just as peer “cultural producers,” or even citizens or stakeholders, but as fragile human beings recognizing together that momentous events threatened us (and they did).

XIII. CASE STUDY PART 6: SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

What were the key elements that facilitated the excellence of What Was The European Union?:

— it emerged from an evolved and evolving dialogue (the Arendt project)

— it took a clear stance – for the European Union, not against it – but this stance was taken as a point of departure, plural reflection and questioning

— the evening presented what was to many people a new perspective (the Arendt > Resistance > European federalism connection)

— the evening shifted modes of address distinctly, ie was not reducible to any professionalized package (academia, performance art, activism)

— the strategy of opening with a discussion successfully shifted the gathered public into something like stakeholders

— the context of the institution was peer organized and so the public were in principle also peers (ie, the hierarchy between the speakers, artists and the publics was treated as a practical matter, not one of social hierarchy)

— the evening was offered on a clear occasion that was itself perceived widely as urgent, thus reached people also on deeper level than intellectual argument

XIV. MANIFESTO

These summary conclusions have proved jarring in recent weeks. If these are the conditions under which I have best experienced art’s capacity for a role in public life, should they then become the rule? Should I only make my work public on specific occasions of relevant political events, in self-organized presentations, held at spaces like artist’s initiatives, and in dialogue with other modes of address? Are art fairs, exhibitions at commercial galleries, museum group shows, and Biennials a waste of time, on this front?

Presenting the results of an evolving dialogue in a context of shared stakeholders, with one eye towards history and political theory, and the other on the day’s headlines, reaching out to people as thinking, feeling, equal citizens: is this my manifesto?

Yes.

The 2011-12 series of events around Arendt’s Crisis in Culture took up key principles of academic work – the production of new knowledge in the field, rigorous scholarship, even a model of expertise or authority – and channeled it out into public, and not through advertising or public relations strategies, but rather through embracing the small scale bottom up tradition of DIY (Do-It-Yourself) and anti-party activism. Rather than aim for a big splash with a conference, I worked with others over years to slowly foster a dialogue that was deeply immersed in Arendt’s work, but never pursued any real recognition.
And it was a tremendous success. Besides the connections between Heuer, Dewey and myself that were detailed above, the ongoing working relations with Taft Hassam from Goleb also continue to be vital, as Hassam has opened a new space titled after one of Dewey’s texts. Almost all of the participants in the Arendt project are thriving from Cally Spooner and Celine Condorelli from London to Mick Wilson, Ines Schaber and Fred Dewey from Berlin. I owe a Guest Professorship and an ongoing Guest Lecturer position to relationships formed through this project. And in terms of one of the original goals – fostering a public connection between Arendt and cultural practice – one ripple of the project was the review in Frieze magazine of “The Pursuit of Public Happiness” exhibition which, among other things, was perhaps the first time Arendt’s “On Revolution” was written about explicitly as something relevant for the context of contemporary art (a ripple from and confirmation of Fred’s intuition and proposal to me in 1998 at Beyond Baroque.)

All this was the result of an experimental testing of the structures that we normally thing of as ‘academia.’ Why not apply such a testing to the structures of ‘the art world’? The original premise of this project was quite different, of course. Taking up the model of Gericault, could one produce an artwork that would access civil society? The goal of course was not to challenge or test the structures, but to pursue this question through production. Amidst the panorama of contexts – from initiating a collaboration with a corporation, to exhibiting work at a major museum, to a global radio broadcast – it was through deepening working relationships, offering a public forum, and presenting work in a context of peers for a public of stakeholders in which I have found confirmation.

But if we go back to the re-examination of Luc Tuymans’ work earlier in this conclusion, in which it was judged that even his seemingly entirely solitary practice was interwoven within a broader action of civil society, and that is partly what has given the Congo paintings such resonance, than perhaps there is a latent quality of mutual support even there.

Or if we recall that the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam is owned by the citizens, than for sure the attending public of the city are stakeholders. Even if the organizers don’t act like it and the citizens forget it themselves, the principle is there. And that the results of exhibiting The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness at the Pompidou in Paris, were not negative, but merely inconclusive.

Than the conclusion I draw from this project is indeed that, if one wants art to have a role in public life, strategies of memory, Arendtian politics, and performative gestures are not really the point. The point is that the DIY, slow building, anti-credentialed, bottom up and mutual support practices that went into the 2011-12 Arendt project need to be extended to cultural work at cultural institutions.

To unlock the potential of self-organized spaces, they must not be just social clubs and instead be in part dedicated to reflection and public life.

To prevent commercial galleries from becoming boutiques, we must treat them as privately held salons that have the capacity to reach out to a limited public, and draw upon the them as support for maximum freedom in artistic practice.

The public institutions like museums and Biennials which are structurally bound to the citizenry must be treated as just as that, public institutions. The education departments must give up the cynical practice of targeting demographics and instead address the substantial issues that citizenry face. They can contribute to their cities through more important things than “branding,” entertainment or philanthropy.

These are not utopian demands nor require heroic efforts. The original premise of my project, that through artistic practice alone one could engage public life, that is utopian. The decidedly concrete and practical lesson is that artistic practice needs to be complimented with a parallel effort of engagement, of taking responsibility, even if it requires friction (more on that momentarily).

In essence this brings us full circle, the fantastic exhibition about war that never addressed the citizenry’s role as war-makers. How could this have been different?

(Some of) the journalists covering it could have made it relevant by connecting the dots.

(Some of) the curators could have focused not on anthropology but civics.

(Some of) the artists could have taken one quarter of the care that went into their installations to look into how the project would be communicated, and insist on some right to participate in that.
(Some of) the public could have been offered a chance to speak, where the point was not to interpret an artwork but to clarify the public’s situation.

(Someone) could have insisted on presenting (and thus fostering) forms of working together than honor and preserve plural perspectives and collaborative work.

Because, as was alluded to in PRAVDA II, there is a public that recognizes our political problem of description. The millions who marched on February 15th, 2003 against a campaign of organized lies have been confirmed as people of sound judgment, who are being disappointed and betrayed by almost fifteen years of political organizations that block the will of the people. All the young people who closed the freeways across the United States after the non-prosecution of the police officers in Ferguson, Missouri – they are an educated public. The people who came to see Based in Berlin in 2011 were expecting serious questions and were up for serious discussion.

In other words, there is a public for a contemporary art that engages civil society, but the process of meeting that public may require simultaneously reaching into the principles and breaking the habits of art institutions. Again the Stedelijk is the people’s museum – legally, financially and with a tradition of public stakeholders – and even if the curators, artists and the public who visit mostly forget that, the Stedelijk is not a private business, it is in principle an organ of public life.

To go back to a passage from earlier:

As Heuer’s example of the course on “political experience” demonstrates, Arendt believed culture could offer a stronger basis for understanding “political experience” than anything else. The “enlarged mentality” which is central to politics is actually fostered by art.

Our capacity to be political is fostered by culture. This principle is implicit in the study of enactment that Fred Dewey introduced me to, but what is the practical status, today?

In the spirit of non-utopian demands and non-fictional imaginations, one must acknowledge that the Stedelijk is unlikely to shift course and suddenly re-oriented itself to civil society or public life, in even the loosest sense.

To take up that principle may require, if not leaving such institutions, then at least not being defined by them. Like the example of the band Fugazi, who sold the records through the record store but also built up a direct mail business at the same time, the way forward seems to be to inhabit structures like commercial art galleries and the legitimated “art world,” and at the same time make active concrete efforts to build other cultural spaces and support a community of peers. After all, Fugazi’s label Dischord is not dedicated to chart-topping hits, but rather to document the work of the Washington DC post-punk community, or a memory project more than a business.

So, first of all - not to just inhabit the “art world” as bad-faith instrumentalisation (which is already pretty normal) - but to bring our principles and bring along our friends as David Hammons recommends (as I bring the guitarist/dramaturge/historian Bart de Kroon with me to perform – not as nepotism, but as solidarity, solidification, plurality), and to bring along our resolve to be citizens and not functionaries. This means being willing to “make waves,” because reminding people of principles often seems like an holier-than-thou posturing.

As if all of a sudden, Goleb and General Public, and Amiri Baraka’s suitcase of copy-shop publications, Dischord records and the Beyond Baroque of Fred Dewey’s tenure – all of these under-financed, sometimes uncool, hard fought for efforts – seem crucial, invaluable, the sine qua non for the next chapter of my practice, and for moving on the principle that art can foster the people’s capacity to act politically. The scale may be small, but perhaps that is all the better for this goal.

With this we go back to Kaprow, to his goal for a poetic vocabulary outside of the institutional trappings, for an art with a human dimension and human traction that he believed the conventional frameworks had come to neutralize. When I met Kaprow in the 1990’s, I tried to get him to make a work with Fred Dewey and I at Beyond Baroque. He declined. “I’m not in the position to be deterring young artists from having careers,” he said. Later, in a “hang-out” session organized by Simone Forti as part of a short-lived group formed out of her improvisation workshop, Kaprow confessed that he had come to realize that one of the short-comings of his strategy of avoiding the art institutions was that they had evolved unchallenged. He had given up on any that kind of “friction” with the status quo, and one consequence was that the status quo had moved along in exactly the way he opposed. Like Alan Sekula is quoted earlier - the world is always changing anyways – but Kaprow had not acted into those changings.
Kaprow’s major retrospective could only really be organized after his death. Part of this strange retrospective was a pile of papers – printed transcripts from conversations between the curator, Eve Meyer Hoffman and Kaprow’s friends Paul McCarthy and Raivo Puusemp who were pushing Kaprow to agree to the show (this pile of paper installation did not, I believe, travel from the Van Abbe Museum to the next show, or appear in the catalogue).

“People want to see your work,” the curator insists.

“The people don’t want my work,” Kaprow replies, “they want to be entertained.”

The other shortcoming to his strategy, to giving up on that friction with the status quo, was the loss of any truly public dimension to the work because he himself had grown so embittered from his experiences of instrumentalisation that he could not imagine a public who might want culture, not entertainment.

In other words, to check out entirely of the way culture is constructed by the dominant institutions has consequences, and it seems that one of the clarifying principles of art in public life is that both are required. Friction with(in) the status quo and building an affirmative alternative, at the same time.

But to be non-utopian, the establishment of self-organized spaces for culture dedicated to public life – projects like Goleb right now seem to require more tending and fostering than the Stedelijk Museums of the world.

Arendt offers a valorization of public life; my project concludes with an adamant defense of the tradition of self-organized cultural institutions. The original premise of my experiment – to explore how cultural practice could access civil society within the existing conventions – has an answer: it can do so when we insist upon the principles that undergird those conventions, and only alongside building our own conventions and institutions and continuing to support them so that they can endure.

Coming this to conclusion, I’ve had to recall the work I was doing before moving to Europe and attempting a good faith effort of working in the white cube, my earlier commitment to build up an independent cultural framework aside Fred Dewey by the beach in Los Angeles. In those days, I’d often dwelled on a passage from one of those photocopy texts that I purchased at Beyond Baroque from Amiri Baraka, out of his suitcase:

Yet the deepest problem, aside from our history being covered, and gains won by our struggles being reversed being claimed by our enemies, conscious or un, is that we still have not built organizations and institutions to struggle for Self Determination, Self Respect, Self Defense. If we had built those institutions… we would not have to worry about the distortions of the terminally backward, Black or White. We would define ourselves and speak for ourselves… Duke and Trane and Billie them to death! But our enemies have created our spokespersons, and they speak for us every day, covering and distorting reality and this is the state in which we exist today.

The Lesson, where are our institutions and organizations…? Where are our theaters and newspapers and journals and truly independent films…? That is the continuing struggle we face… [to] create those organizations and institutions that will finally educate, employ, entertain and liberate us!

XV: FREEDOM OF THE ARTISTIC VARIETY AND OTHER KINDS TOO

Since Courbet, everything and anything has been possible for the artist. For better or worse, artists have been free from the demands of society, able, even encouraged, to go their own ways and to trust that public appreciation would follow. Courbet called his new style realism and thought of it as the final form of art. Realism was in the first place a revolution in subject matter. … He denied the place in art of imagination… But, as Courbet was to discover, this was easier said than done.

There is a risk that in insisting upon those working in culture to take seriously the question of citizenship, it could be understood as a kind of limitation, a foreclosure imposed upon the open field of the art.
On the contrary: Courbet had a salon, where a passionate public could become “indignant,” mock the artist’s work, or embrace it, discuss it, reflect upon it. What do we have, what are the dominant institutions of our time in the visual arts?

Is the professional artist of today, working partly in isolation but in large part interwoven into a commercial/state financial infrastructure of publicity, validation and distribution, really “free from the demands of society”? Courté’s freedom was possible against the backdrop of the Salon, which was an organized “space of appearance,” thus, following Arendt, essentially a political construction. That living structure, which paralleled the evolution of France from Revolution to Commune, existed where an active public could discuss (and/or mock, and/or scorn, and/or cherish) the work of artists, especially from Paris but not exclusively.

In 2004, Paul McCarthy made a video installation with actors in George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden masks chasing each other, embracing, fighting. Luc Tuymans at the time told me he appreciated the courage, not political courage, but artistic courage, to make such a work at such a moment, a moment of mass “irreality,” as Fred Dewey put it above, in the aftermath of the likely criminal act of aggression by the United States against Iraq. To highlight McCarthy’s effort, Tuymans took the initiative to write about the work in an attempt to encourage the community to recognize the stakes, and ultimately to support McCarthy, a figure from a different medium, different community and different continent. Here, Tuymans suggests, was a unique effort by a respected figure to insist on artistic freedom and take a chance by wrestling explicitly with the contemporary situation. Which after all – in that sense efforts to establish a public role for culture, one’s own cultural work especially, those efforts might not be a limitation or burden but on the contrary, a practice of emancipation.

This work has never been shown again. I have predicted it never will be, or at least never in the United States.

How could it be shown? In an art world mobilized almost entirely by self-interest, who privately stands to gain by presenting such a work that is bound to “make waves”? Perhaps the collector who bought it might want to promote it, to increase its value, but its also likely than a new public presentation might in fact do just the opposite. It would require people of resources and power to mobilize themselves and enact the principle that art can constructively reflect on the world. And is there any doubt, looking at the contemporary landscape, that such a critical reflection as Bush and bin Laden chasing each other around madly embracing might have been constructive (and quite likely even effective)?

But, alongside the diminishment of the public, I also suspect that Paul McCarthy will himself never take on such loaded material again. After all, it is hard to avoid being at least partly conditioned by the response to one’s work. What’s in it for him to push on the front that gets the least support, when addressing commercial icons such as Disney wins him admiration? Much like the journalists who are behavioristically deterred from asking difficult questions by a “carrot-and-stick” order, those working in culture have similarly been cowed, I reluctantly suspect. In 2011, after circulating my open letter protesting against the cuts in the Netherlands, several people treated me as if I were quite literally radioactive; those who were busy stalkig to stay ahead in the new game of musical chairs that the cuts set off knew and communicated to me unmistakably that my effort to stand up (for the organization of culture in a country that was not my own, but had changed my life), this effort would not always win me friends. As Fred Dewey put it once, sometimes explicitly addressing politics is like shooting off a can of bug spray: people just fly away from you as if you were trying to hurt them.

In that sense efforts to establish a public role for culture, one’s own cultural work especially, those efforts might not be a limitation or burden but on the contrary, a practice of emancipation.

XV: ACADEMIC FREEDOM

This project was a literally a “pilot”, not for me personally, but for education in the Netherlands: what forms or structures should a Doctorate of the Arts take up? The NWO (the national research foundation of the Netherlands) and the Mondriaan Fonds (the main foundation for the visual arts in the Netherlands) collaborated to support and develop PHD work in art through initially funding two and then ultimately two more ‘pilot projects’. I recall a meeting at one point where someone from the board overseeing this collaboration asked, “eventually, perhaps now even, we

“pilot project”

While such “meta” discussions about “research in the arts” have here been avoided, at a midway point in the Doctoral process I produced an informal report which can be found widely online: “Digging”, included in “Art as a Thinking Process”, (Berlin: Sternberg, 2013). An earlier version “On the Use and Abuse of Research for Art and Vice Versa” is in “See It Again; Say It Again: Artist as Researcher” (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2011) and in Tate zur Kunst, nr. 82, 2011.
should decide: what should be the word count for a PHD in art? What is the minimum?"

It was a question asked in good faith, but once out in the open air, the stakes were immediately clear: if we agreed that day to a number, any number, it was quite likely that this “word count” would achieve some kind of official mandate, a limit not just upon me but upon all future Doctorate of the Arts projects in the Netherlands.

The room had become a bit quiet, and then one of my supervisors spoke: “It sounds as if you are challenging my authority.”

He went on to explain that the power to judge the Doctorate would be his, and his authority was granted by the University, and if his own department and Dean had a problem with his judgment it would be addressed that way, between them. The funders, strictly speaking, had no say in the matter.

It was a crucial moment in my education, perhaps my life. The argument was unassailable, but it sent tremors through the room. The supervisor had reached back into the foundational principles of his institutional role and used it to push back against what can best be described as a [bureaucratization] of what was essentially a human dialogue, legitimated formally by major institutions, but conducted face-to-face, working together. We were in the midst of a barely underway “pilot” project, but a gravity-like force already was pulling us into the imposition of litmus tests. If we agreed, most likely the culmination for all PHDs in Art in the Netherlands would never be a film, it would never be a poem, it would never be an exhibition (or perhaps not even a sprawling memoire-like accumulation, as I’ve stitched together here): it would be a paper with a word count, announced to all researchers in advance, before they even began.

My supervisors’ successful effort to check this was not aggressive, per se, but it required the risk of seeming impolite, giving up a cozy professionalism that might politely sweep the issue under the rug and adopt some half-measure in the assumption it wouldn’t matter anyways. It required constructively addressing conflict and reaching back to the foundational good-faith principles to figure out how to address it. (Not to over-dramatize the story, but this strategy of reaching back to principles and clarifying a conflict in order to establish “a space of appearance” is a classic political move; see the discussions above on Solidarity in Poland). On a human level, they were defending me and my freedom, and the academic freedom of those who would follow me. They established a principle: the funders do not get a say in the dialogue between the supervisors and the candidate, that space of dialogue, judgment and appearance was protected. The PHD in Art remains an open form and the freedom of future candidates (to experiment), future supervisors (to foster and judge) and future deans (to guide the professors) was secured.

It was in emulation of this attitude – what are the principles? how do we move from them? - that I approached the University for support for the 2012 Arendt event at Goleb. The principle was that there should be money available to gather people with standing in the field, not whether it was through a conference or some other form, and not where in the city it should take place or to whom it should be addressed. The finance people at the University never even blinked: I may have been deviating from the norm by inviting scholars from around Europe and the United States to meet at a formerly-squatted classroom (in a remote neighborhood, to a gathering of art students and musicians, that rarely consisted of more than twenty people,) but in matters of shared principle I was on solid ground.

Kaprow quite early gave up the term Happenings, and focused on the more modest, less spectacular term [Doings], and it was as if the freedom of the researcher (as staked out by my supervisors in that meeting) allowed me to blur my own role, and the 2011-12 project with Arendt’s [Crisis in Culture] unfolded as a kind of unclassifiable activity, not curatorial, nor art-work, but a kind of [Doing-With(in)-Art]. If I had not been a researcher, the whole project would likely have seemed like an elaborate theater play in which I appropriated people for props. The status of the researcher, as crucially defended by my supervisors gave me the ground upon which to establish new forms of public intellectual work, on a small scale, but successfully fostering substantive dialogue that has endured, in forms that are legitimated by the academy and even forms of public action.

Arendt, in a crucial argument in a small footnote, once told the story of the Royal Society of sciences as if it was an example of political organizing, which of course it was in a way:

"The Human Condition", pg. 271

When it was founded, members had to agree to take no part in matters outside the terms of reference given it by the King, especially to take no part in political or religious strife. One is tempted to conclude that the modern scientific ideal of
"Objectivity" was born here, which would seem to suggest that its origin is political and not scientific. ... An organization, whether of scientists who have abjured politics or of politicians, is always a political institution; where men organize they intend to act and to acquire power. ... Modern science as "the organization of thought" introduced an element of action into thinking.

The tradition of peer review emerged as part of this effort, and these days, as some in art education try to establish a peer review process for artworks, it seems like a new academicism might take shape in cultural life.

Given the social and political conditions for culture, it is only logical that some would look to the academy as a space from which to defend and foster art and cultural practice. But appropriating the trappings – like peer review – will be no substitute for building the new institutions for culture in the academy (i.e., how to structure the Doctorate of Arts) out of shared principles. It is as if to grab the black robe of the graduate, rather than ask: when will we know when the project is complete, and how will we verify it?

In the case of this project, it was clear that rather than an exhibition (which might imply that artworks are themselves a form of knowledge) the appropriate form would be to produce a publication that might offer not a synthesis but a kind of narrative layer to wrap around, frame and hierarchize the sprawling and diverse material produced – lectures, performances, essays, installations, research projects. This synthetic layer as we came to call it would be the final step.

In this way, as a pilot project, one thing should be made explicit: this project emerged out of human connection and constant oral dialogue, and at no point did I ever apply to enter or follow any set program. I had met my supervisors, first beginning with an art school director and then establishing a dialogue with an art historian, and begun work on the PhD long before it became clear there would be formal recognition or funding by the official educational bodies.

We made it up together as we went along, and I fulfilled my obligations (teaching, writing reports) as my supervisors did, with one questioning eye back towards the foundational principles, checking back to how they might guide the practice. There was even some speculation that having an artist on staff at a university might contribute to the work of others, and in the way that I continually framed my activity to my colleagues and students as a kind of public-personal, reflection-in-material-form unfolding, I think it did encourage a few others to experiment with being both more "personal" and more "public" in the goals and forms of their work.

Such institutional roles are only de-humanized bureaucracy if we let them be, if we allow ourselves to be de-humanized within them, and our shared refusal to do so incurred some surprising results: my main supervisor at the University resigned in protest against the re-structuring of the art history department (which was a kind of academic parallel to the cultural cuts at the state level), and I picked up a new supervisor from the English department, who inspired me to treat the final project (dissertation) as a work of writing, just as I had pursued other projects along the way in different techniques.

The preservation of human judgment + the freedom of the researcher + the academy as an organ of public life became the key organizing principles for this collaborative effort “pilot.” (“Aha,” the English professor noted: “all of these smaller projects are public commemorative gestures. There is a vocabulary here!”) These principles clearly seem like the promising foundation for developing a form for organizing Doctorates of the Arts.

Because on the other hand, the development of a new bureaucracy emulating the formal trappings of other disciplines will only betray the ambition to establish protection for cultural work in the academy. Because the problems are not terminological, but of organizing, and thus themselves political.

XVI: PUBLIC LIFE

“Public life” is not a generic term. When Fred Dewey insisted that we read that passage of Arendt on Rosa Luxemburg, with its insistence on a practice of friction with status quo, not just developing a parallel self-confirming world of superior critique, he was touching upon something bigger, as when he titled his book The School of Public Life. Again the term reaches back to Luxemburg’s attempt to defend the spontaneous activity of the people, which found its form through council democracy, against those wanted to take over all those spaces with a well organized party elite.
The only way to a rebirth is the school of public life itself, the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion. It is rule by terror which demoralizes. …

Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of press and assembly, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains as the active element. Public life gradually falls asleep, a few dozen party leaders of inexhaustible energy and boundless experience direct and rule.

Art in public life, then, is the practice of manifesting and insisting upon the public’s role, which will appear not through throngs attending crowded exhibitions, but the committed slow, small scale unfolding of a shared conversation whose stakes are political. It is not to give up the solitude of production, but rather to not passively acquiesce to a machinery of distribution and presentation of art that blocks out the public. Perhaps it asks that we leave behind the genius myth for the meaning gained by contextualizing art within a tapestry of other practices - as it would be anyways, actually. It is defending the dialogues with your friends that take years to yield fruit.

Last night a student said to me my work was avant-garde because I show you how it’s made, I don’t disappear the modes of production into the product. Art in public life is merely an expansion of this procedure: don’t disappear the people, peers, colleagues, mentors, taxpayers, but instead allow them to appear, structurally, principally, practically, expansively.

When the painter Alisa Margolis interjected “if it’s for the people, it needs to be beautiful” she was simultaneously re-appearing the public and the work, bringing them both back to light, to their own stature out of the functional transaction of a professional opportunity. “Who are the people,” I had to think in response. “Ah, we are. And they are, too. We both just forget sometimes.”

The “faculty of imagination” that “has nothing in common with fictional ability” is itself a political one. Senator Frank Church, through his organizing work to “understand, not undermine” the apparatus of the security state, contributed more to defending the power of the people against secret (and violent) bureaucracies than those who just went about critiquing the moral deficiencies of the state. Like Arendt’s list of material consisting entirely of literature to teach politics, culture can spark such an “imagination”, and at the same time draw upon it to produce works, and last, be informed by it as we reflect on how to organize ourselves.

Hannah Arendt was fond of the phrase the Greeks used when one set out to a new land: wherever you go you will be a polis. To practice art in public life is to take on the criterion, even alone in the studio or immersed a community that is often indifferent to such things: does this art deal with my own political situation, and can it relate to that to my fellow citizens? For Kafka, a political art was achieved in isolation, but remember that the political capacity of that art was only realized through a friend’s initiative and dedication. In practice this new criterion may require taking such care and initiative, not just as an artist, or as a citizen, but as both at the same time.
Epilogue: Tea and Darkness

— No longer content to treat the white cube as neutral ground, instead punching one program – a juxtaposition between Aaron Hughes’ Tea and my performance series on war and citizenship – through various institutional contexts: experimental music festival, anti-war coffee-shop, university collaboration with major cultural center. A testing of the capacity of these format’s publicness.
I.

The best distinction was made by Professor Meyer Schapiro, who was talking about subject in painting. He made the distinction between the subject of a work and the objects in a work.

For example, people think that Cezanne’s subject was the apples. Well, it’s possible to argue that that’s what it was, and for a long time I was very antagonistic to those apples, because they were like super apples. …

Even though my painting as it developed didn’t have any of those objects, that did necessarily mean therefore that there was no subject there.

Some of us did remove all that object matter from the work: the lazy nude, the flowers, the bric-a-brac that in the end had been reduced to a kind of folklore. We introduced a different subject matter that the painting itself entails, that the painting itself projects. In that sense, I think, it has more relevance (which, of course, is a popular word today). It has more meaning in relation to the real issues involved in human life than all the little things that for hundreds of years everybody was involved in trying to make beautiful. People were painting a beautiful world, and at that time we realized that the world wasn’t beautiful. The question, the moral question that each of us examined – de Kooning, Pollock, myself – was: What was there to beautify? … that’s what I mean by beginning from scratch. We couldn’t build on anything. The world was going to pot. It was worse than that. It was worse than that.

— Barnett Newman

Newman took up Schapiro’s “object matter / subject matter” distinction to try and clarify that even though his work had no “apples” in it – no recognizable description or depiction, or what would normally be called content – it didn’t mean that he didn’t have a point.

Form and content can be misleading categories for interpreting art-works because, as in Newman’s example of Cezanne, what is depicted in a work is not necessarily it’s point. The point for Cezanne was of course not apples, nor mountains, but something altogether different and much harder to put into words, which is appropriate because otherwise those subject could be explored with words, not pictures. What is the subject, the theme or the question being interrogated and explored in a work by Cezanne? Is it memory, or even more primary – experience, the capacity to apprehend, be present at all, attending to… attend to what? Attend to the world?

And as he continues in the passage above and in other talks and writings, this problem of subject matter was grounded in the changing landscape Newman and his peers found themselves in. After the dual-Holocausts of Auschwitz and Hiroshima (Newman insisted on linking them) of the Second World War, mankind’s essential experience was returned to the pre-historical human vision of a world in which a rainstorm’s causing a flash flood could destroy literally an entire world. In the haze of organized catastrophic destruction of that period, man’s experience of the world was that of terror.

Newman returned to pre-historical art – pre-Colombian, the Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest – and following them he argued that the role of the artist was to make plastic the experience of overwhelmingness, to cohere those forces into something that could be confronted, and that this confrontation occurred through an articulation of place and space.

Newman elaborated all this in his writings because too often his work would be linked to pattern and design, or to other painters for whom large format paintings consisting mostly of a few colors. He wanted to make clear this broader framework that the work itself did not, in any obvious way, refer to. The work did not refer explicitly, or in terms of narrative, not in a world of nuclear bombs any single thing was somehow so fleeting and ephemeral that to depict it would miss the point, but also because following his understanding of pre-historic art, Newman rejected story-telling as “the anecdotal,” and asserted that the storyteller and the basketweaver were linked because entertainment and design were both functional in comparison with the role of the artist to make plastic the forces of the great beyond.

And just as Newman referred to Cezanne, when I lecture about my work I often explain Newman’s “object matter / subject matter” distinction, first of all to emphasize the issue of subject matter itself, but second of all to make a more complicated point. Just as Newman was trying to argue that even though his paintings didn’t have any apples, they did have a point, then just because my work has lots of “apples” – lots of recognizable depiction and reference - sometimes those apples aren’t the point, exactly. The point is not only the literal reference or indication, but the underlying issue that the “object matter” – Frank Church, Lowndes County – exemplifies.
But, if accessing the ‘enlarged mentality’, the kind of imagination that is not about fantasy (as Dewey elaborated from Arendt’s development of Kant’s aesthetics), depends upon a kind of disinterestedness, a lack of personal involvement in order to access the bigger picture, to see through the eyes of another, then how can that not but disengage the public from their own agency?

How can they relate to the composition as a work of investigation into shared political reality, and at the same time an allegory? Can those two kinds of non-fiction be linked?

II.

Who are we? We are nothing but a predicate in the poem: Iraq’s night is long
— Mahmoud Darwish, 2008

In the long period of working on The Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness, I began to feel like the true wilderness was the place from which Church’s politics emerged, his earnest commitment to the republic. I began to trace a thin vein of continuity between Church and the American republican tradition that Hannah Arendt has valorised. Digging back I found a precedent in the short-lived American Anti-Imperialist League. After the Spanish-American War of 1898, the US took over Spain’s colonial territories and a group formed, including powerful industrialists and at one point led by Mark Twain, to assert that the practices of republican self-government and empire were incompatible.

With this framework in mind, I pursued a strange intersection in the unlikely place of Kaiserslautern, in southern Germany. First there was a news report that Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) had decided to take up the strategy that had been important for Vietnam Veterans Against the War and set coffee shops near military bases to help support and politically organize soldiers, and that one of these was in Germany. Then I heard a talk and read the book by Ann Jones, They Were Soldiers: How The Wounded Return Home From America’s Wars – The Untold Story, which centers around Landstuhl hospital in Germany as the key physical hub in the global war on terror. The planes carrying the wounded to Germany across the world seemed like a metaphor for how I felt about these years of war, and resonated with an essentially artistic ambition I’d nurtured for years to wrestle with them.

The first time I performed the slide show piece that resulted, Bart de Kroon, with whom I’d also worked on the Frank Church project, commented: “it seemed at first like this was an addition to the Church piece, now it feels like Church was just the introduction to this.”

Taking the photo series of the airfield, the hospital and surrounding landscape and then the Clearing Barrel anti-war coffee shop as a point of departure the performance included my own personal experiences with veterans, readings of poems by Mahmoud Darwish about Iraq, and texts by the Anti-Imperialist League. The visit to the café, a kind of lone outpost of visible organised opposition to the war machine so many silently oppose, inspired me and I asked the organizer if there was any way to work together. She suggested I bring over Aaron Hughes to do his work ‘Tea,’ a tea ceremony that interweaves his memories and others stories about the Iraq war with a group discussion.

In 2015 I leveraged the financial support of several institutions to organize a tour of Aaron’s work and my own, and then in 2016 we also did a series of performances in the United States. Following Mark Twain’s famous text about imperialism, I had started calling my performances in this series “To a Person Sitting in Darkness,” and so the tour became Tea and Darkness. This was the first time in over ten years that I didn’t focus on working within the conventional structures of culture. At the same time “Tea and Darkness” didn’t negate or move outside of the art institutions, rather, much like with the Arendt project, I took the institutional frameworks and shaped them into a broader organizing effort, including a (not very successful) fundraising effort for the anti-war coffee shop. Starting with an evening at the Clearing Barrel in Kaiserslautern, then being hosted by a music festival at a theatre in Tilburg in Holland, then Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, and finally, across town at an Antifa/squatter bar for a final fundraiser. Essentially the same work was punched through several models of institutions, asserting a model of culture that exceeded the sum of all of the parts, in which the common denominator was the effort to wrestle with the wars of the last decade in a way that could find some traction amongst the public in general, who somehow were to be found underneath and between the specific venues.

Taking up Fred Dewey’s model, at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin the evening began with an open discussion departing from a question: what is the meaning of the neutrality of cultural institutions after fourteen years of the ‘War on Terror’? Is there any sense were neutrality becomes tacit support?
On the last evening of the series in the US, effectively the end of the ‘tour’ (so to speak), I was part of a larger series of presentations Aaron organized, including lawyers who represented detainees at Guantanamo Bay, a veteran who had served as a guard at Abu Ghraib. In the public was a funny and sharp friend of Aaron’s, one of the main organizers for National Nurses United, the labor union that had given the Bernie Sanders Presidential campaign a big push. He had emigrated from Senegal to the US in the 1980’s and compared the Democratic Primaries to the rigged elections in Africa – “I thought I moved here to get away from that,” he said, laughing. In the fall, Aaron will start work teaching art in a prison in Chicago: perhaps I should ask him to host a performance of mine. The point being is that Aaron Hughes’ frame of reference, despite having performed at the Museum of Modern Art, is something much more like “activist art” than “contemporary art.” Through an anti-war activist, I’d found my way to working with an artist who somehow spanned MOMA and working in prisons.

“Tea and Darkness,” as it toured between those different models, and those different publics, was a kind of pressure-test on each: how much capacity is there in any of these contexts for peer discussion, and how much for the awkwardness of guitar+body+story+slideshow? I wanted to insist that the combination of Aaron’s and my own work, and the artistic ambition we very differently shared to reflect upon our time (and that such reflection could be part of organizing, as Aaron’s IVAW experience taught him), was itself a gesture that could not be packaged by any neat convention. The Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin was given the same status as the community bar of the organized anti-fascists: as potential organs of public life.

At the end of one evening, packing up, exhausted, I turned to a friend and found myself saying, “that’s it: this is the end of my PHD.”
SO THE HORN OF AFRICA IS LIKE A PENINSULA AND THERE’S A FINGER OF LAND THAT COMES OUT AND THAT’S DJIBOUTI, AND THEY’RE BUILDING A BIG CHINESE BASE THERE, AND THERE WAS A FRENCH AIR BASE AND THERE’S A BIG AMERICAN BASE.
I met a guy in Paris who said, ‘You want to know where the money’s at? The money’s in Djibouti.’ But he didn’t sound like that because he was a French guy.

Then I saw him again in Amsterdam and he’d driven up in a car with these girls and some cocaine… ‘That’s where the money is at – Djibouti.’ And that was the first time I heard about it.

It’s a place you can see the sunset and sunrise on the water on the same day.

And if you’re there and you get shot, there aren’t any hospitals there for the Americans or the other NATO forces, so they stabilize you and then they pack you into a plane and
THEN THE PLANE GOES TO RAMSTEIN

GUITAR STARTS –

[SHOUTING OVER GUITAR]

AND THE PLANES GO TO LANDSTUHL AND I GUESS IF YOU’RE SHOT IN AFGHANISTAN YOU END UP IN LANDSTUHL REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER, AND ON FRIDAY AN ENGINEER WHO WORKS AT RAMSTEIN TOLD ME
THEY’RE BUILDING A NEW HOSPITAL THERE BECAUSE THE TRIP, THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE AIRFIELD AND THE HOSPITAL IS TOO BIG.

AND I GREW UP ON A PENINSULA ALSO - CAPE COD. IT’S ALSO LIKE A FINGER OF LAND, IT’S LIKE THAT. [SHOWS ARM] AND WE’D DRIVE DOWN THIS FINGER OF LAND ALL SUMMER LONG AND I DROVE IN THIS CAR WITH THIS GUY AND HE’D...

HE’D GONE FROM HIS, HE’D GONE FROM HIS PARENT’S HOUSE TO THE NAVY. AND THEN HE WENT BACK TO HIS PARENT’S HOUSE, AND HE DIDN’T EVER TALK ABOUT IT TO ME REALLY. BUT I HEARD THAT HE’D COME OUT OF THE NAVY BECAUSE HE WAS IN THE FIRST GULF WAR SO HE WAS OLDER THAN US WE WERE ALL LIKE 17 AND WE WOULD DRIVE THIS
TRUCK AROUND AND WE WOULD GO DOWN.

AND THEN THE SUMMER ENDED AND IT TURNED TO FALL AND ALL THE BEACHES CLOSED DOWN AND EVERYBODY WAS GONE AND IT WAS JUST ME AND HIM, AND YOU KNOW SOMETIMES WHEN PEOPLE GIVE YOU A BAD JOB YOU SAY 'FUCK ME, MAN' AND HE WOULDN'T SAY THAT. HE WOULD SAY 'RAPE ME' LIKE THE NIRVANA SONG, RAPE ME, LIKE HYSTERICALLY.

I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE

I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE

I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE

I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE

RAPE ME.
So the planes come from Bagram and then they come down at Ramstein, which is next to Kaiserslautern, and then other planes go up and that’s where the drones are, but I don’t know that’s where they’re gonna put the new nukes, there’s gonna be new nukes. And that’s where Meike’s place is.
I heard she started it with her partner. He’s not in the picture, so she’s holding down the fort.

Through her I met this other guy. He’s in Germany. He told the story, he told the story about helicopters. I guess Meike helped him.

And the helicopter story was, the helicopter story was that one day all of the troops assembled and one day all of the troops assembled and then this helicopter came in and then this guy came up to the microphone, it was General Mark Sanchez, and he said you know guys, you can stop looking, basically. There aren’t any weapons of mass destruction, so stop looking.
THAT’S THE FIRST HELICOPTER.

AND THEN THERE WAS THIS OTHER HELICOPTER WHICH WAS THAT HE SAW THIS VIDEO OF THE HELICOPTER SHOOTING, THE BRADLEY MANNING VIDEO.

AFTER THIS FIRST HELICOPTER CAME, HE SAID IT WAS [WHISPERING] VERY QUIET ON THE MILITARY BASE, IT WAS VERY VERY QUIET AND THERE WAS A FEELING THAT
SPREAD THIS FEELING
THIS QUIETNESS, HE
SAID HE STARTED
DRINKING AND
OTHER PEOPLE DID IT
DIFFERENTLY AND IT
LANDED ON THEM, IT
WAS LIKE A FOG THAT
SETTLES IN.

[GUITAR PLAYS SO
LOUD YOU CAN’T
HEAR VOICE.]

AND SO THIS OTHER
HELICOPTER WAS
THIS VIDEO THE ONE
THAT SHOT THOSE
PEOPLE THE BRADLEY
MANNING VIDEO AND HE SAW THAT AND HE SAID WELL THAT’S A WAR CRIME AND HE WAS A HELICOPTER REPAIRMAN, HE IS A HELICOPTER REPAIRMAN. AND HE SAID YOU KNOW IF I FIX THOSE HELICOPTERS AND THEY’re USED IN WAR CRIMES, THEN I COULD BE COMMITTING THIS WAR CRIME. AND HE WAS IN GERMANY AND HE REMEMBERED THE NUREMBERG PRINCIPLE WHICH IS THAT IS... A LEGALLY, A LEGALLY, A CORRECT AND LEGALLY GIVEN ORDER. A CORRECT AND LEGALLY GIVEN ORDER IS NOT ENOUGH, IF THE ORDER IS TO COMMIT A CRIME AND SO HE WENT TO HIS COMMANDER AND HE SAID YOU KNOW I’M NOT GOING TO GO BACK AND HE WAS
SENT BACK ANYWAYS AND SO HE LEFT AND HE’S IN THIS LIMBO, THIS SPACE BECAUSE GERMANY CAN’T DECIDE IF THE IRAQ WAR WAS A CRIME OR NOT AND HE MAKES THIS SPACE FOR HIM TO BE IN BECAUSE IF THEY SAY IT WAS A CRIME THEN IT WOULD PISS OFF AMERICA, AND IF THEY SAY IT WASN’T A CRIME THEN THEY’D PISS OF THEIR OWN PEOPLE, SO BECAUSE THEY DON’T WANT TO DECIDE THEY’RE JUST GONNA WAIT IT OUT AND GIVE HIM A PASSPORT.

AND I THOUGHT ABOUT A THIRD HELICOPTER: IT WAS WHEN OBAMA, IT WAS THE INAUGURATION, IT WAS WHEN BUSH, THEY PUT BUSH ON THE HELICOPTER AND WATCHED IT FLY AWAY, AND IT GOT SMALLER, IT GOT SMALLER, IT’S CHANGING, IT’S REALLY DIFFERENT, AND IT GOT SMALLER
AND SMALLER.

AND I THOUGHT OF MEIKE, IN A WALMART. GOING FROM THE GOING FROM THE IPADS TO THE WRANGLER JEANS TO THE FRUIT OF THE LOOM AND THERE WAS THIS GIRL THERE AND I WAS KIND’VE LIKE CHASING HER AROUND, SEVENTEEN YEAR OLD GIRL, AND I’D KNOWN HER SINCE SHE WAS TEN SO IT WAS NOT LIKE THE NORMAL WAY OF CHASING AROUND A SEVENTEEN YEAR...
OLD GIRL AND I WAS CHASING HER AROUND AND I THOUGHT, WELL, BUT YOU KNOW HAVE YOU, I MEAN HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT, HAVE YOU CONSIDERED THE POSSIBILITIES? AND IT WAS BLACK FRIDAY AND IT WAS THE SHOPPING DAY, BIG SHOPPING DAY IN AMERICA AND SO WE WENT TO WALMART AND SO ON THE WAY THERE IN THE PARKING LOT SHE SAID THAT THE BIG QUESTION WAS LIKE THE BIG QUESTION SHE HAD TO GET OVER WAS RESERVES OR JUST FULL-ON MILITARY, SHOULD SHE JOIN THE RESERVES OR FULL-ON MILITARY. AND I THOUGHT WHEN YOU MEET A GIRL WHO’S LIKE TEN YEARS OLD, LITTLE BRAIDS, YOU DON’T THINK. THERE’S THE HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES?
THERE’S THE

YOU KNOW YOUR
GRANDMOTHER’S
FAMOUS – IF YOU TELL
THEM ABOUT YOUR
GRANDMOTHER I’M
SURE YOU CAN GET A
SCHOLARSHIP.

AND I COULDN’T
CATCH HER. IN THE
END, I SAID DO YOU
THINK, WHERE YOU’RE
GOING TO GO, DO YOU
THINK THAT PEOPLE
ARE GOING TO WANT

YOU THERE?

AND LATER THAT NIGHT
I WENT DRINKING, WE
WENT TO THIS SMALL
OLD HOUSE, EVERY-
BODY GOT TOGETHER
IN LIKE THIS HOUSE,
AND I WAS LIKE, WHY
DON’T WE GO TO A
BAR, THEY WERE
LIKE – WHAT, YOU
WANNA GET SHOT?

TELL ME ONE BAR
IN SELMA ALABAMA
WHERE NOBODY GOT
SHOT IN THE LAST
YEAR.
AND THEN I THOUGHT
– I HAD THIS IMAGE
AND IT WAS COLD AND
IN THE HOUSE WAS
THIS ONE STOVE AND
IT WAS LIKE THAT FOG
THAT SETTLED IN, IT
WAS LIKE A WASTE-
LAND IT WAS LIKE A
BURNED UP BURNED
OUT FROZEN TUNDRA
AND I THOUGHT
ABOUT THE IRAQ
VETERANS AGAINST
THE WAR STANDING
IN A LINE IN THEIR
BLACK T-SHIRTS AT
THE RECRUITING
STATIONS
SAYING ‘DON’T GO!’
AND I THOUGHT,
‘FUCK YOU.’

WHERE SHOULD SHE GO? YOU GONNA MAKE SOME PLACE FOR HER TO GO TO?
YOU BETTER MAKE SOME PLACE FOR HER TO GO TO. YOU TELL HER NOT TO GO, WELL WHERE SHE’S GONNA GO?

IT’S COLD. IT’S VERY, VERY COLD. WHERE IS SHE GONNA GO?

HER GRANDMOTHER HAD BEEN IN GERMANY IN THE MILITARY, SHE LIKED IT, HER FATHER HAD BEEN IN THE MILITARY AND HE LIKED IT.

YOU DON’T WANT HER TO GO, YOU BETTER MAKE SOME PLACE FOR HER TO GO.
AND THEN I REMEMBERED THE CLEARING BARREL. AND I THOUGHT WELL, I ASKED HER WHAT I SHOULD DO, AND SHE SAID I SHOULD GET IN TOUCH WITH THIS GUY AARON HUGHES. AND THAT’S WHY WE’RE HERE, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
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