

Trespassing Relevance

By Nato Thompson

You heard about its arrival but never expected it to work like this. The flyer asked you to "get the black out. Bring three to ten items that you associate with blackness to the Black Factory." Now you stand there watching a white box truck pull up to the local YMCA, wondering what on earth this truck wants with your coffee grounds, dominoes and Missy Elliot CDs. You watch the crew get out of the truck and unload a large table adorned with blenders, scissors and pulverizers. Then, suddenly, a white balloon begins to inflate from the back of the truck. To your total surprise, the balloon takes the shape of a massive igloo. You can faintly see the workers setting up display booths inside it. Instead of the Black Panther Willie Wonka you expected, the artist William Pope.L is friendly. He talks and laughs with the people beginning to bring their items of "blackness" for pulverization. You nervously approach and hear Pope.L say, "Well, the Black Factory is here to provide opportunity."



**The
Black
Factory**

*Black Factory Logo,
William Pope.L*

The *Black Factory* epitomizes the work of the interventionists, touring the New England countryside, "bringing the politics of difference where it is needed most," as William Pope.L advertises. At each stop, it offers the local community a set of tools for disrupting expectations. People contribute their items of blackness only to have them transformed into unlikely objects: rubber ducks, prayer rugs, drinking water. The *Black Factory* experience is ambiguous, ambivalent, even confusing, but it delivers the one thing that it promotes: opportunity.

The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere is a survey, in limited form, of tactical practices in contemporary visual culture beginning in the late 1980s. The timing of this exhibition is not without a sense of urgency; the entire world feels "unsettled" (to use globalism theorist Saskia Sassen's term)¹ due in no small part to the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. If it's true that artists operate as both a social litmus of politics today and a harbinger of politics tomorrow, then this is a good time to survey the field.

A cursory scan over the last ten years of American art may lead one to believe that "political art" has fallen out of fashion since artists like Barbara Kruger, Hans Haacke, Leon Golub and Jenny Holzer took center stage in the early 1980s. Fashionable or not, however, political art has continued, albeit off the art world radar screen, throughout the 1990s.² The most telling point of departure for this "off the radar" art practice is its increasing emphasis on the tactics of intervention. Instead of representing politics (whether through language or through visual imagery), many political artists of the 1990s enter physically; that is, they place their work into the heart of the political situation itself. "Tactics" is the key term for discussing interventionist practices, and it will be examined at greater depth later in this essay. For now, let us think of the term "tactic" as a maneuver within a game which, for the interventionists, is almost always the real world. Their projects are made to operate within and upon systems of power and trade using the techniques of art. Driving around the United States with a factory for grinding up expectations about race is just one example.

In an era shaped by the phenomenon known as globalism, the aesthetic of tactical intervention has been more warmly received outside the U.S. than in it. However, the dialogue about



Bill Clinton and Fleetwood Mac
Photographer: Barbara Kinney
Courtesy of Barbara Kinney

tactics amplified by the internet and global exhibitions and conventions — has flowed across oceans and nations. Thus, this exhibition spotlights what is a worldwide tendency to insert the practice of art into the social realm.

tactics can be thought of as a set of tools. Like a hammer, a glue gun, or a screwdriver, they are means for building and deconstructing a given situation. Interventionists are informed both by art and (more importantly) by a broad range of visual, spatial and cultural experiences.³ They are a motley assemblage of methods for bringing political issues to an audience outside the insular art world's doors. They appeal to a viewer who is confronted by an increasingly privatized and controlled visual world. Humor, sleight of hand and high design are used to interrupt this confrontation and bring socially imperative issues to the very feet of their audiences.

If one had to make a generalization about the political art of the 1990s, it would be a near unanimous refusal to restrict their actions to mere representation. The images of violence and exploitation that so often, rightfully, move people to political action are conspicuously absent. Instead, laboratory experiments, perplexing archives, mobile homes, and bags designed to facilitate shoplifting fill MASS MoCA's gallery spaces. That these things "present," as opposed to "represent," is not an accident. When the words "political art" are spoken, most people imagine a unilateral institutional critique - depressing refugee photographs, or possibly graphic statements attacking the viewer for ignorant complicity. The symbolically charged image or overtly political text no longer feels adequate as a communicative device. Preaching is suspect. But why? In short, visual exhaustion, such pivotal factors as the rise of the culture industry, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the increasing privatization of public visual and social space have dramatically transformed the cultural landscape of the 1990s.

The '90s: A Taco Revolution

The sixties are more than merely the homeland of hip, they are a commercial template for our times, a historical prototype for the construction of cultural machines that transform alienation and despair into consent.

- Thomas Frank, *Conquest of Cool*.⁴

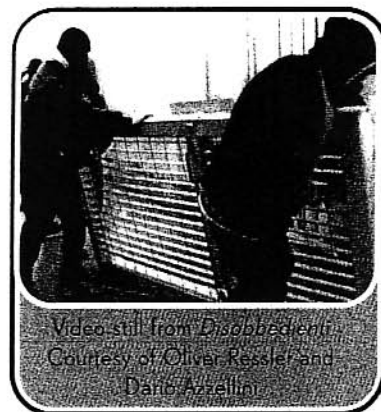
The various analyses of "new social movements" have done a great service in insisting on the political importance of cultural movements against narrowly economic perspectives that minimize their significance. These analysis, however, are extremely limited themselves because, just like the perspectives they oppose, they perpetuate narrow understandings of the economic and the cultural. Most importantly, they fail to recognize the profound economic power of the cultural movements, or really the increasing indistinguishability of economic and cultural phenomena.

- Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*.⁵

"A taco revolution, I am there."

-Taco Bell Chihuahua dog.

In 1992, Bill Clinton assumed the U.S. presidency to the rock and roll sounds of Fleetwood Mac. Baby boomers were in the ascendancy, and the horn of victory Clinton raised was his own saxophone. The moment was prescient. Just three years earlier, the Berlin Wall fell and the "end of history," as Francis Fukuyama had so famously described it, was upon the world. The 1990s were a complex decade known for the rise of the dot-coms, the generational switch in power to the baby boomers, the end of the Cold War, and the end of revolutions. Yet, revolutions were still occurring. They were marketing revolutions, as the most popular marketing campaign of the 1990s — the Che Guevarian-clad Taco Bell Chihuahua — so glamorously made known. The United States officially shifted toward an "information economy", with the often contested but frequently used term "globalism" as its dancing partner.



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Theodore Adorno, the genuinely cynical member of the German Frankfurt School, dubbed the commercialization of culture "the culture industry," a derogatory catchall term for everything from film to television to music to advertising to fashion to, of course, art. In short, the culture industry — so defined — comprises most of the service industry markets we encounter every day. The fact that "culture" became a primary industry of global capitalism was not lost on many of the artists across the globe. Globalism and the culture industry combined to form a fertile ground for the growth of interventionist practices. Through the 1990s, the branding of culture took an especially strong step forward. As Naomi Klein writes in her insightful book, *No Logo*, "The effect, if not always the original intent, of advanced branding is to nudge the hosting culture into the background and make the brand the star. It is not to sponsor culture but to be the culture."⁶

The fact that the visual and cultural apparatuses of the globe were honing in on the once rarified niche of artistic practice could only have dramatic effects on the terms in which artists saw themselves.

A signature element of this growth of the culture industry was the emphatic co-opting of all forms of America's counterculture. The major powers in the U.S. economy were now standing side by side with beatniks, ravers, punks, gangsters, and revolutionaries. The culture industry found resonance in promoting the likes of Jack Kerouac and Mahatma Gandhi in advertisements for The Gap and Apple Computer, respectively. When Stevie Nicks sang "Don't Stop" to a captivated audience, with Hillary and Bill clapping in the background, we got a clue as to the tenor of the next decade. We were entering a period of rebels, repackaged. The heroic alternative culture of the 1960s (the easy rider, the beatnik, the lonestar, the hippie, the drag queen, the revolutionary) became the poster children of the 1990s.

A particularly telling point occurred in December 1991 when underground band Nirvana reached number one on the pop charts. Alternative music had officially become mainstream. Black culture, feminist culture, and queer culture gradually followed. For the first time in music history, in October 2003 none of the artists on the top ten singles charts were white.⁷ The music industry embraced all points of view, and yet still just one reaped the cornucopia of American difference.

This switch in the role of cultural production radically affected the way in which cultural producers, including visual artists, saw their "content." In 1915, a person might go entire weeks without observing an advertisement. The average adult today sees some three thousand a day.⁸ The dramatic increase in popular visual inundation, coupled with the growing use of symbols of political action (like Che Guevara, Mao or Bob Dylan) for commercial purposes, meant that artists needed to reconfigure their tactics to make themselves heard. How could any artist compete with image juggernauts like Nike, Gap, Starbucks, McDonald's, or MTV? Terms like "content provider" became common, as anything resistant and edgy was used to sell an underlying not-so-hip consumerism agenda. If Che Guevara could

be turned into a marketing-Chihuahua for Taco Bell, left-leaning political artists had no more air to breathe. The counterculture was out of room.

At the same time, globalism became a household word. While interconnectedness between nations had been increasing over the past century, the 1990s saw a rapid acceleration of these processes. The Treaty on European Union signed in Maastricht (1992), the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994), and the introduction of the Euro (1999) are just a few notable examples. Accompanying these processes was the now-familiar movement of factories to nations with cheaper labor pools, the increased hybridization and displacement of cultures and the boom of global cities like New York City, Buenos Aires, Tokyo, Berlin, and London, to name a few.⁹ The sudden conclusion of the Cold War elicited from leaders in the West a "full steam ahead" approach to neo-liberal economic models across the globe. And, in the art world specifically, the rise of biennials created the sense that art was being de-centered, and this de-centered quality was big business.

Activists across the world reconceived their practices in reaction to the changing political climate. The effects of globalism were not without oppositional political responses, as the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization in November 1999 made clear. The Seattle protests marked a critical moment in progressive political history because the rallying cry was not against a specific government, but against the intangible and relatively abstract international finance organizations that so perfectly represented the shift toward an unchecked, diffuse, international power. Since that pivotal event in 1999, the global justice movement has tracked the movement of international finance: the International Monetary Fund meeting in Washington DC (2000); World Bank/IMF meeting, Prague (2000); G20 meeting in Quebec (2000); World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland (2001); FTAA Summit of the Americas, Quebec City (2001); EU Summit, Gothenburg, Sweden (2001); G8 Summit, Genoa, Italy (2001); World Economic Forum, New York City (2002); EU Summit, Barcelona (2002); and WTO, Cancun, Mexico (2003), to name a few. Power and resistance have obviously gone global.

While creation of cultural content was absorbed by the cultural industry, physical urban space underwent a parallel co-opting. In the major American cities of New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, as well as internationally, artists began to register the effects of globalism in their neighborhoods. Gentrification became a buzz-word to describe the efforts by many cities to remake their downtowns into inviting hot spots for global capital. Artists found their own housing habits complicit with renewal strategies for evicting lower-income families in larger metropolitan areas. Rosalyn Deutsche writes in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, "When galleries and artists, assuming the role of the proverbial 'shock troops' of gentrification, moved into inexpensive storefronts and apartments, they aided the mechanism by driving up rents and displacing residents."¹⁰ While housing increasingly felt the brunt of expanded privatization, so too did the arts (see Gregory Sholette's essay in this book). The space

for non-commercially driven art, generally the haven for supporting and legitimating political art practice, rapidly decreased. As Brian Wallis, Chief Curator at the International Center for Photography in New York, writes, "In recent years, the gradual withdrawal and relocation of NEA funds has created a sort of Darwinian ethos in the world of alternative spaces. Many of the smaller and more fragile spaces have ceased to operate or have become 'virtual spaces.' Those that have survived have become larger and more like those institutions they once challenged."¹¹ While political representation was being depoliticized, space, it seemed, was becoming radically politicized. This twist is the critical turn.¹²

The '60s Malcontent Speak Out

This is not to say that these conditions - the increasing banality of revolutionary images coupled with the increasing politicization of urban space - arose out of the 1990s, but rather that they became all the more acute during this period. It is instructive to look at the writings of the Situationists (1957-1972), an avant-garde collective inspired by Dada, CoBRA (acronym meaning: Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam) and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus. The Situationists included the Danish painter Asger Jorn (1914-1973), the Dutch urban designer Constant Nieuwenhuys (born in 1920), and theorist Raoul Vaneigem (born in 1934).

In his seminal work, *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord (1932-1994), the most outspoken member of the Situationists, warned of the spectacle nature of late capitalist society. By spectacle (a key term for the Situationists), Debord meant the overtly visual and alienating aspect of late capital. While more orthodox Marxists of the period were haggling over the alienation caused by the rise of consumerism, the Situationists asserted that culture itself was fast becoming the ultimate commodity. Clothing, music, film, television, and even walking were all forms of commodification. Their hysteria finds validity in the increasing privatization of culture, in the form of intellectual copyright, and in the shrinkage, policing, and control of public space. If culture was turning into a commodity, then the Situationists were determined to develop methods to confront and reverse this trend.

The Tools

The Situationists' aspirations resulted in the development of two key tactics subsequently embraced by most of the artists in this exhibition. The first is the *detourné*, which is the rearranging of popular sign-systems in order to produce new meanings. For the Situationists, this took the form of reinserting their own language into the thought bubbles of popular comic strips. In the comic strip on the following page, the gentleman is saying "The very development from class society to the spectacular organization of non-life leads the revolutionary project to become visibly what it already was essentially." This form found new relevance in the 1990s when "culture jammers" and, later, magazines like *AdBusters* began rampant re-articulating popular advertising to produce an underlying message, such as the McDeath logo.

The second tactic was the *dérive*: a short meandering walk determined by one's desires. The *dérive* was designed to resist the work and control-oriented design of Paris that had been put in place by Baron Haussmann in the 19th century. The *dérive* would reveal hints of what the Situationists called psycho-geography, "the study of the precise effects of geographical setting, consciously managed or not, acting directly on the mood and behavior of the individual."¹³ While at first such meanderings may seem fairly leisurely and not the least bit political, they propose the radical idea that ways of being in physical space (particularly in the cities) are political acts. The confluence of the *détourné* and the *dérive* manages to territorialize the visual. The spectacle is a territory. The city is a spectacle. Both tactics, *dérive* and *detourné*, take trespassing as their essential character. They must cross into the territory of others, whether these are the advertisements of Nike or the orderly storefronts of Paris, to produce new meanings. This sensibility becomes visually apparent in the video performances of Alex Villar. In his 2001 project *Temporary Occupations*, Villar performs movements that resist the structuring of public space. He clambers up, hops over, crawls into, and slides past fences and walls designed to prevent one from entering particular spaces in the city. These actions bring to light the nature of the built environment and how strongly it is developed around the boundaries of public and private.

As we know, the political upheavals of the adolescent baby boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964) were not simply occurring in the streets of Paris, but around the world. In the United States, foremost "culture jammers" were the extraordinary yippies Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, whose pranksterish antics foreshadow much of the interventionist work of the 1990s. One of their most enduring actions took place on August 24, 1967, when Hoffman led a group to the New York Stock Exchange and dropped dollar bills to the traders below. The sudden appearance of money fluttering down from the sky caused eager traders to pile on top of each other as they instinctually chased the cash. As planned, news of the Wall Street action was quickly broadcast around the globe. As Jerry Rubin states, "You can't be a revolutionary today without a television set - it's as important as a gun! Every guerilla must know how to use the terrain of culture that he is trying to destroy!"¹⁴ The Yippies understood the connection between the spectacle, media, and political action, and their influence can be seen in much of the work in this exhibition.

Hoffman and Rubin understood the importance of mixing wit with drama in their actions (the Situationists, on the contrary, did not possess much of a sense of humor). The yippies' politics, while just as heartfelt and real as those of the Students for a Democratic Society, were tempered by an understanding of how they would be interpreted on a national media front. Humor was a tactic. Antics were a tool. Their actions were a manipulation of visual codes in a specific time and in a specific place that produced a critical result. The codes were redesigned, for application in the streets, on a billboard, on one's body, or in a classroom.

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Indeed, Rubin and Hoffman thought of life as a game, and they played well. To assure success, their clever projects were designed for the media and for public consumption. They calculated that if they could get the audience to laugh, the political message would follow.

Art in the Social Sphere

In *Free Range Grain*, the collective Critical Art Ensemble with Beatriz de Costa has transported a genetically modified organism (GMO) testing lab to the gallery space, where they will test for GMOs "organic" foods bought from stores. They anticipate that many of the foods labeled "organic" will test positive for GMOs. This revelation is not meant as an exposé on inaccurate packaging of organic foods so much as an amateur experiment that makes visible the extent to which the complex science of agro-business has inserted itself into the food chain, even where we least expect it.

For the last decade, Critical Art Ensemble has made the field of biotechnology its focus. Biotechnology is a system of knowledge that has particular rules and advantages for those who have control over it. The members of Critical Art Ensemble are amateur researchers purposefully operating in a system controlled by someone else. They are "intervening" in biotechnology and reworking the premises of how science should progress. This is the inflection point at which the reworking of a system, or language, can become a social or political happening. When Critical Art Ensemble inserts its own home-brewed science techniques into the field of genetically modified foods, it does so in order to challenge the role of the individuals, corporations, and scientific systems that determine the rules of the game of biotechnology.

The Interventionists illustrates a broad field of approaches, categorized into four sections: Reclaim the Streets, Nomads, Ready to Wear, and the Experimental University. Almost every project in the exhibition could fit into more than one category. Generally, the combination of a series of tactics is used to produce a result.

The reader will note that the catalogue is designed like a users' manual. Recalling Russian Constructivist Vladimir Mayakovsky's (1893-1930) book of poems designed by Lazar "El" Lissitzky (1890-1941), the book has thumb tabs which allow the "user/reader" to flip to specific sections.

Reclaim the Streets (RTS)

"Today, street action groups such as the *Tutte Bianche* use spectacular forms of conflict and theatrical actions designed for filming, such as climbing up a huge crane and risking one's own life to hang a banner." -Enrico Ludovici, from the film *Disobbedienti* by Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini, 2002.

The streets have long embodied the public sphere: a space where the entire citizenry can participate democratically and freely. Most political artists desire to reach the general public, and so the streets are their most natural field of action (far more hospitable than the museum, which remains anathema to many.) The section "Reclaim the Streets" (RTS) is named after the radical form of protest begun in London in 1991. RTS began as a logging protest that rearranged the rules of dissent by introducing DJs, dancing, wild costumes and pleasure to radical politics in the streets. Influenced in large part by the boom of rave culture in England, the combination of pageantry and civil disobedience has since become a signature characteristic of political participation in the 1990s. Art and radical politics appeared to merge under the famous anarchist Emma Goldman's dictum, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution."¹⁵

This pageantry takes on a remarkable performative quality in the sermons of the Reverend Billy. A disillusioned performance-artist-turned-street-activist, Bill Talen donned the disguise of a white-haired fanatical priest to preach his over-the-top brand of anti-consumerism gospel in the heart of capitalism: Disney Stores and Starbucks. Much like the Brazilian Augusto Boal's Invisible Theater, the Reverend Billy's actions use daily life, whether it is a corporate franchise or public sidewalk, as the stage. He delivers diabolical sermons against globalization,

Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life

consumerism, and the privatization of daily life:

*"I am preaching here in the Disney Store today because I am a tourist myself. Like all New Yorkers I am allowing this apocalypse to take place. I know that Manhattan in fourteen months will be entirely within the hellishly expanded Disney Store. This is Manhattan as suburban mall. This is a fatal disease known as Involuntary Entertainment."*¹⁶

Since 2000, the Reverend Billy's unexpected appearances at various multinational corporations have won a cult following. His sermons at Starbucks have been so successful that the company developed a document for its employees letting them know the proper protocol for dealing with Reverend Billy appearances.

The urban environment has also been home to a variety of ad-hoc decorations, such as graffiti, wheatpaste posters, stickers, and stencils. This do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetic is often relegated to an "outsider" part of the art world since it is predicated on unsanctioned space. Or to speak plainly, these projects often shine brightest when they are illegal. The street aesthetic thrives on the antagonisms of public space, and retains allegiance to more traditional forms of social resistance such as broadsheets, manifesto's, political posters, and leaflets. For this exhibition the God Bless Graffiti Coalition has assembled over 200 of these projects that range from the more directly political work of Claude Moller to the simply beautiful work of Swoon.

The street can be a forum for discussion or — in the case of the collective e-Xplo — a subject in itself. E-Xplo uses the bus tour, a more down-to-earth version of the Situationist *dérive*, to transform preconceived notions of the collective environment. As e-Xplo member Rene Gabri says of their project, "We try to take familiar sites and open them up to new readings and possibilities. These sites range from the physical sites we explore to the discursive sites we inhabit; even the 'tour' itself becomes something to interrogate and question. Rather than an end point, the tour is really a tool for introducing questions, a familiar departing point for a set of overlapping journeys."¹⁷

In their project for the exhibition, *Roundabout - Love at Leisure: Help Me Stranger* (2004), e-Xplo's tour bus meanders between MASS MoCA and the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in nearby Williamstown. The passengers listen to a Global Positioning System (GPS)-triggered soundtrack designed to enliven the side streets between the two cultural institutions. As one travels between these areas, the auditory environment encourages a contemplative form of viewing: an abandoned factory: a drive-through cemetery, a family's front yard all are seen in a new light. Geography becomes contested and re-interpretable. For a brief period, the means/ends of commuter travel is reworked as the living landscape. Its meaning is tossed up for grabs during a delightful ride.

And at other times, cultivating public participation becomes an interventionist project in and of itself, as in the work of collective Haha and their project *Taxi, North Adams* (2004). Haha collected submissions of short phrases from North Adams residents and community groups relating to specific sites in their neighborhoods. The taxi provided free rides for community members while displaying — through computer-assisted flash animation on LCD screens atop the taxi — these site-sensitive statements. With the assistance of geographically sensitive technology, Haha transformed what is usually a space for advertisements into a space for public expression. In essence, they encouraged North Adams to talk to itself about itself.

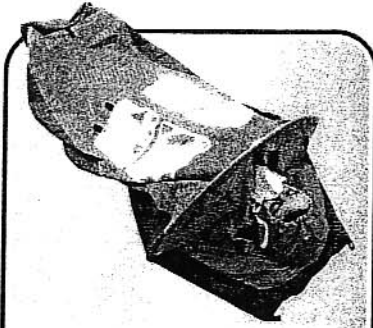
Nomads

The Situationists may have walked the streets, but today many artists prefer wheels. These interventionists are nomads cruising through the homeland to discover and support dissonant forms of existence. As described earlier, William Pope.L's extraordinary *Black Factory* (2004) serves as one of the most elaborate forms of the Situationists' *dérive* existing today.



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The INTERVENTIONISTS



Body Architecture, Lucy Orta



Center for Tactical Magic
The Ultimate Jacket



The Yes Men lecturing

For many artists, the use of vehicles (often coupled with advanced technologies) owes much to Krzysztof Wodiczko, who developed many of the milestone ideas of transport-based art.

For over thirty years, Polish-born Wodiczko has expanded the Russian Constructivists' notion of utility and technology for the public good. As Wodiczko acknowledges, his work is a mix of Situationism and Constructivism with design. "Designers must work in the world rather than 'about' or upon it."¹⁸ His preferred term is "interrogative design," which he has incorporated into his teaching at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at MIT. With a shift away from representation and an emphasis on "use" in the social sphere, Wodiczko has not only given interventionist artists some of the most powerful visual forms, but also an ideological foundation. By emphasizing use over representation, Wodiczko's projects reveal his inherent suspicions of capital and control. His projects tend to augment individual autonomy and make visible certain forms of social oppression. As an émigré from Poland, Wodiczko tempers his political affinities with a suspicion of all large systems, communist and capitalist.

Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle Project* (1988-89) was a critical point of departure for much interventionist political art of the 1990s. The design of the vehicle was inspired by the 1987 mandate by New York Mayor Ed Koch that all homeless people in New York must undergo psychiatric evaluations, and, if they failed, would face hospitalization. Wodiczko decided to focus on the issue of homelessness and used the shopping cart as his form. After conversations with homeless people, Wodiczko designed the *Homeless Vehicle* for multiple purposes. The *Homeless Vehicle* not only provided a user-friendly place for sleeping and can-collection, but also gave symbolic form to the social issue of homelessness. Wodiczko is under no illusion that he is capable of acting as a social service agency. He believes this is the job of a properly functioning government. The artist's job is different: "The oldest and most common reference to this kind of design is the bandage. A bandage covers and treats a wound while at the same time exposing its presence, signifying both the experience of pain and the hope of recovery."¹⁹

"Mobile" projects have followed the example of Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle*. Michael Rakowitz, a student of Wodiczko's at CAVS, is the author of one such project called *paraSITE* (1998) which, as the name implies, literally feeds off the urban environment. Using the heating, ventilation and air conditioning exhausts of buildings, the homeless shelter inflates with this "found air." Rakowitz produced many *paraSITE* projects in consultation with homeless people who helped design the inflatable home so that it could be folded into a small bundle and carried in one's pocket.

Many of these "mobile" projects have affinities in displaced populations. The mobile nature of the works point, in function, to a nomadic populace who become *de facto* parasites of the urban environment. Tools for mobility are prescient in a world increasingly forced to stay on the move. There is, for example, an abundance of tents in *The Interventionists*. The tent is mobile architecture. The tent provides a home for those trespassing or camping out in public space. It facilitates autonomy and, like Wodiczko's bandage, points to the need for self-sufficiency in displaced populations. Perhaps no one, except Buckminster Fuller, has explored the functional and symbolic possibilities of tents more than Dutch artist/designer Dré Wapenaar. Wapenaar has produced tents for reading newspapers, playing pianos, hanging off trees, and, in this exhibition, for giving birth and for memorializing the dead.

Ready to Wear

Trained as a fashion designer, Lucy Orta develops conceptual and functional projects that extend and perpetuate her socially engaged aesthetic. She produces nomadic architecture as well as nomadic clothing. In Orta's oeuvre, clothes become tools that activate the body as a locus for politics. Among many of her radical fashion creations, she has developed architectural clothing lines that make literal the symbols of Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicle*. Her *Refuge Wear* series (1992-1998), which she produced in response to the Gulf War, won Orta international attention. The work is most distilled in the early piece *Habitent* (1992-93): a tent/jacket with

whistle, lantern, and transport bag. Here we see yet another example of clothing making visible and assisting the situation of global refugees. Her clothes are spaces of refuge at the most intimate of levels.²⁰ Her fashion is of resistance and survival.

Fashion also acts as camouflage. As the Center for Tactical Magic (CTM) writes, "Disguise is the power to conceal, to hide away in the shadows of another's misperception. The appropriation of signifiers in the minds of onlookers, keyed in to their signal decoders along hacked bandwidths."²¹ Going "under cover" is not so much an entertaining game (although fun does play a part); it is often a necessary survival tactic when trespassing. Influenced by various schools of concealment and espionage (private detective, magician, ninja), the CTM produced *The Ultimate Jacket* (2004) as a means to augment the ability to act in various situations. The jacket contains over 50 secret pockets and allows an intrepid interventionist to segue from the identity of a worker, for example, to ninja.

The art of undercover finds perhaps its greatest example in the work of the collective, the Yes Men. Although their name contains the word "Men," it doesn't describe who they are; it describes what they do. Yes Men use any means necessary to agree their way into the fortified compounds of commerce, ask questions, and then smuggle out the stories of their undercover escapades to provide a public glimpse at the behind-the-scenes world of business.²²

Their project stems from the strange opportunities made available when the group took control of the website www.gatt.org. The site copied the official site for the General Agreement of Trades and Tariffs, with a few critical modifications. The collective has a history of producing these sites, such as their previous web creation www.GWBush.org. Treating these domains as public terrain, the collective created its own version of these various political entities. While they expected some people to confuse their site with the official one, they did not expect visitors to actually invite them to speak as official representatives of these organizations. Their charade became increasingly complex.

In October 2000, the Yes Men found themselves in the confounding situation of agreeing to speak in Salzburg, Austria, on behalf of the World Trade Organization (WTO) at a conference of international trade lawyers. The Yes Men wrote that unfortunately the General Director of the WTO, Michael Moore, would be unable to attend but they would happily send a substitute representative, Dr. Andreas Bichlbaum. Dr. Bichlbaum arrived with a security guard and cameraman and proceeded to give an audacious Powerpoint presentation on the need to streamline voting in the United States by selling votes on-line and the need to ban siestas as an inefficient holiday. After the talk, the cameraman claimed Dr. Bichlbaum received a pie in the face from an angry anti-WTO protester.

Since their first foray into speaking, the Yes Men have given several talks, with increasing absurdity, as representatives of the WTO. The gold leotard with a three-foot phallus on display here is the result of one of the Yes Men's most bizarre forays in Tampere, Finland. The group, represented this time by Hank Hardy Unruh, presented a lecture to a group of Finnish college students on the inefficiency of the Civil War. Slavery, Unruh argued, would have inevitably been replaced by the much cheaper economic solution of sweatshops. At the end of his lecture, Unruh's assistant ripped off the lecturer's clothes. Underneath his suit, Unruh wore a golden "Management Leisure Suit" which came equipped with a large, inflating phallus. At the head of the phallus, Unruh explained to the astonished students, a satellite-fed monitor allowed the manager to monitor workers across the globe while retaining the management's requisite level of comfort.

The Experimental University

Although the Experimental University is a departure from the more literal forms of intervention, it also points to a critical departure in thinking about what art is and how art can be used. In the Experimental University (Nicholas Mirzoeff's manifesto speaks to this in spirited terms),



Continue

artists interrupt a particular field of study (whether this is urban studies, biotechnology, anthropology, or ethnography) in order to present alternative critical perspectives. We can recognize these practices as "art-inspired" because they manipulate visual and spatial codes in order to produce criticality.

In their *Can You See US Now? Ya Nos Pueden Ver?* (2004) project at MASS MoCA, the cyber-feminist collective subRosa produced research here in North Adams on spaces of refuge for women. This study took a number of forms including assistance from both an engineering and feminist studies class at Smith College. The collective set out to "uncover and map the intersections of women's material and affective labor in cultures of production in North Adams and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico." Their interest in Ciudad relates to the fact that the jobs once held at Sprague Electric — the capacitor manufacturing company that previously existed at the MASS MoCA site for 50 years and closed in 1986 — migrated there. Their installation includes a series of trap doors hidden in a "forensic floor" that can be opened by visitors to reveal points of associations (also marked on large satellite surveillance maps on the walls) between women's lives and labor conditions in factories in North Adams and Ciudad Juarez, as well as a series of kiosks placed at local places of refuge. This web of interconnections links theoretical constructs of globalization and real aspects of local life.

While subRosa produces factual correlations, the Atlas Group presents imaginary findings. In its archival display titled *The Truth Will Be Known When The Last Witness Is Dead: Documents from the Fakhouri File at the Atlas Group Archive*. The Atlas Group investigates the contemporary landscape of Lebanon, with particular focus on the history of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991). If the term "imaginary research" doesn't immediately make sense, there is a good reason. The "imaginary" part of the Atlas Group research is that it is culled from its collective imaginations. That is to say, the facts are not necessarily "true," but then again, as the project implicitly asks, whose perspective is?

This project, like many projects in the Experimental University, problematizes truth claims. As the title says, the truth will be known when the last witness is dead. So what, then, does research look like if it doesn't trust assertions of truth? The installation is open-ended and lets viewers make up their own minds. In particular, when investigating the imagery and history of the Middle East, the Atlas Group is careful to not repeat the use of neocolonial techniques. It does not assert. It does not define. Yet, this technique also does not slip into the postmodern relativism of which many rigorous scientists accuse cultural studies. The research is ultimately grounded in the history of the Lebanese wars.

The research conducted in the Experimental University possesses an urgency that aligns it with traditional activism. The seductive visual displays highlight a dramatically changing political landscape, whether in the lives of women, the technologies of race, the biotechnology of agro-business, or the politics of Arab visual representation. These interventionists manipulate the visual field to create a learning environment in which we, as viewers, participate. It is, in the

end, a form of pedagogy, but of radically shifted perspectives.

But these experiments can only become transformative in the open, evolving context of a social movement, outside the cliques and clienteles of the artistic game. - Brian Holmes, "Liars Poker"²³

While tactics are a useful place to begin, they are not necessarily a satisfactory place to end. While it is true that many of these projects gain resonance by dancing within the dominant systems, some prefer to operate more strategically to change these systems as well. As the French theorist Michel De Certeau defines it, tactics depend on a dominant system.²⁴ For De Certeau, tactics constituted small subversions, such as lazy work ethics and meandering walks through the city. He was not particularly interested in whether or not these tactics added up.

However, political artists are constantly concerned with — to use De Certeau's term — strategies. They want results beyond aesthetic pleasure (and some practitioners have no interest at all in aesthetic pleasure). Frustrated with political irrelevance, they operate in many different social games, from the art world to political activism to biotechnology. They understand their work means different things to different people. With this in mind, we can sidestep the argument about whether these practices, in and of themselves, are politically effective. Their connection to a robust array of audiences and methods — such as activists, publishers, or people on the street — allows their specific interests to come into light. The documentary *Disobbedienti* (2002) by Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini demonstrates the extent to which tactics used by interventionists have been availed in the global justice movement (and vice versa). To say there is a connection between experimental interventionist practices and the collective protest actions of today would be putting it lightly. Interventionist practices do not work in isolation and, in fact, are part of a larger movement.

That is why New York-based art collective 16 Beaver has been included in this show as both a signpost and metaphor for social connection. It would be difficult to say that what this constantly shifting collective does constitutes "art," yet its centrality to interventionist practice should not be underestimated. 16 Beaver is, at heart, a reading group that has met every Monday since 1999. Over the course of five years, it has produced projects reacting to war and has connected various intellectuals, artists, and activists. This connectivity — and there are countless examples of it in action — blurs the distinctions between those who produce art and those who produce political results.

There is no political consensus among interventionists. Interventionism is not a political movement disguised as art. Practices and ideologies among interventionists vary greatly. Nor should this exhibition be misinterpreted as a "greatest hits" of interventionist practices. This assortment of artists / activists / reading groups/designers presented here points to new forms of resistance in the age of an increasingly privatized and visualized cultural sphere. They represent methods of protest and public education integrally connected to larger social movements. And while there are

extraordinary differences of opinion regarding how and what social changes should be brought about, it is also true that many artists seem to agree that the current political climate is dangerous. The artists in the exhibition are not telling us what to do about that perceived danger, but are providing tools for engagement. In short, the interventionists provide, as William Pope.L's *Black Factory* explicitly advertises, "opportunity."

Notes

1. From a lecture given at the *Rethinking Marxism* conference, UMASS, Amherst, Nov. 21, 2003.
 2. This is not to say that there haven't been informative and important exhibitions of political art in the 1990s. In 1994, the Boston ICA produced the exhibition *Public Interventions* curated by Eleanor Heartney and then ICA director Milena Kalinovska. In 1993, Mary Jane Jacob produced the critical exhibition *Culture In Action: New Public Art in Chicago*, sponsored by Sculpture Chicago.
 3. See Nicolas Mirzoeff's *Visual Culture Reader* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998).
 4. Thomas Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 235.
 5. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 275.
 6. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York, Picador, 1999), p. 30.
 7. Elizabeth Jackson, *The World Today*, Tuesday, 7 October, 2003.
 8. James B Twitchel, "Plop, Plop, Fizz, Fizz," *Signs of Life*, eds. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon. (3rd. eds Boston: Bedford/ St. Martins, 2000) p. 202-221.
 9. Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: New Press, 1999).
 10. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1998), p. 151.
 11. Brian Wallis, "Public Funding and Alternative Spaces," *Alternative Art in New York, 1965-1985*, ed. Julie Ault. (Minneapolis - London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p. 178.
 12. For more information, see the burgeoning field of critical geography spearheaded by the writings of David Harvey, Mike Davis, Edward Soja, Neil Smith, and the art writings of Rosalyn Deutsche and Miwon Kwon.
 13. Definition found at www.angelfire.com/ar/corei/SI/SIsecc.htm
 14. Jerry Rubin, *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), p. 108.
 15. According to Alix Kates Shulman in "Dances with Feminists" *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. IX, no. 3, December 1991, Emma Goldman never actually said the above quote. This popular quote paraphrased a much longer quote from Emma Goldman's book *Living My Life*.
 16. Bill Talen quoted in Jason Grote's "The God that people who do not believe in God believe in: taking a bust with Reverend Billy", in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (London: Verso, 2002), p. 366.
 17. Rene Gabri, personal interview, 18 Nov. 2003.
 18. Krzysztof Wodiczko, "Interrogative Design", *Critical Vehicles*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), p. 17.
 19. Ibid.
 20. subRosa's project, *Can You See Us now? Ya Nos Pueden Ver?*, (2004), investigates sites of refuge for women. The prominence in the exhibition of the term "refuge" correlates directly to larger social conditions such as the shrinkage of social services and the increasing displacement of global populations.
 21. From the website, www.tacticalmagic.org
 22. From the Yes Men website, www.gatt.org
 23. Brian Holmes, "Liar's Poker: Representation of Politics: Politics of Representation", *Springerin* (Vienna, Austria: January, 2003: <http://www.springerin.at/en/>)
 24. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, and London: University of California Press, Ltd., 1988), p. 37.
- Michel De Certeau, in his 1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, made a useful distinction between "strategies" and "tactics." "I call strategy", he writes, "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that become possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated." That is to say, a strategy is a plan made by those who have the power to predict and change the lived landscape. On the other hand, a tactic "operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids." "In short, the tactic is the art of the weak."



*The Yes Men, Management
Leisure Suit with Employee
Visualisation Appendage
Courtesy of The Yes Men.*

*Front Cover: The Center for Tactical Magic
The Ultimate Jacket.
Courtesy of The Center for Tactical Magic.*

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