

ART AS INTERVENTION:

A Guide to Today's Radical Art Practices

Julie Perini

N AN AGE WHERE CLIMATE change makes daily headlines, the current financial crisis has exposed severe economic inequalities, and the inhumane consequences of capitalism have infiltrated almost every corner of world, it appears as though the only sane thing to do is work to halt the progression of catastrophe. Why, then, would anyone make art?

Art plays an important role in *imagining* and *creating*, shared human traits that can connect individuals in collective, generative action. Art can provide dis-alienating experiences for a society desperately in need of healing. Art allows for experimentation with new ways of seeing, being, and relating, as well as opportunities to develop innovative strategies and tools for resistance movements. Art creates accessible points of entry into political discussions, educating and mobilizing people in ways that may be difficult to quantify but nonetheless tangible.

In this article, I present individuals and groups who believe their work aids in the struggles against the prison industrial complex, corporate control of technology, and the isolation engendered by capitalism. Their projects build and model new kinds of relationships. They shy away from the limited identities of 'artist' or 'activist.' Instead, they use creative energy to transform immediate social realities and construct meaningful experiences that happen in the streets, museums and galleries, domestic spaces, and any location where oppressive, authoritarian forces reign.

To declare that there is *a* radical art community in the U.S. would be both misleading and unproductive. Beyond their self-identification with radical politics, as those artists that follow have artistic expression of the real experiences of oppressed and working-class peoples, people of color, and others takes many forms, with divergent histories then self-identified radicals. Those discussed here form loose networks throughout the U.S. and beyond; they borrow freely from the tools and traditions of theater, painting, printmaking, sculpture, dance, music, film, graphic design, engineering, robotics, biotechnology,

and other interdisciplinary arts and sciences. All espouse different approaches to the problem of creating tools and situations that will amplify, augment, and render concrete the messages of progressive and radical social movements. I refer to some of the work as "interventionist" because it disrupts or interrupts normal flows of information, capital, and the smooth functioning of other totalizing systems.

As a media artist, I am deeply invested in this interventionist art. I grapple with synthesizing my desire to explore the aesthetic possibilities of moving-image art with my commitment to radical social change and solidarity with movements of the oppressed. This dilemma likely stems from the professionalization of artists in the U.S., as both the art and academic markets require specialization, newness, and easily digestible products. One can be an artist or an activist, but to be both is viewed with suspicion and skepticism. This is also a struggle for the people discussed in this essay, and their work provides important insights as to how to refuse it.

First, I look at the work of highly visible and vocal advocates for social change like The Yes Men, Josh MacPhee and Justseeds Artists' Cooperative, and Dara Greenwald. Next, I address pointed interventions into the corporate-controlled discourses of science and engineering, through discussions with Natalie Jeremijenko and the collective Critical Art Ensemble. I then examine collectives that are primarily interested in creating platforms for discussion, collaboration, and resource exchange, particularly the Center for Urban Pedagogy, 16 Beaver Group, and AREA Chicago. Finally, I highlight the work of Trevor Paglen, an "experimental geographer" who uses mapping techniques to make visible seemingly 'hidden' structures of power. Although exciting new projects emerge daily across the country, I discuss individuals, collectives, and organizations established in their practices for at least five years. The discussion is intended to inspire and intrigue, but also to empower, since it is generative at heart. It is within all of our power to turn ideas into images, actions, and objects—to realize things that often seem possible only to the imagination.

RADICAL ART AND RADICAL ACTIONS

As LONG AS THERE HAVE been social movements, there have been people doing the important work of translating the messages of movement builders into understandable documents, objects, stories, and events. The art object itself can reach a person in emotional and intuitive ways that thick layers of explanatory text cannot. Take the image of the raised fist, for example: it instantly communicates the values of unity, strength, and power. While originating in radical labor unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World, this symbol has been adopted by a dizzying array of movements. Most notably in the U.S., the black liberation struggles generalized the image to the point where black athletes at the 1968 summer Olympics raised their fists during the American national anthem, bringing black struggles in the U.S. to a international audience. The pink triangle, originally used as a badge in Nazi concentration camps to identify homosexual prisoners, was reclaimed by gay rights activists in the 1970s and placed above the words "Silence=Death" by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) to call attention to the severity of the AIDS crisis. Images like these are both reproducible and mutable. The raised fist and pink triangle are classic examples of the power of artistic production; they are often invoked graphically, on posters and other printed matter, and as a live action, a collective and individual gesture. People who do not think of themselves as artists become involved in creative production

through the reproduction of these symbols, developing confidence and skills, and generating new poly-vocal expressions of a movement mission.

IMPOSTURE AS ART: THE YES MEN

THE YES MEN ARE A well-known network of activists born out of the alter-globalization movement, led by Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum. For over a decade, Bonanno and Bichlbaum have been staging media interventions that expose corporate crimes and argue for humane global economic relations. The two met when mutual friends alerted them to the fact that each was doing similar creative protest work on gender and sexuality. Mike had been responsible for the Barbie Liberation Organization, a media heist that involved the switching of hundreds of voice boxes from talking G.I. Joe and Barbie dolls just in time for Christmas. Andy had had become well-known in Silicon Valley after he programmed a hidden trigger in a Sims game to activate a kissing frenzy of young men in Speedo bathing suits. This meeting of minds has yielded some of the most effective public political stunts since the Yippies rained dollar bills on the New York Stock Exchange in 1967.1

The Yes Men consistently exploit codes: the HTML code that composes web sites, the behavioral codes that regulate conduct in the overlapping spheres of corporate media, global business, and federal government, and the graphic and linguistic codes that dictate the appearance of mass media. Anyone can lift the entire HTML code from a website by right-clicking on the page and selecting "View Page Source." Recognizing this, in 1999 the Yes Men mimicked the site of the World Trade Organization (WTO), transferring a copy of the code from www.wto.org to a new domain, www.gatt.org, with a few significant changes. One key change included re-routing the contact email address for information requests to themselves. When organizations began to request their participation at conferences and other meetings, Mike and Andy obliged, delivering outlandish presentations while masquerading as representatives from the WTO. These lectures push the neoliberal logic of the WTO to such an extent that claims such as "slavery is an economically sound business model" do not seem out of the realm of possibility. In fact, elite audiences often have frighteningly nonchalant—or, even more distressing, enthusiastic reactions to these ideas.

The Yes Men have pulled off numerous other infiltrations exploiting the power of the mimic, what they call "identity correction": "impersonating big-time criminals in order to humiliate them," and targeting people "who put profit ahead of all else." In one of their most well-known stunts from 2004, Andy posed as a representative for Dow Chemical on the BBC, announcing that the company had taken full responsibility for the 1984 Bhopal disaster that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and planned to compensate victims and make amends. The event garnered international media attention, while Dow suffered a stock loss of two billion dollars on the German Exchange.

Mike and Andy are both articulate, able-bodied, young white men, educated in American colleges. Using the privileges that these facets of their identity afford them, they effectively pass through systems of power, exposing contradictions and injustices from the inside. These interventions are something other than theatrical protest. Mike and Andy (not their legal names) live their work, stepping in and out of their public identities as needed. The Yes Men acknowledge their unearned privilege as members of the dominant social group and perform important ally work, acting as agents of social change rather than agents of repression.

Though the Yes Men's work has functioned in support of various movements, it has not, until recently, been in concert with any specific one. Their efforts to call attention to the disastrous consequences of unchecked capitalism reveal that anti-sweatshop campaigns, movements to halt global warming, and other struggles are inextricably linked. In public lectures and interviews, the Yes Men acknowledge that their work supports the important, difficult work of grassroots community organizing:

Our work is a small part of a global movement that is interested in derailing the kind of no-holds-barred capitalism that is starving the world's poor and ruining the environment. Our role is a tiny one in that overall movement, where people are engaged in thousands of other approaches to the issues. It is the people doing the social organizing, legal battles, etc. that are doing the real important work, which we are trying to support.³

Recently, the Yes Men have been working directly with organizations to promote policy change, such as Code Pink, Gray Panthers, and other activists. In addition to providing tools and encouragement for people who want to become active in their communities and to become more like Yes Men, the Yes Men's websites now contain information about local and global organizations fighting on a variety of fronts, including global poverty, corporate accountability, and climate change.

The Yes Men's form of irreverent public protest has roots in a strong working-class tradition that brings political theater to the public sphere. An early example of such street theater is the *Punch and Judy* show, which originated in Europe in the sixteenth century and continues to be performed across the globe. This puppet show centers on the comical character Punch as he triumphs over the forces of law and order. Bread & Puppet Theater began in New York City and is known for creating enormous puppets used during Vietnam War protests. Currently based in Vermont, Bread & Puppet continues to serve bread during its performances and remains a strong presence on an international stage, protesting American involvement in wars abroad and supporting struggles for self-determination.

Indeed, many artists and art-activists work directly with political campaigns and community organizers, often creating work with the participation of the constituencies they seek to serve. This solidarity results in the communication of specific messages that can be used as popular education tools. Furthermore, the process of creating artworks directly from movements for instrumental purposes of ten makes artists out of people who had not previously thought of themselves as particularly creative in this way.

COLLECTIVE ART IN SERVICE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

COLLECTIVE ART PRODUCTION, AS OPPOSED to individual artistic output, complicates traditional conceptions of the artist. Collectively creating an artwork disrupts the romantic notion of 'artistic genius': the familiar figure of the artist alone in their studio, waiting for divine inspiration to flow through their body and onto a blank canvas. Who is the distinct genius if the *all* residents of a particular block paint a mural on an abandoned building? What does the market do when there is no singular personality to commodify? Just as artist collectives have sprung up frequently throughout history, the U.S. in recent years has

seen many artists working together in various formations. These groups sometimes share authorship of specific pieces and usually share resources like supplies, information, and even food and shelter.

Even a brief survey of these artists would be too long to enumerate, but a few representatives of this phenomenon include the Beehive Design Collective (based in Maine, with members located throughout the U.S. and Mexico), Temporary Services (Chicago), Art and Revolution (California), and Justseeds Artists' Cooperative (U.S. and Mexico). Bees from the Beehive Collective buzz all over North America, leading educational workshops and creating collaboratively designed posters and murals for communities and campaigns. Their work is anti-copyright, anonymous, and created in close conversation with the people who will use the graphics. David Solnit has been involved with mass movements in the United States for almost three decades, incorporating art and theater—particularly puppets—into his work. In the late 1990s, he helped found Art and Revolution, a network of street theater practitioners and art collectives whose aim is create new forms of resistance that incorporate art and theater into movements. Temporary Services is a collaborative endeavor among three artists in Illinois, which has made an impact on the cultural life of Chicago by creating community-based projects, including experimental exhibition spaces and collectively authored publications.

Justseeds Artists' Cooperative is a group of twenty-five artist-workers throughout the U.S. and Mexico who cooperatively maintain a web presence, which functions both as a marketplace for their work and as a site for information exchange and community building. The artists of Justseeds create affordable artworks that are reproducible, lacking an 'original' object: silkscreen prints, block prints, stencils, zines, and other multiples. These works often depict figures and events from radical and under-represented histories, or address themes like anarchism, the environment, labor, anti-racism, and gender liberation. Justseeds artists often collaborate to generate calendars and poster series.

In addition to generating income from the sale of postcards, calendars, and limited edition prints, Justseeds provides a context for critical discussions about art and activism. Many Justseeds artists are also involved in ongoing projects, including the God Bless Graffiti Coalition, a loose network of artists combating anti-graffiti trends, and GhostBikes. org, a site that documents the creation of Ghost Bike memorials by local communities. Ghost bikes are bikes painted white and locked to urban locations where cyclists have lost their lives or been the victims of traffic accidents.

One example of collective creative action in solidarity with movement organizers is the Voices from the Outside: Justseeds Prison Portfolio Project, which effectively complements prison abolition work (such as that done by Critical Resistance). This portfolio brought together the work of twenty artists and one collective from North America, each of whom created a print that addressed the prison industrial complex or its abolition. These portfolios were bundled with a CD containing high-resolution images of the prints, and were distributed to prison organizing groups, who then used the posters and images in their own organizing and campaign work.

Another notable project by Justseeds co-founder Josh MacPhee is the book Reproduce & Revolt!, edited with artist Favianna Rodriguez. Filled with over 600 royalty-free illustrations from around the world, the book is designed for use by individuals involved with social justice movements. Rodriguez is active in Oakland, California as an artist and community organizer. Well-known for her bold political posters, she is a printmaker, digital artist, and educator who proclaims, "I am in the business of education and liberation. My

subjects are Black, Latino, Asian, and Native communities that have been ignored and smashed by this government." She is the co-founder of the East Side Arts Alliance, an organization devoted to training young people in the tradition of muralism. Rodriguez continues a long tradition of political poster making, one that remains important for all national and international grassroots struggles.

Some of the recent history of political poster making is documented in the ambitious exhibition, Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960s to Now, organized by Josh MacPhee and artist Dara Greenwald in 2008. This exhibition surveys artwork from more than forty-years of international movement building, including anti-Apartheid work in Africa and the civil rights movement in the U.S. This important exhibition explores histories of oppressed peoples through artworks created by the movement makers themselves. The exhibition contains over 800 posters, photographs, videos, and other works that have been generated concurrent with movements for social justice. Greenwald explains:

> One of the hopes of doing Signs of Change was to share moments with other artists when people used creativity to mobilize for social transformation, to show social movement history through the lens of culture and not primarily through the lens of individual artistic production. We also wanted to show activists, who might not see art as a serious political activity, that there are historical examples of artistic production being integral and important to movements and movement success. We found that movements themselves can become cultural producers in which the mobilizations inspire new kinds of creativity. In the examples we looked at, the art and media coming out of social movements was often anonymously and collectively produced.5

Signs of Change is one of many recent artist projects that reanimates radical histories. With MacPhee and artist Olivia Robinson, Greenwald has begun a project called Spectres of Liberty, an ongoing series of public projects about the history of the movement to abolish slavery in the U.S. The group has created one public project, The Ghost of the Liberty Street Church, which consisted of a life-sized inflatable church occupying the site of the former Liberty Street Church in Troy, New York. The space is currently a parking lot; through posters, video projections, sound, and other media, the group sought to bring to life the history of what had been a central location for anti-slavery organizing. Greenwald has extensive knowledge of historical and contemporary trends in radical art production and the relationship between cultural production and social movements:

> Unfortunately, in the neoliberal system we live in, it is so hard to make a living and find support for our art that a kind of careerism, competition, marketing and branding of the self seems necessary. This can be at odds with participating in social movements. Although we are all complicit in the logic of the market, we still must strive to resist and transform it if we are laying claim to doing work for social change. This is no easy task.6

Greenwald elaborates on these ideas in her essay, "The Process is in the Streets: Challenging Media America," which surveys the history of video collectives in the U.S. in the

1970s and 1980s.7 Like Justseeds, these collectives accounted for the economic conditions behind the production of cultural objects and media, by pooling equipment that at the time was unaffordable to most individuals. Media collectives like upstate New York's Videofreex, though not explicitly 'political,' were unquestionably anti-authoritarian and experimental in their collective structure. Artists today can look back to this time to see a moment when the process of creating art, particularly media art, successfully transformed social relationships.

Other critical art interventions speak to a tradition of exploring identity. African American conceptual artist Adrian Piper's street antics from 1960s and 1970s continue to influence later generations. With her Mythic Being series, Piper donned a mustache and men's clothing and walked the streets of New York City in order to experience firsthand public attitudes toward black men. William Pope, L, calling himself "The Friendliest Black Artist in America," carries out similar critical street performances today. His project, The Black Factory, is a large truck that travels to public places and gathers "black things" from participants (objects that speak to them of blackness) which are then pulverized and turned into new objects. Coco Fusco is a Cuban-American interdisciplinary artist whose work in multimedia and performance explores women and society, war, politics, in addition to race. She and Mexican-born performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña collaborated on Couple in a Cage in 1993, a social experiment and traveling exhibition where they exhibited themselves as caged American Indians from an imaginary island, complete with feathered headdresses and 'native garb.' While they had intended to create a commentary on colonialism and objectification of indigenous peoples, to their surprise, many spectators believed that the two artists actually were "savages from a faraway land."

MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY, AND INTERVENTIONS

LIKE STREET ARTISTS RECLAIMING COMMON space to widen its latitude of acceptable use, media artists have always trespassed onto the largely privatized turf of technology. The history of media art is one of innovative artists and technologists collaborating, sharing resources, and blurring the boundary between scientific research and art production. Technology is one of the most mystified areas of our culture, fetishized as extremely difficult and complex, something only specialists and those with access to adequate resources—like corporations—can understand and develop. The artists described in this section prove that amateurs, hobbyists, and collectives can co-produce knowledge and engage in "contestational" scientific inquiry. Technology can provide us with more than disposable gadgets and gizmos; it can create tools that reverse the alienating effects of capital, aid activists in their work, and increase our understanding of the natural and social worlds.

For the past ten years, the Institute for Applied Autonomy has been developing technologies specifically for use by activists. Calling their practice "contestational robotics," this collective produced GraffitiWriter, a robot that spray paints subversive messages in public locations, and StreetWriter, a van equipped with a computerized system that also paints subversive messages, but on a much larger scale. In 2009, Nike appropriated the latter project for use during the Tour de France, much to the dismay of its original collective of inventors. Years before the Nike scandal, artist Cat Mazza, who also maintains a blog that provides information about anti-sweatshop campaigns and the history of organized labor, had combined the low-tech art of knitting with the high-tech art of software design to create the Nike Blanket Petition, a fourteen-foot wide blanket combining hundreds of knit squares by individuals from forty countries, created to protest Nike's use of sweatshop labor. This simple object—a large hand-knit blanket featuring the Nike logo—powerfully communicates the message of global, collective solidarity with sweatshop laborers.

Paul Vanouse originally studied painting, but soon began to investigate what he has termed "emerging media." Emerging media are technologies and processes that have hitherto been unexplored by artists, including such new fields as genetic experimentation. Vanouse's works playfully and critically interrogate current popular scientific issues, particularly those around the scientific construction of race. The Relative Velocity Inscription Device is a live experiment and installation that takes DNA samples from four members of a multiracial family, literally racing them against one another in a genetic separation gel. The winner of the race is different each time, a result that flies in the face of early twentieth century eugenics theories. Instead, the experiment encourages viewers to examine their own conceptions of racial identity. Another artist, Brooke Singer, often works with the collective Preemptive Media, using new media to create projects that address environmental and social issues. Their collaborative projects include Purpool, a social networking site designed to promote and facilitate carpooling, and Swipe, a project that allows participants to find out what kind of data is being collected about them each time their driver's license is swiped and pooled into a database.

Many of the artists listed above are continuing an interventionist approach to technology that the collective Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) has been engaged in for over two decades. CAE is a name that has become synonymous with tactical media, a practice the collective describes as "situational, ephemeral, and self-terminating." Tactical media "encourages the use of any media that will engage a particular sociopolitical context in order to create molecular interventions and semiotic shocks that contribute to the negation of the rising intensity of authoritarian culture." ¹⁰ Tactical media derives its name from an influential passage from philosopher Michel de Certeau's The Practice of Everyday Life, where he distinguishes between strategies used by structures of power and tactics used by individuals to carve out autonomous space within these same structures. Artists have responded positively to de Certeau's description of the tactic, eager to utilize the concept: "The space of a tactic is the space of the other. [...] In short, a tactic is an art of the weak."11

Founding CAE member Steve Kurtz describes his outlook on contemporary art interventionist practices:

> How are people doing these kinds of interventions? It is not going to be through a dropout culture, and it is going to be through people who are trying to construct new kinds of social relationships, new kinds of relationships to the commodity, new kinds of relationships to information, new kinds of relationships to technology. That's what the best interventionists do now. They create new relationships; that's the creative practice and that is how we can somehow relate it to art in some way.12

CAE's practice is process-oriented and performance-based. Their projects explore the intersections among technology, critical theory, and radical politics. Working in public, educational, academic, and art contexts, their work has, for the past few years, focused on demystifying the modern biotech industry by developing participatory performance experiences for audiences. Free Range Grain typifies their method of inquiry and presentation: a mobile microbiology lab allows audience members to perform tests on food they bring from home to determine whether or not the food contains common genetic modifications. CAE often works directly with community organizers and other times as an outside operation. Kurtz explains:

> CAE has always tried to strike a balance between autonomy and alliance. On one hand we need to be free to move when we see a concrete opening, or to explore possibilities that could fail. On the other hand, we feel compelled to support progressive causes. CAE is a cultural research wing off the main body of collected progressive movements—we have points of conjunction, but are still a part unto ourselves. 13

Natalie Jeremijenko is another defiant artist/engineer whose work tirelessly imagines and develops new ways for humans to understand, relate to, and connect with the natural environment. Her public experiments focus on creating methods for the participatory production of knowledge about the natural world, as well as the development of technologies that enable social change and promote critical dialogue.

Since 1991, when Jeremijenko established the Bureau of Inverse Technology, she has been committed to using machines to address the needs of an increasingly alienated, mediated society. Her projects include HowStuffisMade, a collectively produced encyclopedia providing information about the manufacturing, environmental costs, and labor conditions behind the creation of products. With her Feral Robot Dogs project, she organized workshops and other public events that provided support for hacking into robotic dog toys and reprogramming them to sniff out environmental waste in communities. Inverting the logic and typical structure of a zoo, her OOZ projects describe a variety of technological interfaces that facilitate human interaction with natural systems and encourage meaningful interactions between humans and non-humans.

Responding to current environmental justice movements and drawing upon the history of the 1970s feminist art movement, Jeremijenko's most recent project is the Environmental Health Clinic, a clinic that works with clients to prescribe plans of action that will address their environmental health concerns. Clients work with Jeremijenko at the Clinic to generate processes and devices that will improve local air quality or stimulate food production. She refers to the protocols she develops with clients as "lifestyle experiments":

> At the Environmental Health Clinic, in addition to the prescriptions and protocols I've been developing, it is also facilitating these different lifestyle experiments. There are a number of bio-monitoring protocols I've developed and coded. The clinic has a website and people blog on their 'medical records' and share information. The clinic works as a context over which we can take very specific, locally optimized protocols and start to generalize and figure out what to do. Initiatives such as efforts to recycle, urban agriculture, or recycling grey water are happening already. I think the role of the artist is to produce it in a way that is demonstrable, in a way that makes these ideas accessible.

In the arts, it's an endemic practice that comes out of 1970s feminist practices that used the domestic sphere as the realm of representation. These are small experiments with one's own lifestyle where you have control, a high standard of evidence, you know when it works and when it fails, and yet it's demonstrative and not just symbolic. So these lifestyle experiments, in the tradition of Thoreau's lifestyle experiment of Walden Pond, are about figuring out how to re-imagine relationships to natural systems, not through consumption, but through taking the lifestyles over which we have agency and changing them. 14

EXPERIMENTS WITH COMMUNITY BUILDING AND CREATING PLATFORMS FOR DISCUSSION

JEREMIJENKO'S WORK WITH "LIFESTYLE EXPERIMENTS" links to other cultural work similarly focused on ways of living. In addition to generating images, stories, technologies, and other items useful for resistant culture, cultural workers can offer movement builders new ways to conceive of social relationships, pedagogical practices, and communication. Not tethered to particular political positions and free of the need to produce tangible results, artists often use their autonomy to experiment with new ways of living, relating, and communicating. Below I describe several groups whose purpose is to create situations or platforms in which other people can exercise creativity, or to stimulate critical thought and community dialogue. These groups create subtle interventions; they destabilize norms and disrupt structures of power by posing questions and broadening access to creative and critical practices.

The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest is a print and online publication that reports on the activities of a wide variety of cultural workers and thinkers in the U.S. and abroad. The Journal is a valuable resource for people looking to learn about the intersections of contemporary social theory, critical art production, activist practices, and other global struggles. AREA Chicago is another hub for people working in art, research, education, and activism. AREA engages in many projects, including a biannual publication and an accompanying events series, as well as maintaining an informative website about political and cultural work concerning local social justice issues, such as prisons, gentrification, and food systems. Dan Tucker, one of the main organizers of AREA Chicago, discusses how movements can better utilize cultural strategies:

Art practices bring a highly experimental approach to how and why things can be organized that goes far beyond aesthetic strategies. Artists embedded within social movements have the greatest potential to push the conceptual boundaries of what we mean by "community," "solidarity," "revolution," "grassroots," "utopia," and "struggle"—to name a few of the often narrowly defined frameworks which categorize the subcultures of contemporary Left politics.15

In New York City, 16 Beaver Group exists as a loose coalition of artists, activists, and curators who regularly gather at 16 Beaver Street in lower Manhattan. It began as a reading group in 1999 and has evolved to include film screenings, walks, lunches, workshops, and other types of events. Rent from the studio spaces on the same floor as the communal space covers the cost of maintaining the common areas that function as event spaces. As their website describes, "16 Beaver is the address of a space initiated/run by artists to create and maintain an ongoing platform for the presentation, production, and discussion

of a variety of artistic/cultural/economic/political projects. It is the point of many departures/arrivals."16 Filmmaker and activist Paige Sarlin, a longtime member and organizer of 16 Beaver Group, speaks about their activities:

> Having some knowledge of the history of the organized Left in the United States, it has always struck me that there is an absence of space for sustained political education and training in movements. 16 Beaver addresses this need, but unlike movements that are tied to a sense of urgency and necessity for action, 16 Beaver provides a space for selforganized research and inquiry that is really flexible. We have been teaching each other for ten years and the curriculum keeps changing as different people become involved. We have developed an ethic of conversation that responds to particular ideas, events, questions and concerns. As a result, we have built a shared interest in what makes conversation useful, working together to make discussion productive but not tied to finding a solution. That's not to say that we don't all grapple with searching for solutions or projects or actions to take. But we don't see our discussion and presentation practice as needing to be over-determined by that sort of urgency or necessity.

> To a great degree, this is an alternative holding space for both politics and aesthetics. "Politics and aesthetics" in the sense that it's a space that has been teaching people how to be in the world as feeling, thinking beings, as people who are able to live and build relationships with others at the same time that they are building movements which are aimed at changing conditions and structures, addressing issues and problems within the economic and social world.¹⁷

She also discusses the need for systemic change in the U.S. and how initiatives like 16 Beaver Group can contribute to the growth of inclusive social systems:

> What does it really mean to build a broad-based mass movement? We need a profoundly diverse broad-based mass movement in order to enact structural change and not reform. We need to learn to coexist with differences. This is the difference between a united front and popular front. We all know how transformative it is to be part of a movement socially; you become more confident because you understand you're not the only one who thinks and feels the way you do. That's an important part of movement building. But everyone is so overextended and isolated. Artists can do more than just inspire people; artists can model other ways of living your life, offer different ways to relate to other people other than in the instrumental, urgent way that the neoliberal capitalist society requires and forces on us. We can attempt a more humane way of life.

Also engaged in this transformative work is The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), an organizing body that creates projects to investigate, understand, and educate New York City dwellers about their built environments. Much of their work involves pairing skilled artists and researchers with school groups and urban neighborhoods that typically lack funding for community art, of ten reaching communities of recent immigrants and people of color. CUP facilitates this co-production of knowledge about particular urban issues and oversees the creation of educational tools such as videos, comics, pamphlets, posters, exhibitions, or a combination of these forms. Their ongoing series of fold-out posters, Making Policy Public, pairs innovative graphic designers with policy advocates to make complex policy issues accessible to everyday people. Another project, Garbage Problems, was a collaborative endeavor between CUP and students from City-As-School. When Fresh Kills landfill closed in 2001, New York needed to devise new methods of waste disposal. The students and CUP members involved with Garbage Problems investigated garbage infrastructure and produced educational posters, a video, and a speculative design for reuse of the landfill. This fusion of research, design, and community involvement characterizes CUP's inquiry-based approach to local social justice activism. Rosten Woo, one of CUP's founders and its former executive director, discussed his experiences and CUP's development over the past several years:

> CUP works as a connecting vehicle, a platform for cooperation. The act of collaboration and creation of a tangible product is uniquely powerful and able to forge connections between people with really different approaches and ways of working, from activists to high school teachers, to bureaucrats, to graphic designers. One of the really wonderful things about our early exhibition projects was that we were able to collect work from all these different kinds of folks into one space and forge spatial or conceptual connections that way, and then at the openings, because we had involved so many people and they wanted to see their work, we would get these big crowds from very different communities, and so the exhibition space could be a place where personal connections could also be formed. Over time, our focus shifted away from doing exhibition work and towards making works that were more easily distributable. There is definitely a particular kind of magic that happens when you use a space to gather material and people, but a year's worth of work could disappear after a couple of months at an exhibition, whereas a DVD or a publication could be utilized by people for years, and in multiple cities at once, etc. So the challenge is to find ways of maintaining the excitement, momentum, and sense of shared purpose that an exhibition project generates, but also find ways to kind of bottle and distribute the fruits of that work. 18

Because of their emphasis on urban exploration, projects by the Center for Urban Pedagogy often find themselves included in exhibitions about geography, space, place, and the practice of map-making. This allows CUP's work to extend beyond their immediate intended audience and impact other communities.

CREATIVE CARTOGRAPHY

MAPS ALLOW US TO VISUALIZE our relationships to space, power, resources, and social formations. In recent years, creative cartography has become an increasingly popular way

to make often invisible information visible. This interdisciplinary practice often brings together people working in community building, design, geography, environmental issues, art, and sociology. 19

Artist and geographer Trevor Paglen coined the term "Experimental Geography." Much of his work focuses on researching secret government operations and representing these networks of invisible power through photography and book projects, and by leading group expeditions to view clandestine military activity. He has mapped information about locations of the CIA's extraordinary rendition program and other covert activities, and created photography projects about classified American reconnaissance satellites orbiting the earth. In a recent article in the popular art magazine Art Forum, he commented on this latter project, called The Other Night Sky. He writes:

> If, as was the case with the landscape photographers of the past, the production of symbolic order goes hand in hand with the exertion of control—if, that is, we can only control things by first naming or imaging them—then developing a lexicon of the other night sky might be a step toward reclaiming the violence flowing through it.20

Others use maps as tools for the participatory production of knowledge about social life. AREA Chicago's People's Atlas is a multi-city mapping initiative, collecting blank city maps that participants have filled in with information about diverse areas of knowledge and human experience. Maps made in Chicago include "The Streets I Walk Down," "Neighborhoods by Income," and "Iraq Veterans Against the War." Maps, with their portability and flexibility, are important artistic tools for representing and communicating complex information, and they can aid in many grassroots struggles.

ACTIVE IMAGINATIONS AND ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS

EVERY PRACTITIONER DISCUSSED IN THIS essay is concerned with imagining and practicing new kinds of relationships. Steve Kurtz noted this when he said that today's interventionists are going to be people who construct "new kinds of social relationships, new kinds of relationships to the commodity, new kinds of relationships to information, new kinds of relationships to technology."21 From collectively authored community murals to the development of contestational technologies, the work of the artists discussed here show numerous ways to conceive of and implement new social relations and practices in everyday life; there are countless more to explore.

Radical and interventionist art resonates with other cultural practices occurring throughout the U.S. both now and in the past, a rich area for inquiry. For example, there are numerous interventionist practices that specifically explore social relationships through the lenses of gender, race, sexuality, and class; the work of Adrian Piper, William Pope L., Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gomez-Peña are just some areas to explore for divergent and different histories. Additionally, the use of art and community-building practices in public murals, graffiti, community gardens, and traditional crafts are other avenues of exploration. While these critical interventions deserve further inquiry and contextualization as radical art practices working alongside liberationist movements, there are neighboring traditions and rich histories that should not be excluded from our understanding of the role of arts in radical change and community building.

There are also lingering questions as to how radical artists move from simply being in solidarity with working-class- and people of color-led movements to seeing themselves contextualized within a larger patchwork of practices. Specifically, artists who are members of privileged social groups do not always take responsibility for learning how oppression manifests in everyday life. Artists, to be critical and useful, must make themselves vulnerable, ask questions, and do the work of being an ally in the struggle against all forms of oppression. The Beehive Collective's method of "cross-pollination" is one of the most important and useful strategies among creative communities for building new social relations. It is a simple idea, though not often deployed by cultural workers: testing one's ideas by running them by people from communities other than one's own. In their own words:

The Beehive prefers to gain its knowledge of issues as directly from the source as possible, by conducting interviews with those being directly affected, or organizers that are specialists on the issues. We research each topic of our graphics campaigns thoroughly, including visits to botanical societies for photos of the specific species of animals and plants we convey, and have our ideas and facts critiqued by many people before they hatch and get shouted to the world. Filtering the information for subtle racist assumptions, cultural appropriation, and myopic North American perspectives through critique from people of color and those directly affected by the issues being discussed is an important step in our collaboration process. ²²

Of course, many people would hesitate to call themselves creative in the multitudinous ways mentioned here. Yet most everyone would agree that every human being possesses an imagination. We use it each time we perform mundane tasks or plan future events. Our imagination allows us to link our private experiences to broader collective struggles, social institutions, and our society's position in history. Artists are simply people who activate their imaginations regularly and mindfully, to the point where it becomes a reflex and a way of seeing, thinking, and acting creatively; this, too, is a strategy to build new forms of social relations. The imagination is not an untroubled space, for it is here that assumptions about what is and is not possible collide. This alternate reality is a rehearsal space, a laboratory, and a place to become acquainted with uncertainty. It is here that active imaginations, combined with active participation, become critical tools for co-creating social systems that benefit everyone.

NOTES

- 1 The Youth International Party, whose members were known as Yippies, was an American youth-oriented radical organization formed in the late 1960s, known for its use of street theater and political pranks.
- 2 From the Yes Men website, http://www.theyesmen.org.
- 3 C. Ondine Chavoya, "The Yes Men," in *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Dis*ruption of Everyday Life, eds. Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 106.
- 4 From Favianna Rodriguez's website, HTTP://www.favianna.com. (accessed January 20, 2010).

- 6 Dara Greenwald, interview (2009).
- 7 Dara Greenwald, "The Process is in the Street: Challenging Media America," in *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority*, eds. Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland (Oakland: AK Press, 2007), 168–179.
- 8 Critical Art Ensemble describes the concept of "contestational biology" in their book, *The Molecular Invasion* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2002). Contestational biology is the radical appropriation of knowledge systems to create new biochemical fronts that can be engaged to disrupt profits. "Contestational" is a term that cultural workers use to describe other critical art practices including "contestational robotics" and "contestational geography."
- 9 Conversation with Paul Vanouse (2009); http://www.contrib.andrew.cmu.edu/~pv28/
- 10 C. Ondine Chavoya, "Critical Art Ensemble," in *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, eds. Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 117.
- 11 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 37.
- 12 Steve Kurtz, interview with the author, Buffalo, NY, September 6, 2009.
- 13 Steve Kurtz, email interview with the author, November 27, 2009.
- 14 Natalie Jeremijenko, interview with the author, New York, NY, October 4, 2009.
- 15 Dan Tucker, email response to general survey, November 3, 2009.
- 16 Beaver Group, http://www.16beavergroup.org. (accessed January 20, 2010).
- 17 Paige Sarlin, interview with the author, October 10, 2009.
- 18 Rosten Woo, interview with the author, October 11, 2009.
- 19 In the U.S., a useful place to begin to learn about this work is through *An Atlas of Radical Cartography*, edited by Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat, a collection of ten maps and ten essays about social issues.
- 20 Trevor Paglen, "1000 Words," Art Forum (March 2009), 228.
- 21 Steve Kurtz, interview with the author, Buffalo, NY, September 6, 2009.
- 22 From the Beehive Collective website, HTTP://www.beehivecollective.org (accessed January 20, 2010).