



# MONASH University

**The Impossible Public:  
The Politics of People in Contemporary Art**

Holly Elizabeth Arden  
BA (Hons Class 1)

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## Abstract

The term ‘public’ is a buzzword in art institutional lexicon, variously used to indicate art made by and for the public, or efforts made by galleries, museums and other organisations to reach a wider number of individuals, as in the terms ‘public art’ or ‘public programming’. Further, the amount of theoretical discussion on art’s public dimensions has intensified since the 1990s, being integral to Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’, Grant Kester’s ‘dialogical art’ and Claire Bishop’s ‘participatory art’. However, much of this discourse has neither substantively, nor with sufficient nuance, considered the political and artistic ramifications of contemporary art’s focus on its public, *per se*. In this thesis I argue that this is a significant oversight, given that the broader context of neo-liberal capitalism has threatened, if not decimated, many aspects of public life.

*The Impossible Public: The Politics of People in Contemporary Art* examines participatory and collaborative projects and artworks from the mid-1990s onwards that engage overtly with the idea of the public. The artists and artistic groups, from North America, the United Kingdom and Australia, are A Centre for Everything (Gabrielle de Vietri and Will Foster), Komar and Melamid, Harrell Fletcher (with collaborators Jens Hoffmann, Jon Rubin and Miranda July), Jeremy Deller, Stuart Ringholt and Natalie Bookchin. Through a close examination of their artworks, this thesis observes specific artistic approaches toward, and a distinctive set of interests in, the notion of the public, as distinct from other art-related terms including ‘audience’ and ‘community’. For example, these works tend to consider the public in its most open sense, as an incalculably large and diverse number of people. I argue that these artworks invest in the continuing viability of a particular idea of the public—the public as a form of *potential*—which I develop in this thesis. My approach considers the post-Enlightenment and bourgeois origins of the idea of the public and draws on recent political philosophy and art theory to rethink the concept of ‘the public’ for contemporary art.

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## Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature



Print Name: Holly E. Arden

Date: 25 August, 2016

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## List of publications during enrolment

Arden, Holly. "Long Story Short: A Conversation with Natalie Bookchin." *Institute of Network Cultures Video Vortex Blog*, February 22, 2016, <http://networkcultures.org/videovortex/2016/02/19/natalie-bookchin-in-conversationlong-story-short/>.

\_\_\_\_\_. Exhibition review of Marina Abramović: In Residence." *Journal of Arts & Communities* 7, no. 3 (2015): 181-185.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public." *Art and the Public Sphere* 3, no. 2 (2014): 105-118.

\_\_\_\_\_. Exhibition review of Amy Spiers and Lara Thoms: Lonely Hearts. *eyeline* 77 (summer 2012/2013): 78-79.

\_\_\_\_\_. Book review of *The Eyes of the Public*, Jeffrey Edward Green. *Visual Studies* 26, no. 3 (2011): 273-274.

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## Introduction

“Good Lord! who can account for the fathomless folly of the public?”  
“They’re a remarkably sensible people.”  
“They are subject to fits, if that’s what you mean; and you happen to be the object of the latest fit among those who are interested in what they call Art.”

— Rudyard Kipling, *The Light That Failed*, 1891

This research began in the wake of a very public controversy in 2008. As the renowned Australian photographer Bill Henson faced criminal charges over his photographs of nude adolescents as part of an art exhibition in Sydney, I became fascinated with the type of public response to so-called moral transgressions by contemporary artists. It soon became abundantly clear, however, that my understanding of the notion of ‘public response’ needed clarification. Who was this public so distressed or concerned by Henson’s photographs? And who was the public involved in defending them? Was the public more than a group of particular individuals? These questions presented a divergent stream of research that led me away from my earlier theme of moral panic to interrogate this most ambiguous of concepts with respect to art—the public. That is, the question driving my research increasingly turned around the much larger question of who is ‘the public’ for art? For it suddenly became apparent that ‘the public’ is continually invoked in relation to art but the meaning of the term is rarely scrutinised or consistent. The tabloid media frequently uses the concept when it decries the waste of taxpayers’ money on contemporary art, often from the commonly wielded ‘public purse’. Art institutions also employ the concept but in a different way, referencing art’s educative and civic functions in the forms of ‘public art’, ‘public museums’ and ‘public programming’.

But who comprises the public? Is it too large to count because it supposedly includes everyone and anyone? Is it ‘ordinary people in general’?<sup>1</sup> According to theorist Alastair Hannay, the public cannot be counted because it is, in an important sense, singular—a mass noun—however paradoxical this may seem.<sup>2</sup> The word ‘public’ is related to the term ‘people’ and comes from the Latin, *populus*. Its origin is the Latin *publicus*, a combination of *poplicus* ‘of the people’

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Dictionaries, “Public,” Oxford Dictionaries, accessed May 3, 2016, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/public>; see also definition of “publicus,” Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 1485.

<sup>2</sup> Alastair Hannay, *On the Public: Thinking in Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 21.

(from *populus* ‘people’) and *pubes* ‘adult’.<sup>3</sup> The title of this thesis, *The Impossible Public*, is intended to evoke the difficulty of being able to define a single collection of individuals under the heading of the public, despite the regularity with which this is done and despite the temptation to do so.<sup>4</sup> As art historian Rosalyn Deutsche suggests, the public is impossible to definitively pin down, both as a concept and as a living reality.<sup>5</sup> The term has wide-ranging meanings, not to mention the potential for significant ambiguity because of its myriad applications. The public can be conjured to agree with this or that statement, while politicians typically claim that they are acting on behalf of the (voting) public. Democracy, rule by the people, is in practice a process by which political parties wield their ‘public’ mandate for enacting policies. Commonly used to suggest ‘everyone’ or ‘anyone’, often under the politically rhetorical catchall ‘the general public’, it almost goes without saying that it cannot really mean this; the public is far too multifarious. However, ‘the general public’ can be a convenient piece of classificatory political rhetoric that belies the heterogeneity of the voting or opinion-holding populace.

The expression ‘public’ is used regularly in political theory, in everyday parlance and in arts discourse, as noted above, in conjunction with ‘public engagement’ with art, or in terms of ‘public access’, ‘public funding’, and so on. But the term’s singular referent masks the fact that the public is always plural, or that in a sense there are always multiple *publics*.<sup>6</sup> As curator and photographer Jorge Ribalta argues, ‘the public has a double meaning of social totality and

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<sup>3</sup> Oxford Dictionaries; Lewis and Short.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase ‘impossible public’ also recalls the title of Walter Lippmann’s book *The Phantom Public* of 1925. However, my use of it is distinct to Lippmann’s, for whom public affairs were controlled ‘from distant centers’ and ‘by unnamed powers’ (3), rendering the public both disenchanted and democratically impotent. See Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, introd. Wilfred M. McClay, 1993 ed. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1993). Despite the public’s phantasmagoric abstraction (in Lippmann’s terms), and despite its conceptual ambiguity, the public is still a primary political subject. Cultural theorist Bruce Robbins explains that:

the public has long served as a rallying cry against private greed, a demand for attention to the general welfare as against propertied interests, an appeal for openness to scrutiny as opposed to corporate and bureaucratic secrecy, an arena in which disenfranchised minorities struggle to express their cultural identity, a code word for socialism. Without this discursive weapon, we seem to enter such struggles inadequately armed.

Bruce Robbins, “Introduction: The Public As Phantom,” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, Cultural Politics, Vol. 5, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), x.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions, Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago, IL and Cambridge, MA: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and The MIT Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Warner’s book *Publics and Counterpublics* makes an important distinction between *the* public (definite article) and *a* public (indefinite article) as follows:

*The* public is a kind of social totality. Its most common sense is that of the people in general. It might be the people organized as the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community.... But in each case, the public, as a people, is thought to include everyone within the field in question. This sense of totality is brought out by speaking of *the* public, even though to speak of a national public implies that others exist; there must be as many publics as polities, but whenever one is addressed as *the* public, the others are assumed not to matter.

Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 65-66.

specific audiences'.<sup>7</sup> In relation to art, for instance, we might consider these specific audiences as the publics who view art, for example, or the publics who pay taxes to fund various elements of the arts (publics that, as argued above, are regularly conjured during debates over 'questionable' artistic morality or taste). However, just what the concept of 'the public' means with respect to art is generally ill defined by those who use the term and rarely scrutinised by art theorists. This is an oversight considering the increased and growing interest among artists in participatory and collaborative practice from the 1990s onwards, and the burgeoning discourse on these practices. The key protagonists of these critical debates, including Suzanne Lacy, Nicolas Bourriaud, Miwon Kwon, Grant Kester, Claire Bishop and Dave Beech, among others, have sought to understand the political, ethical and aesthetic ramifications of art's overt engagement with its various communities, collaborators and participants. Considering the depth and breadth of critical interest in so-called 'relational', 'dialogical' and 'participatory' works (Bourriaud, Kester and Bishop respectively), it seems to me an omission that the relationship between art and the public *as such* has not been considered in critical depth.<sup>8</sup> Kester provides one of the only, and relatively brief, analyses of the contemporary public for art in his 2011 book *The One and the Many*.<sup>9</sup>

There is a steady and growing interest among contemporary artists to engage with members of the public beyond the 'art world' through participatory practice. But how is the public evoked, visually and conceptually, in this work? To be clear about terminology, this thesis is not about 'public art' *per se*. Public art typically refers to a work's location in public space, usually its geographical siting. The majority of works in this study are not 'public' in this sense.<sup>10</sup> While this research is less concerned with public art in a spatial sense, there are of course significant crossovers between 'public' (designating space) and 'the public' (designating people). Philosophers and critical theorists from Jürgen Habermas to Rosalyn Deutsche have argued that one's membership of the public is thoroughly enmeshed with one's membership and right to

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<sup>7</sup> Jorge Ribalta, "Mediation and Construction of Publics: The MACBA Experience," *republicart*, April 2004, accessed August 10, 2014, [http://republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01\\_en.htm](http://republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01_en.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* was originally published in French in 1998 and translated in English in 2002. (*Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland (Dijon-Quetigny: Les presses du réel, 2002)). Widely viewed as a canonical text in the theorisation of relational practice, curator Bourriaud sought to examine a number of artists with whom he had worked closely, and for whom inter-human relations were the subject of their work. Also see Grant Kester's use of the term 'dialogical' in his book *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 2004). Claire Bishop has adopted the term 'participation' more consistently than other key theorists in the field, including in her edited anthology *Participation, Documents in Contemporary Art* (London, UK and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel and The MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The theorisation and practice of public art has become increasingly innovative and experimental since the 1990s, moving away from the 'plonk' style monuments for which this area of practice was once known. Work by public art organisations such as Situations in the UK and Creative Time in New York have been instrumental in this change.

appear in public space as a legitimate member of society.<sup>11</sup> In addition, I want to avoid conflating the notion of the public with the terms ‘audiences’, ‘communities’, ‘spectators’ and ‘viewers’, all of which suggest more or less quantifiable groups of individuals, often particular individuals who are present at an exhibition, event or performance. For example, the term ‘audience’ delimits the public as a group of viewers or listeners, while the term ‘community’ suggests a group of individuals defined by their common location, interests, and so on, as opposed to the greater indefinability of the public.<sup>12</sup> I therefore distinguish the concept of the public for art from ‘community art’, art made in collaboration with, or with participation from, such definable groups of individuals.<sup>13</sup>

It may actually seem unusual to bring the term *public* into proximity with terms like ‘audience’ at all. A public, after all, is paradigmatically different to an audience in that it does not necessarily imply an engagement *with anything by anyone in particular*. The public exceeds an attempt to define it and I will argue that it is this very unknowability (even this unpredictability) that lends political force to the idea of the public. This thesis aims to critically develop the concept, arguing that it suggests a unique and politically driven mode of encounter between

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<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans., Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989); Deutsche, *Evictions*. Indeed, modern concepts of the public can be viewed in terms of a continuous renegotiation—set against private, capital and statist interests—between so-called public spaces, who may participate in these spaces, and how.

<sup>12</sup> Harriett Senie prefers the term ‘audience’ to ‘public’ or ‘community’ as “it implicates only those for whom something was created”, a number of people who directly experience the work in person, or else indirectly experience it second-hand through various channels. (Harriet F. Senie, “Reframing Public Art: Audience Use, Interpretation and Appreciation,” in *Art and Its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, ed. Andrew McClellan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 185.) Senie’s empirical research describes specific audience responses to a range of public artworks in the US. She asserts that the term ‘audience’ implicates those for whom something is created. This suggests that artworks are created ‘for’ an audience in the first place, and a specific audience at that: one that ‘receives’ the work. This position is excusable in this case; given the subject is ‘public art’, one can assume that the artists of such works had at least a site in mind, if not necessarily an audience for that site. Senie’s theoretical approach is, however, problematic in parts. For example, in the remainder of her text, Senie suggests that discrete ‘meanings’ might belong to the works (those intended by their artists) while audience members can ‘alter’ the meanings of these works by physically interacting with them or interpreting them differently.

This warrants comparison with Rosalyn Deutsche’s use of the terms audience and public, where ‘public art as art operating in or as a public sphere...means that an art public, by contrast with an art audience, is not a preexisting entity but rather emerges through, is produced by, its participation in political activity’ (*Evictions*, 288). My theoretical position in this thesis supports artworks that actively or non-intentionally problematise any predictable ‘outcome’.

<sup>13</sup> In its contemporary form, community art is often made for socially ameliorative purposes. Community art tends to connote a qualitative distinction as an ‘other’ to ‘high art’; typically, it is produced by and for a local community of non-arts-professionals and is not subject to industry and market-driven concerns. I recognise that this is a contentious distinction, particularly for the type of practice being discussed in this thesis. Indeed, some of the works in this study actually share artistic methodologies with so-called community art; others all but shun traditional distinctions between artist/non-artist and high/low art. However, the distinction I am making is based in part on artists’ concerns with philosophical and aesthetic questions (often engaging directly and self-reflexively with the ‘art world’) rather than a concern with localised and practical issues and outcomes. See also Grant Kester’s definition of community in “Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Art,” *Afterimage* 22, no. 6 (Jan 1995): 5-11.

artworks and individuals that terms such as audience cannot account for. Indeed, the public for art, I wish to argue, includes *potential* audiences and communities.

### **The public as potential**

The public of potential audiences and communities is evoked by the artworks in this thesis, in works by A Centre for Everything, Komar and Melamid, Harrell Fletcher, Jeremy Deller, Stuart Ringholt and Natalie Bookchin. I have chosen these particular artists because their works emphasise specific issues and a distinctive set of approaches toward the notion of the public that I want to explore in this research.<sup>14</sup> The works by these artists engage overtly with the idea of the public. They do this in two ways: either through involving people directly in exhibition projects that they have facilitated or curated, or through participatory artworks, or both. Taken together, these exhibition projects and participatory works span a range of media and contexts, from painting to performance, video installation, conversational works and a centre for alternative education.

Many of the projects or works by these artists consider the public in its loosest or most open-ended sense, not as a monolithic ‘mass’ or as a politically coherent community, but amorphously, as an often incalculably large and diverse number of people. Further, many of the artists take an experimental approach to finding or ‘recruiting’ the public with whom they will work. Conceiving of the public as any ‘open’ number of people, their works stage artistic investigations that yield unpredictable outcomes in terms of the public that comes to be involved, its response to the ‘invitation’ to participate in the work, and in terms of the art that results from this exchange. While a level of unpredictability surrounds most works of art (one cannot, of course, ever quite gauge how an audience will respond to a work of art) many of the works in this study appear to engage consciously with this unpredictability as a motivation. As such, my hypothesis is that the public evoked by such works is a public of potential: of potential knowledge, potential action, of potential creativity, ideas, and so on. Further, it seems to be a public characterised by its very diversity, anonymity, unknowability and unpredictability.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Works by other artists (including Hiromi Tango, Thomas Hirschhorn, Paul Ramirez Jonas, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Tino Sehgal) were considered during this research but ultimately they were not the focus of this study because they did not specifically seek to articulate or interrogate the notion of ‘the public’ that is otherwise shared by the works selected for the case studies in Chapters Two to Six.

<sup>15</sup> As critic Gretchen Coombs and cultural theorist Justin O’Connor argue, ‘[t]he importance placed on “community” tends to privilege unity and consensus over multiplicity and dissensus and is defined as static rather than dynamic’—characteristics that are at odds with the multifariousness and unpredictability implied by the term “the public.” Gretchen Coombs and Justin O’Connor, “Come together,” *Art and the Public Sphere* 1, no. 2 (2011): 148.



A reason for these artists' experimental or 'stab in the dark' approach to involving people in their works is conceivably their suspicion of artistic paternalism and troubling displays of artistic 'ethnography'. Such accusations have been variously leveled at participatory art, including art that involves 'communities'. In her well-known book *One Place After Another* (2002), the art historian Miwon Kwon writes at length about the reductive representation of communities in some examples of community art, at worst an essentialising of individual and group subjectivities.<sup>16</sup> More recently, Claire Bishop has mounted a sustained critique of British community art and other participatory practice that she argues has lost its once-political goal of 'empowering' individuals and groups and instead has been instrumentalised by neo-liberal governance as a 'Band-Aid' to heal communities that have been affected by corrosive policy decisions.<sup>17</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising therefore, that many contemporary artists find such collective concepts as community difficult to reckon with.

And yet, I want to argue that the six artists/collaborations in this study explore a notion of the public, not as a collective or entirely coherent entity, but one that nonetheless conceives of the public in an identifiable way. They evoke the contemporary public 'from below', with several works indicating a clear alignment between the concept of the public and political and economic powerlessness. Some works contain overt and sometimes subversive references to the Marxist proletariat, the industrial-era working classes and 'the people', with others alluding more generally to 'common folk', the popular, and the 'ordinary' or 'average' person. In other words, the public is frequently conceived of as an amorphous non-elite. While at risk of repeating the similar paternalistic approaches to their public subjects, the manifestly 'open' nature of each of the artworks—their evocation of the breadth and size of the public 'from below'—avoids, I believe, some of the more troubling aspects of previous approaches to participatory art.

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<sup>16</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another, Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 146-147. Kwon also quotes Hal Foster, who in 1996 published his seminal essay titled "The Artist as Ethnographer" in his book *The Return of the Real*. (Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 171-203.) Foster identified what he called 'the ethnographic turn' in contemporary art. This is a tendency, particularly in site-specific art, to adopt ethnographic forms of investigation and representation of the cultural or racial 'other', who is then idealised according to 'primitivist fantasies' of authenticity, or who is seen to have 'special access to primal psychic and social processes from which the white subject is somehow blocked' (175).

<sup>17</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 188.



(Fig 1) Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, *Folk Archive* [detail], 2000-2005  
 'Tom Harrington, Cumberland and Westmoreland Wrestling Champion, Egremont, Cumbria, 1999'.  
 Image courtesy Jeremy Deller.

The frequent 'public outcries' around contemporary art (commonly due to this art's representation in the tabloid media) have contributed to extremist discursive discrepancies between the 'art world' on one side (an elite minority who waste public money) and the broader public on the other who are ignorant about, and suspicious of, contemporary art. This leads to the second and somewhat tongue-in-cheek meaning of my thesis title, *The Impossible Public*, where it refers to a popular view of the public as the lowest common denominator, in other words, an ignorant and base public—the necessary but difficult public, incapable of relating intelligently to such complexities as contemporary art. Indeed, this type of discursive framing of the public, a working class public in need of education, enlightenment and of civilising, was the basis for the growth in nineteenth-century Europe of public buildings and spaces for instruction

and entertainment, which included art galleries, libraries and parks.<sup>18</sup> The proliferation of public art in modern cities from the 1960s onwards had similar ideological goals: to educate, civilise and bring examples of higher culture to the ‘common folk’, the public.<sup>19</sup> Indirectly, these goals remain central to many contemporary examples of public art, which also continue to provide forms of entertainment and beautification in centres of urban growth and redevelopment.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, in 1979, the French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu famously argued in his empirical study, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* that the appreciation of art is related to an individual’s level of ‘cultural capital’. Bourdieu linked appreciation for the arts with the seemingly inherent ability of the higher social classes and the better educated—those with more cultural capital—to naturally ‘read’ works of art.<sup>21</sup> Despite widespread critiques of Bourdieu’s elitism, there remain clear affiliations between wealth, privilege and cultural capital and the professional practice, distribution and consumption of art. And, as Grant Kester writes, even while art galleries have increasingly ‘jumped on the bandwagon’ of exhibiting socially engaged and participatory work, seemingly in the name of the ‘public’, this is not without tension:

in an effort to appear relevant they [galleries] are now being forced to rapidly calibrate the relationship between their own institutional agendas (typically concerned with the prerogatives of individual and corporate wealth and prestige, massaging the egos of rich collectors, and vague notions of the “public”) and the imperative to challenge the easy affiliation of wealth, privilege and art, which is the implicit foundation of many socially engaged art practices.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of the level of semantic confusion and passivity still frequently attached to the notion of the public, I have been drawn to artists who are trying to counteract this; disassociating it from the ideological baggage of governmental and institutional attempts to bring art to the public, they are approaching the public more directly through participatory practices. These practices seem to be driven by a belief that art can and does benefit individuals (through personal empowerment, through mutually beneficial encounters with others, and in other psychologically beneficial ways). Admittedly, the language of personal empowerment is also a neo-liberal formulation, which I will address in the next section of this chapter. Further, governments and arts funding agencies have undoubtedly co-opted some participatory practice, as Bishop

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<sup>18</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

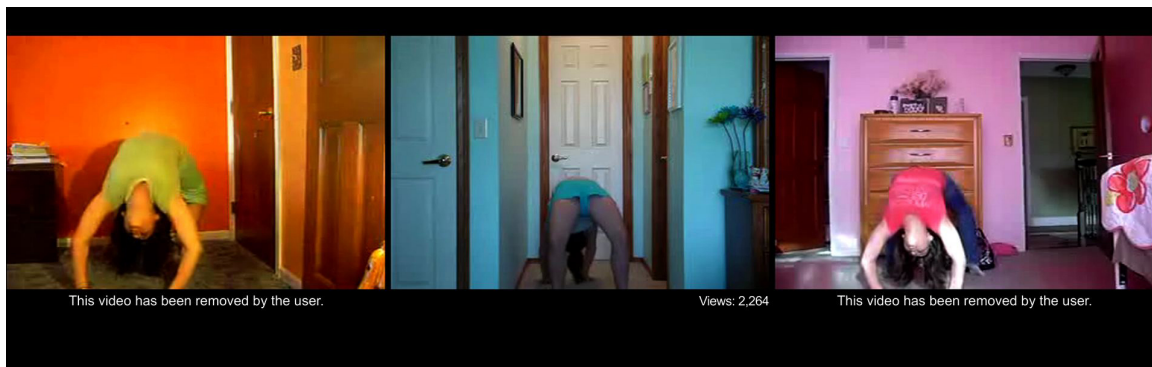
<sup>19</sup> Kester, *The One and the Many*, 187.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans., Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1979), 2-5.

<sup>22</sup> Grant Kester, “Editorial,” *Field: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art* (Spring 2016), second paragraph, accessed June 15, 2016, <http://field-journal.com/editorial/field-editorial-4>.

argues.<sup>23</sup> However, this does not mean that such practice cannot happen in a range of other contexts—personal and subjective—that can be viewed beyond immediate ideological interests, neo-liberal and otherwise. Further, despite the fact that the idea of the public is open to abuse, compromise and inculcation by ideology, I want to argue that it nonetheless retains the promise of democracy (rule by the people) and openness to ‘everyone’ and ‘anyone’. To borrow from Rosalyn Deutsche, ‘the term “public” has unmistakable democratic connotations. It implies “openness,” “accessibility,” “participation,” “inclusion” and “accountability” to “the people.”’<sup>24</sup> Through the lens of a number of participatory projects, I seek to test the limits of these qualities.



(Fig 2) Natalie Bookchin, still from *Mass Ornament*, 2009, single-channel video installation, 7 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.

### The demise of the public

My hypothesis is that artists are attempting to reinvent or reimagine the notion of the public in an era when it has been severely threatened. The last three decades have witnessed the near decimation of many facets of ‘the public’. This is apparent in the diminishment of the ‘public sphere’, the multitude of spaces, physical and conceptual, in which public activity takes place. Attacks on the public sphere grew particularly in the 1980s with greater moves toward privatisation instigated by conservative Western governments, notably in the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and in the United States under President Ronald Reagan. During the late ’80s and early ’90s, for example, Thatcher’s Conservative government sold key public utilities and services including British Coal, British Gas and British Rail. Such moves were touted as a means of maximising industrial efficiency and financial

<sup>23</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, “The Question of Public Space,” American Photography Institute National Graduate Seminar Proceedings (New York: The Institute, 1999), Iwalewahaus, Bayreuth University, Germany, accessed July 4, 2016, [https://iwalewapublicspace.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/rosalyn-deutsche-\\_the-question-of-\\_public-space\\_.pdf](https://iwalewapublicspace.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/rosalyn-deutsche-_the-question-of-_public-space_.pdf).

competitiveness, but they took ownership away from the public.<sup>25</sup>

The neo-liberal economic approach fostered by the Thatcher and Reagan administrations has continued to underscore the policy decisions of successive governments throughout the West, including in my local context of Australia. Broadly speaking, neo-liberalism supports the ‘deregulated’ market and ‘individual freedoms’ (read individual responsibility) as key determinants of wealth distribution, with minimal state intervention except insofar as to protect the ‘right’ to accumulate property.<sup>26</sup> In this vein, we can recall Prime Minister Thatcher’s now (in)famous TINA (‘There is No Alternative’) agenda, where she asserted this individualist focus in her statement: ‘there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families’.<sup>27</sup> Neo-liberal economic policy has supported scale backs to, or the dismantling of, the public sector across the health, education and welfare sectors.<sup>28</sup> In this context, it has become commonplace for private corporations to partner with, and in some cases take over, services that were previously the domain of the state (controversially, for example, a proportion of services under the UK’s National Health Service are now administered by private companies). Additionally, neo-liberal values have increasingly been absorbed by the education sector in the US and elsewhere since the early 1980s, with a focus on educational providers as markets rather than as societal institutions.<sup>29</sup> From the perspective of art critic and curator Carol Becker, ‘the concept of a “public” has all but disappeared—except perhaps as an epithet used by the right wing to reflect its scorn for what its adherents portray as an outdated, liberal notion of citizenship’.<sup>30</sup> Political scientist Wendy Brown also writes: ‘[a]s it dispenses with the very idea of the public, neoliberal rationality recognizes and interpellates the subject only as human capital, making incoherent the idea of an engaged and educated citizen’.<sup>31</sup>

And yet, I speculate in this thesis that the notion of the public continues to be viable in the work of certain contemporary artists. My speculations are framed in light of certain Marxist and post-Marxist writings that interrogate the political formation of the ‘public sphere’. In particular, I draw on the work of the radical democratic theorists Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière.

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<sup>25</sup> Richard Seymour, “A Short History of Privatisation in the UK: 1979-2012,” *The Guardian*, Thursday 29 March 2012, accessed August 24, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/29/short-history-of-privatisation>.

<sup>26</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Mitchell Dean, “Society,” in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, ed. Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 326.

<sup>28</sup> David Hursh, “Assessing ‘No Child Left Behind’ and the Rise of Neoliberal Education Policies,” *American Educational Research Journal* 44, no. 3 (Sep. 2007): 495.

<sup>29</sup> Hursh, 494.

<sup>30</sup> Carol Becker, “Microutopias: Public practice in the public sphere,” in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011*, ed. Nato Thompson (New York and Cambridge, MA: Creative Time Books and The MIT Press, 2012), 66.

<sup>31</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 183.

Both Mouffe and Rancière are explicitly critical of liberal democracy and neo-liberalism; both understand them as dominant systems that privilege social unity and political consensus to create the ‘social order’ as such. Both theorists assert that politics should destabilise the naturalised social order through ‘dissensus’, which, according to Mouffe, ‘makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate’.<sup>32</sup> In Mouffe’s terms, dissensus gives a voice to those individuals who are typically excluded from the current social order.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, for Rancière, dissensual activity connects to the very heart of politics, and redraws ‘the frame within which common objects are determined’.<sup>34</sup> Drawing on a range of texts by Mouffe and by Rancière, I argue that the public sphere, underpinned as it is by political activity, is open to continual, dissensual rearticulation. Further, I build an argument around ‘the public’ that is also based on dissensus as a continual redrawing of who can be included within the purview of ‘the public’. I contend that, despite its wide-ranging cooption, the idea of the public remains not only viable but essential—this is the potential that contemporary artists are seeking to explore.

### **The ‘public turn’ in participatory art**

The engagement of artists with the (non-art) public—with ‘other people’ and especially with ‘non-artists’—is not new. However, this thesis seeks to more rigorously analyse the conceptual significance of the public as a contemporary entity, a point to which I shall return shortly. Throughout the twentieth century, artists have in various ways repeatedly sought to collapse the distinction between ‘art and life’, commonly at the ‘frontier’ between artwork and audience, and suggestive of a range of ideological, aesthetic and philosophical motivations. For example, Claire Bishop describes the ways in which avant-garde practice in the early decades of the twentieth century aimed to foster an awareness of collective identity among its publics as an ideological maneuver. The Futurists encouraged the anger of audience members (and embraced the various aerial projectiles thrown at them) as they sought ways to develop the audience’s awareness of itself as an entity.<sup>35</sup> This was a deliberate political move, although not necessarily a progressive one. These artists’ fostering of violent crowds and their total absorption into the artwork, ‘created situations in which the audience were mobilised to participate in an orgy of hostility towards Futurist artists and poets engaged in a political mission of pro-war militaristic

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<sup>32</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Art and Democracy: Art as An Agonistic Intervention in Public Space,” *Open* no. 14 (Art as a Public Issue)(2008): 12.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. and edited by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 139.

<sup>35</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 46.

nationalism’.<sup>36</sup>

The late 1950s and 1960s brought about a surge in participatory and activist art that echoed contemporary developments in post-structuralist theory and the protest politics. This work interrogated, in an effort to undermine, the dominance of the ‘artist-author’ in relationship to the viewer. More often conceptually driven, with no physical objects being produced, such artworks also examined the aesthetic realm of audience participation. Notably, the North American artist Allan Kaprow pioneered a series of what he termed ‘Happenings’ in the late 1950s. Kaprow had trained as an Abstract Expressionist painter and became more interested in the ‘action’ side of art making rather than the actual production of paintings.<sup>37</sup> These actions involved members of the public as well as several of Kaprow’s artist friends (the likes of John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg) in performing temporary, staged events. These were usually of an everyday and even a banal nature. And, as distinct from the more open-ended or ‘unpredictable’ public works discussed in this thesis, Kaprow’s Happenings were frequently highly scripted and planned in advance by the artist. In his writings of 1966, he argued that Happenings needed to eliminate the typical role of the audience entirely, so that: ‘All the elements [of a work]—people, space, the particular materials and character of the environment, [and] time—can...be integrated’.<sup>38</sup> He was critical of Happenings in which artists merely staged another version of a theatrical performance, in which audiences were not necessarily willing or prepared to participate, or even aware of what they were participating in. Indicating his aversion to work that was too unpredictable, the artist wrote: ‘... [T]o assemble people unprepared for an event and say that they are ‘participating’ if apples are thrown at them ... is to ask very little of participation’.<sup>39</sup>

Key protagonists of this period also included Fluxus and Conceptual artists who disavowed art’s insularity from life, along with its consumption by bourgeois audiences. For example, in his first Fluxus Manifesto of 1963, the American artist and writer George Maciunas urged artists to ‘PURGE the world of bourgeois sickness, “intellectual”, professional & commercialized culture’ and to ‘promote NON ART REALITY to be ~~fully~~ [sic] grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals’.<sup>40</sup> Further, in the vein of his assurance that ‘everyone is an artist’, the German Fluxus and performance artist Joseph Beuys pioneered the Free International

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>37</sup> Hauser and Wirth, “Hauser and Wirth New York to Open with Allan Kaprow Yard,” press release, Hauser and Wirth New York, accessed May 4, 2016, <http://cloud.hauserwirth.com/documents/1bs68jH42uT5mqT3S19WAqryGWE0NKeEDheyi4r8DXeZR9Dslj/hwny-press-release5-725u4t.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Allan Kaprow, “Notes on the Elimination of the Audience,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel and The MIT Press, 2006), 102-3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>40</sup> George Maciunas, *Fluxus Manifesto*, 1963, offset, Museum of Modern Art, New York, accessed May 4, 2016, [http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2010/06/30/unpacking-fluxus-an-artists-release](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/06/30/unpacking-fluxus-an-artists-release).

University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research in 1973 as a means of fostering more porous exchanges between artist, audience, student and teacher in a pedagogic-cum-activist environment. Bishop also observes that while Beuys's pedagogic projects laid the conceptual groundwork for free, alternative learning projects facilitated by contemporary artists, the more recent projects of this nature differ importantly in their downplaying of the individual artist's persona as teacher/authority-figure.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, 'Beuys's commitment to free education was for the most part dependent on his own charismatic leadership, rendering unclear the line between education and one-man performance'.<sup>42</sup>

The latter part of the twentieth century, from the 1990s onwards, witnessed further manifestations of participatory art, labeled variously as 'new genre public art', 'relational aesthetics' and 'dialogical' practice, as critics sought to discern the forms, content and politics of this art.<sup>43</sup> Relational aesthetics, mentioned previously, was a concept developed by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud to describe the work of various artists who worked 'interactively', partly in response to widespread social alienation caused by factors including modernisation and new technologies. Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics* was first published in France in 1998, and was based on his curated exhibition *Traffic*, at the Musée d'art contemporain in Bordeaux. The book explored works that took as both subject and form the 'realm of human relations and their social context'.<sup>44</sup> Bourriaud described the various features of relational art (including its propensity toward staging encounters between individuals and creating convivial environments) through the works of several artists including Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Phillipe Parreno.

At approximately the same time (the mid-1990s), North American artist and critic Suzanne Lacy coined the term 'new genre public art'. This described participatory work that developed out of the activist practices of the 1970s including feminism, political and ethnic activism and community art. New genre public art opposed 'public art' in the sense of the creation of physical structures that may be either irrelevant to, or alienate, large numbers of the public. Often this was because they were 'plonked' in public space with little or no involvement from the residents of the communities in which they were placed, and with little attention paid to the specifics of their environment.<sup>45</sup> As suggested by the title of Lacy's book *Mapping the Terrain* (1995), new genre public art sought a more nuanced and engaged dialogue with place and with

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<sup>41</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 244.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Bourriaud; Kester, *Conversation Pieces*.

<sup>44</sup> Bourriaud, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Lacy, "Introduction: Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys," in *Mapping the Terrain*, 21.



individuals. Much of the work that Lacy included under the new genre banner explored and responded to feminist and racial politics, oppression, marginalisation and social and cultural privilege.<sup>46</sup> In the same book, the curator and writer Mary Jane Jacob discusses the ‘public’ dimension of new genre public art, noting its specific address to the public considered ‘outside of’ the narrow reaches of some modern and contemporary art:

It is not art for public spaces but art addressing public issues. This art is dependent upon a real and substantive interaction with members of the public, usually representing a particular constituency, but not one that comes to art because of an identification or connection with the art world... This work departs from the position of authority over and remove from the audience that has become a hallmark of twentieth-century Western art. It reconnects culture and society, and recognizes that art is made for audiences, not for institutions of art.<sup>47</sup>

Lacy’s own theorisation of new genre public art underpins the growing importance in the last three decades of the concept of the public as what she terms an ‘operative concept and quest’ for artists.<sup>48</sup> This can be charted, in part, as a response to sweeping changes to the public sphere since at least the 1980s, as previously described, particularly under the Republican leadership of Reaganism in the United States (from where Lacy wrote) and Conservative Thatcherism in the United Kingdom. And, perhaps reflecting its roots in community art, Lacy acknowledges that an ideal of ‘seeking consensus’ underpins new genre public art. By ‘seeking consensus’, she seems to mean that works strive to ‘inclusiv[ely] unit[e]...issues and concerns’ through the consideration and inclusion of multiple viewpoints, including those of previously marginalised groups.<sup>49</sup> While the works in my study take the concept of the public as their ‘operative concept and quest’, as noted previously in this chapter they also appear to theoretically revise Lacy’s view about public consensus. This does not mean they reject outright the idea of the public in the sense of a collective force; rather, they are more cautious about what it means to do so.<sup>50</sup> Again, I suggest that this is in part due to a suspicion among many contemporary artists about the ways in which such collective terms have been used historically.

My research begins in the mid-1990s in the wake of relational aesthetics and new genre public art and amid continuing political concern over the current and future state of the public sphere. What I am describing as a ‘public turn’ in art since the mid-1990s draws on Bishop’s 2006

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>47</sup> Mary Jane Jacob, “An Unfashionable Audience,” in *Mapping the Terrain*, 54.

<sup>48</sup> Lacy, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>50</sup> As a term and as form of practice, ‘new genre public art’ has not had much purchase in the critical discourse surrounding contemporary art since Lacy edited *Mapping the Terrain*. As it has unfolded over the last decade at least, much contemporary art has fostered forms of dissensus rather than consensus and has been less ameliorative than the art described in Lacy’s book. Essentially, Lacy is writing about a form of community art, which theorist Grant Kester has subsequently tried to redeem from a conceptual point of view.

phrase ‘the social turn’ but is intended to suggest much more open-ended relations between artworks and the public.<sup>51</sup> The public turn has also been significantly shaped by the adoption of Internet technologies since the 1990s by artists and arts institutions, and particularly by the participatory dimension of Web 2.0. Commentary on art produced by ‘non artists’ or by ‘amateurs’ has sometimes linked this art with the concomitant burgeoning of Internet technologies, wherein ‘the advanced technical relations of art are available to everyone irrespective of their professional schooling [and] pretty much anyone can produce art that *looks* like advanced art’.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, individual practitioners and galleries have embraced the Internet as a means for marketing and disseminating information about artworks and exhibitions. In an effort to monitor public feedback and to promote their exhibitions, particularly among young and ‘engaged’ audiences, state-funded institutions now embrace technologies such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. It can also be suggested that the ability to connect with an incalculably large and multifarious public of the Internet has bolstered a certain fascination of artists with the public as a similarly amorphous and unknowably large number of people. My argument about the works in this thesis also counters the claims of critics such as Bishop who have been quick to identify the limits of some participatory work (especially Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics) because it ‘preaches to the converted’, so to speak.<sup>53</sup> In the examples of the artists I am exploring, who directly appeal to the public beyond the ‘art world’, this is clearly not the case.

The ongoing project, A Centre for Everything, is a case in point. Since late 2012, Melbourne artists Gabrielle de Vietri and Will Foster have organised and facilitated A Centre for Everything as a base for a continuing series of public events. Held roughly once per month, these focus on creative political gestures and alternative learning—open-ended and relatively untraditional pedagogical methods that allow for flexible group dynamics and potentially unknown outcomes.<sup>54</sup> Previous events have included a session on parallel universes, a ‘bat discovery’ excursion with a flying fox expert, a workshop where participants re-wrote the news

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<sup>51</sup> In her recent attempts (2006/2012) to contextualise participatory art over the past century, Bishop traces a history of art that has been characterised by what she calls a ‘social turn’ (“The Social Turn, Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum International* 44, no 6 (February 2006): 178-83, a version of which also appears in *Artificial Hells*, 2012, 11-40). Bishop discusses artists who use ‘social situations to produce dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life’ (2006, 179). Her analysis tends to focus on contemporary artworks that can be contextualised by a history of political activism and movements for social change in modernist art. She expresses concern with the way in which the discourse on socially engaged art (by interlocutors including her contemporary Grant Kester) might privilege ideas of ‘society’ as based on values such as ‘an inflexible mode of political correctness’ whereas ‘discomfort, frustration...absurdity, eccentricity, doubt or sheer pleasure...[are] essential to gaining new perspectives on our condition’ (2006, 181). Bishop is correct in her assertion that the concept of ‘society’ may delimit intersubjective relations. However, this thesis is less didactic or prescriptive than Bishop in suggesting how participatory artworks engage with their publics.

<sup>52</sup> John Roberts, “The Amateurs Retort,” in *Amateurs*, eds Grace Kook-Anderson and Claire Fitzsimmons (San Francisco: California College of the Arts, 2008), 22.

<sup>53</sup> Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* no. 110 (Fall 2004): 67.

<sup>54</sup> De Vietri and Foster, interview by author, Melbourne, March 23, 2015.

into stories they wanted to read, a communal meal of Ethiopian food, a lesson about DIY toilet composting and a panel on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Currently located between de Vietri and Foster's Melbourne studio and a new venue in the Yarra Valley outside the city, each event comprises a trio of activities, including a shared meal, which provides informal socialising time and allows the artists to get to know participants.<sup>55</sup> Events are publicised by email and social media and cost between \$10 and \$20.

By way of an example, in early February 2014 I sat in de Vietri and Foster's Melbourne living room, surrounded by around 25 strangers. I was there to attend an afternoon event titled 'New Games, Dumplings and Auslan'. After the group settled into our seats around the edge of the room, two instructors gave us an hour-long introductory lesson on Auslan, Australian sign language. We learned how to sign the basics: the alphabet, hello, thank you and goodbye. Some swear words were thrown in for fun. Each member of the group took turns to sign out their name for the rest of the group, and then each person nominated a word for everyone else to learn. Following this interactive lesson, de Vietri and Foster led us outside and down their street to a wide nature strip in the middle of Alexandra Parade, a busy arterial road that runs through Melbourne's northeast. The artists explained the site's significance: once slated as a section of public rail network, the area had been included in recent plans to establish a major extension of the road linking eastern and western parts of the city. The controversial (and since shelved) East-West Link would have tunneled under the ground where we stood. De Vietri and Foster selected this site to teach us some games drawn from *The New Games Book*: physical, group games developed during the 1970s by counter-cultural activist Stewart Brand and writer George Leonard. New Games opposed the Vietnam War; it encouraged individuals to rethink their social and environmental relationships and allowed 'participants to suspend the culturally defined significances and consequences of their behavior'.<sup>56</sup> We learned two New Games, including 'Pruil', a game not unlike Tag but where all players keep their eyes closed (Fig 3). The evening at A Centre for Everything concluded with a participatory, Chinese dumpling-making session. A guest instructor showed our group how to fold the dumplings, using fillings that he had pre-made. We each made several dumplings, and the group moved out to de Vietri and Foster's courtyard to eat, drink and talk into the evening.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Shoshana Tembeck and Andrew Fluegelman, "It Began with World War IV," in *The New Games Book*, ed. Andrew Fluegelman (np: The Headlands Press, 1976), 7; Celia Pearce et al, "Sustainable Play: Toward a New Games Movement for the Digital Age," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2007): 262



(Fig 3) A Centre for Everything, 'Group 8: Auslan, Dumplings and New Games' [the author playing a game of Prui], February 2, 2014. Documentation image from Facebook, courtesy the artists.

The Centre's experimental approach to alternative methods of pedagogy is, in itself, not new, and can be contextualised among a number of other such artists' projects over the last fifty years—beginning with Beuys—many of which have responded to the increasing bureaucratisation of education.<sup>57</sup> Related values underpin non art-based alternative education venues in Australia and overseas, such as Laneway Learning (Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane), The School of Life (Australia, Europe and South America), and The Public School (run in multiple venues around the world), which 'is not accredited [and] does not give out degrees'.<sup>58</sup> Here, the Centre's appeal to more 'public' modes of pedagogy—to featuring

<sup>57</sup> Claire Bishop argues that since the pedagogical artworks of Joseph Beuys, Luis Camnitzer and other artists from the 1960s onwards, art and education have become allied in 'an age of ever-decreasing public space, rampant privatization and instrumentalised bureaucracy' (Artificial Hells, 242.) Even now, a flood of texts and exhibitions deal with issues around art and pedagogy, including Learning for Life at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in 2012/13 and the accompanying reader, *The Phantom of Liberty: Contemporary Art and the Pedagogical Paradox*, ed. Lars Bang Larsen and Tone Hansen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014). North American artist Jon Rubin's 'The Independent School of Art' (ISA), which ran from 2004-2006 in the San Francisco Bay area also sought to provide an alternative to tertiary art education through the creation of activities where 'students were challenged to determine and create their own artistic realities'. See <http://www.jonrubin.net/the-independent-school-of-art/>.

<sup>58</sup> While Laneway Learning and The School of Life still operate within classroom situations, they provide opportunities for informal introductions to academic disciplines such as philosophy that their students may not typically seek from traditional or formal environments. The School of Life also focuses on integrating elements of philosophy into everyday life, running courses that sound like popular self-help topics, such as 'How to stay calm', 'How to find a job you love' and 'How to make love last'.

unusual, non-vocational, non art-based and even perversely obscure ‘learning activities’—can be seen as an antidote to traditional institutions of learning. While it could be argued that the obscurity of the Centre’s activities narrows, rather than open up, the public that attends, it also facilitates a far more diverse range of activities than even those offered by other alternative education venues.

The Centre encourages a wide public to attend: events are held outside of typical art venues by individuals with widely different personal and professional backgrounds, many of who would not identify as artists or arts professionals. It provides its public with a means of engaging more directly with its structure and content: sessions are cheap, informal, flexible and participatory, with some events run by guest programmers or based around topics suggested by participants. In many cases, participants do not receive ‘lessons’ at all, but work collaboratively on creative outcomes, workshopping or playing games, some of which aim to achieve common goals (the simple act of making a meal together or the more politically charged aim of rethinking group behaviours using games). The Centre seemingly makes its endeavours more open to the public, which is to say that it encourages more casual public participation in a non-competitive and less hierarchical format than that offered by formal providers of education. Sessions are geared toward collaborative and usually non-didactic modes of learning. Perhaps most crucially, while many of the events have a political or activist ‘bent’, they rarely take a didactic approach. Herein, education is used as a means to open up spaces for public action, like the New Games played at the Centre, rather than directing it to occur.

In his article titled “Becoming Public: Public Pedagogy, Citizenship and the Public Sphere” (2012), the education theorist Gert Biesta defines ‘public pedagogy’ as combining politics with education and locating this firmly in the public domain, as against the increasingly private sphere of pedagogy for personal gain.<sup>59</sup> Biesta also supports a model of public pedagogy that is not about learning as such but is instead a confluence of politics and education to create what the philosopher Jacques Rancière might call a ‘third space’ or ‘dissensus’. As Biesta writes:

To ‘stage’ dissensus is to introduce an incommensurable element—an event, an experience and an object—that can act both as a test and a reminder of publicness. It is an element that can act as a ‘test’ of the public quality of particular forms of togetherness and of the extent to which actual spaces and places make such forms of human togetherness possible. The aim of such interruptions is not to teach actors what they should be, not to demand a particular kind of learning, but to keep open the opportunities for becoming public.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Gert Biesta, “Becoming public: public pedagogy, citizenship and the public sphere,” *Social and Cultural Geography*, 13:7 (2012): 684.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 693.

Biesta concludes by asserting that events that occur on these terms (like those I have identified at A Centre For Everything) are not political acts *per se*, but rather set up a free—or more particularly, an ‘open’ or public—space for political action to occur.<sup>61</sup>

### **Scope of study and chapter outlines**

The works discussed in this thesis are by artists from the United States, the United Kingdom and my local context of Australia. One of the reasons for this is that the latter two nations have a strong history of public welfare and thus a virulent neo-liberal agenda has made itself strongly felt here. The second reason is that I have sought, where possible, to participate personally in the artworks, whether this has been to conduct a nude tour of a gallery space (Chapter Five) or to take part in a short-course on sign language (discussed above). This has limited the study to English-speaking artists. I believe this first-hand experience of how the works have involved their participants has given me a far more nuanced understanding of how these works engage with the public.

The thesis is roughly chronological. Chapter One traces a history of the notion of the public. Beginning with its ancient origins, I chart the development of the concept in Enlightenment-era aesthetic and political theory, and its current significance within the discourse on contemporary art. I describe how art galleries have changed their relationship to the notion of the public, beginning with the opening of the Louvre in the eighteenth century through to the era of ‘public engagement’ in contemporary museums of art.<sup>62</sup> In this chapter I examine theoretical literature on the public’s political dimension in texts by Jürgen Habermas and his critics. I trace the critical interest in participatory art since the early 2000s, particularly in the work of two of its key interlocutors, Claire Bishop and Grant Kester. Through a reading of Chantal Mouffe’s work, I critique Bishop to assert my own position in relation to some of this participatory practice. Further, I draw on the political philosophy of both Mouffe and Rancière to position my own theoretical understanding of the notion of the public. Chapter One aims to develop a revised critical notion of the public, which will be used to explore the work of a number of contemporary artists in later chapters.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 694.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 4.

Chapters Two through to Six are ‘case studies’ of works that I have identified as being, in distinct yet related ways, overtly engaged with the notion of the public for art. Chapters Two and Three develop the concept of ‘the people’ in art. Chapter Two begins in the mid-1990s, with a series of paintings by the former collaborative duo Komar and Melamid, Soviet dissident artists who now reside in the United States. Their series *The Most Wanted/Unwanted Paintings* (1994-99) is based on the results of extensive, global public polling to determine the public’s aesthetic preferences, with the resulting works seemingly aspiring to bridge the gap between the public and contemporary art. The series is at once a satire of Stalinist conceptions of ‘the people’ in the former Soviet Union and a meditation on the ‘democratic’ tools of political polling and public opinion research, which view the public as an object of statistical inquiry. Chapter Two considers the idea that the public is—necessarily—an abstraction or an illusion that eludes being known or grasped in its entirety. It draws on Rancière’s notion of postdemocracy to posit Komar and Melamid’s project as a kind of ‘failed’ experiment in public consultation about art.

The abstract public in Komar and Melamid’s works are, in a certain sense, made ‘actual’ in various artworks and curatorial projects by Harrell Fletcher, discussed in Chapter Three. Fletcher’s humanising works engage deeply with individual people (people with a lowercase ‘p’) and with aspects of their day-to-day lives and art. Chapter Three focuses on Fletcher’s recent curation, with Jens Hoffmann, of the People’s Biennial (2010-2012), an ongoing series of exhibitions that invites submissions of work from so-called ‘non artists’, including amateurs and hobbyists. I explore the first iteration of People’s Biennial as a form of quiet, grassroots activism and its associations with both left-wing politics and a ‘do-it-yourself’ form of amateurism. Chapter Three engages with ongoing debates around art world ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’; it considers Fletcher’s practice in terms of the democratic aspirations of the twentieth-century avant-garde, Walter Benjamin’s seminal “The Author as Producer” and Rancière’s later theorisation of the ‘aesthetic regime’.

Chapter Four engages with the notion of the public in a more explicitly political context. I discuss a number of works made since the 2000s by English artist Jeremy Deller, including his provocative conversational work in the public realm, *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq* (2009). Here, Deller conducted a road trip through North America, touring the bombed-out husk of a Baghdadi car, to engage members of the American public in conversation. I also discuss his participatory works set in a British context: the collaboration with Alan Kane, *Folk Archive* (2000-2005) and Deller’s *Procession*, a street parade held in the English city of Manchester in 2009. Deller’s agonistic works engage with conservative economic and cultural policy in

Britain since the 1980s—policy that has threatened to decimate many elements of public life. His works revive a certain notion of the contemporary British public that roots it in industrial worker histories as well as in traditional craft and vernacular culture.

While Chapter Four discusses a number of Deller's works within the public realm, Chapter Five turns more directly to the issue of public space to address another conversational work, this time by the Australian artist Stuart Ringholt, which was presented in a major public square in Melbourne's city centre in 2011. In *Do You Want To Talk About Sculpture?* Ringholt stopped passers-by, asking them if they would like to sit with him and discuss sculpture. Drawing on Grant Kester's notion of dialogical art and a critique of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, I consider how *Do You Want To Talk?* invests in the notion of the public more broadly, and the public for art more specifically. I discuss Ringholt's practice since the early 2000s in terms of the artist's broader concern with healing or remediation and explore this work in terms of Ringholt's use of conversation in public space.

My final case study is less concerned with the public *for art*, and considers the viability of the public in broader political and economic terms. Chapter Six discusses recent video installations and films by the North American artist Natalie Bookchin. These interrogate the nature of collective subjectivities, namely 'the public', in the age of digital and social media. This chapter focuses on three of Bookchin's works that use found footage from YouTube or draw on the aesthetic conventions of public video logs or 'vlogs': *Mass Ornament* (2009), *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See* (2012) and *Long Story Short* (2016). Chapter Six also develops a discussion on the public's association with the 'working classes'. It considers how Bookchin's works posits the public in terms of economic and class factors, and connects her political installations with recent historiography of the 'public from below'.

Within the chapters the works are united in yet further ways: namely, in terms of concepts of 'the people'; mass culture and 'the masses'; nationhood and nationalism; notions of the 'working class'; public conversation; and ideas of public space and the digital public sphere. This thesis posits the notion of the public in a revised theoretical and aesthetic framework. It offers an alternative way of framing the works in this thesis based on my close readings of them, and on a critical engagement with recent art theory and political philosophy by Mouffe, Rancière and others. It clarifies the particular set of interests and approaches to the notion of the public that unites the works in this thesis. My hope is that it more clearly articulates the impossible public that drives the work of a number of contemporary artists.



## Chapter One

# The Promise of the Public

An artist occupies a public square, asking passers-by if they would like to sit and talk with him about sculpture (Stuart Ringholt); an artistic duo invites members of the public to learn sign language (A Centre for Everything); two artists poll thousands of members of the public around the world to research each nation's most and least wanted painting (Komar and Melamid) and another artist makes a video using YouTube clips of people dancing (Natalie Bookchin). What each of these artworks has in common is a particular desire to engage with anonymous members of the public.<sup>1</sup> As I have suggested, this desire is shared among a number of contemporary artists and I have chosen specifically to focus on a group of works that are united by their common approaches to, and interests in, the notion of the public. Concurrent with such practice, institutions of art, including funding bodies, galleries and museums, have apparently adopted a more concerted public focus than ever before. The critical discourse on art's public dimensions has thus intensified since the 1990s. However, most of this discussion has neither substantively, nor with sufficient nuance, considered some key questions: who is the public for art? How viable is the notion of the public, bearing in mind the eradication of many aspects of public life? And, given the steady interest by contemporary artists in ideas of the public, how is the public actually evoked in contemporary practice? The specific contribution of this thesis is to investigate points of intersection between contemporary artworks and the often markedly different understandings of, and characteristics attributed to, the public.

This chapter argues for the continuing possibility of a certain notion of the public, despite the concept's broad institutional and ideological co-option.<sup>2</sup> It proposes that, despite the prevailing ambiguity of the concept of the public, or precisely *because* of its wide-ranging applications, the idea of the public holds open a promise, which is that its reach may extend to include 'anyone' and 'everyone'. This is the notion of the public that the artists in this thesis appear to test and respond to through their participatory works. This chapter begins to investigate the question 'who is the public for art?' by locating the historical origins of the public. It also considers how the public has subsequently been understood in the context of contemporary political philosophy, in current art theory and by contemporary institutions of art. My aim is twofold:

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this introduction was previously published in Holly Arden, "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public," *Art and the Public Sphere* 3, no. 2 (Dec. 2014): 103-117.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Sheikh, "In the Place of the Public Sphere? Or, the World in Fragments," *republicart.net* (June 2004), para 15, accessed May 16, 2016, [http://republicart.net/disc/publicum/sheikh03\\_en.htm](http://republicart.net/disc/publicum/sheikh03_en.htm).

first to consider how the idea of the public has changed markedly over these centuries, and second to understand how this revised concept drives the work of contemporary artists.



(Fig 4) A Centre for Everything, 'Group 6: Humanure, Summer Rolls and Multiple Tests', March 14, 2013. documentation image, Courtesy the artists.

### The birth of the public

The origins of what is now widely defined as the public has been commonly attributed to classical times and especially to the activities of the *demos*, the common people of the ancient city-states. The *demos* met in the forum in Rome or in the agora in Athens and other Greek city-states to debate issues and to legislate.<sup>3</sup> The *demos* were considered free, unlike the slaves and women of the time, whose interests remained at the hands of the *demos*.<sup>4</sup> Sociologist Craig Calhoun observes that the classical roots of the term 'public' already suggested the concept's limited application to a specific number of 'rightful' people. As Calhoun writes, the public's 'philological roots lie in the *L poplicus*, of the people, which shifted to *publicus* apparently

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<sup>3</sup> John Hartley, *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 189.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

under the influence of its restriction to *pubes*, adult men'.<sup>5</sup> The idea of 'rightful' people with the capacity to affect democracy has come to shape subsequent theorisations and idealisations of the notion of the public, as I will demonstrate in the pages to follow.

First, however, it is important to clarify a further concept, which developed much later during the European Enlightenment: the notion of the 'public sphere' as a conceptual and physical realm.<sup>6</sup> The concept of the public sphere occurred in tandem with developing theories of aesthetics by philosophers of the time including David Hume and Immanuel Kant. Both Hume and Kant sought principles by which the widely divergent aesthetic tastes of individuals could be reconciled to reflect a common standard of taste.<sup>7</sup> For example, Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste* of 1757 considered that the skilled art critic should encounter artworks 'free from all *prejudice*', putting himself into the shoes of the everyman, so as to experience art in the manner in which it was intended to be addressed to the public.<sup>8</sup> As Hume writes:

when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or enmity with the author, I must depart from this particular situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being, and my peculiar circumstances.<sup>9</sup>

By clearing his mind of prejudice, the 'true standard' of the work could be sensed. Nevertheless, Hume concluded that 'though the principles of taste be universal', some tastes were still superior to others.<sup>10</sup>

Later, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant developed the notion of shared or universal taste (*sensus communis* or 'common sense'), a standard of inter-subjective understanding and communication on which individual aesthetic judgements could be based. 'This is accomplished,' Kant wrote, 'by weighing the judgement, not so much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgements of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of every one else, as the result of a mere abstraction from the limitations which contingently affect our own estimate.'<sup>11</sup> For Kant, reasonable judgements of taste are not merely subjective; rather, subjective judgement is implicitly comparable with a standard of judgement universally held.

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<sup>5</sup> Craig Calhoun, "Public," in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. ed. Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 282.

<sup>6</sup> Grant Kester notes that 'the public' is first articulated in the work of Enlightenment thinkers as early as 1650. These included Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. See Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 172.

<sup>7</sup> Günter Bentele, "Public Sphere (Öffentlichkeit)," in *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* 2, ed. Robert L. Heath (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Reference, 2005), 707-710, eBook Collection (Gale Virtual Reference Library).

<sup>8</sup> David Hume, "Dissertation IV: Of the Standard of Taste," in *Four Dissertations* (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1757), 224, eBook Collection (Gale Eighteenth Century Collections Online).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 228-29.

<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, "*Taste as a kind of sensus communis*," in *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. and with analytical indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 151.

Kant proposed that *sensus communis* should be understood as a form of ‘public sense’ precisely because it takes into account (a priori) collective reason in the formation of subjective judgements.<sup>12</sup> Further, as art historian Grant Kester clarifies, Kant proposed that judgements—or more specifically, aesthetic encounters—are capable of linking us with ‘universal humanity’ so that:

[T]he feeling of pleasure that is produced by an aesthetic encounter... is a visceral sign of the underlying harmony between the individual subject and the “universal voice” of humanity. It reassures us that we are all, essentially, rational individuals, capable of reaching political agreement by virtue of our common cognitive experience of the world... Further, it presupposes that a public sphere, based on the free and open exchange of ideas, will produce an eventual consensus because individuals are able to overcome self-interest and judge from the vantage point of a greater good.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, as Kester argues, in Hume’s and Kant’s aesthetic treatises we can glimpse some of the earliest theorisations of what the concept of the modern public sphere would come to represent: the idea of a ‘general’ opinion, free from personal prejudice, and shared or ‘universal’ understandings reached through reasoned and rational communication by members of the public. We can also observe a ready association between the concepts of the aesthetic and the public.

From a political and economic standpoint, modern concepts of the public and the public sphere were born from liberal democratic principles—also a product of Enlightenment thinking. Liberalism recognised the freedom of the individual from the state. It also made a distinction between the realms of the monarchy or state and the private spheres of home and personal life.<sup>14</sup> The burgeoning concept of a ‘public sphere’ was thus, perhaps paradoxically, based on the notion of the private and ‘an idea of the family and intimate life as the proper seat of humanity, from which persons could come together to form a public’.<sup>15</sup> Typically the bourgeoisie and landed businessmen, such individuals shared common interests and rights that concerned them neither wholly on an individual level, nor at the level of the state. In theory, individual interests were downplayed in the interest of the common good through citizens’ participation in public affairs, where shared concerns would be rationally debated, and a public consensus reached.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 2004), 28.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 47; Andrew Reeve, “Liberalism,” in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, ed. Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (np: Oxford UP, 2009), eBook Collection (Oxford Reference Online).

<sup>15</sup> Warner, *ibid.* Theorist Alastair Hannay also describes the liberal notion of the concept of the public. He writes that the terms ‘people’ and ‘public’ are from different ends of the political spectrum, and in this sense it can be argued that contemporary notions of the public belie their liberal origins in the realm of the private. Hannay, *On the Public: Thinking in Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Craig Calhoun, “Civil Society/Public Sphere: History of the Concept,” in *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences* (np: Elsevier Ltd, 2001), 1898. eBookCollection (SciVerse ScienceDirect).

This is the basis of the Enlightenment-era public sphere described by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his classic study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962).<sup>17</sup> Here, Habermas traces the development of the European bourgeois public sphere—a ‘private’ public sphere—as a product of modern liberal democracy. Herein, the bourgeoisie, working to assert its own fiscal and business interests, dominated the direction of public discussion to distinguish a discursive realm distinct from the ruling authorities. Despite the bourgeois underpinnings of the public sphere, Habermas describes a relatively egalitarian situation, where status could purportedly be disregarded and men of different rank could freely partake in social discourse that served the interests of all.<sup>18</sup> The physical manifestations of the public sphere included both built and literary environments: coffee houses and salons, newspapers and novels. In these physical spaces, working men could mingle in person with the bourgeoisie.

Habermas posits the public sphere as a testing ground for ideas and opinions, the strongest of which would ultimately influence authorities; herein a ‘public opinion’ could emerge as if spoken by a single individual channelling the opinions of everybody because it had been ‘purified through critical discussion in the public sphere to constitute a true opinion’.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the public sphere was underpinned by the deliberative democratic principle of reaching consensus decisions through rational discussion. Nevertheless, reiterating in part its precursors in ancient Greece and Rome, it was inaccessible to the impoverished and uneducated masses, and in certain domains, not accessible by women. The intellectual bourgeoisie was dominant, having ‘learned the art of critical-rational public debate through its contact with the “elegant world”’, namely literature and art.<sup>20</sup> And indeed, individual positions of power and prestige were unlikely to have actually been suspended, concedes Habermas, even though the objective to do so was ‘at least consequential’.<sup>21</sup> He goes on to describe the breakdown of the rather utopian, and ultimately short-lived, private public sphere, largely due to the pressures of developing trade interests, which forced an interventionist approach by the state. The corollary to this, observes Habermas, was greater state participation in public affairs and the ‘end point’, a system whereby ‘the parties...fused with the organs of public authority, established themselves...above the public whose instruments they once were’.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans., Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989). See also Luke Goode, *Jürgen Habermas : Democracy and the Public Sphere* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Goode, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Habermas, 95

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. See also Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts, “Introduction,” in *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere*, ed. Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Habermas, 36.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 147, 176.

Nevertheless, the core principles of consensus reached through rational discussion continue to prevail as key tenets of Western liberal democracy. And, as a text, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has remained extremely influential within political theory, despite being widely critiqued by contemporary theorists.<sup>23</sup> The book's description of a consensual political stage has been seen by certain postmodern theorists in particular to support normative, hegemonic power structures. For example, in her widely cited essay "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" (1990) feminist theorist Nancy Fraser contests the normalisation of bourgeois masculinity as a defining feature of the liberal public sphere. Fraser observes that in Habermas's account, the public sphere came to evolve as 'the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men, who were coming to see themselves as a "universal class" and preparing to assert their fitness to govern'.<sup>24</sup> The gender-exclusive public domain contrasted with the privacy of female domestic life. From the point of view of the bourgeoisie, this public/private distinction worked favourably to distinguish the bourgeoisie as a form of 'civil society' from both the aristocratic elite and from the lower classes from which it sought to separate itself.<sup>25</sup> Fraser accuses Habermas's account of the bourgeois public sphere as being implicitly ideological in its assumption that this sphere represented the public *per se*. She argues that:

virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics. Thus, there were competing publics from the start, not just from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Habermas implies.<sup>26</sup>

Alongside Fraser's feminist theorisation of 'counterpublics', the critical theorists Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge conceive of a Marxist counterpublic sphere. Their influential book *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* [*Public Sphere and Experience*] of 1972, translated into English in 1993, develops the concept of a proletarian public sphere in parallel to the dominant forms of the bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas.<sup>27</sup> More recently, critics including Simon Sheikh have readdressed the idea of counterpublics. Sheikh draws on Negt and Kluge's work to understand the counterpublic sphere 'as consisting of a number of spaces and/or formations that sometimes connect, sometimes close off, and that are in conflictual and contradictory relations to each other'—in other words, as a multitude of divergent spaces that are entirely different to

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<sup>23</sup> See for example the useful anthology of critical responses to Habermas edited and introduced by Crossley and Roberts.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* no. 25/26, Duke University Press (1990): 60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, "The Public Sphere and Experience: Selections," trans. Peter Labanyi, *October* no. 46 (Autumn 1988): 60. The work of Negt, Kluge and Fraser has clearly influenced a number of later theorists who have written about counterpublics and 'subaltern counterpublics'. See, for example, Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

Habermas's historicisation of the consensual, rational public sphere.<sup>28</sup>

Together with the notion of counterpublics, the notion of the public sphere as a site of gender, class and cultural normativity has also received sustained theoretical attention by recent art theorists, artists and curators of art in public space. These include WJT Mitchell, Suzanne Lacy, Rosalyn Deutsche, Miwon Kwon, Claire Doherty, Simon Sheikh (mentioned above) and Nato Thompson.<sup>29</sup> Based on Fraser's argument above, it is perhaps unsurprising that many of these leading interlocutors are women. Since the 1990s, these protagonists have contributed to a wider theoretical discourse around the contemporary constitution and viability of the public sphere. In particular, such debates have focussed on how art, especially art in public space, contributes to understanding and rethinking individual and collective subjectivities.<sup>30</sup> As described in the Introduction to this thesis, Lacy and her contemporaries including curator Mary Jane Jacob have readdressed how art functions in public space to determine 'what exists in the space between the words public and art'.<sup>31</sup> Lacy's 'new genre public art' (defined in her 1995 anthology *Mapping the Terrain*) attempted to widen the scope of art's interaction with 'broad and diversified audience[s]' beyond the art world, including with marginalised groups. Her notion of the public is 'founded on a sense of service and a need to overcome the dualism of a separate self'.<sup>32</sup> As I noted in the Introduction, this service ethos is quite distinct from that of the artists I focus on in the chapters to follow.

The critical projects of Lacy and her contemporaries during the mid-1990s are attempts to rethink what the public for art might mean, particularly in light of the public's historical lineage described above: the modern, liberal democratic conception of the public designated it in terms of class, gender, the capacity and the right to opine on shared matters, and a sense of universal commonality reached through *sensus communis*. Departing from this conception, and drawing on recent critical theory in which the public sphere embodies a multitude of conditional and conflicting spaces, this thesis develops the idea of the public for art in a more recent context since the 1990s. However, it is first important to describe how the idea of the public burgeoned in modern institutions of art and analyse why it has become a catchphrase of sorts in the

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<sup>28</sup> Sheikh, "In the Place of the Public Sphere?", para 6.

<sup>29</sup> WJT Mitchell, ed. *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Suzanne Lacy, ed. *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions, Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago, IL and Cambridge, MA: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and The MIT Press, 1996); Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another, Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002). Doherty and Thompson are curators of public art in their respective organisations, Situations (Bristol, UK) and Creative Time (New York, US).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Kwon's notion of 'collective artistic praxis', which refers to a temporary, provisional community of audience-participants who could be formed and performed around the making of an artwork, 154.

<sup>31</sup> Suzanne Lacy, "Introduction: Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys," in Suzanne Lacy ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 20.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

contemporary art world.

### **Art and the public: an institutional context**

Art has always had a public of sorts, but art institutions have taken up this concept more emphatically during the modern era and arguably with a greater level of anxiety. The term 'public' is now a buzzword in institutional lexicon, variously used to indicate art made by and for the public, or efforts made by galleries and museums to reach a wider number of individuals (as in the terms 'public art', 'public outreach' and 'public programming'). However, since the opening of the first public galleries, relations between public institutions of art, those responsible for professional art production, and members of the public, have at times been fraught. This continues to be the case, despite the fact that many artists and institutions have sought to close the perceived gap that exists between the narrow sphere of professional art production and art's potential public.

The first modern-style museum collections (known as *Wunderkammern* or *Kunstammern*, 'curiosity' or 'art' cabinets) were exclusive, private affairs, owned by an elite patronage of Renaissance scholars and nobility.<sup>33</sup> Such collections formed the basis of modern practices of collection and display, and some were gradually made available to a wider public through donation. The Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University has been cited as the first public museum in the world; its scientific 'curiosities' donated by Elias Ashmole were housed in a purpose-built museum from 1683, and the collection used for scientific research and study.<sup>34</sup> However, the opening of the first European public museums in the eighteenth century marks the beginning of a period in which museums opened their doors more liberally to individuals other than a minority of royalty, nobility and scholars. The Louvre in Paris is widely credited as being the first art museum to open to a broader public. Upon the commencement of regular Salon exhibitions in the Louvre in 1737, the museum was the main form of public entertainment in Paris.<sup>35</sup> Art historian Thomas Crow provides a leading account of a new type of art public, born with the modern museum.<sup>36</sup> As Crow writes:

The eighteenth-century Salon...marked a removal of art from the ritual hierarchies of earlier communal life. There the ordinary man or woman was encouraged to rehearse

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<sup>33</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> Ashmolean Museum, "History of the Ashmolean," Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.ashmolean.org/about/historyandfuture/>.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 1.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



before works of art the kinds of pleasures and discrimination that once had been the exclusive prerogative of the patron and his intimates.<sup>37</sup>

That this public was not easily discernable in a collective sense among the individuals from various walks of life who visited the museum is, in my view, significant; the Salon environment provided an opportunity for the lay person to express views about ‘high art’ that were, relatively speaking, unimpeded by the existing social hierarchies that were elsewhere prevalent.<sup>38</sup> A broad cross-section of people mingled in the Salon, from ‘the Savoyard odd-job man’ to the ‘great noble in his *cordon bleu*’, from the fishwife to the ‘lady of great quality’.<sup>39</sup> Individuals came to the Salon to express their personal opinions, debating with each other in a space that was manifestly different from either the private home or from spaces where they might otherwise gather.

Naturally, this did not mean that everyone’s opinions about art were valued. Art institutions of the time did not necessarily celebrate the burgeoning voice of critical ‘public opinion’, which grated against the traditions of the Academy and which was mocked in the burgeoning critical press for its lowering of standards.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the French artist Honoré-Victorin Daumier depicted this new and frequently comical spectacle of the Parisian Salon-going public in his series of caricatures published in the French satirical newspaper *Le Charivari* during the mid-nineteenth century. Daumier’s lithographs variously depict Parisian commoners making ill-placed remarks about Salon exhibits or upper class crowds eyeing up fellow gallery-goers on days of free public admission to the Louvre (Fig 5). Daumier appears wryly affectionate toward the jostling, unattractive crowds that populate his caricatures, upper and lower classes alike. In one print from 1864, a group of rather idiotic-looking, lower class men huddle around a table of half empty beer glasses, set in front of a sculpture gallery in the Louvre. ‘And you, what do you like best at the Salon this year?’ one asks. ‘The beer,’ another replies. (*Et toi? Qu’ e est-ce tu trouves le meilleur au Salon cette année? La bière.*)<sup>41</sup> As Daumier’s works indicate, with the throwing open of artistic judgement to this wider public, the modern museum was to embody the public sphere in microcosm—even if it was to judge the beer better than the art, or perhaps *because* it judged the beer better than the art.<sup>42</sup>

In tandem with this shifting conception of art’s public, one may also chart the public’s

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 1-18.

<sup>41</sup> Daumier’s lithographs of the Salon-going public were produced in several series, notably *Le Public du Salon* (also referred to as *Le Public au Salon*—The Public of the Salon), *Croquis pris au Salon* (Sketches Made at the Salon) and *Au Musée du Louvre* (At the Louvre) of the 1850s and 1860s.

<sup>42</sup> Crow, 18. Also see Rex Butler’s insightful analysis of Daumier’s lithographs and the notion of the modern public for art in his essay “Modernism: More Popular Than Populism,” *Broadsheet* 43, no. 4 (2014): 19-28.

institutionalisation by the art museum itself. Tony Bennett's book *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) explores the ideological role of modern liberal governance in institutionalising the museum-going public. As Bennett observes, social reformers of the Victorian era had recognised that providing spaces of self-improvement including public museums and galleries was just as important to the health of a community as were well-planned towns, which resulted in a spate of public buildings and spaces erected during this time.<sup>43</sup> Informed by the work of French poststructuralist Michel Foucault, Bennett argues that self-management and self-improvement went hand-in-hand with the institution's concomitant, civilising purpose as a tool of governmental knowledge-power.<sup>44</sup> The contexts of display and representation in the public museum developed an individual's capacity for receiving instruction. Furthermore, as individuals began to visualise how humankind related to the world at large through displays that mapped out these relationships, they simultaneously acquired the behaviour to match through their internal regulation, or 'self-surveillance', another concept developed by Foucault.<sup>45</sup> Notably, the twin ideas of self-management and self-improvement are cornerstones of current neo-liberal ideology.

In essence, Bennett argues that culture was not merely 'opened up' to the gallery-going public at large, but was necessarily mobilised toward specific ideological and behavioural ends.<sup>46</sup> The public of the modern museum mirrored a kind of idealised world in which the art of proper comportment à la the bourgeois, civilised classes was normalised and in which the objects on display required 'socially-coded ways of seeing' underpinned by the education that class could provide.<sup>47</sup> Appositely for my argument, Bennett also describes the burgeoning, institutional public in terms of its coherence and its metaphoric 'visibility'. Drawing on Foucault's work on modern systems of incarceration, Bennett compares the increasingly 'opaque' forms of modern discipline with the ever more visible public subjects of the modern museum.<sup>48</sup> The museum's facilitation of self-surveillance allowed its public to be seen as, and see itself, as a coherent entity, providing the potential for ideological instruction to more easily permeate and removing the necessity for more transparent forms of discipline, as in the Middle Ages.<sup>49</sup> As such,

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<sup>43</sup> Bennett, 18-20.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 23-24. Foucault theorised systems of power, incarceration and their affects on the body, such that in the modern era, public disciplinary systems transformed from the overt violence of the Middle Ages towards systems of surveillance and confinement during the nineteenth century. For Foucault, while the carceral system became ever more enclosed and private in its displays of power, the new modern museums became progressively more open and public, where they 'formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power ... throughout society' (Bennett, 61). Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans., Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, ([1977] 1995).

<sup>45</sup> Bennett, 63.

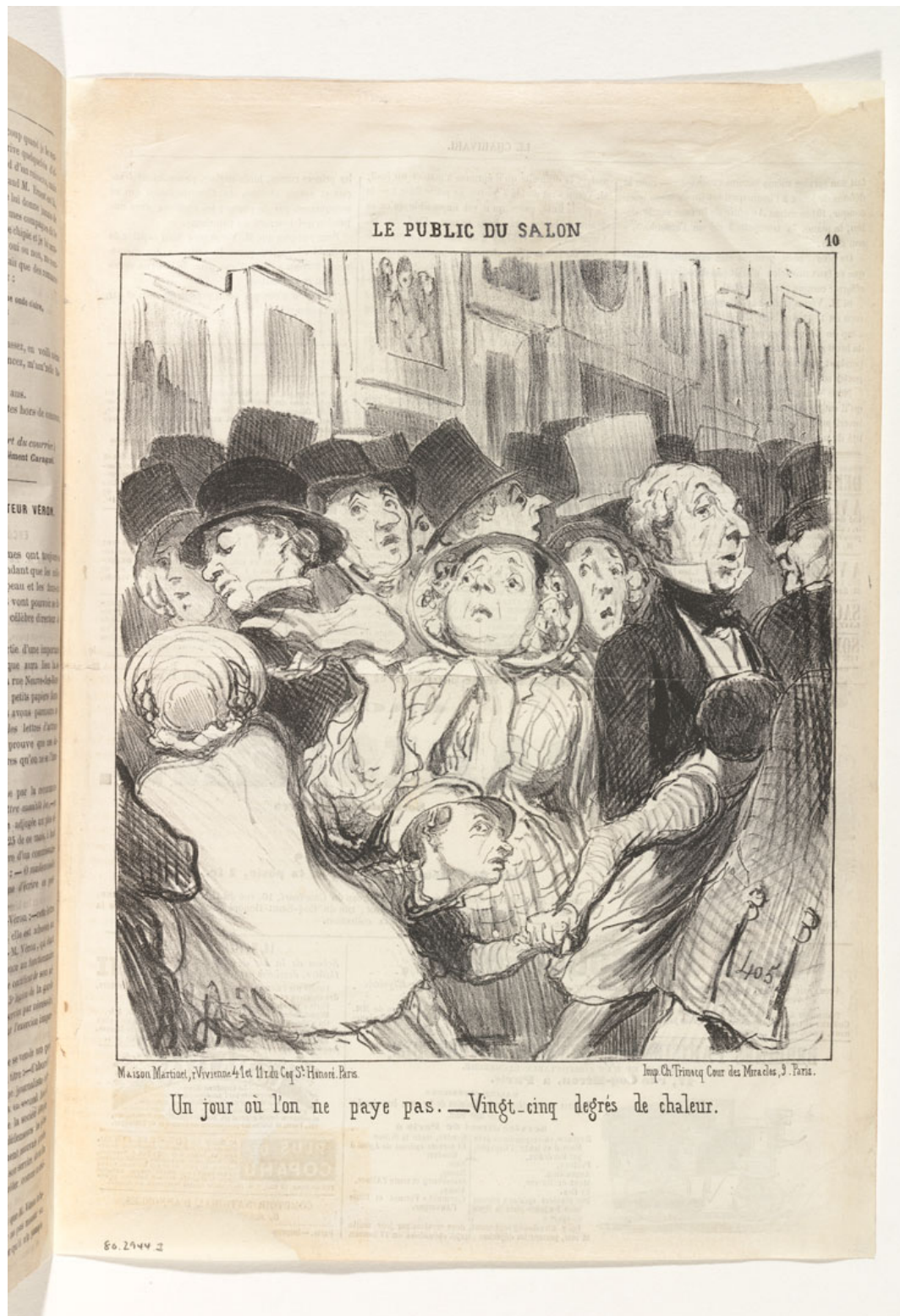
<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 24-47.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 28, 35. Bennett appears to draw on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital', in Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans., Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1979).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 61-62.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

museum-goers were transformed from a populace 'into a people, a citizenry', as the museum instilled specific forms of behaviour aimed toward self-improvement on a collective scale.



(Fig 5) Honoré Daumier, *Un jour où l'on ne paye pas* (*A day when they let you in for free*) 1852 from the series 'Le Public du Salon', published in *Le Charivari* on 17 May 1852, lithograph sheet 35.4 x 24.8 cm  
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra Purchased 1980.

Although less marked, facets of the contemporary public gallery still recall these early lessons in comportment where the public is encouraged to exercise self-surveillance and control in front of artworks. Additionally, the art museum's traditional associations with 'socially-coded ways of seeing'—in other words, with possessing the education or 'cultural capital' necessary to be able to interpret works of art—continues to prevail in various forms.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the idea of the museum as an elitist arbiter of bourgeois culture and proper comportment has, at least since the late twentieth century, been tested by cultural institutions and artists alike, with many museums and galleries seemingly desperate to reverse these historical and classist associations in an effort to bring a broad public through their doors. However, in his influential critiques of the museum's inward-looking institutionalism, first published on the pages of *Artforum* in 1976, critic Brian O'Doherty took aim at high modernism's ideological detachment from society (and by extension, from the public world) via its conceptual investment in the 'white cube' gallery space as a marker of class. In O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube*, a collection of the *Artforum* essays, he writes: 'Never was a space, designed to accommodate the prejudices and enhance the self-image of the upper middle classes, so efficiently codified'.<sup>51</sup> Here, O'Doherty unpacks the multiple social codes inscribed in the seemingly neutral walls of the gallery space ('a place deprived of location, a reflex to the bald curtain wall, a magic chamber, a concentration of mind, maybe a mistake') all the while recognising it as a sort of 'necessary evil' for viewing art.<sup>52</sup>

As noted above, since the 1990s, 'the public' has become a buzzword for state-funded arts institutions and funding bodies alike, with each party apparently acting on behalf of the public. What this means is often unclear, and frequently depends on who is using the phrase. As mentioned previously, public galleries appeal with what seems like an ever-increasing urgency to attract public visitors with 'blockbuster' exhibitions and family-friendly amenities housed on-site. Their urgency in this regard often reflects a need to justify to government funding bodies their continued financial support. In recent decades the arts sectors in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, among other nations, have faced substantial cuts, with the UK's local gallery sector particularly affected by steep cuts to arts and culture in the years following the 2008-09 Global Financial Crisis.<sup>53</sup> Decades earlier, during the 1990s,

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 35; Bourdieu, "Distinction".

<sup>51</sup> Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, introd. Thomas McEvilly, expanded ed. (Berkley: University of California Press, 1976), 76.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example Eliza Sarlos, "Arts Workers Should Be Angry About Funding Cuts—We Can't Work Harder For Less," *The Guardian*, Friday May 13, 2016, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/may/13/the-arts-industry-has-the-right-to-be-angry-about-funding-cuts-it-cant-possibly-work-any-harder>; Australia Council for the Arts, "Australia Council Outlines 2015-2016 Budget Impact," media release, 21 May, 2015, Australia Council for the Arts, accessed May 17, 2016, <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/news/media-centre/media-releases/australia-council-outlines-2015-16-budget-impact/>; Mark Brown, "Culture Spending by Councils 'down 17% since 2010'," *The Guardian*, Wednesday April 13,

approximately one-third of the US's National Endowment for the Arts budget was slashed.<sup>54</sup> Although not directly related, this notably came on the back of several years of high-level controversy over public funding of 'morally questionable' work by artists including Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano on the basis of 'the public good'. Again, this rather old-fashioned-sounding concept of the public good is unclear, and often has multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is used. With respect to cases like Mapplethorpe's and Serrano's, the public good refers to the well being of the public as a whole and it is closely aligned with upholding moral values. Given their controversial nature, public funding of these works proved to be a target for politicians who opposed them on moral grounds.

Some recent critical discourse has focused on the visual arts as one of Western society's last bastions of the public sphere. Used in this context, the public good is synonymous with autonomy for the visual arts as representative of the public sphere. According to this view, the content of works should remain unfettered by government interests, even while individual artists, artistic companies and galleries may receive government funding. At a recent 2014 conference at London's Tate Modern, writer and curator Ana Vujanović argued that neo-liberal governance, which frequently supports austerity measures in the arts and beyond, is against the idea of the public good, which has been left to 'decay freely'.<sup>55</sup> By way of a local example, in Australia in mid-2015, the federal Minister for the Arts controversially diverted \$105 million from the Australia Council, the nation's arms-length funding body, to create a discretionary fund under the control of his ministry, titled *The National Programme for Excellence in the Arts*.<sup>56</sup> Notably, such gestures represent a more authoritarian approach toward arts administration, with the ministry seeking to assert a much stronger reign over the arts.<sup>57</sup> Further,

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2016, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/apr/13/culture-spending-councils-arts-council-england>.

<sup>54</sup> Joanna Woronkiewicz, Bonnie Nichols and Sunil Iyengar, *How the United States Funds the Arts*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2012), accessed May 20, 2016, <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/how-the-us-funds-the-arts.pdf>, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Ana Vujanović, "The Public Good Will Not Be Curated" (paper presented at BMW Tate Live: Spatial Confessions – Speaking Part, Tate Modern, London, May 24, 2014), (online video), accessed July 25, 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/conference/bmw-tate-live-spatial-confessions-speaking-part>.

<sup>56</sup> Attorney-General for Australia Senator the Hon George Brandis QC, "Attorney-General's Portfolio Budget Measures 2015-2016," media release, May 12, 2015, accessed May 20, 2016, <https://www.attorneygeneral.gov.au/MediaReleases/Pages/2015/SecondQuarter/12-May-2015-Attorney-General%27s-Portfolio-Budget-measures-2015-16.aspx>.

<sup>57</sup> The idea that visual art forms part of the 'public sphere' is further complexified from a local Australian standpoint, given the current (2016) Coalition government's focus on funding art that is, in their words, 'excellent'—a term that echoes traditional values related to 'quality' and top-tier production. For example, during a 2013 address by the then Shadow Minister for the Arts, George Brandis, to a Sydney arts forum, Brandis spoke in thinly veiled, hierarchical terms about what is considered 'excellent art'. He concluded with the fact that, although the 'many millions' of Australians can and should have access to the arts, there also exists an 'arts public' that appreciates 'excellence' in the arts and that Australia should not be ashamed of this. See George Brandis, "The Coalition's Vision for the Arts in a Confident and Outward-looking Australia," (address to the Western Sydney Arts Forum, Blacktown, August 19, 2013), in *Wollongong City Council Cultural Plan, 2014-2018: Background Report* (Appendix 10), 182-188, accessed May 29, 2015, [haveyoursaywollongong.com.au/cultural-plan-exhibition/documents/2192/download](http://haveyoursaywollongong.com.au/cultural-plan-exhibition/documents/2192/download).

the conservative Australian Coalition government sought to attract private investment in the arts in a much broader move toward securing private and corporate arts funding. Vujanović's position raises some complex, even contradictory, questions about what might constitute the public good with respect to art under neo-liberalism. These concern the extent to which the visual arts should be funded by governments if there can exist an artistic public sphere, especially considering Bennett's argument above about the ideological role of museums in 'shaping' the public.

Commercial funding arrangements have filtered into the gallery system in Australia, as elsewhere, where public galleries—local, state and federally funded institutions—are frequently co-funded by corporate philanthropy. In what is arguably a reflection of both their corporate relationships and a desire to maximise visitor numbers, a large number of public galleries have co-opted elements from popular entertainment: movies, retail, theme parks, and so on, with many now featuring 'blockbuster' exhibitions, designated children's areas and exhibition-specific merchandising. In this latter sense, the public is discursively aligned with specific marketing imperatives in an effort to attract large swathes of the public through the doors—literally 'anyone' and 'everyone'. It is no surprise that a number of art galleries and museums undertake market research to understand their audience segments. Undoubtedly, this market-based approach represents the current zenith of art's popularisation.

However, the institutions of art, its markets, galleries and art schools, are still thoroughly reliant on a system of discrepant power, knowledge and skill. Despite the wide adoption of the concept of the public by many of art's institutions, the broader public 'beyond' these institutions is rarely involved in the selection and presentation of works. Works are bought, sold and exhibited according to perceived artistic ability, taste and access to the putative gatekeepers to the profession, which include curators, critics and dealers. And I would venture that the public with respect to art is still widely synonymous with both 'non-professionalism' and 'popular' in the pejorative senses of these terms. There is a considerable difference and a significant contradiction between the notion of the public as conceived of by some of art's gatekeepers, whose professions rely heavily on the enduring bourgeois associations of art with cultural capital, and the broader public that many public galleries are vying with each other to engage through the popular attractions described above. Nevertheless, the field of participatory art has been one area of practice that has sought to question such pejorative associations of the public. In the next part of this chapter, I develop this claim by critiquing key theoretical positions in relation to participatory art. I argue that these positions actually delimit the concept of art's public, which needs to be rethought in light of current art practice.

## The politics of participatory art

As described in the Introduction, the field of participatory art has for several decades displayed a natural affinity with the idea of the public because of its more direct engagement with individuals from outside of the professional art world. Over the last three decades in particular, this art has been critiqued in terms of the various ways in which it has engaged viewers, participants and communities. Broadly speaking, much of the theoretical discourse on participatory art, led by critics and curators including Suzanne Lacy (discussed previously), Nicolas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop and Grant Kester, has analysed the motivations, and purported successes and failures of this art.<sup>58</sup> These critiques and debates have related specifically to the aesthetics of politically motivated participatory art, and to this art's involvement with identity and spatial politics.

In the last decade, the British critic Claire Bishop has been particularly outspoken concerning the politics of participatory art, namely, with the ways in which such art has succeeded and sometimes failed to intervene in 'real world' politics or to disrupt the political status quo. I will outline several of Bishop's key arguments around participatory art before asserting my own. My aim here is to critically reconsider how participatory art intervenes in politics through configuring particular manifestations of the public. In 2004, Bishop published her widely cited essay "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" in *October* magazine, which broadly critiqued the political aspirations of curator Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of 'relational aesthetics' (mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis). Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* had been published in English two years prior to Bishop's critique. As defined by Bourriaud, who wrote the book in the late 1990s after the fall of European communism and partly in response to the perceived loss of social bonds through new communication technologies, relational aesthetics focused on the 'sphere of human relations'. Broadly speaking, Bishop's essay critiques what she sees as Bourriaud's glibly positive approach to the politics of human interactions. Further, she notes that the works included under Bourriaud's banner of relational aesthetics do not consider to whom they are addressed, suggesting that they preach to a converted choir of the art establishment rather than to a broader public.<sup>59</sup>

Bishop constructs her argument using the works of two sets of relational artists: Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija on the one side, and Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra on the other. Taking up the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe's concept of antagonism (developed

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<sup>58</sup> Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London and New York, Pluto Press, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* no. 110 (Fall 2004): 67.

with Ernst Laclau in their earlier book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 1985), Bishop criticises Bourriaud's valorisation of the relational artworks of Gillick and Tiravanija. In her view, these artists create 'feel-good' quasi-utopian meeting places for individuals without questioning the politics of difference at stake in these human encounters.<sup>60</sup> Like Mouffe, Bishop draws on Lacanian theory to describe how Bourriaud's relational micro-utopias (mini utopias) present the self (problematically) as already fully formed, rather than as a partial self that is in 'constant flux' and therefore open to conflictual relations with the 'Other'.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, for Bishop, the 'more uncomfortable' works of Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra are 'marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging'.<sup>62</sup> In Bishop's view, the latter works 'acknowledge[ ] the impossibility of a "microtopia" and instead *sustain*[ ] a tension among viewers, participants, and context'.<sup>63</sup> The latter situation is preferable, in Bishop's view, because it more accurately reflects the politics at stake in social encounters, or between members of a 'community'.

Bishop valorises Hirschhorn's and Sierra's works on the basis that they are more antagonistic and thus more reflective of the type of subjectivity formed through relational encounters. However, it is worth noting the difference that Mouffe (on whom Bishop bases her argument) assigns to the two concepts of antagonism and agonism. Bishop's essay actually uses Mouffe and Laclau's concept of antagonism, rather than Mouffe's notion of agonism, developed at length in her book *The Democratic Paradox*, 2000, to critique the concept of relational aesthetics. Antagonism is a contest between enemies, whereas agonism, from the Greek *agon* or 'struggle', is a struggle between adversaries. The difference is critical. Agonism allows for the diffusion of antagonistic hostilities by recognising 'the democratic principles of "liberty and equality for all"', while still recognising that difference may not be reconciled rationally through consensus.<sup>64</sup> Agonism is not synonymous with conciliation and consensus, which in Mouffe's view would remove the antagonistic element.<sup>65</sup> Rather:

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<sup>60</sup> Despite critiquing Bourriaud's lack of nuanced attention to the public addressed by relational works, Bishop's own critique is at times limited. For example, although echoing Mouffe (Lacan) and the notion that identity is formed and negotiated through contact with the Other ('the presence of what is not me renders my identity precarious and vulnerable', ("Antagonism," 66), she admonishes Liam Gillick's writings as being 'frustratingly intangible—full of deferral and possibility, rather than the present and actual' (ibid., 61). I am making a large and therefore possibly unfair conceptual leap from Bishop's account of human identity as contingent to the fact that writings may also be 'incomplete' or contingent. Cannot this condition of 'becoming' that Bishop refers to in Mouffe also be applied to Gillick's writings?

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "For an agonistic public sphere," in *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance and Lack*, eds. Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2005), 126.

<sup>65</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Some Reflections on an Agonistic Approach to the Public," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA. and London, England: ZKM, Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe and MIT Press, 2005), 805.



While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties recognize the legitimacy of their opponents, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict.<sup>66</sup>

For Mouffe, agonism is the basis of a healthy democracy, and an approach that seeks to frame antagonistic relations differently. Agonism seeks not to eliminate the possibility of political antagonism but ‘requires that some kind of common bond must exist between the parties in conflict, so that they will not treat their opponents as enemies to be eradicated, seeing their demands as illegitimate...’.<sup>67</sup> However, Bishop uses the former concept of antagonism to describe artistic scenarios whereby viewers experience unease and discomfort. This is as a result of experiencing their political subjectivity by encountering the usually less fortunate Other. Such experiences are not necessarily foreign to an agonistic relationship. The problem here is that Bishop’s argument creates a reductive binary between the works that she sees as being antagonistic (by Hirschhorn and Sierra) and the works that are not (by Tiravanija and Gillick). According to this view, the former works are ‘more political’ (and therefore politically *superior*) because they apparently sustain antagonisms, whereas the latter fail to question the political ramifications of relational encounters. Clearly, Gillick’s and Tiravanija’s works are not antagonistic *enough* for Bishop.



(Fig 6) Thomas Hirschhorn, *Bataille Monument*, 2002 (Imbiss), ‘Documenta 11’, Kassel, 2002.  
Photo: Werner Maschmann. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York, Brussels.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Agonistic Politics Between Ethics and Politics,” *Critique and Humanism Journal*, no. 35 (2010): 16.

One of the key issues I take with Bishop's argument is that it instigates an 'athletics of disruption' (to appropriate a concept from the artist Dave Beech).<sup>68</sup> By this I mean that, in Bishop's view, Hirschhorn and Sierra are 'more political' because they are more psychologically disruptive. This is an overly simplified critique of the politics of Gillick's and Tiravanija's works. As Gillick himself responded to Bishop in the pages of *October*:

There is more in common among the subjects of Bishop's text than she is prepared to reveal. The implication that Hirschhorn and Sierra upset more people than Tiravanija and I do does not mean that they are closer to Mouffe's notion of antagonism; rather, all four of us are, at best, engaged in an ongoing sequence of arguments in relation to one another and the broader culture.<sup>69</sup>

Bishop's use of the concept of antagonism equates with viewers being 'shocked' by situations; for example, by confronting Sierra's installation of boxes housing Chechnyan refugees. The assumption here is that such encounters will confront viewers with political and social realities—a hallmark of the twentieth century avant-garde which Bishop's position advocates.<sup>70</sup> There is a problematically prescriptive assumption of didacticism in Bishop's argument: the idea that political works *should* make viewers see or feel unsettling things in order to reveal the underlying complexities of identity, the political status quo, and so on.<sup>71</sup> This is distinct from the way that Mouffe theorises agonism. According to Mouffe, agonism does not 'lift a supposedly false consciousness so as to reveal the "true identity"'.<sup>72</sup> Rather, it disrupts any formation of an essential identity, which is symptomatic of hegemony.

Using Mouffe's work, discussed more fully in the next section of this chapter, I seek in this thesis to provide an alternative critical reading of participatory artworks than the one offered by Bishop. I want to explore how certain artworks by Komar and Melamid, Fletcher, Deller, Ringholt and Bookchin take an agonistic approach to conceiving of a notion of the public. The works I discuss in these later chapters can also be considered 'gentler' than those by Sierra and Hirschhorn that Bishop advocates for. My argument is that artworks need not articulate the partiality of identity or underscore the politics of relational encounters by creating discomforting or upsetting situations in the name of antagonism. However, just because works do not disrupt audiences does not mean that they are blithely feel-good either, which is Bishop's main line of attack on Gillick and Tiravanija. In short, artworks need not be radically activist or

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<sup>68</sup> Dave Beech, "Art and Participation," Weblog Dave Beech, entry posted March 13, 2011, *dbffree: an artist's blog*, accessed August 1, 2016, <https://dbffree.wordpress.com/2011/03/13/art-and-participation/>. Beech actually writes about an athletics of participation and collaboration but I have appropriated his metaphor.

<sup>69</sup> Liam Gillick, "Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", *October*, no. 115 (2006): 102.

<sup>70</sup> Also see Kester, *Conversation Pieces*.

<sup>71</sup> Gillick, 106.

<sup>72</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Cultural Workers as Organic Intellectuals," in *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 213.

‘uncomfortable’, à la Bishop, in order to be political. Mouffe’s point largely overlooked by Bishop is that, while antagonism should always be present, a democratic society should ‘diffuse’ antagonism through agonism, lest the antagonistic position become dominant, as in examples of political fanaticism.<sup>73</sup>

Bishop’s concern with antagonistic politics also extends to her criticism of discourse on the subject of socially engaged art by theorists like her North American contemporary, Grant Kester.<sup>74</sup> Bishop criticises what she perceives to be Kester’s repressively ethical approach to community art (its lack of ‘disruption’, so to speak), as well as the wider tendency of supporters of this art to draw a ‘tacit analogy between anticapitalism and the Christian “good soul”’.<sup>75</sup> Kester’s books *The One and the Many* (2011) and *Conversation Pieces* (2004) (the latter published the same year as Bishop’s “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”) advocate for more moderate or less extreme forms of relational approach, based on processes of exchange and listening. Kester terms this the ‘dialogical approach’, based on the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the work of art as a form of conversation.<sup>76</sup> Kester’s theory of dialogical art is based in a theoretical renunciation of the modernist avant-garde, which aimed to shock or disrupt the viewer through presenting uncomfortable images or performance. It is also useful to consider Kester’s own experience of such art practice in the US with its strong traditions of community-based art and ‘new genre public art’, discussed above. Kester and Bishop have hotly debated their respective approaches on several occasions, most notably in the *Letters* page of a 2006 issue of *Artforum*, where Kester takes issue with what he sees as Bishop’s exceptionally reductive, binary view of political art.<sup>77</sup> Kester’s conversational approach to art informs my analysis of works later in this thesis.

In more recent years since her publication of “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, Bishop has been particularly vocal about recent participatory art’s uneasy relationship with the dominant neo-liberal agenda. In her 2012 book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* she argues that:

[e]ven though participatory artists invariably stand against neoliberal capitalism, the values they impute to their work are understood formally (in terms of opposing

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<sup>73</sup> Mouffe, “For an agonistic public sphere,” 126; Sheikh, “In the Place of the Public Sphere?”

<sup>74</sup> Bishop’s critique of Kester’s *Conversation Pieces* appears in her essay “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents”, originally published in *Artforum* in Feb. 2006. A longer version of this essay and a more sustained criticism of Kester’s work appears in her later book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn, Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum International* 44, no. 6 (February 2006): 183; *Artificial Hells*, 25-26.

<sup>76</sup> Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Grant Kester, “Another turn,” *Letters* page, *Artforum International* 44, no. 9 (May 2006): 22. Kester writes: ‘In this view [of Bishop’s], artists who choose to work in alliance with specific collectives, social movements, or political struggles will inevitably be consigned to decorating floats for the annual May Day Parade’.

individualism and the commodity object), without recognizing that so many aspects of this art practice dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism's recent forms (networks, mobility, project work, affective labour).<sup>78</sup>

Bishop's critique needs to be framed within her experience of art practice in a British context under Tony Blair's New Labour government. Her view is that, with the dismantling of the welfare state in the UK and across Europe, New Labour harnessed participatory art as a 'form of soft social engineering'—in other words, to gently maneuver society in ways that dovetailed with neo-liberal agendas.<sup>79</sup>

Bishop's arguments around the neo-liberal co-option of participatory practice recalls the earlier work of British art critic Julian Stallabrass, who similarly levels a stinging critique of the complicit relationship between contemporary art and the 'New World Order' of neo-liberal capitalism in his book *Art Incorporated* (2004).<sup>80</sup> There, he contends that not only is contemporary art 'bound to the economy like Ahab to the white whale'<sup>81</sup> but that it is also thoroughly enmeshed in both the financial imperatives and philosophies of neo-liberalism such as freedom (read free trade) and globalisation. This is particularly so in the case of socially interactive or participatory art, because its socially-minded ethos support and reflect the interests of the capitalist state rather than the individuals it purportedly 'serves':

Governments [...] look to art as a social salve, and hope that socially interactive art will act as bandaging for the grave wounds continually prised open by capital. Corporations may also employ it specifically to leaven workplace environments with creative play, and free up company structures and methods with innovative thinking. Art is refashioned as management consultancy.<sup>82</sup>

Stallabrass's argument could be extended to the surge in so-called 'creative industries' over the last decade, which he briefly mentions. These directly align art making with capital, through entertainment and business-oriented outcomes.<sup>83</sup> While governments have likewise taken up the concept of 'creativity', which apparently encourages 'flexible thinking', more often than not this actually means 'doing more with less'.

To this end, art's inculcation in the dominant political agenda has blunted its critical edge—its 'zone of freedom'—according to Stallabrass. It may be useful to note that his book was published in the mid-2000s, and its context is the money-fuelled British art scene on the back of a decade of art production by the likes of Damien Hirst that celebrated, if somewhat ironically,

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<sup>78</sup> Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 277.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>80</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 182-183.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 138.

its own ‘mainstream’ commercial success (this was the subject of Stallabrass’s earlier book *High Art Lite*, published in 1999).<sup>84</sup> Stallabrass’s and Bishop’s arguments above are arguably over-simplifications that sell many artists short, as though they are somehow unwitting about how their work ‘reads’ in a wider political and economic context. On the contrary, I contend in this thesis that a number of artists are engaged in dissensual political projects that work to interrupt this reading of them as having been coopted by neo-liberal capitalism. I argue that one of the ways these projects do this through an overt engagement with the concept of the public as a political figuration that seems to escape or resist such cooption. The writings of both Mouffe and of Jacques Rancière provide a compelling theoretical basis from which to reconsider the notion of the public. In the next sections of this chapter I propose a number of political ‘characteristics’ of this public based on the writings of these two theorists.

### **Chantal Mouffe: the agonistic public**

Chantal Mouffe’s work can be situated within recent political theory from the 1980s onwards that has interrogated the status and forms of democracy within neo-liberal society.<sup>85</sup> Mouffe’s current work draws on a number of earlier concepts developed with her contemporary Ernst Laclau in their key text *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). Mouffe and Laclau’s work is referred to as post-Marxist because it rejects Marxism’s essentialist position that the economy and class are the exclusive determinants of social identity. Instead, Mouffe and Laclau posit that discourse shapes all social and political action.<sup>86</sup> Mouffe’s own critical approach has continued to view politics as a discursive arena in which takes place an ongoing hegemonic contest. Her notion of hegemony is drawn from the imprisoned Marxist Antonio Gramsci who understood hegemonic political leadership as ‘based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class’.<sup>87</sup> Broadly speaking, Mouffe’s ‘radical democratic’ approach rejects the tendency towards democratic consensus so valorised within the dominant neo-liberal world view.

Mouffe’s work in particular is central to my understanding of the public in a number of ways. She posits the public sphere as a site (or *sites*, geographic and discursive) where politics takes place. As such, the public sphere is where hegemony may be destabilised and then rearticulated.

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<sup>84</sup> Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s* (London and New York: Verso, 1999).

<sup>85</sup> See, of course, Jacques Rancière’s prolific work in this area and Wendy Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” *Theory & Event* 7, no. 1 (2003): np.

<sup>86</sup> James Martin, “Discourse,” in *Political Concepts: A Reader*, ed. Iain MacKenzie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 560. Mouffe and Laclau’s work also drew on the work of certain poststructuralist theorists including Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas R. Bates, “Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, no. 2 (Apr-June 1975): 352.

A dominant narrative of many of the artworks in this thesis is that the public is both an open and unstable formation, and I propose that this is how Mouffe also theorises the public sphere in its 'ideal form', in other words, as perpetually destabilised. In Mouffe's view, the drive towards political consensus within liberal democracy, à la Habermas and certain contemporaries including Hannah Arendt, has virtually eradicated democracy itself.<sup>88</sup> Despite seeming to extol pluralism by considering everyone's views, the liberal democratic model cannot actually support pluralism because of the drive toward consensus, in which one set of viewpoints inevitably dominates others.<sup>89</sup> For Mouffe, the workings of hegemonic projects (capitalism and neo-liberalism) are insidious and they become naturalised so that 'what is at a given moment accepted as the "natural order", with the common sense that accompanies it, is the result of sedimented hegemonic practices'.<sup>90</sup> Thus, Mouffe argues for a form of radical democracy, where the public sphere should be in a permanent state of disharmony, lest one political order come to dominate. Her position undercuts the liberal democratic focus on consensus to argue that the public sphere should be inherently unstable if democracy is to occur.

Mouffe's *The Democratic Paradox* (2000) engages directly with the idea of political hegemony in so-called democratic politics. One of her key arguments in this book draws on the work of the German political philosopher, and later Nazi supporter, Carl Schmitt. Despite this deeply troubling history, Schmitt's polemic around the paradox of liberal democracy is of particular interest to Mouffe.<sup>91</sup> The paradox is that, on the one hand, liberalism calls for the defence of human rights. However if democracy is supposed to grant popular sovereignty then it is bound not to consider everyone's rights; effectively, some individuals will always be precluded. Therefore,

[i]n his [Schmitt's] view, when we speak of equality, we need to distinguish between two very different ideas: the liberal one and the democratic one. The liberal conception of equality postulates that every person is, as a person, automatically equal to every other person. The democratic conception, however, requires the possibility of distinguishing who belongs to the demos and who is exterior to it; for that reason, it cannot exist without the necessary correlate of inequality.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Indeed, Mouffe writes that Arendt, like Habermas, ultimately envisages public space as a result of consensus decision-making that, while seemingly drawing on multiple perspectives, actually rejects any basis in antagonism. See Mouffe, "Cultural Workers as Organic Intellectuals", 213.

<sup>89</sup> Mouffe, "Some Reflections on an Agonistic Approach to the Public", 804.

<sup>90</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Politics in the Age of Post-Fordism," *Open* no. 16 (The Art Biennial as a Global Phenomenon) (2009): 36.

<sup>91</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 39.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

Mouffe is thus especially critical of the deliberative democratic models espoused by Habermas and also by the American philosopher John Rawls.<sup>93</sup> She explains, 'We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion'.<sup>94</sup> Habermas's deliberative model presents consensus as based upon rationality and in Mouffe's view this obscures the fact that it is by definition exclusive. In other words, it assumes a common agreement over what is considered 'rational' in the first place, and anyone who is considered irrational on these terms is necessarily incapable of or unable to participate in democracy.

Drawing on Schmitt, Mouffe argues that the democratic concept of the *demos* (the political sphere in which 'the people' appear, physically and discursively) is always determined along political lines, rather than on the basis of a universal humanity, or on common notions of what is good or reasonable. Thus, her argument is that any construction of 'the people' is necessarily political. Furthermore, any claim to represent what the people think or want in any unified way is to foreclose or reify what, in Mouffe's view, is radically plural. And so Mouffe writes:

Democratic politics does not consist in the moment when a fully constituted people exercises its rule. The moment of rule is indissociable from the very struggle about the definition of the people, about the constitution of its identity.... Liberal democracy is precisely the recognition of this constitutive gap between the people and its various identifications. Hence the importance of leaving this space of contestation forever open, instead of trying to fill it through the establishment of a supposedly 'rational' consensus.<sup>95</sup>

Mouffe refers to the notion of 'the people' here rather than the public. It is worth considering the distinction here between both terms given their related etymology. Mouffe's use of 'the people' is related to her overarching concern with democracy (rule by the people) and how the people, the *demos*, is politically constituted according to a system of inclusion and exclusion. Crucially for Schmitt, on whose work Mouffe bases her argument, a form of equality *is* possible, but only among those who belong to the *demos*. As Mouffe notes: 'This is why he [Schmitt] declares that the central concept of democracy is not 'humanity' but the concept of the 'people', and that there can never be a democracy of mankind. Democracy can exist only for a people'.<sup>96</sup> It cannot consist of 'free and unconstrained' discourse between 'everyone'. This is also key to the idea of the 'democratic paradox' in Mouffe's book of the same name.

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<sup>93</sup> Mouffe's argument in *The Democratic Paradox* concerns Rawls's defense of the idea that political consensus can be reached on the basis of moral and reasonable agreement. Mouffe critiques Rawls's views because they assume a fundamental acceptance of certain liberal values to ascertain what is 'reasonable' in the first place. She argues, 'What is this if not an indirect form of asserting that reasonable persons are those who accept the fundamentals of liberalism?' (24)

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 41.

Understood in this exclusively political context, there is little to differentiate the concept of the people from that of the public. However, when related to the subject of contemporary art, the public is the term that is used much more frequently; according to my argument it designates a wide and diverse *potential* audience for art that cannot be substituted with the concept of ‘the people’. Further, in her book *The Democratic Paradox* and in a number of essays, Mouffe also extends her argument to a compelling reconsideration of the politics of the public sphere and of public space, both of which are central to my understanding of the public *per se*.<sup>97</sup> In particular, Mouffe is interested in the way that a pluralist democracy could function in the neo-liberal public sphere, which supports consensus democracy and thus eradicates real pluralism.<sup>98</sup>

Despite this seemingly pessimistic view, Mouffe’s view of democracy centres on the notion of a certain instability or conflict, which I believe actually allows us to think about the potential of the public in a more generative way.<sup>99</sup> Key to understanding Mouffe’s position is the idea that an adversarial democratic politics (‘agonism’) can contest the hegemonic order. As mentioned previously, agonism prevents the sedimentation of any social order. In the absence of such conflict a Western-style democracy is in danger of slipping into a mode of consensus that is actually hegemonic, excluding from public space those who fall to the left or the right of a middle-ground politics.<sup>100</sup> Thus, the public sphere must always centre on agonistic contestation, and must never be reconciled.<sup>101</sup>

Mouffe’s proposition concerning the agonistic public sphere is compelling and is of central importance to my argument about the public. Her notion of an irreconcilably pluralistic public sphere can be brought to bear on the concept of the public as, likewise, an irreconcilable or ‘impossible’ political subject. This means that the public’s irreducibility (its radical plurality, in other words) is a counter-point to hegemonic power, whose interests it serves to have a coherent, united public. We can consider, as extreme examples, how such forms of the public have been conjured and even realised by political regimes throughout history, including the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* and the People’s Republic of China. Even in the political discourse of contemporary Western liberal democracies, phrases such as ‘in the interests of the Australian public’ are common—serving to discursively unite the public as a coherent entity. However, in the radical pluralist view defended by Mouffe, the concept of the public has a democratic potential that can contest the dominant political order. In this way, the public is both constant *potential* and unknowable *difference*. The theoretical framework in which I discuss the artworks

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Chantal Mouffe “Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space,” *Open* no. 14 (Art as a Public Issue) (2008): 6-15.

<sup>98</sup> Mouffe, “Some Reflections on an Agonistic Approach to the Public,” 804.

<sup>99</sup> Also see Sheikh’s reading of Mouffe.

<sup>100</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 104.

<sup>101</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 92.



in this thesis is underpinned by the idea that the public sphere, conceptually speaking, is perpetually agonistic, prone to constant rearticulation of its manifold boundaries and therefore of who constitutes the public.

### **Jacques Rancière: The public as dissensus**

The concept of consensus, or more particularly, of dissensus, is theorised in depth by the French post-Marxist philosopher Jacques Rancière. Despite the fact that Mouffe and Rancière have, as far as can be ascertained, never referred explicitly to one another's work, there are a number of key points of convergence that I want to focus on here. Both Mouffe and Rancière condemn the idea of consensus democracy and hold the view that politics should work to destabilise consensus. More relevant to the argument contained in my thesis is the idea, decipherable in the work of both theorists, that the public sphere is open to continual rearticulation by people 'doing politics' in order to assert their right to be counted within the current social and political order.<sup>102</sup> Rancière's own work is underpinned by a radical democratic position developed following the riotous political uprisings of May 1968. Rancière distanced himself from the views of his former teacher, the Marxist Louis Althusser, on the basis that the latter's take on Marxism served to reinforce hierarchical social roles ascribed to workers; namely, their helplessness to overcome their designation without the guiding hand of the Marxist intelligentsia.<sup>103</sup> Rancière's anti-hierarchical or egalitarian position has continued to shape his philosophy since the late 1960s, as has his key proposition that equality within society exists on the basis of its assumption. His position aspires to the reconfiguration of both equality and power in the political and public arena. Herein, politics does not belong to the institutions that govern society but occurs when the people assert their equality through specific interruptions to the dominant order, which he terms 'dissensus'. Rancière's work, like Mouffe's, is significant to the present discussion because of the ways in which it critically reimagines the public sphere as a function of the political, and thus allows for the constant possibility of new configurations of the public. Therefore, I want to expand on Rancière's notion of dissensus before bringing it to bear on my understanding of the public.

For Rancière, bodies and their capacities for acting in the world accord with the sensory lexicon of the dominant mode of power. Rancière refers to the specific ways in which bodies inhabit particular times, spaces and roles within a given social and political order as the 'partition', or

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<sup>102</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. and edited by Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 139.

<sup>103</sup> Todd May, *Contemporary Political Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 6; Brian Duignan, "Jacques Rancière," Encyclopaedia Britannica (online), accessed August 4, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Jacques-Ranciere>.

‘distribution’, of the sensible’ (*le partage du sensible*). The distribution of the sensible is akin to a shifting boundary of the political, which permits those who have the ability to take part in a shared community of citizens or denies entry to others. Rancière variously describes the space in which this occurs as ‘the common space of the community’ (what can be sensed by everyone within a common space), which correlates with the public sphere as I have previously described it.<sup>104</sup> Thus:

This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.<sup>105</sup>

The term ‘dissensus’ appears in Rancière’s expansive writings on both politics and aesthetics to mean two distinct, yet interrelated, things. For Rancière, political dissensus interrupts the ways that individuals occupy the sensible order. This means that political and social roles are ascribed to individuals according to the ways in which they are ‘sensed’ (encountered visually or aurally) or are otherwise relegated to ‘non-sense’—cannot be sensed and thus are literally nonsense. In a related way, aesthetic dissensus is an interruption between the sensual presentation of something (visually, aurally) and its meaning (literally, the difference between sense and non-sense). In short, both types of dissensus require a form of interruption.

Of particular relevance to my discussion is Rancière’s interest in political subjects—*the people*—whom he also refers to variously as *the proletariat*,<sup>106</sup> *the community*,<sup>107</sup> *the workers*, *the demos*, and occasionally as *the masses*.<sup>108</sup> For Rancière, ‘the people’ are virtually non-existent outside of naturalised socio-political frameworks until such time as they ‘do politics’. This does not mean that they do not exist at all. It means that in a particular worldview, that of the current, dominant society, they are ‘supplementary’, fulfilling only certain roles ascribed to them by the current order of ‘sense’—of what can be perceived (sensed) and the meanings ascribed to this

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<sup>104</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2000), 12-13.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>106</sup> Rancière and David Panagia, “Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière,” *Diacritics* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 113-126. Rancière describes the uptake of the term *proletariat* by nineteenth century workers to designate their political subjectivity. The term was used in ancient Roman times where it literally meant those people whose sole purpose it is to breed (115).

<sup>107</sup> See, for example, Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated Julie Rose. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Rancière suggests that the ‘community’ are those who are ‘counted’ by the state. The community gives legitimacy to some bodies and not to others—namely, ‘the people’ (9).

<sup>108</sup> ‘The people’ can mean different things in Rancière’s work but it is often understood to mean the poor. As critic Robert Porter suggests, Rancière’s use of this term can also mean those unaccounted for by the state who then ‘render problematic the current order of identification’. Robert Porter, “Distribution of the Sensible,” *Variant*, no. 30. (Winter 2007): fn 4, accessed August 4, 2016, [www.variant.org.uk/30texts/Rancier.html](http://www.variant.org.uk/30texts/Rancier.html). The ‘masses’ is used less often but has a similar connotation in Rancière’s writing, where it means something akin to ‘the nameless and the faceless’.

perception (made sense of).<sup>109</sup> ‘The people’ appear when politics occurs, that is, when the distribution of the sensible is interrupted and they claim a place for themselves in the sensory order. In his book *Disagreement* (1999), Rancière is concerned with the appearance of the people within consensus democracy, which he refers to as ‘postdemocracy’. This is ‘a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people’, whose institutional mechanisms work to eliminate dissensus.<sup>110</sup> Rancière argues that consensus is based on accounting for all viewpoints and all problems, so that (seemingly) no one is left out. Thus, the dividing line between those who are included and those who are excluded does not exist, based as it is on the ‘presupposition of inclusion of all parties and their problems’.<sup>111</sup>

Politics occurs for Rancière when individuals disrupt or interrupt the dominant distribution of the sensible, as in the case of the poor and the nineteenth century proletariat on whom his work is frequently based. In this view, the proletariat had been relegated—or more accurately, mythologised—by Marxist theorists and labor historians to inhabit lives of work and nothing else.<sup>112</sup> In several texts, most notably in *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth Century France* (first published in English in 1989) and *The Philosopher and His Poor* (translated into English in 2004), Rancière unpacks workers’ histories and literature to question the premise that workers have no time (and therefore no capacity) to do anything other than their work and neither a capacity nor a desire for writing.<sup>113</sup> For Rancière, proletarian writing was expressly political, and not only because of its content, for ‘how can those whose business is not thinking assume the authority to think and thereby constitute themselves as thinking subjects?’<sup>114</sup> The workers, who are essentially ‘without a part’ (*sans part*) in the realm of the thinking and the literate, displace the distribution of the sensible through the act of writing (‘the territory of the literati’).<sup>115</sup> The act of writing disrupts the given distribution of the sensible as the writers took the time they ‘had not’ in order to claim for themselves a new way of being in the world. This assumption, that political equality occurs on the basis of its presupposition, underpins Rancière’s oeuvre. Furthermore, Rancière assumes an equality of *intelligence* whereby all individuals have the fundamental ability to be able to *independently* acquire the knowledge they need to be able to make sense of their place in the world without the input of an

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<sup>109</sup> The people are: ‘the political subjects of democracy that supplement the police account of the population and displace the established categories of identification. They are the unaccounted for within the police order...’. See Anon. “People (Le Peuple),” in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Glossary of Technical Terms), 88.

<sup>110</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 102-103.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>112</sup> Andrew Parker, “Editor’s Introduction: Mimesis and the Division of Labor,” in Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, ed. and introd. Andrew Parker (np: Duke University Press, 2004), xi.

<sup>113</sup> Parker, xii

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., xxvi

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

What of the notion of ‘the public’ in Rancière’s writing? Rancière has only rarely made mention of ‘the public’ *per se*, more often than not referring to ‘the people’, or to the other collective entities mentioned above. This indicates the humanist dimension of his philosophy and his abiding faith in people who are virtually non-existent outside of naturalised socio-political frameworks until such time as they interrupt the sensible order. As described above ‘the people’ are frequently understood in Rancière’s work to mean the ‘underclasses’ of the poor, the disenfranchised, and ‘ignorant’ non-experts. Nevertheless, this element of Rancière’s thinking may be extended beyond such specific groups of individuals, based as it is on the supposition that politics is both fundamentally disruptive and is, in theory, ‘available’ to everyone—to an incalculably large public as I understand it in this thesis. This expands Rancière’s theory of dissensus beyond its obvious relevance to working class struggles to one that critically considers how the social order at large is framed at any given moment according to ‘specific ways of being, seeing and saying’, or what Rancière also calls the ‘politics of aesthetics’.<sup>117</sup>

The point I am making is that via specific acts of interruption by individuals (by any individuals, in theory) the public sphere may be radically reconfigured according to who and what is seen and understood there.<sup>118</sup> Rancière’s notion of dissensus is critical to my understanding of the public as both an open and unstable entity. In a consensus situation, bodies and objects take a recognisable order in the world, allowing us to make sense of sensory presentations. However, in the politics of dissensus:

Politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the ‘natural’ order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy certain positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific ‘bodies’, that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying.... Politics invents new forms of collective enunciation; it re-frames the given by inventing

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<sup>116</sup> These ideas are best explored in Rancière’s texts *The Emancipated Spectator* (2004/2007) and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987). “The Emancipated Spectator” was a lecture first delivered by Rancière in 2004 and which subsequently informed Rancière’s article “The Emancipated Spectator” in *Artforum International* 45, no. 7 (2007): 271-280. This text considers the political public sphere in terms of its potential to radically redistribute the sensible, leading to reconfigurations of the places and roles of individuals within this order. Rancière begins the lecture by recounting the story of “The Ignorant Schoolmaster” Joseph Jacotot, who was also the subject of Rancière’s 1987 text of the same name. Jacotot was a French professor who theorised that pedagogy is based on a system of inequality. The presumption that a master can transfer the content of his knowledge to his ignorant students assumes a radical distance between the intelligence of each that only the master can fill. However, Jacotot asserted that there is, in fact, nothing for the ignorant to know that they cannot teach themselves. Just as: “[t]he human animal learns everything as he has learned his mother tongue...by observing, comparing one thing with another thing, one sign with one fact (“The Emancipated Spectator”, 275) the master can instruct the student that he can learn—can teach himself—by the same process.

<sup>117</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 139.

<sup>118</sup> The concept of dissensus is critical to understanding Rancière’s linking of art with politics and it characterises modern art, or what Rancière refers to as the aesthetic regime of art.

new ways of making sense of the sensible....<sup>119</sup>

My thesis focuses on artworks that I claim enact a form of dissensus. These works challenge what are perceived to be existing discrepancies between the professional sphere of art and the public for art ‘beyond’ this—a public that may be seen to lack the specific ‘knowledge’ to engage intelligently with art, or the skills required to make it. These works imagine a public for art that engages with the unknowable potential that ‘the public’, seen as a political entity, suggests.

Put in another way, the works in this thesis complicate Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘cultural capital’ described in the Introduction, which Rancière notably disavows in his *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983). Rather, Rancière draws on Kant’s notion, described at the start of this chapter, that aesthetics can link us with a universal humanity by dislodging the ‘natural’ identificatory order of whom may come to art, and how. Recalling the earlier argument made in this chapter around Kant and Hume, we could also see this dislodgement as linking us with a form of universal public.<sup>120</sup> As Tony Bennett observes:

Kant, Rancière says, refuses ‘the absolutisation of the gap between working-class “nature” and the “culture” of the elite’ that he sees in Bourdieu’s account of the relations between the bourgeois principles of ‘pure taste’ and the working-class choice of the necessary, seeking instead ‘the anticipation of the perceptible equality to come, of the *humanity* that will be the joint surpassing of the culture of the dominant and the culture of Rousseauist nature’. His contention, then, is that the aesthetic is a social force that might lead to the overcoming of the divisions between occupations.<sup>121</sup>

To reiterate, the artworks discussed in this thesis are not attempts to bring individuals together in displays of consensual togetherness. Rather, they seek to form or to ‘draw out’ new manifestations of the public for art by dislodging and complicating its current configurations, some of which are readily associated with earlier forms of bourgeois subjectivity.

I have previously described the public as both unstable and heterogeneous, or to expand on Mouffe’s theorisation of agonism outlined previously, as both constant potential and unknowable difference. This argument relies on a notion of the public that radically alters the concept’s meaning from its bourgeois origins discussed at the beginning of this chapter to an open-ended concept that, in theory, accounts for ‘anyone’ and ‘everyone’—a promise espoused, if never delivered, by liberal democracy. In addition to Mouffe’s notion of agonism, I also seek

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<sup>119</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 139.

<sup>120</sup> Kester, *The One and the Many*, 173-178.

<sup>121</sup> Tony Bennett, “Guided Freedom: Aesthetics, Tutelage, and the Interpretation of Art,” *Tate Papers*, no. 15 (2011), accessed August 4, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/15/guided-freedom-aesthetics-tutelage-and-the-interpretation-of-art>.

to bring Rancière's concept of dissensus to bear on my argument for the public in this thesis. Here, I am suggesting that the public is inherently dissensual; it may reconfigure itself all the time and at any time to allow for the 'invention of new [political] subjects' with 'new bodily capacities' for acting in the world.<sup>122</sup> Like Mouffe's concept of agonism, dissensus destabilises coherent political figurations like 'the public'. However, unlike agonism, dissensus 'is not a designation of conflict as such, but is a specific type thereof, a conflict between *sense* and *sense'*: between what is seen, felt or heard and how it is made sense of.<sup>123</sup>

### Participatory art and dissensus

Bringing Rancière's work to bear on participatory art is relatively unconventional. Indeed, Rancière has openly criticised relational aesthetics and denigrated 'critical art' more broadly; that is, art overtly involved with politics or promoting political outcomes. It could therefore be claimed that I am using Rancière, in a sense, against himself.<sup>124</sup> However, I want to argue that Rancière's notion of dissensus provides a useful basis from which to consider how some participatory works figure the public as a dissensual subject. But first to his criticisms: Rancière suggests that the politics of critical art has been watered down to a series of ethical gestures at the expense of the polemical, or that its politics is utterly ambiguous, even vacuous. He argues that such art often revolves around attempts at 'repairing the social bond' (evoking Bishop's own criticisms of relational art) or parodies of spectacle, which are nothing more than parodies of the critical process itself.<sup>125</sup> More specifically, Rancière's key criticism of art in the current 'aesthetic regime' can be summed up as its lack or loss of forms of dissensus, whereas: 'artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination'.<sup>126</sup>

In forming his argument, Rancière draws comparisons between contemporary critical art and the earlier, dissensual examples of Brecht, who portrayed Nazi leaders as cabbage sellers and Martha Rosler who 'juxtaposes photographs of the war in Vietnam with advertisements for petty-bourgeois furniture and household goods'.<sup>127</sup> Both examples characterise a 'politics of aesthetics' in Rancière's view, disrupting the fabric of sensory experience through the use of surrealism or symbolism. Collage also features as a prime example of how art can reconfigure

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<sup>122</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 139.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Claire Bishop frames her discussion of contemporary participatory art in terms of Rancière's work in her book *Artificial Hells*.

<sup>125</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 144-145; Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009).

<sup>126</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 140.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 142.

the sensory experience.<sup>128</sup> It is only through this certain ‘distance’ from life—this sensory interruption—that art exists as art. And secondly, it is only by maintaining a distance from art that art can enact politics, can break with the dominant sensory order so as to pose new ways in which individuals can inhabit society.<sup>129</sup> In this view, art’s potential political efficacy lies in the fact that it straddles both spheres of life and art and ‘what comes to pass is a process of dissociation: a rupture in the relationship between sense and sense, between what is seen and what is thought, and between what is thought and what is felt’.<sup>130</sup> Rancière’s critique of contemporary critical art lies in the fact that it does not enact dissensus.

Despite his reservations about current instances of critical art, Rancière does not close down the issue, and even speculates about how critical art might be still be possible today.<sup>131</sup> Again, he suggests that this would involve aesthetic and political dissensus. Strikingly, Rancière is less interested in the specific occurrences of what happens following these dissensual interruptions; his focus remains on the process of interruption itself. This is because, in his view, it is important to understand that one can never, should never, calculate what is going to happen as a result of dissensus, just as one can never guarantee a logical progression from thoughts inspired by an artwork leading to political action in the ‘real world’.<sup>132</sup> Unpredictability is the logic of dissensus—it should destabilise the social order to unknown ends. However, rather than declaring any impotence on the part of artworks or artists, Rancière actually ascribes potential to art in the presence of this unpredictability. This is why he worries the point about critical art in the context of political and aesthetic consensus. In particular, his criticism of relational aesthetics is based on this art’s political instrumentalisation to meet certain calculated or predetermined ends (like ‘restor[ing] a certain sense of community’), rather than remaining dissensual and thus with the potential to engender new and incalculable political subjectivities.<sup>133</sup>

Rancière’s problematisation of critical art is provocative, and has influenced my thinking about the participatory artworks discussed in this thesis in a number of ways. As a general rule the works in this thesis overtly advocate for creative participation by the public comprising ‘anyone’ and ‘everyone’, but they do so in ways that privilege unknown outcomes rather than predetermined results. To this end, there is an assumption by most of the artists that participants are inherently knowledgeable about, and capable of participating in, the creation of artwork. I

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<sup>128</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 45-60.

<sup>129</sup> Also see Claire Bishop’s excellent summary of these ideas in *Artificial Hells*.

<sup>130</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 143.

<sup>131</sup> See Rancière, “The Paradoxes of Political Art,” in *Dissensus* and “Problems and Transformations of Critical Art,” in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*.

<sup>132</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 143

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

also distance my own reading of Rancière from Claire Bishop's. Despite using Rancière to support her thesis that critical art can avoid the 'pitfalls' of a 'didactic critical position', she simultaneously marries the idea of political dissensus in artworks with a ready response in the viewer: frustration, fear, contradiction, and so on.<sup>134</sup> However, Rancière's theorisation of dissensus disavows any clear relationship between a work's political intent, a viewer's reading of the world and any subsequent political action.<sup>135</sup> I attempt to read dissensus as a means by which clear relationships between political content, affect and action necessarily become blurred and unstable. The works I examine in this thesis preference responses in their viewers, which, in keeping with my understanding of the public, are likewise open and necessarily unpredictable. Secondly, and perhaps more abstractly, Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*) underpins my understanding of the public in a broader sense beyond the art world. The artworks' overt engagement with the public as potential interrupts what I argue has become a naturalised sensible order of neo-liberalism which has threatened the notion of the public as a dissensual possibility.

In conclusion, my argument in this thesis rests on two interrelated ideas about the public. With respect to democracy, the public cannot be understood as a unified or normative entity. It is, in other words, 'impossible'—an impossibly irreducible notion, to draw from Mouffe. And yet, I assert that the public's very ambiguity and its definitive excess—the impossibility of pinning it down—is also its potent political and democratic potential. It is the 'the raw power of a large number' (to appropriate Rancière) and the idea that an uncountable number of people may hold something in common: the potential agency of that elusive 'large number'.<sup>136</sup> With this in mind, the next chapter moves to the first case study of artworks, a project by Komar and Melamid, which playfully courts the notion of this impossible public.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>136</sup> This phrase appears in an article written by Jacques Rancière on populism and I think it is equally applicable to my concept of the public. See Rancière, "The People Are Not a Brutal and Ignorant Mass," Weblog Verso Books entry posted January 30, 2013, accessed January 23, 2015, <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1226-the-people-are-not-a-brutal-and-ignorant-mass-jacques-ranciere-on-populism>.



## Chapter Two

### Statistical Illusions: Komar and Melamid's *People's Choice*

And in art, we—my partner and I—were brought up with the idea that art belongs to the people, and believe me or not, I still believe in this. I truly believe that the people's art is better than aristocratic art, whatever it is.

—Alexander Melamid<sup>1</sup>

[N]o one has ever, will ever, could ever actually hear the *Vox Populi*, but still it exists.

—JoAnn Wypijewski<sup>2</sup>

Blue lakes reflect clear skies with only a hint of clouds, and a tree marks out the foreground, just right of centre. Animals (moose, deer, a bear, a hippopotamus) populate the landscape alongside small groups of figures at work and at leisure. Mountains skirt the edges of these scenes and, in the distance, their grey-blue peaks form dusky horizon lines. Such scenes are shared by several of the *Most Wanted* series of paintings created by Russian émigré artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid between 1994-97.<sup>3</sup> Although varying in size, the paintings bear striking similarities across the series. Alongside these *Most Wanted* paintings, the artists produced a companion series titled the *Most Unwanted*—a group of works characterised by the same 'sameness'. These are typically abstract, geometric compositions in mixed media on canvas or wood. They comprise squares and shards of colour, ranging from insipid browns, oranges and peach to high key yellows, reds and golds.<sup>4</sup>

Each work in the *Most Wanted* and *Most Unwanted* series aspires to reflect a different global

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<sup>1</sup> E. Y. Meyer et al., "The Search For a People's Art: Painting by the Numbers," *The Nation* 258, no. 10 (March 14, 1994): para 8. Melamid is referring to his artistic collaborator Vitaly Komar.

<sup>2</sup> JoAnn Wypijewski, "Vox Pop: Notes on a Public Conversation," in *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, ed. JoAnn Wypijewski (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Melamid has later argued that he was the sole creator of this project. Nevertheless, I have chosen to refer to both artists in this chapter. Komar and Melamid worked collaboratively until 1999 and all of the other literature on this series of paintings refers to the *Most Wanted/Unwanted* series as a collaboration. Alexander Melamid, interview by author, New York/Melbourne, January 27, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> A version of some of the ideas and text in this chapter was previously published in Holly Arden, "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public," *Art and the Public Sphere* 3, no. 2 (2014): 105-118.

nation's aesthetic preferences and dislikes, which were determined using the results of nationwide, public polls. Pollsters led the research in 17 countries, from Finland to Germany, China to the United States, Kenya to Russia, with a 15<sup>th</sup> poll conducted via the Dia Art Foundation to produce the most and least wanted works according to 'the Web'.<sup>5</sup> While significant literature, both critical and popular, already exists in response to the *Most Wanted/Unwanted* paintings, this chapter aims to resituate the focus of the discussion in a way that has not been amply articulated. Specifically, I want to examine the series within twentieth century historical and contemporary political contexts to rethink how, and indeed why, it attempts to engage the public with contemporary art.<sup>6</sup> I also want to reconsider the paintings as grappling with ideas of a universal, and indeed a national, public—the latter commonly expressed in collective terms such as 'the people'. In fact, when the first paintings in the series, *America's Most Wanted* and *America's Most Unwanted*, were shown at New York's Alternative Museum in 1994 they were exhibited under the title of the *People's Choice* (and also exhibited under the title *Nation's Choice* at the Moscow-based Guelman Gallery in 1994).<sup>7</sup> A later example, *Russia's Most Wanted* (1994) (Fig 7), was painted using the results of data collected by the joint-stock company ULTEX Services A.O. in adherence with requirements set by ESOMAR, a leading international association for market, social and opinion research.<sup>8</sup> ULTEX collected 1001 responses from face-to-face surveys from a sample of 'average residents' living in European regions of Russia.<sup>9</sup> *Russia's Most Wanted* measures up to the size of a household object; it is 'television size'. The companion painting, *Russia's Most Unwanted* (1994) (Fig 8), is larger at 'refrigerator size'. Thickly impasted, this composition of Malevich-style grey and black triangles is set against a bright red-orange background.

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<sup>5</sup> Additional paintings were made in regional locations, including Ithaca, NY and Ridgefield, CT. The Ithaca painting is based on the results of town hall meetings with members of the public. It is also important to note that, despite, or because of, Komar and Melamid's adherence to the survey results, there are different versions of some of the paintings. During an interview with Alexander Melamid, I ascertained that this was because the artists later decided to make paintings that adhered more closely with the survey results. The image of *Russia's Most Wanted* contained in this thesis is slightly different from the one on the project's website at <http://awp.diaart.org/km/rus/rus.html>. Alexander Melamid, interview by author, New York/Melbourne, January 27, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Nadim Samman provides a thorough overview of certain aspects of the project, including Komar and Melamid's engagement with collective authorship 'versus' individual artistic subjectivity. Samman maps this onto a discussion of the duo's critique of Soviet history, the artistic/political despot and the degraded ego. He engages with the notion of 'the people' and uses this term throughout his article, discussing 'the people' in relation to collective authorship and modes of artistic and political representation. See Samman, "Komar and Melamid's Collective Disappointment," *Immediations* 2, no. 2 (2009): 61-77. Arthur Danto's essay in Wypijewski's *Painting by Numbers* monograph forms one of the key pieces of scholarship on the series. Danto concludes that the paintings are a postmodern joke that '[show] how great the distance is between where art is today and where the population is so far as, until the mischief began, its taste is captured in *America's Most Wanted*' (139). Undoubtedly, the paintings are satirical but I do not think that Danto's argument takes into account the sincerity with which the artists also critique political and statistical systems for being out of touch with the people that they purportedly represent.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Govan, "Director's Introduction to The Most Wanted Paintings on the Web," Dia Center for the Arts, accessed October 5, 2011, <http://awp.diaart.org/km/>.

<sup>8</sup> Guelman Gallery, "Nation's Choice," Guelman Gallery, accessed May 25, 2016, <http://www.guelman.ru/eng/gallery/moscow/vybor/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



(Fig 7) Komar and Melamid, *Russia's Most Wanted*, 1994, oil and acrylic on canvas, 40.64 x 50.8cm [television size].  
Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



(Fig 8) Komar and Melamid, *Russia's Most Unwanted*, 1994, oil on canvas,  
134.62 x 60.96cm [refrigerator size]. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Considering the title *People's Choice*, the popular reactions to the works were mixed, to say the least; ironically the project's website lists feedback on the project from members of the public which is decidedly less than positive. Some individuals argued that the survey questions were loaded, overly simplistic, and did not allow for a diversity of opinions. One such response is from an individual named John Carroll, who writes: 'I like the idea of conducting a survey, but your survey is to [sic] simplistic. It is aimed at arriving at a conclusion about a certain predetermined audience'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, given that the *Most Wanted/Unwanted* series allegedly surveyed the opinions of nearly two billion people worldwide, it is perhaps surprising, if one is to trust the survey methodology, that the painted results are so similar.<sup>11</sup> Despite drawing on the survey data, Melamid admits that the landscape scenes depicted in many of the *Most Wanted*s relies on a variation of the traditional 'rule of thirds' for landscape compositions and were painted according to the ideal landscapes of the classical, seventeenth century Italian painter Domenichino.<sup>12</sup> The survey questions themselves, which included variations on the following examples, lack the nuance and complexity that one might expect to pertain to art:

Speaking of colors, if you had to name one color as your favorite color—the color you would like to see stand out in a painting you would consider buying for your home, for example—which color would it be?;

Thinking back to the paintings of people that you have like[d] in the past, for the most part were the figure[s] working, at leisure, or were they posed portraits?; and

On the whole, would you say that you prefer seeing paintings of wild animals, like lions[,], giraffes or deer, or that you prefer seeing paintings of domestic animals, like dogs, cats, or other pets?"<sup>13</sup>

The questions are rather bizarrely straightforward, painstakingly drawing out the smallest of details from respondents in a process of seeming objectivity generally associated with scientific

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<sup>10</sup> The reactions of members of the public to works produced in the first two years of the project is displayed in the form of written correspondence on the project website, theoretically completing the work's democratic 'feedback loop'. "Letters to Komar and Melamid," Dia Center for the Arts, accessed October 5, 2011, <http://awp.diaart.org/km/letters.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Samman, 73. This figure was calculated according to the fact that the people surveyed in each country were seen to act as representatives of the entire country's population, thus adding up to a much higher figure than the number of people actually surveyed.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Meyer, et al., "Blue Landscapes, Bewitching Numbers, and the Double Life of Jokes, in *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, ed. JoAnn Wypijewski (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 31.

<sup>13</sup> These questions are drawn from the Chinese survey, "The Survey Results," Dia Center for the Arts, accessed May 25, 2016, <http://awp.diaart.org/km/>. Questions and wording differed slightly from country to country. Some questions were not asked at all in certain countries, although it is not clear why this is the case.

data collection.<sup>14</sup> *America's Most Unwanted* (Fig 9), for example, contains the following most unpopular features as recorded in the surveys: 'Paintings that are 'different-looking'' (30%) and feature imaginary objects (36%); 'Thick, textured surfaces (40%); 'Geometric patterns (30%); 'Darker shades (22%); 'Sharp angles (22%) and bold, stark designs (39%); 'Colors kept separate (18%); and 'Gold, orange, peach, teal (1%'.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, a handful of anomalous paintings are included in the series, including Holland's *Most Wanted* and *Unwanted* (Figs 13 and 14). We can only speculate as to why this is the case. Is the Dutch public tired with domestic interior scenes, à la Vermeer, for example?!



(Fig 9) Komar and Melamid, *America's Most Wanted*, 1994, oil and acrylic on canvas 60.96 x 81.28cm [dishwasher size]. Photo: D. James Dee. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



(Fig 10) Komar and Melamid, *America's Most Unwanted*, 1994, oil and acrylic on canvas 13.97 x 21.59cm [paperback size]. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

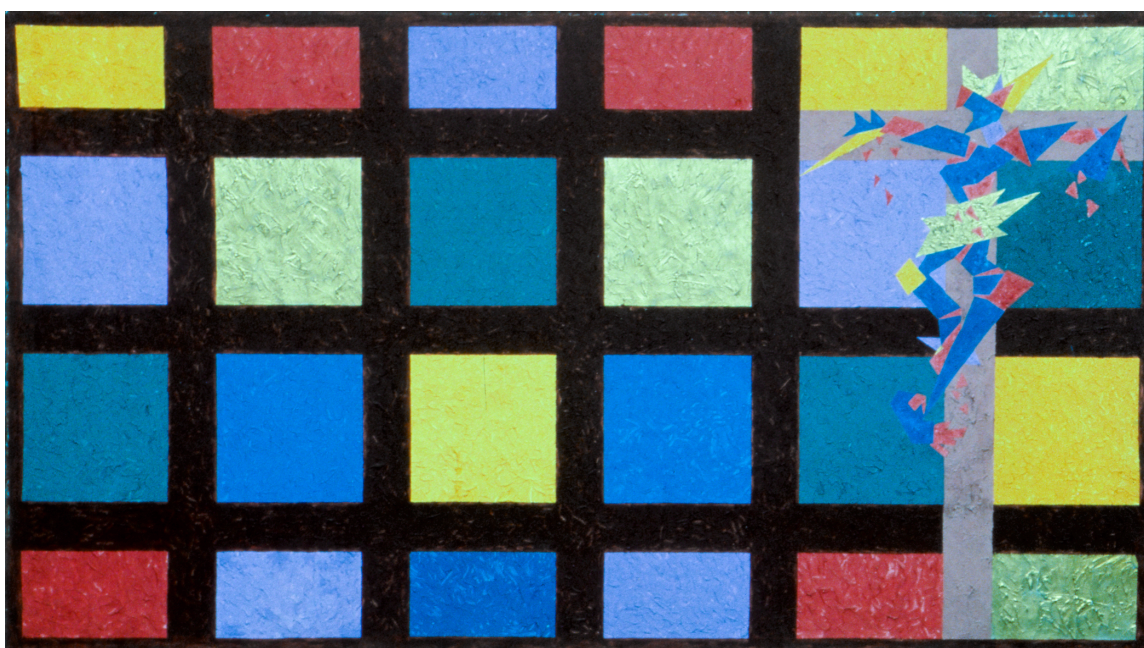
<sup>14</sup> Notably, the survey questions used the word 'art' as little as possible; Melamid notes that this was deliberate, so that respondents would refrain from moderating their answers according to preconceived ideas about art, which he argues are ideological in nature. Alexander Melamid, interview by author, New York/Melbourne, January 27, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Wypijewski, ed., *Painting by Numbers*, 6.





(Fig 11) Komar and Melamid *France's Most Wanted*, 1994, oil and acrylic on canvas, 40.64 x 55.88cm [television size].  
 Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



(Fig 12) Komar and Melamid, *France's Most Unwanted*, 1994, oil and acrylic on canvas, 209.55 x 50.8cm [wall size].  
 Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

In addition to the various criticisms of the paintings by individuals like John Carroll, the series received more measured responses from other interlocutors. For example, during a panel discussion on the results of the first public poll in 1994, critic Dore Ashton is noted to have said:

I think that talking about what the people want is absurd, and I think that they [Komar and Melamid] know it is absurd. I hope they do, anyway. But it's interesting that so many of us are here to talk about what the people want.<sup>16</sup>

Further, in the publication produced in conjunction with the project, the art critic Arthur Danto argues that the *Most Wanted* painting is actually 'incompatible with what most people want of a painting. But that may be different from what most people want *in* a painting'.<sup>17</sup> Bearing in mind these comments, the series' alternative title *People's Choice* needs further consideration. The concept of the people is similar in many ways to that of the public yet remains distinct. As I observed in the Introduction, the two terms share an etymology: from as early as the first century BCE the term 'publicus' meant 'of or belonging to the people, State or community'.<sup>18</sup> Alastair Hannay also observes the association between the Latin word *populus* and nationhood.<sup>19</sup> In some contexts 'the people' shares with 'the public' similar associations: both can designate an unquantifiably large number of individuals and can suggest 'the ordinary'. Indeed, in common parlance, the two are often used interchangeably. However, 'the people' is, arguably, more ideologically loaded, used throughout the twentieth century to designate political activism and dictatorial regimes, such as the Bolshevik People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, for example.<sup>20</sup> In the pages to follow I articulate the ways in which Komar and Melamid's series engages with the ideological potency of the concept of 'the people', particularly in Russia and the Soviet Union. Melamid's opening quotation about people's art indicates his belief in art that belongs to the people as opposed to the aristocracy, a comment that nods toward Russia under the rule of the Tsarist monarchy in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>16</sup> Dore Ashton, quoted in Wypijewski, ed., "Vox Pop: Notes on a Public Conversation", 75.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Danto, "Can it be the 'Most Wanted Painting' even if nobody wants it?," in Wypijewski, ed., 136.

<sup>18</sup> Definition of 'publicus,' in *A Latin Dictionary*, ed. and revised by Charlton Lewis and Charles Short (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1962), 1485. The term is used in Cicero (106BCE - 43BCE): 'multi suam rem bene gessere et publican patria procul'—'the business of the state' (in Cicero's *Epistulae ad Familiares*, c. 62-43 BC).

<sup>19</sup> Alastair Hannay, *On the Public: Thinking in Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 10.

<sup>20</sup> David Welch, "Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People's Community," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39, no. 2 (2004): 213–238.

Despite the shared connotations of both ‘the people’ and ‘the public’, writers on contemporary art, museum curators and marketing departments, and funding bodies in particular, have more readily adopted the term ‘the public’, correlating it with ‘public funding’, the ‘public museum’, ‘public engagement’, and so on. The suggestion, if not always the reality, is that the art in public museums is funded by the public and is therefore *for* the public: in Rosalyn Deutsche’s terms, open, accessible and inclusive.<sup>21</sup> In reality, this is, historically and culturally, highly variable. As I demonstrated in Chapter One, public museums themselves have shifted in orientation since the founding in the late eighteenth century of great public institutions such as The Louvre. Furthermore, public galleries in nations like the US, Britain and Australia are increasingly relying on private and corporate philanthropy, meaning that they are less reliant on public funding at all. My reference to the public in this chapter picks up on Komar and Melamid’s apparently sincere attempt to make art that directly reflects the collective taste of as large and as broad a number of individuals as possible.

### Popular culture and kitsch

Despite suggesting a public consensus around taste at the national and even international level, one of the most glaring paradoxes of the *People’s Choice* works is that they can readily be described as unsuccessful and strangely discordant. The paintings are bizarre compositions of subjects and settings. Much of the feedback around the paintings, noted above, was aimed at their ‘quality’, which, far from being examples of ‘good art’ are, in effect, kitsch parodies of academic landscape painting of the sort one might see at hotels or cafes or sold in chain stores. In their accompanying descriptions on the project’s website, the dimensions of the paintings are listed variously as according with household objects, suggesting their easy comparison with the stuff of popular consumerism such as lounge room furniture, electrical items or white goods.<sup>22</sup> In this part of the chapter I explore the series’ engagement with notions of the kitsch and the

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<sup>21</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, “The Question of Public Space,” American Photography Institute National Graduate Seminar Proceedings (New York: The Institute, 1999), Iwalewaha, Bayreuth University, Germany, accessed July 4, 2016, [https://iwalewapublicspace.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/rosalyn-deutsche-\\_the-question-of-\\_public-space\\_.pdf](https://iwalewapublicspace.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/rosalyn-deutsche-_the-question-of-_public-space_.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Melamid notes in an interview:

when I hired some pollsters, or the people that sponsored hired the pollsters, they always talked to me first and I said, ‘listen, you have to do it according to your science of polling...I trust you, I only work with the numbers you present to me and I need to know the texture or the colour or whatever in order for me to paint it.’ And I didn’t interfere in the process at all. The only thing I asked them to do because they asked for the size of the paintings in inches and said ‘no, no, no, people wouldn’t understand inches, let’s do it you know the size of real objects they’re familiar with like the size of a refrigerator, the size of a dishwasher, the size of a TV, that was my input, the only input, to make it more familiar, more realistic let’s say. That’s what the people know really for sure, the sizes of a refrigerator, or a wall or a TV and stuff like that.

Alexander Melamid, interview by author, New York/Melbourne, January 27, 2012.



popular—with art made for a large number of people or a broad public—by considering the works in the context of the more ideologically loaded forms of twentieth century mass culture.



(Fig 13) Komar and Melamid, *Holland's Most Wanted*, 1994, oil and acrylic on canvas, 34.29 x 26.67cm [magazine size]. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



(Fig 14) Komar and Melamid, *Holland's Most Unwanted*, 1994, oil and acrylic on canvas, 205.74 x 330.2cm [refrigerator size]. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

First, however, it is important to describe another facet of the project. Another two, later works augmented the series in 1997, also based on the results of public polling. Instead of making paintings, the artists turned their attention toward popularly created music to produce *The Most Wanted Song* and *The Most Unwanted Song* in collaboration with the composer Dave Soldier. The songs (collectively titled *The People's Choice Music*) are based on the results of approximately 500 responses to a poll, also written by Soldier, which was open to respondents on Dia's website.<sup>23</sup> The music CD's humorous cover shows the artists and Soldier all dressed in white lab coats and pointing in an exaggerated way toward a calculator that Soldier is holding (Fig 15). *The Most Wanted Song* has many of the components of a commercial pop ballad, with romantic, clichéd lyrics—at least, in the first verse:

Everyday [sic] I think of love  
And thank the angels up above  
They sent you into my world  
Baby let me be your girl!

The ballad features a silken-voiced female vocalist and its melody recalls popular Top 20 romantic songs by artists such as Mariah Carey or Whitney Houston. However, further on in the five-minute song, the lyrics become gradually more discordant as the music, like the paintings before it, tries to incorporate many of the divergent responses to the polls:

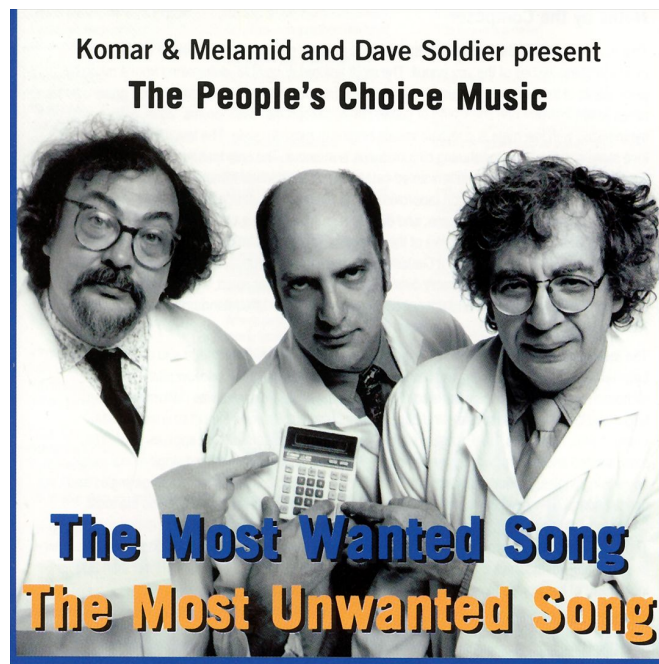
Maybe she likes reading Wittgenstein  
Fancy dinners drinking red wine!  
Simple livin' in our own R.V.  
Could it be that you're exactly like me?

According to the CD's paper cover, 26% of respondents cited 'intellectual' as their most important response when listening to music, and one can presume that this accounts for the

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<sup>23</sup> Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid and David Solider, *People's Choice Music: The Most Wanted Song, The Most Unwanted Song, Most Wanted* performed by Ada Dyer and Ronnie Gent, *Most Unwanted* performed by various, Mulatta, 2002, CD. The CD jacket includes the following note by Soldier: 'Most participants desire music of moderate duration (approximately 5 minutes), moderate pitch range, moderate tempo, and moderate to loud volume, and display a profound dislike of the alternatives. If the survey provides an accurate analysis of these factors for the population, and assuming that the preference for each factor follows a Gaussian (i.e. bell-curve) distribution, the combination of these qualities, even to the point of sensory overload and stylistic dis cohesion, will result in a musical work that will be unavoidably and uncontrollably "liked" by  $72 \pm 12\%$  (standard deviation; Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic) of listeners... The most unwanted music is over 25 minutes long, veers wildly between loud and quiet sections, between fast and slow tempos, and features timbres of extremely high and low pitch, with each dichotomy presented in abrupt transition. See also Dave Soldier, "Notes by the Composer," Dia Center for the arts, accessed September 2, 2011, <http://awp.diaart.org/km/musiccd.html>.

Wittgenstein reference.<sup>24</sup> If one can also assume that Dia's audience were more familiar with philosophy than the 'average' individual then the music would seem to reflect this sample bias. *The Most Unwanted Song* is, similarly, difficult to enjoy, though for perhaps different reasons. At nearly 22 minutes long it is an eclectic mixture of vocal styles and instruments including accordion and bagpipe, banjo, flute and tuba, which occasionally overlap with each other. According to Soldier: '[t]he most unwanted subjects for lyrics are cowboys and holidays, and the most unwanted listening circumstances are involuntary exposure to commercials and elevator music'.<sup>25</sup>



(Fig 15) CD cover of *The People's Choice Music*,  
Vitaly Komar, Alexander Melamid and David Soldier, 1997

The music and the paintings' 'umbrella' title, *People's Choice*, connotes the 'low-brow' culture of popular voting contests such as the American *People's Choice Awards* for popular film, television and music, as opposed to the 'critic's choice'. Its other association is with the 'most popular choice' prize occasionally awarded to artworks in exhibitions after the official judges have made their selections. This prize is awarded on the basis that while the work may not be deemed the most successful in academic terms, it nonetheless wins the widespread support of gallery viewers, 'the people'. Komar and Melamid use a statistical research methodology that

<sup>24</sup> Soldier, notes inside *People's Choice Music* CD jacket.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

mimics the kind used in both political polling and market research to garner the popular choices and opinions of the public. Ironically however, the title *Most Wanted* also recalls the subjects of criminal investigation, those whom the community want to remove from their midst, while *Most Unwanted* suggests widespread rejection.<sup>26</sup>

Bearing this in mind, how might we account for the idea that the *Most Wanted* paintings, as Danto argues above, include what people want *in* such paintings but do not reflect what people want *of* these same works? One answer would be that the paintings, while created *for* ‘the people’ are not created directly *by* them; of course, Komar and Melamid themselves painted the final works. Furthermore, the *Most Wanted* paintings could readily be described as ‘tacky’, resembling the kind of low quality pieces available at low cost in cheap stores. In other words, these are works created for the masses by commercial industry—and it should be noted, too, that some of the research for the works was funded by the Chase Manhattan Bank in what is perhaps the artists’ satirical nod to commerce.<sup>27</sup> In this vein, we can consider the American critic Clement Greenberg’s now canonical essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), in which he decried the effects of capitalist mass production on culture. Greenberg condemned kitsch as being the avant-garde’s debased, mass produced other, which catered to the popular taste of the masses through ‘popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.’.<sup>28</sup> He traced the development of kitsch to the Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which led to widespread literacy and the concomitant mass production of easily digestible culture. Kitsch appropriated the forms of ‘genuine culture’ but did so on a purely surface level; any emotions that the viewer got from it were likewise superficial, pure simulacra.<sup>29</sup> Greenberg allied kitsch with the degradation of ‘high culture’ under the powers of capitalist profiteering, but his concern was even more politically oriented. Writing at the start of World War Two and during the height of Hitler’s power in Germany and Stalin’s in the Soviet Union, he worried in particular about kitsch’s propensity toward spreading fascist ideas through its appeal to the masses.<sup>30</sup>

For the Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno, the effects of capitalism on autonomous art (art not produced specifically for mass market consumption) were also powerfully ideological. Adorno condemned the manner in which capitalist industry had leached into the sphere of

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<sup>26</sup> Danto, 138.

<sup>27</sup> Govan, “Director’s Introduction to The Most Wanted Paintings on the Web”.

<sup>28</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press [1939] 1961), 9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-21.

culture, homogenising cultural products through what he termed the ‘culture industry’, a term developed with Max Horkheimer in 1947.<sup>31</sup> For Adorno, the culture industry was a means by which industry extended its ideological reach into the leisure time of workers, turning them into consumers—a remarkably prescient observation that is as relevant today as it was in 1947.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Adorno argued that mass culture is made according to a standard set of variables, which assures a consistent ideological recipe and a ‘sameness’ that can also be seen in the *People’s Choice* series. As Adorno writes:

What parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness; everywhere the changes mask a skeleton which has changed just as little as the profit motive itself since the time it first gained its predominance over culture.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, if we consider Greenberg’s and Adorno’s texts, then Komar and Melamid’s series can be seen to exemplify mass culture and kitsch in their more debased forms. While apparently less ideologically laden than the mass culture of which both critics write, the point can nonetheless be made that the *People’s Choice* series does not directly reflect the people it purports to represent. This ‘distance’ is perhaps greater if we consider the paintings’ standardisation through market research, which can necessarily rely on over-simplifications—the kind of simplifications that John Carroll reacted to in his critique of the works, mentioned above. In the next part of this chapter, I broaden the discussion of popular culture and kitsch to consider these ideas in the context of the artists’ own history in the former Soviet Union.

### **Socialist Realism: art for the masses**

Komar and Melamid’s engagement with mass produced culture relates to their personal and professional histories. Both artists were Soviet émigrés to North America, arriving in New York during the 1970s. Art historian Nadim Samman notes that their exit from the Soviet Union was subject to pressure from the State: the duo participated in illegal exhibitions and, after government pressure, formally applied to leave.<sup>34</sup> Their individual and collaborative work was, for over three decades (until 2003-04) directed at a critical engagement with Soviet ideology and its impact on culture and identity, most prominently through Soviet Socialist Realism, the propagandist work made following the 1917 Revolution.<sup>35</sup> The duo founded the Sots Art

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<sup>31</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. and introduced by J. M. Bernstein (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 98-106.

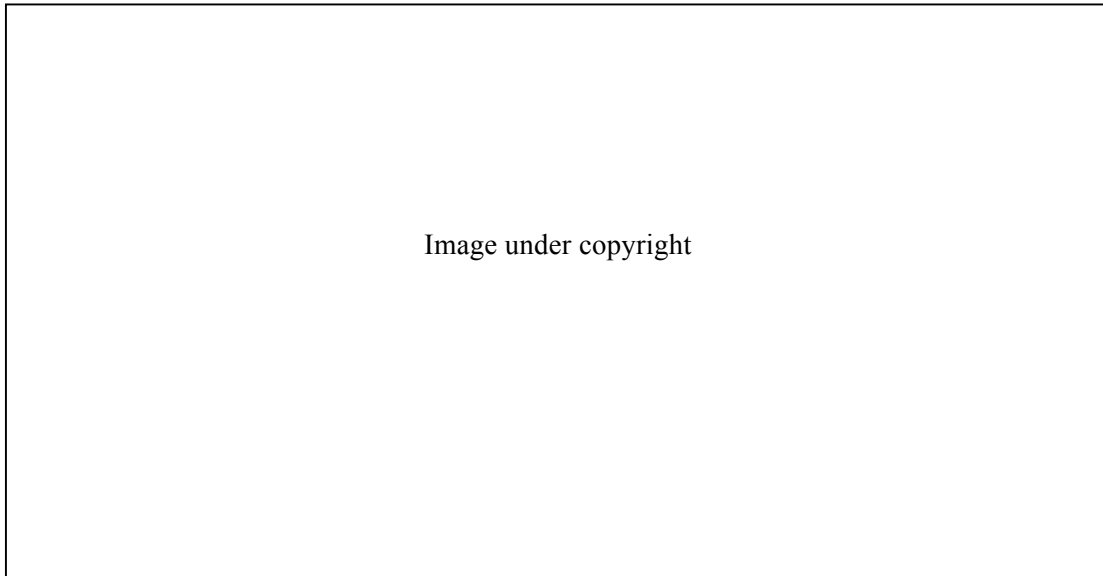
<sup>32</sup> Adorno, 98. Also see J. M. Bernstein, “Introduction,” in the same volume, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Adorno, 100.

<sup>34</sup> Samman, 63.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

movement, a form of Pop/Conceptual art based on Soviet imagery and mass culture, which was part of their long-running critique of Soviet politics, father-figure or god-like identities such as Stalin, and their influence over art and culture.<sup>36</sup>



(Fig 16) Alexander Deineka, *Collective Farm Worker on a Bicycle*, 1935, oil on canvas, 120 x 220 cm. The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. © State Russian Museum.

The prominent Russian-born art critic Boris Groys has written extensively about the Soviet propagandist art known as Socialist Realism, which dominated artistic production from the 1930s until around the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. In his book *Art Power* (2008), Groys notes that under Stalinism, artistic production was heavily and often violently controlled. The content of works was narrowed to a handful of State-sanctioned themes that encapsulated visions of the great Soviet future. Workers engaged in satisfying activities on the land or scenes showing Communist activities such as parades and demonstrations were the primary subjects of this art.<sup>37</sup> Alexander Deineka's painting *Collective Farm Worker on A Bicycle* (1935) (Fig 16) is characteristic of the style of Socialist Realism. Deineka's work shows a red-clad woman riding her bicycle along a country road, presumably on the collective farm in which she works given the painting's title. Surrounded by an expanse of greenery and blue sky, there is the sense that this road is endless, as the woman rides off out of the canvas, seemingly into her metaphoric bright future.

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<sup>36</sup> Valerie L. Hillings, "Komar and Melamid's Dialogue with (Art) History," *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (1999): 49-61; "1972 – Chronology," Komar and Melamid.org: The Website of Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, accessed October 25, 2011, <http://www.komarandmelamid.org/>.

<sup>37</sup> Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 144.

One of the defining features of Socialist Realist art was its engagement with the concept of *narodnost*'.<sup>38</sup> *Narodnost*' has a wide variety of meanings, but according to art historian Toby Clark, it is 'literally people-ness; accessible to popular audiences and reflecting their concerns'.<sup>39</sup> Prior to the Revolution, under Peter the Great, the term was used to signify 'common' or 'simple' people, namely peasants, as the 'authentic embodiment of the nation'.<sup>40</sup> (Clark's definition correlates with Hannay's etymological description of the word *populus*, mentioned previously, in which *populus* was linked with nationhood.)<sup>41</sup> In a supplementary definition of *narodnost*', historian Maureen Perrie lists the concept's meaning as wide-ranging, from 'nationalism, nationality, nationhood, and national identity, through folkways, folksiness, and folklorism, to populism, popularity, accessibility, and comprehensibility'.<sup>42</sup> Perrie charts the concept's evolution throughout the nineteenth century, where it remained as an important concept signifying a fundamental Russian national spirit—the idea of the *prostoi narod* or simple people—that would distinguish the nation from its Western enemies and eventually underpin the work of the Revolution.<sup>43</sup> With respect to the art of the Soviet era after 1917, the concept of *narodnost*' required that artworks reject depictions of the intelligentsia in favour of simple portrayals of the socialist *narod*'.<sup>44</sup> Here, such depictions of simple people played an important propagandist function and served to popularise the aims of the regime. As Attwood and Kelly write:

*narodnost*' might be equated with popularity, except that the "popularity" of a Soviet work of literature or art was intended to be determined from above, by the tastes of the Party leadership, rather than below, by the operation of market forces.<sup>45</sup>

Fostering this mass popularity-as-propaganda, Socialist Realist works were also produced *en masse*, much like the mass culture produced by concurrent and successive totalitarian regimes including under Nazism. Groys notes that 'successful' works leant themselves to mass distribution (the bold, flat colour and graphic style of Deineka's *Collective Farm Worker* recalls the look of much mass-distributed poster art of the same period). He also points out the striking

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<sup>38</sup> Maureen Perrie, "Narodnost': Notions of National Identity," in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940*, eds. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>39</sup> Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 87.

<sup>40</sup> Perrie, 28-29.

<sup>41</sup> Hannay, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Perrie., 28.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Lynne Attwood and Catriona Kelly, "Programmes for Identity: The 'New Man' and the 'New Woman'," in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940*, eds. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 286.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



similarity of Socialist Realist works across the board. With the type of subjects so regulated and formal qualities restricted to portrayals that preferenced a form of photographic realism to avoid the ‘distortion’ of Western modernism, it was perhaps not surprising that works looked like the same artist had made them.<sup>46</sup> Groys notes that Socialist Realist art emerged during the global burgeoning of mass produced culture, including the so-called kitsch culture that Greenberg denigrated in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”. In contrast to Greenberg, however, Groys draws several notable distinctions between Soviet mass culture and the kitsch products of Western capitalism. Firstly, the art market had been abolished under the Soviet state, along with the free market, and sanctioned artworks were made in order to further the vision of the State. Accordingly, notes Groys, art was made to educate and direct members of the public about State matters, rather than to foster ‘individual contemplation’ like the art of the West.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, issues of artistic quality and its concomitant degradation through crude mass reproduction were deemed irrelevant.<sup>48</sup> This view of art is completely at odds with the context of the *People’s Choice* series when viewed within the frame of the Western art market, which trades on notions of quality and taste.

Groys makes a further point to distinguish Socialist Realist art from Greenbergian kitsch, based on the notion of the public to whom this art was aimed. Soviet mass culture was not driven by capitalist profiteering, since the market had been abolished, but by a desire to push Soviet political ideology. Crucially, this also meant a different conception of the public for this art. As Groys writes:

Socialist Realism did not seek to be liked by the masses—it wanted to create masses that it could like. Generally, the public gets the art that it deserves. But Socialist Realism tried to produce the public that would deserve it.<sup>49</sup>

He also notes that ‘the primary interest of Socialist Realism was not an artwork but a viewer. Soviet art was produced in the relatively firm conviction that people would come to like it when they had become better people, less decadent and less corrupted by bourgeois values.’<sup>50</sup> In this way, argues Groys, Socialist Realism was used as a propagandist device to persuade the public to move collectively toward the future subjecthood foretold by this art. Once again, this contrasts with Komar and Melamid’s apparent aspiration to create work to suit its public’s taste in the context of Western aesthetic traditions.

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<sup>46</sup> Groys, 146.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>49</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, And Beyond*, trans. by Charles Rougle (London and New York: Verso, 2011), 124.

<sup>50</sup> Groys, *Art Power*, 147.



Given Komar and Melamid's dissident history we can read the *People's Choice* as a subtle mockery of the Stalinist regime and of Socialist Realist Art that aimed to make art in the service of 'the people'. More specifically, some points of comparison can be drawn between the paintings and Groys' argument, as well as the concept of *narodnost*'. On a purely visual or even 'surface' level, the paintings recall examples of Socialist Realism. In many of the *Most Wanted* paintings, we see people working away on the land or otherwise engaging with serene landscapes, painted in a style that recalls the 'realism' of the paintings' Soviet precursors. This is so despite the obvious difference that the *Most Wanted*s were, in fact, painted by only two people with the input of several thousand others, as opposed to the tightly controlled directive of the Soviet regime which represented a very few. Secondly, we can consider the way in which Komar and Melamid conceive of the public for their art. Their works appear to invest in the idea of a public that is deeply connected to its 'own' art. The *People's Choice* series was made, at least in one sense, by the public, and for the public—not, of course, by the State as a way of creating the public in its own vision. Even bearing in mind my earlier argument that the series invokes the 'arm's length' approach of commercial industry to mass culture, it may still be argued that the *People's Choice* is a form of 'art for the people'—distinct from the 'people's art' of Socialist Realism. The artists work from the premise that individuals know what they like and dislike and, moreover, that they have the capacity to express taste. Indeed, the very strangeness of the *People's Choice* indicates the artists' apparent aim toward painterly 'objectivity' in harnessing the multiple and often strangely discordant views of the public.

And yet, there is a paradox here. Given the methodology employed to create the *People's Choice* series, it is assumed that the people—'ordinary people' or non art-specialists—will be able to relate to them. However, as mentioned previously, the results of the surveys produced works that are far from relatable, or even likeable, according to the artists' feedback. As the critic Arthur Danto argues, one of the reasons that the works do not 'stack up' as paintings that any individual would want to own or admire is because they rely on 'scientific' polling rather than other assumed qualities such as intuition or instinct.<sup>51</sup> They represent a singular unified voice of the people that entirely misses its mark. Danto has astutely observed that 'the painting that is supposed to reflect the integrated aesthetic utility curves of Everyone in fact reflects the aesthetic utility curve of no one at all.'<sup>52</sup> If 'the people' purportedly represents a form of unified subjecthood, then the paintings seem to suggest that this collective designation has very little

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<sup>51</sup> Danto, 136.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 138.

relationship with the people it allegedly represents; the people can never be represented in any definitive way.

The concept of ‘the people’s’ subjecthood can be extended through yet another definition of *narodnost*’ which historians Perrie, Attwood and Kelly liken to ‘national’ spirit or character, to ‘nationalism’.<sup>53</sup> Perrie makes the point that it was the influence of the educated elite in Russia and elsewhere in Europe in harnessing and framing the *narod*’ as ‘embodiments of traditional national virtues’ that led to the development of a sense of national character.<sup>54</sup> That is, a class of cultured elite (the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau among them) framed the people as the authentic expression of a nation’s culture. In its ideological sense, then, ‘the people’ is an abstracted form of national subjecthood that is not owned by the people themselves. Nationalism in art, as in politics, was widely prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (consider, as a prime example, history paintings such as Delacroix’s renowned work depicting the French Revolution, *July 28. Liberty Leading the People*, 1830). If we recall that the *People’s Choice* series allegedly reflects each of its polled nation’s preferences, there is a sense in which this portrayal of ‘nationhood’ in such recent paintings is anachronistic and somewhat distasteful, bearing in mind the more negative associations of nationalism with dictatorships, war and colonisation.

In a final, related means of engagement with Soviet cultural history, the *People’s Choice* series can be viewed as reflecting on Russian and Soviet histories of collectivism versus individuality. Even prior to the Soviet era, the concept of individual identity, in the Western sense of individual selfhood and personality, was not articulated in social and cultural life.<sup>55</sup> Historian Derek Offord writes:

Pre-Petrine Russia [before Peter the Great] lacked that sense of worth of the human personality embodied in the concept of *humanitas* inherited by the West from the Roman world, the sense, as it has been described, of the ‘dignity of one’s own human personality, which is a thing unique and which must be cared for and developed to the full’, on the one hand, and a ‘recognition of the personalities of others and their right to care for their own personalities’, on the other.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, in pre-Revolutionary Russia, collectivist life, involving community-oriented duties and common deeds, influenced by religious beliefs, were seen as preferable to the notion

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<sup>53</sup> Perrie, 28; Attwood and Kelly, 286.

<sup>54</sup> Perrie, 29.

<sup>55</sup> Derek Offord, “*Lichnost*’: Notions of Individual Identity,” in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940*, eds Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 14.

<sup>56</sup> Derek Offord, 13-14.

of individualism.<sup>57</sup> As Samman describes at length, Komar and Melamid deal with the complexly intertwined notions of individual and collective that defined the Soviet regime, which of course impacted on cultural production. As Samman also notes, the artists are at once a collaborative duo (a ‘we’)<sup>58</sup>; their collaborative work harks back to collectivity in the field of art in the 1920s, where the Constructivists promoted collective cultural production, unromantically de-individualising the artist, who turned from studios to factories, which in turn became ‘the instruments of collective creativity’.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the Soviet avant-garde operated not just on the principle of shared production but, argue Beth Hinderliter et al., on the utopian basis of ‘simultaneous collective reception’, an impossibility that was doomed to fail.<sup>60</sup>

Melamid has commented on the evidence of collective, or rather ‘universal’, taste that he and Komar captured in the *People’s Choice* paintings: a universal preference for blue, for example.<sup>61</sup> A Western philosophical form of this idea also predated the Constructivists, and lay in the Kantian notion of *sensus communis* or common sense, discussed previously in this thesis. The Enlightenment idea of *sensus communis* underpinned the burgeoning notion of the bourgeois public sphere. This asserted that a shared capacity for aesthetic judgement signalled an ability to make judgements that were beyond the selfish interests of the individual and could concern the ‘collective reason of mankind’.<sup>62</sup> If the *People’s Choice* series reflects on universalism (either in terms of its Soviet or its Western cultural and conceptual precedents) it also illustrates in a conceptual sleight of hand how the faculty to share taste in common can be employed to ‘unwant’ the works that have been ‘collaboratively’ produced.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Catriona Kelly and Vadim Volkov, “Obshchestvennost’, Sobornost’: Collective Identities,” in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940*, eds Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 26-27.

<sup>58</sup> Samman, see 62-68.

<sup>59</sup> Qtd in Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, Berkley: University of California Press, 2005, 155.

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, qtd in Beth Hinderliter et al., “Introduction,” in *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, eds Beth Hinderliter, William Kaizen, Vered Maimon, Jaleh Mansoor and Seth McCormick (Duke University Press: Durham, 2009), 12.

<sup>61</sup> Melamid, in Peter Meyer, et al., 13.

<sup>62</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Taste as a kind of *sensus communis*,” in *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. and with analytical indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 151; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 2004), 28.

<sup>63</sup> Another perspective on universal taste, which is outside the gamut of this study, can be gleaned in Thierry de Duve’s, “Do Artists Speak on Behalf of All of Us?”, in *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, eds Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon eds. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 140-156. De Duve writes about universal taste as theorized by Kant in his notion of *sensus communis*. Also see Dennis Dutton, “America’s Most Wanted, and Why No One Wants It,” *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1998): 530-43 and Ellen Dissanayake, “Komar and Melamid Discover Pleistocene Taste” in the same issue, 486-496. Both writers respond to the *People’s Choice* series from the perspective of shared taste as the product of ancestral inheritance. Dutton’s article criticizes the works for their lack of statistical accuracy (and in doing so, I believe, misses their point, which is that such tools can never be entirely representative). Both Dutton’s and Dissanayake’s argument contrasts with Danto’s relativist point of view to suggest that, rather than being culturally constructed, taste may be the product of ancestral inheritance. ‘Since universal human preferences presumably derive from an adaptive Pleistocene hunter-gatherer psychology,’ argues Dissanayake, ‘they have been suggested as a profitable arena in which to study the evolution of aesthetic taste,’ 488.

The idea that universal taste could exist (the very universal taste that the *People's Choice* works seem to 'prove') actually contradicts the idea that a national 'character', à la *narodnost*, could be conveyed by any nation's art. This is particularly the case in the contemporary, global context of artistic production and dissemination in which Komar and Melamid produced the paintings. As observed previously, the paintings are very similar in form and content, with the notable exceptions in the *Most Wanted*s of national preferences for religious, spiritual or political figures.<sup>64</sup> Can we 'read' in the works a sly artistic commentary on the global homogenisation of cultural difference under capitalism? Or a satirical take on the dangers of nationalism, as in the Soviet Union? Or are the paintings 'simply' an outcome of the artists' seemingly 'objective' research methodology? I would suggest that all three types of commentary are at play in the works, which defy any 'easy' conclusion about their politics; instead they seem to rest on an uneasy understanding about the extent of political and economic power and of the tools used to wield power, most often at the expense of the people who are supposedly served by it. Melamid observes that the polls used to create the artworks are, like any other polling methods, inherently ideological and biased:

there's no objective questions either. It's very biased and mostly really stupid [laughs] but that's what it is ... the whole work shows this enormous prejudice of our time I think because the polls are so important, so widely spread, so influential. We believe in them, and medical research and everything, but they all lie, it's another form of lie ... of total deception.<sup>65</sup>

In many ways, we can view the *People's Choice* as the result of Komar and Melamid's own 'double vision': a collaborative project that also fails to quite capture the people in focus.

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<sup>64</sup> Komar has argued: 'Here in America, before we got results of poll we thought we would have to paint different pictures by income, by race. Instead, we made surprising discovery: in society famous for freedom of expression, freedom of individual, our poll revealed sameness of majority. [sic]' Quoted in Peter Meyer, et al., 8. When statistically 'mapped', the results of the surveys do seem to indicate national preferences. Statisticians John Bunge and Adrienne Freeman-Gallant plotted the results on a map, where the countries that revealed similar preferences were situated closer to each other, and the ones that showed greater discrepancy in their taste were situated further away on the map. Bunge and Freeman-Gallant write, 'Statistics is not an absolute science, and the integrity of polls is subject to all kinds of variability. But it was interesting to us that most countries' positions on the map appear reasonable from a cultural perspective. Turkey, for instance, falls a significant distance from the U.S. This is even more interesting because the American and Turkish questionnaires were identical. So it seems that the questionnaire does measure preferences in art, rather than simply producing results that were predetermined by the formulation of the questions.' John Bunge and Adrienne Freeman-Gallant, "Blue World Order? A *Post Hoc* Statistical Analysis of Art Preference Surveys From Ten Countries," in *Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art*, ed. JoAnn Wypijewski (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997), 90.

<sup>65</sup> Alexander Melamid, interview by author, New York/Melbourne, January 27, 2012.

## Consumer polling, democratic painting

Moving on from this discussion of Soviet history, I now want to consider the *People's Choice* series in a more contemporary, political context. As we have seen, the works engage with the possibilities created by the votes of the public in a version of the democratic process. The series purports to represent the *vox populi*, the voice of the people. These voices are so often called for across various strata of democratic societies from political opinion polls to market research and in the voting contests of popular media. Melamid has outlined (with what seems like irony given the crudeness of the works) how the series' statistical 'methodology' allowed what he saw as the 'truth', and thus the 'beauty', of the works to emerge:

In a way it [the series] was a traditional idea, because a faith in numbers is fundamental to people, starting with Plato's idea of a world which is based on numbers. In ancient Greece, when sculptors wanted to create an ideal human body they measured the most beautiful men and women and then made an average measurement ...<sup>66</sup>

With irony and humour, the paintings illustrate a form of the adage: 'every country has the government it deserves', modifying this to 'every country has the *painting* it deserves', with the exception, perhaps, of communist China and of Russia, whose people had until recent decades little choice over much of their national art.<sup>67</sup> The series reads on one level as deeply critical of the vote and the opinion poll as tools of democracy, highlighting the unrepresentativeness and inaccuracy of statistical tools. On a small scale, the paintings highlight the inherent possibilities and problems of representation in contemporary Western democratic and market-driven systems. Indeed, common critiques of Western representative democracy include its manifestly unrepresentative nature due, among other issues, to the infrequency with which individuals vote, not to mention vested interests including lobby groups and corporate media interests.<sup>68</sup>

Public opinion polling, it is assumed, gives politicians access to the collective 'popular mind', invoking the singular, dominant opinion, or at least the opinions held by a majority of voters.<sup>69</sup> However, one of the problems of polling, as the paintings make clear, is precisely the problem of how to represent 'the public'. A common criticism of contemporary political polling is that focus groups and polls are about giving back to the public what they have said in the form of

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<sup>66</sup> Govan, "Director's Introduction to The Most Wanted Paintings on the Web".

<sup>67</sup> The adage 'Every country has the government it deserves' has been attributed widely to Joseph de Maistre.

<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 104.

<sup>69</sup> A version of this section of the text was previously included in Arden, "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public".

shallow, vote-winning policy statements, rather than helping politicians lead on difficult policy issues.<sup>70</sup> A second criticism is that the short turnaround of political polls means that the public is over-pollled. With politicians captivated by these fast-moving figures, one can argue that this leads to a loss of complex reflection on both sides.<sup>71</sup> The paintings appear to correlate visually with these remarks to the extent that they are a jumbled ‘mirroring’ of public responses.<sup>72</sup> Komar and Melamid’s polling process mimics the systems used by political pollsters and market researchers alike to garner the popular choices and opinions of the public. Politicians and commercial businesses purportedly aim, after all, to give the public ‘what it wants’. The *People’s Choice* compares the seriousness of democratic decision-making to the more superficial aspects of consumerism, where political parties value margins and percentages above all else.

In a related vein, both social theorist Michael Warner and sociologist Craig Calhoun have pointed to the inaccuracy and inadequacy of public opinion research, the very type of research that Komar and Melamid conducted in order to gather their data.<sup>73</sup> Warner writes, referencing Jürgen Habermas, about the distortive qualities of public polling and market research, which constitute the public as a social fact, denying its very open-endedness.<sup>74</sup> Further, Calhoun argues:

Public opinion research ... focuses not on the forming of opinion through public discourse, but on the use of survey methods to identify the opinions of private persons. These are deemed to be public either because they can be aggregated statistically to represent the whole mass of persons, or because they are on topics of public interest. There is no implication, however, that such opinions have been formed in a public manner, let alone through open sharing of information and rational-critical debate rather than through the management of public relations.<sup>75</sup>

Calhoun argues that opinion research is a numbers game, much like the *People’s Choice* series, rather than a correlation of views that have been formed through open, public debate. Recalling my earlier argument about the ideological subjectivity attached to the designation ‘the people’, we can also draw from Calhoun the idea that public opinion research often counters the very

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<sup>70</sup> John Hewson, “The Talking Point: Greasy Polls,” (online video), public forum at The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne, 26 October 2011, The Wheeler Centre, accessed June 26, 2012, <http://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/the-talking-point-greasy-polls>.

<sup>71</sup> George Megalogenis, “The Talking Point: Greasy Polls,” (online video) public forum at The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne, 26 October 2011, The Wheeler Centre, accessed June 26, 2012, <http://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/the-talking-point-greasy-polls>.

<sup>72</sup> Arden, “Participatory Art and the Impossible Public”.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005). Craig Calhoun, “Public,” in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, eds Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg, and Meaghan Morris, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), 284.

<sup>74</sup> Warner, 72.

<sup>75</sup> Calhoun, 284.

democratic idea of the public otherwise designated by this term, that is, its openness and accountability to the people it purportedly represents.<sup>76</sup>

Expanding on the idea that polling has a superficial and compromised engagement with the notion of the public understood as a democratic entity, we can also consider philosopher Jean Baudrillard's writing on polling. Baudrillard has written at length about polling 'the masses' rather than the public; this correlates with his broader philosophical inquiry into the modern phenomenon of the mass media, particularly in the post-Fordist era since the 1960s.<sup>77</sup>

Nevertheless, his invocation of the masses as an elusive and evasive entity is instructive in terms of Komar and Melamid's project. In his essay "In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities" (1978), Baudrillard writes about polling as a science of simulation, one that 'simply simulates an elusive object'<sup>78</sup>. He argues that:

The mass is dumb like beasts, and its silence is equal to the silence of beasts. Despite having been surveyed to death ... it says neither whether the truth is to the left or to the right, nor whether it prefers revolution or repression. It is without truth and without reason. It has been attributed with every arbitrary remark. It is without conscience and without unconscious.<sup>79</sup>

Baudrillard asserts that the muteness of the masses is not the result of power inflicted on them from the outside, but is a form of passivity or inertness that cannot be acted upon by any external authority. The masses stand in for the once-political and the once-social that have been re-constituted into a new 'mass' subjectivity; the masses are represented by unceasing 'currents and flows' of information in the form of statistics and survey results.<sup>80</sup> Drawing on Baudrillard and on Calhoun (above), we can consider the *People's Choice* series as merely simulating the masses. The paintings are a reflection of an entity that is, in one sense, unquantifiable and unknowable.

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<sup>76</sup> Also see Deutsche, "The Question of Public Space".

<sup>77</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, "In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities," in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities or, The End of the Social*, trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston, Paul Patton, and Andrew Berardini (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1983), 1-61. The notion of the masses warrants comparison with that of the people discussed previously in this chapter, if only to suggest that Baudrillard's concept of the masses is much more elusive than that of the people. In an Introduction to Baudrillard's essay, Sylvère Lotringer, Chris Kraus and Hedi El Kholi write that '[t]he people belongs to the state and the state in return protects them. The masses or the multitudes, on the other hand, are unrepresentable'. In "Introduction: Requiem for the Masses," in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities or, The End of the Social*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 26.

<sup>78</sup> Baudrillard, 32.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 35.

Baudrillard's contention echoes Jacques Rancière's theory of postdemocracy.<sup>81</sup> As I outlined in Chapter One, Rancière argues that we live today in an age of postdemocracy, the state of affairs after which democracy in the true political sense can no longer be achieved because it has been reduced to a mode of consensual interplay between parties and societies.<sup>82</sup> What is in effect consensus democracy represents the people as a whole, untroubled, and in this sense it effaces any sense of politics, of people outside the naturalised order of ways of saying, doing and being. And so Rancière asks:

What in actual fact is this identification of democratic opinion with the system of polls and simulations? It is the absolute removal of the sphere of appearance of the people. In it the community is continually presented to itself. In it the people are never again uneven, uncountable, or unrepresentable. They are always both totally present and totally absent at once. They are entirely caught in a structure of the visible where everything is on show and where there is thus no longer any place for appearance.<sup>83</sup>

Rancière's account provides a critical point of engagement with Komar and Melamid's *People's Choice* series because the paintings and music exemplify the failure of a kind of consensus democracy.<sup>84</sup> In postdemocracy, the process of polling renders the public *too visible* so that there is no space for politics to happen, no appearance of a critical sphere in which a contest can happen. I argue, therefore, that one of the 'failures' of the *People's Choice* is that all aesthetic possibilities, all opinions, are on view at once and in this 'transparency' there is no room for the emergence of critical faculty within the paintings themselves. Another way of putting this is that all expressions of dissensus, in the form of contrary preferences, are accounted for in the works and are represented as statistics (e.g. "40% of people dislike thick, textured surfaces the most, while 30% don't like geometric patterns"). Whereas, according to Beth Hinderliter et al., dissensus politics should identify difference and therefore should disrupt a unitary notion of the people:

politics is a stage on which the people appear as divided ... . Politics designates subjects that do not coincide with the parties of the state of society: it is therefore a site of disidentification, of a miscount in which the sum of the parts never equals the whole."<sup>85</sup>

The *People's Choice* works absorb all such differences of opinion, swallowing expressions of dissensus in overly 'democratic', overtly 'transparent' works that present a face of popular

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<sup>81</sup> However, to be accurate, Rancière actually distances himself from Baudrillard in relation to the notion of postdemocracy.

<sup>82</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 102.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>84</sup> Arden, "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public".

<sup>85</sup> Hinderliter et al., 8.



unity—a ‘group think’.<sup>86</sup> In this way, the series is a metaphor for the totalitarianism of the Soviet regime. Funnily enough, however, Komar and Melamid’s correlation of responses does lead to the kind of ‘miscount’ of which Hinderliter and her co-writers describe. But I would argue that Komar and Melamid’s miscount (an aesthetic miscount) is not due to their representation of dissensus, but to their abiding interest in a kind of statistical ‘accuracy’, which is nonetheless perverted.<sup>87</sup>

The *People’s Choice* alludes to the liberal democratic system and its consensus-led agenda, which denies the radical plurality suggested by the notion of the public as I understand it in this thesis. As I argued in Chapter One, drawing on Chantal Mouffe, individual difference must never be finally reconciled in the representation of a normative ‘public’; politics must hold open the idea of the public’s very impossibility. The failings of the ‘majority’ vote are widely acknowledged and politicians and marketers alike continually evoke the singular, coherent ‘public opinion’. Nevertheless, the public, understood democratically, is impossibly open, undecided and unpredictable. Mouffe argues that a ‘disidentification’ of the political subject with its subjectivity is at the core of a healthily functioning democracy.<sup>88</sup> In this sense, Mouffe’s notion of disidentification is conceptually aligned with Rancière’s concept of dissensus: both ideas rest on the maintenance of a crucial discrepancy between forms of subjecthood and their actualisation. These same notions of disidentification and dissensus apply to the concept of the impossible public, recognising that ‘the public’ as a unified discursive subject threatens the public’s very political agency. As an exercise in public opinion, in democracy, the *People’s Choice* is clearly ludicrous.

On a conceptual and aesthetic level, the complexities typically embodied by contemporary art are, in one sense, emptied out by the *People’s Choice* series. The survey questions skirted around any discussion of the ‘deeper’ attributes typically associated with contemporary art—its various nuances, or tendency toward satire or irony—in the name of scientific objectivity. Despite appearing to preference both a ‘democratic’ and a scientific method of art making, the *People’s Choice* exemplifies the results of a seemingly simplistic exercise in ‘painting by numbers’—the title of the monograph documenting the project.<sup>89</sup> The works can be viewed as

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<sup>86</sup> Arden, “Participatory Art and the Impossible Public”.

<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Komar notes that the polls create a ‘grotesque [vision] of ideal art’. He continues, ‘Under Brezhnev, we founded Sots Art, a nostalgic grotesque of socialist realism; now, along with Yeltsin, we are creating grotesque [sic] of democracy and, in this case, its central tool, statistics.’ Meyer et al., 18.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>89</sup> The book’s title suggests the statistical, numbers-based approach taken by the artists. ‘Painting by numbers’ books or kits give their users (often children) outlines of the finished artworks; individuals join up the dots in the outlines to complete the pictures. Komar and Melamid’s allusion to these books suggests that their works are straightforward and user-friendly, rather than complex or complicated works of contemporary art.

veritable ‘shells’ of paintings without the elusive ‘X factor’: in modernist terms, an ‘essence’ or ‘spirit’. The suggestion, of course, is that ‘art’ is ever elusive and autonomous and can neither be measured or standardised. This aligns with Adorno’s disapprobation of mass culture produced by the profit-driven culture industry.<sup>90</sup> It would suggest that a form of modernist rhetoric drives the paintings’ otherwise postmodern bent, rhetoric that supports art’s autonomy from life and from the everyday concerns of the public. Indeed, the kitsch-looking paintings would appear to exemplify Greenberg’s concepts of avant-garde and kitsch. This is true, I believe, but only in part. If kitsch is popular and supposedly reflects ‘the people’s taste’, then why should the people shun their art? Should they not they embrace it because it caters to them? No, because it does not cater to them and cannot cater to them—to the many thousands of individuals who participated in the project and to the countless thousands more who might view it. The works lump together, as a mass, a vast number of individuals with widely differing views; it is hardly surprising, therefore, that they ultimately fail to appeal to many people. In accounting for everything, in catering for all possible outcomes, the paintings supposedly mirror the opinions and taste of everyone (or at least a majority of people), yet reflect the taste of no one in particular.<sup>91</sup> The popular vote, relying as it does on memorable, vote-winning statements and channeled by media that encourages brevity, leaves little room for subtlety and nuance. Meanwhile, the diversity of the public is diminished via necessarily reductive questioning to a set of supposedly definitive images that crudely quantify the nuanced territories of judgement and taste.

### **A public of abstractions**

In conclusion, I contend that for Komar and Melamid, the public is an abstraction or an illusion that eludes being known or grasped in its entirety. Herein, it can be argued that the *People’s Choice* series appears to court the idea of dissensus. This does not stop the artists’ ambition to connect art with the public; rather, as I argued above, it serves to support this aspiration. Despite their satirical bent, the *People’s Choice* aims to connect the public to art on a broad—even a global or ‘universal’—scale, despite the obvious ludicrousness of this endeavour. The project seems to genuinely and even earnestly aspire to invest in an idea, or an ideal, of the public for art, especially given the works’ salient criticism of Stalinist propaganda invoking ‘the people’.

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<sup>90</sup> Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered”.

<sup>91</sup> Arden, “Participatory Art and the Impossible Public”.

now a term often anachronistically associated with totalitarian ideology.<sup>92</sup> As Melamid observes in a recent interview with this author, with a characteristic level of irony:

if we believe that [democracy is] ... fair and the only possible great system of ruling, then why not apply [it] to other spheres of our world? ... fine art is totally immune to that. It is the hands of a very small clique of people: you know gallerists or buyers or museum curators, which are all connected to each other. It's one group of people with one interest ... . So in a way it is anti-democratic.<sup>93</sup>

As Melamid suggests, polling and public opinion research are surely one of the most accurate ways, indeed one of the only ways, that a large and heterogeneous number of individuals can voice their opinion on a single issue. As suggested by the *People's Choice*, it does not necessarily yield 'good art'. But perhaps this is not Komar and Melamid's goal. Along with their wry disavowal of Socialist Realism, which sought to create an art free from bourgeois values, the artists also metaphorically thumb their noses at the bourgeois traditions of Western 'high art'—an art also removed from its public, as Melamid suggests. In this chapter, I have focused on the *People's Choice* series as examples of works that posit the public, understood as a political entity, as necessarily and crucially incoherent. I have also sought to demonstrate the many points of convergence between the notion of the public and its ideological cooption in the unifying designation 'the people'. In the next chapter, I carry forward the idea of 'the people' to explore a very different conception of this term in a more recent project by Harrell Fletcher and Jens Hoffmann.

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<sup>92</sup> See Samman's article, which has a thorough analysis of the 'battle' between individual and collective authorship in Komar and Melamid's projects. Samman observes that the duo's artistic projects are underpinned by Russian/Soviet histories of exploiting 'the people' (serf ownership and Stalin as 'the people's artist'). For Samman, Komar and Melamid's works such as *Stalin and the Muses* and *Komar and Melamid Inc.* imply that 'artistic subjectivity can only annex "the people" in an exploitative manner', 72.

<sup>93</sup> Alexander Melamid, interview by author, New York/Melbourne, January 27, 2012.

## Chapter Three

### Some People in Harrell Fletcher's Art<sup>1</sup>

Unapologetic, Fletcher loves people and their stories, and he invites us all to participate in their lives.

—Jens Hoffmann<sup>2</sup>

Between September 2010 and March 2012, the People's Biennial, an exhibition curated by the artist and curator Harrell Fletcher and curator Jens Hoffmann, toured North America. This exhibition differed to other biennials in several significant ways. According to the curators, the artists were from outside of art world circles with little previous exposure to audiences.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, Hoffmann asserted, 'the quality of what they are doing is just as high—or better said more unique—than that of artists showing in Culver City [Los Angeles] or Chelsea' [New York].<sup>4</sup> The curators also sought work that they claimed was 'more immediate, spontaneous, even vulnerable', and which offered 'a potential model for more community-based, grassroots exhibitions'.<sup>5</sup> Fletcher and Hoffmann selected many of their artists through a series of open call-outs, a process arguably less predetermined when compared with other biennials. Furthermore, rather than showing in a mainstream art centre or in a single city, People's Biennial toured to the home cities of its exhibiting artists: Portland, Oregon; Rapid City, South Dakota; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Scottsdale, Arizona and Haverford, Pennsylvania.<sup>6</sup> While Fletcher and Hoffmann opted for more formal 'white cube' exhibiting spaces within the majority of these host cities, Fletcher argued that, '[w]e want to challenge the idea of what normally goes in those

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of ideas contained in this chapter was delivered as a paper titled "Extra/Everyday: Harrell Fletcher and the People's Biennial" at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand Conference, Sydney, on 13 July, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Jens Hoffmann, "You and Me," *Frieze*, no. 119 (Nov-Dec 2008), last paragraph, accessed September 14, 2015, [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/you\\_and\\_me/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/you_and_me/).

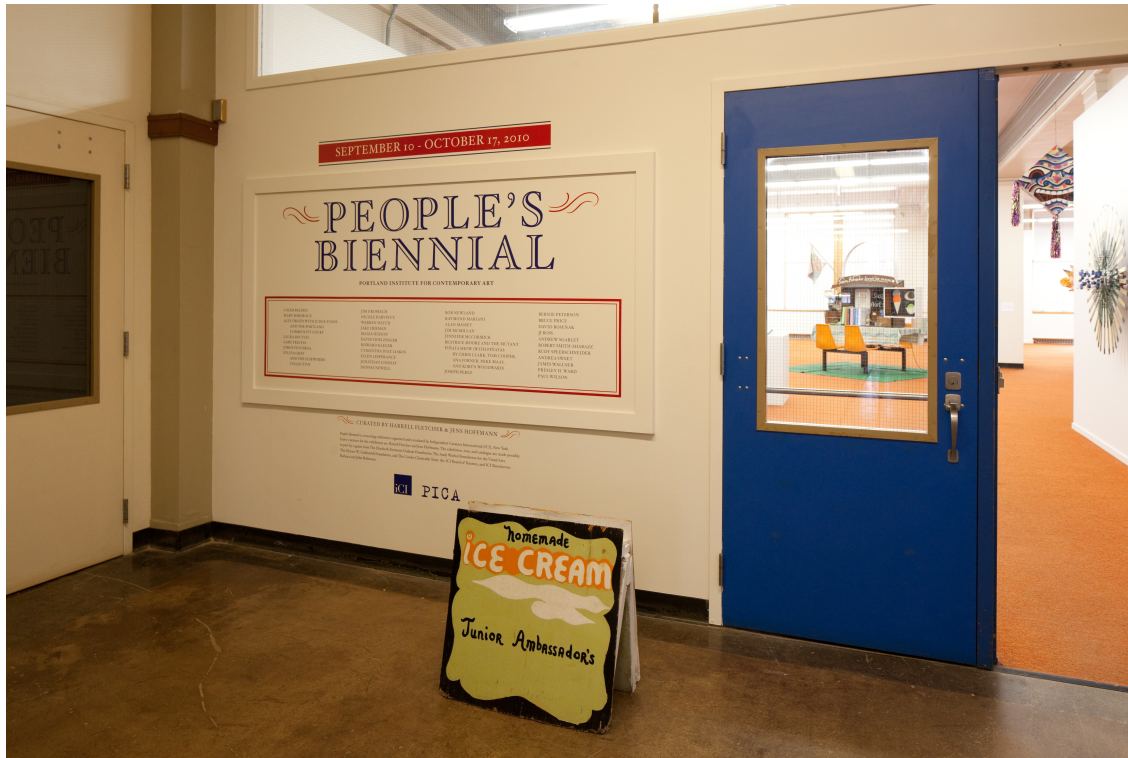
<sup>3</sup> Ellen Freeman, "Take your art-or-something-like-it to the People's Biennial Open Call this Thursday," Weblog Philly Fringe Live Arts Festival, entry posted June 28, 2010, accessed November 22, 2011, <http://blog.livearts-fringe.org/2010/6/28/Take-your-artorsomethinglikeit-to-the-Peoples-Biennial-Open-Call-this-Thursday/>.

<sup>4</sup> Hoffmann, quoted in Alexander Ferrando, "The People's Biennial," *Flash Art* 44, no. 276 (2011): 38.

<sup>5</sup> Jens Hoffmann, "Voices of America," in *People's Biennial 2010: A Guide to America's Most Amazing Artists*, eds Harrell Fletcher, Jens Hoffmann and Renaud Proch (New York: Independent Curators International, 2011), 16.

<sup>6</sup> The venues were (in touring order): Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (Portland, Oregon), Dahl Arts Center (Rapid City, South Dakota), Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (Winston-Salem, North Carolina), Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (Scottsdale, Arizona) and Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, Haverford College (Haverford, Pennsylvania).

spaces ... . In that way we're creating our ideal situation, allowing an art world context to operate in a much more inclusive, open-ended way'.<sup>7</sup>



(Fig 17) People's Biennial installation view, Portland OR, Courtesy Independent Curators International.

This chapter focuses on the People's Biennial, Fletcher's collaboration with Hoffmann, with reference in non-chronological order to two earlier projects by Fletcher that also engage with ideas of the public for art: *Pictures Collected From Museum Visitors' Wallets* (with Jon Rubin, 1998) and *Learning to Love You More* (with Miranda July, 2002-2009). Since the 1990s, Fletcher's participatory and collaborative projects have dealt with notions of access to the 'art world', the professional sphere of art making and exhibiting, by non art-specialists from the wider public. As the title of People's Biennial would suggest, Fletcher's projects also centre on the concept of 'the people'. As I observed in Chapter Two, the public and the people are intimately related in general English usage, although they are not commonly interchangeable. This chapter seeks to further explore this relationship via Fletcher's works as a means of clarifying it. It advances the discussion in Chapter Two to develop additional understandings of the people as this notion has manifested within art and political histories. I trace the ways in which Fletcher's projects draw on these historical and artistic contexts to conceive of a

<sup>7</sup> Fletcher, quoted in Freeman.

particular notion of the public for art in the present day. In contrast to the abstracted, global public invoked by Komar and Melamid discussed in the previous chapter, I argue that Fletcher's work invests in the idea of a highly individuated public for art.

## People's Biennial

Fletcher and Hoffmann's People's Biennial is challenging to describe because of the exhibition's diversity.<sup>8</sup> The Biennial included 36 artists of all ages, the youngest born in 1995 and the eldest, now deceased, born in 1892. Small sculptures, perfectly formed from individual bars of domestic soap, featured alongside paintings, a collection of African American memorabilia, drawings, photographs, piñatas, woodcarvings, videos and a Lego diorama (Fig 23). The artworks ranged widely in terms of subjects and approach. For example, one set of inkjet prints depicted its artist's 'day job' as a paid medical artist. This series by North Carolina artist Jennifer McCormick, titled *Medical Demonstration Evidence* (2006-2010), shows in gruesome and rather fascinating detail evidence of injuries caused to human bodies during accidents (Fig 18). McCormick's drawings are used in prosecution trials to prove negligence or malice on the part of the person responsible for the accident.<sup>9</sup> The three prints exhibited in People's Biennial had all been used in real trials, with faces and names changed. A print subtitled *John Doe's Traumatic Injuries* shows a man's body inflicted with wounds to his abdomen, chest and face. Details of these injuries are captured in inset boxes, attended by labels such as 'A. Brain Trauma' and 'B. Skull/Facial Trauma'. The various schemata float on a bright background of pastel purple, green, blue and pink.

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<sup>8</sup> The second iteration of People's Biennial, also curated by Fletcher and Hoffmann, was displayed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, between September 12, 2014 and January 4, 2015. The curators asked 17 established North American artists to create projects with 'creative individuals who are known to them but not part of the mainstream art world'. The Biennial was shown within a dedicated, freestanding structure inside the Museum. I focus on the first iteration of the Biennial in this chapter because it assists me to explore my thesis in a more relevant way. See Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, "Detroit City," media release, *e-flux*, accessed 1 June, 2016, <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/detroit-city-and-people%E2%80%99s-biennial-2014/>.

The first People's Biennial was organised by Independent Curators International (ICI), a non-profit exhibition and publication-based organisation based in New York City. While this chapter focuses on Fletcher's work it is also important to note Hoffmann's own curatorial contribution. Like Fletcher, Hoffmann is also interested in practices of exhibition making. He has been the long-standing editor of *The Exhibitionist*, which is promoted as a journal about curatorial practice for curators. Hoffmann notes that the idea for People's Biennial arose out of a conversation he had with Fletcher following an exhibition titled *Amateurs* held at the CCA Wattis Institute, during which time Hoffmann was the director of the Institute and Fletcher had a work in the exhibition. Fletcher, Hoffmann and Proch, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Illustration and artist's statement in Fletcher, Hoffmann and Proch, eds., 74-75.





Another North Carolina artist, Presley H. Ward, exhibited several drawings, one of which is titled *Industrial Disease* (2008) (Fig 19). Rendered in graphite, coloured pencil and crayon, this hectic, highly detailed composition depicts an apocalyptic, urban landscape. The scene is filled to bursting with somber imagery: smoking chimneys, a crane, a truck, high rises, burning oilcans and dubious-looking figures. Each individual is pictured smoking a cigarette with a long plume of curly smoke. On the top left of the drawing is an inscription written in pencil and underlined, as follows:

INDUSTRIAL DISEASE  
MAN YOU TOLD ME THAT  
YOU WOULD CLEAN UP  
THE MESS YOU MADE  
THAT KILL MY CHILDREN  
BEFORE THAY [SIC] WAS [SIC] BORN  
MAN YOU TOLD ME SO  
MANY THINGS.  
WHEN YOU DIE AND  
MEET JESUS, TELL  
HIM THE SAME LIE  
YOU TOLD ME

To the right of the inscription, Ward has signed the drawing in an elaborate cursive. Opposite Ward's artwork in the exhibition catalogue is a brief text written by the artist where he comments on his art:

Critics often ask me where I get all of these complex ideas from. Well, here is the answer to their question: I often thought myself to be an instrument inspired by dreams, with a psychological relationship between illusions and the subconscious ... . Some think that I have too much imagination. But no matter what the case may be, they all love my artwork.<sup>10</sup>

Apparently, Ward was homeless, and now 'spends a lot of his time in the Greensboro Public Library working through a lot of ideas, fantasies, dreams through drawing'.<sup>11</sup> Ward's brief comments in the catalogue give the impression of an individual who is self-conscious and self-deprecating about his art on the one hand, but—to be critical—may also hold illusions of grandeur that are perhaps beyond the scope of his talents. Ward's rather grandiose comments are, it could be claimed, less sophisticated than one might expect of a professionally trained artist.

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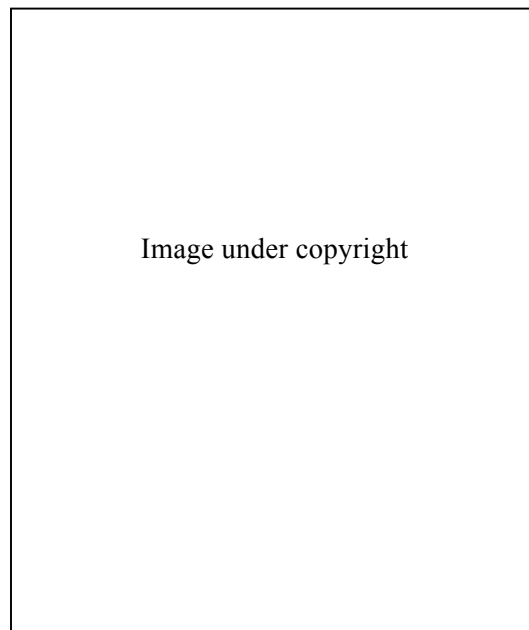
<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>11</sup> Steven Matijcio, quoted in Keith T. Barber, "People's Biennial a colorful tapestry of folk art," *Yes! Weekly* 7, no. 28 (July 13-19, 2011): 37, accessed November 22, 2011, <http://npaper-wehaa.com/yes-weekly/2011/07/13/#?article=1324548&z=6>.



The Biennial's curators note that its concept and titling drew on an earlier project by the New York artist's collective Group Material.<sup>12</sup> In 1981, Group Material initiated *The People's Choice* (alternatively titled *Arroz con Mango—What a Mess*), an exhibition of objects belonging to residents of a neighbourhood block in New York City (Fig 20). An excerpt from the exhibition's press release notes that it was 'a display of the private gone public, of the-not-normally-found-in-an-art-gallery, of personal choice and cultural value on one block in New York City'.<sup>13</sup> Group Material's invitation to local residents to participate in the project reads:

We would like to show things that might not usually find their way into an art gallery: the things that you personally find beautiful, the objects that you keep for your own pleasure, the objects that have meaning for you, your family and your friends... They can be photographs, or your favorite posters. If you knit, crochet, do needlepoint, or any other craft, these would be good also. Drawings, paintings, sculpture, furniture or any other art forms created by yourself or others will be included.<sup>14</sup>



**(Fig 20)** Group Material, *The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)*, exhibition view, New York, January 10 - February 1, 1981.

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<sup>12</sup> Hoffmann, quoted in Alexander Ferrando, 38.

<sup>13</sup> Julie Ault, ed. *Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material* (London: Four Corners Books, 2010), 34.

<sup>14</sup> Reproduced in Ault, 33.

According to Hoffmann, the People's Biennial was also influenced by Howard Zinn's bestselling book *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present* (1980). Zinn's text tells the histories of marginalised peoples including African American slaves, the white poor and Native Americans.<sup>15</sup> Hoffmann remarks:

Zinn speaks about the United States as having a history of popular struggle for human rights marked by a fight against oppression, slavery, militarism, racism, war, and economic exploitation, which are condoned by the ruling class. I think what connects our project with Zinn's book is that we are trying to look at artists and places that are on the periphery of the art world—the marginalized and the excluded.<sup>16</sup>

Also relating People's Biennial to Zinn's text is the design of the exhibition's catalogue, which is subtitled *A Guide to America's Most Amazing Artists*. The Harper Perennial edition of *A People's History of the United States* has a cover that is adorned in the red, white and blue of the American flag. The People's Biennial catalogue appears to be modeled on the Harper edition of Zinn's book, with a similar font and glyphs used on its front cover.

Given the Biennial's links to Zinn's *A People's History*, we can associate the project with a further meaning of the term 'the people'. In Chapter Two, I observed that the term frequently suggests a more ideologically loaded form of the public, connoting socialist or communist politics. In broader and less extreme terms it may be also used in conjunction with socially oriented, grass-roots movements and popular political struggles frequently relating to left wing and environmental movements of the 1960s and '70s. The discussion to follow situates Fletcher's works, and People's Biennial in particular, within this latter political and theoretical context. As suggested at the start of this chapter, the concept of the people is thematically central to Fletcher's works, and the word people recurs in several of his earlier works' titles, for example, *Some People From Around Here* (1997), *People in Real Life* (1998) and *These Fine People* (1998). As in People's Biennial, people are not only participants and collaborators in these projects, but frequently also the subjects of these works. In this vein, I also want to pick up on an element of Fletcher's practice that links it with the earlier exhibition by Group Material, mentioned above: the idea of the 'private gone public', which is to say personal, home-made or domestic objects from local contexts exhibited in the gallery environment. The pages to follow examine how Fletcher's collaborative practice draws both on specific political associations of 'the people' and on the idea of people situated within local and personal contexts. I explore how Fletcher's works challenge elements of academic elitism and bourgeois

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<sup>15</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1980).

<sup>16</sup> Jens Hoffmann, "People Talking: Harrell Fletcher and Jens Hoffmann," in *People's Biennial 2010: A Guide to America's Most Amazing Artists*, eds Harrell Fletcher, Jens Hoffmann and Renaud Proch (New York: Independent Curators International, 2011), 19.

values still widely active in the specialist art world as they aim to connect art more directly with people.

## Biennial art

I want to consider the argument that the Biennial connected art more directly with people by viewing it in the broader context of the biennial model of exhibition making. As an entity, the biennial has been the object of criticism in recent decades, for, among other things, its spectacle-making tendencies and apparent propensity toward building the brands of exhibiting artists. Namely, according to this argument, the art can become lost amid the exhilarating drama of the event, crowds of visitors and marketing paraphernalia.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, biennials frequently exhibit a similar roll call of artists who could be claimed to be the most popular among a global network of curators and buyers at any given time. In his review of the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, critic Peter Schjeldahl coined the pejorative term ‘Festival Art’ to describe art that exists at biennials and that is ‘instantly diverting but not too absorbing’—in short, art that attracts crowds, at least during the all-important opening days.<sup>18</sup> A second type of criticism in the vein of the first is that art can become homogenised ‘biennial art’, which glosses over complex and localised issues with its shiny, global reach.<sup>19</sup>

In stark contrast, the People’s Biennial is avowedly anti-spectacular in terms of the artworks on display.<sup>20</sup> A key ‘criterion’ for inclusion within this biennial was that an artist was unknown, even within the specialist art world.<sup>21</sup> The works therefore exist outside of the art market; they are made by their producers as hobbies, or for personal or vocational reasons. Fletcher confirms that many of the artists refused to sell their works in the exhibition to interested buyers,

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<sup>17</sup> Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal and Solveig Ovstebo briefly summarise some of the criticisms in their introduction “Biennialogy,” in *The Biennial Reader*, eds. Filipovic, van Hal and Ovstebo (Bergen: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Schjeldahl, “Festivalism: Oceans of fun at the Venice Biennale,” *The New Yorker* 75, no. 17 (1999): 86.

<sup>19</sup> See Jan Verwoert, “The Curious Case of Biennial Art,” in Filipovic, van Hal and Ovstebo, 184-197.

<sup>20</sup> This said, biennial curators in recent years have also sought to engage with the spectacle of the biennial format. Consider Hou Hanru’s 2009 Lyon Biennale “The Spectacle of the Everyday”, Hongjohn Lin and Tirdad Zolghadr’s 2010 Taipei “anti-biennial” and Ivo Mesquita’s 2008 São Paulo Biennial. The latter two exhibitions are covered in David Frazier, “Tapei’s ‘Anti-Biennial,’” *Art in America* 98, no. 10 (2010): 35. In a local context, the Australian Indigenous artist and curator Jenny Fraser has also organised a series of ‘alternative’ biennials called The Other APT. Conceived in 2006 as a point of difference from the Asia-Pacific Triennial (APT) held at the Queensland Art Gallery (and now Gallery of Modern Art) in Brisbane, Australia, The Other APT aims to address the imbalance of Aboriginal artists shown in the APT. As Fraser writes: ‘In our case, no amount of complaining or highlighting the cultural apartheid entrenched in the Queensland Art Gallery’s [sic] selection process has worked on getting enough Australian Aboriginal artists represented in the Asia Pacific Triennials, so we just have to show them how its done.’ Jenny Fraser, “Notes towards an alternative Curators Manifesto, The Other APT,” cyberTribe, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://cybertribe.culture2.org/theotherapt/2012/manifesto.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Hoffmann, “Voices of America”, 16.

arguably suggesting a resistance to, or motivation toward, seeing commercial outcomes for their work.<sup>22</sup> Further, many of the works were made with a highly localised community and context in mind. For example, one group of works evolved from a legal rehabilitation process ordered by the Portland Community Court, while another group of paintings depicts Sioux legends connected with the community of South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation (Fig 21). Another group of works originated in an annual piñata exhibition at Kooky Krafts Shop, an Arizona arts and crafts store. Organised by the shop's owner, artist Beatrice Moore, the so-called Mutant Piñata Show accepts submissions from individuals of all skill-levels.<sup>23</sup> Strictly speaking, this siting of projects within local contexts is common among artists exhibiting at international biennials, including by Thomas Hirschhorn, Mark Dion and Jeremy Deller, to name only three. However, Hirschhorn's projects, for one, are arguably less 'accessible' in a certain sense than the works exhibited in the People's Biennial. We can consider, for example, projects such as Hirschhorn's *Musée Précaire Albinet* (2004) or *Bataille Monument* (2002) (Fig 6). Both projects were installed in working class communities, physically removed from the commonly inhabited spaces of the art world. *Bataille Monument* was literally 'other' to Documenta 11 in Kassel, located in a Turkish immigrant community and accessible to Documenta patrons via a cab driven by community members. Hirschhorn's projects are highly complex amalgamations of philosophical and aesthetic references, meditations on questions of access (to art, to society), conglomerations of low-tech, high impact materials and ruminations on the place of philosophy, history, literature and art in everyday life. They require, I suggest, a more complicated form of looking and one that often calls upon specific knowledges (of philosophy, and so on).

On the other hand, most of the works in the People's Biennial are 'immediate' in the sense that I believe is meant by Hoffmann at the beginning of this chapter: 'more immediate, spontaneous, even vulnerable'. That is, they can be understood and identified with by audiences with less knowledge of contemporary art and art history. Hoffmann's desire to include work that is 'more unique' than the work shown in established art centres, also quoted at the start of this chapter, indicates his preference for works that seemingly disregard or else lack knowledge of, current aesthetic trends and specialist conventions. On this basis, unique might also mean 'idiosyncratic'. We can therefore read the term 'people' designated by the title People's Biennial as referring to both the non-professionalism of artists in the exhibition and its audience. Herein, it would seem that Fletcher and Hoffmann aspire to reduce or to blur the

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<sup>22</sup> Harrell Fletcher, interview by author, Melbourne/Portland, February 10, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Open call-outs were staged in North Carolina, South Dakota, Arizona and Pennsylvania. In some of the regions the curators worked with local curators who helped guide the process and recommended people and places to see. Harrell Fletcher, interview by author, Melbourne/Portland, January 31, 2012; David Richardson, "Open call report," Weblog People's Biennial, entry posted August 3, 2010, accessed February 8, 2012, <http://news.haverford.edu/blogs/biennial/2010/08/03/open-call-report/#more-207>.

putative 'gap' between professional artist and lay audience through the display of work that may be identified with immediately in the absence of specialist knowledge. The works are by made, so to speak, by people, for people.



(Fig 21) Jake Herman, *Big Hand*, c. 1960, oil on canvas board, 66 x 80.6cm (framed).  
Courtesy Independent Curators International.



(Fig 22) Bernie Peterson, *Soap Carvings: Foot, Buffalo*, 1983-1994, soap, approx. 6.4 x 10.2 x 3.8cm each.  
Courtesy Independent Curators International.



(Fig 23) Dennis Newell, *Lego Battle with Droids and Clones*, 2010, Lego and lights, 50.8 x 50.8 x 25.4cm.  
Courtesy Independent Curators International.

We might also align the aims of the People's Biennial with certain aims of community art, as this art could be seen to involve or appeal to 'lay people'. Indeed, Hoffmann refers to the Biennial as a community-based, grassroots exhibition, quoted at the start of this chapter. Art critic Claire Bishop describes the ethos of British community art in the 1960s and '70s as a politicised artistic project desiring to return 'power to the people' in a way that seems to align with the Biennial's own aims. Bishop writes that the movement:

was positioned against the hierarchies of the international art world and its criteria of success founded upon quality, skill, virtuosity, etc., since these conceal class interests; it advocated participation and co-authorship of works of art; it aimed to give shape to the creativity of all sectors of society, but especially to people living in areas of social, cultural and financial deprivation ...<sup>24</sup>

There is, perhaps, little to distinguish the ethos of People's Biennial and other projects by Fletcher from earlier and even more recent community art projects except for the fact that Fletcher and Hoffmann based the Biennial squarely in the context of the 'art world' through

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<sup>24</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 177.

their choice of professional exhibiting venues (and even this is something of a grey area given the way in which some community art seeks to mix ‘high art’ with the ‘everyday’ objects and activities of local people).<sup>25</sup>

While the Biennial invokes the left-wing ethos of earlier grassroots movements and popular political struggles, it may be also seen to conceptually draw on the term ‘people’ as designating the ‘ordinary’ and thus as complicating the binary of art world ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. We can see elements of this in the exhibition’s catalogue, mentioned previously. At the beginning and end of the catalogue are a series of photographs of members of the public (prospective Biennial artists) holding up their artworks for the camera. Individuals are positioned in front of a grey drop-sheet and each has a typewritten number to designate the order in which the curators would see them.<sup>26</sup> The photographs resemble mug shots taken at auditions so that the directors can remember those they auditioned. In one of the photographs, a silver-bearded man wearing socks and sandals holds up three small sculptures and a copy of *A Soap Sculpture Manual*. He wears an expression of faint surprise and pleasure. Inside the catalogue we learn that this is Bernie Peterson, maker of the *Soap Carvings*. The Biennial’s highlighting of individual artists and the circumstances in which works were created is familiar within an exhibition-making context, particularly with respect to the ‘big name’ artists of other biennials. However, it can be argued that Fletcher and Hoffmann use this discursive device to posit their Biennial artists and their works as exemplars of ‘ordinary’ people and their art, of the extraordinary in the ordinary, so to speak. In other words, the Biennial discursively constructs its public (its artists and its viewers) in terms of an idiosyncratic or individuated ‘ordinariness’. I will develop this argument throughout the remainder of this chapter, but first I want to turn to some criticisms of the Biennial, which contested the curators’ very aspirations toward representing this ordinariness.

### **Amateur art, people’s art**

Despite their professed intentions to make an exhibition by and for ‘people’—‘ordinary’ people, overlooked people, marginalised people—the People’s Biennial aroused some criticisms. I want to dwell on these here, not because they dominated the Biennial’s critical reception, but because they allow me to develop an argument around the ideas of ordinariness and of art world ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ that Fletcher and Hoffmann sought to interrogate, and ultimately to mitigate, in the exhibition. I also consider the Biennial in relation to various other related terms, including

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<sup>25</sup> Bishop, 179.

<sup>26</sup> Fletcher, interview by author, Portland/Melbourne, February 10, 2012.



‘amateur’ and ‘outsider’.<sup>27</sup> The Biennial’s artworks could perhaps also be called ‘folk art’ or the lesser-used ‘people’s art’, which in the case of People’s Biennial could be defined as work that has not entered the mainstream art market or been exposed to the institution of curators, dealers and critics. Historically, the Biennial links to *art brut* or ‘raw art’, the collections made by artist Jean Dubuffet of work by the mentally ill and children.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Fletcher and Hoffmann remain deliberately ambivalent about the use of loaded terms including ‘amateur’ because, as Hoffmann asserts: ‘We never wanted to define it exactly, so as not to confine ourselves to categories’.<sup>29</sup> But he also adds: ‘In appearing grassroots or amateur, *People’s Biennial* calls explicit attention to how most so-called professional art is merely art that conforms to a set of conventions that most of us have accepted and internalized’.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of their reluctance to pigeonhole the work, the Biennial aroused some criticisms about its purported engagement with notions of amateurism and art world outsiders. For example, Katherine Bovee’s review of the Biennial appeared in a 2011 issue of the Atlanta-based *Art Papers Magazine*. One of Bovee’s key criticisms is that, despite attempting to bring ‘outsiders’ into the fold of the art world, the exhibition actually reiterates an ‘insider/outsider’ model and thus remains an example of the very system it critiques. She writes:

the *People’s Biennial* stops short of making radical change in the existing system because it is largely about the condition of being on the margins. The exhibition remains a critique by and for ‘the inside,’ even though it looks to the margins for source material.<sup>31</sup>

In a related vein, Bovee also critiques the exhibition for what she views as its pejorative ‘top-down’ curatorial approach because both of the curators (already well-known in the art world and thus perceived to be in a position of power) selected artists from lesser-known regions. Here, she conjures the spirit of Hal Foster’s treatise on the ethnographic turn in contemporary art.<sup>32</sup>

Fletcher and Hoffmann employ a top-down curatorial approach which, intentionally or not, put them in a position of power where they have the privilege of bestowing some degree of artworld access to artists they have hand-picked from these lesser-known

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<sup>27</sup> The popular use of the word ‘kitsch’ also comes to mind, but I believe the work in People’s Biennial differs from the notion of kitsch discussed by Clement Greenberg in his seminal essay ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ (1939).

<sup>28</sup> See brief definition at “Art brut,” Tate, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/a/art-brut>.

<sup>29</sup> Hoffmann, “People Talking”, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>31</sup> Katherine Bovee, “People’s Biennial,” *Art Papers Magazine* 35, no. 1, (2011): 36.

<sup>32</sup> Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 171-203.



corners of the nation.<sup>33</sup>

It may be suggested that Fletcher (to a greater degree than Hoffmann) embodies a delicate position here as both practicing artist *and* curator. As a curator he arguably holds some semblance of power (the power to decide who is included in exhibition); as a practicing artist one may assume that he knows what it feels like not to ‘make the cut’, although Bovee’s critique suggests otherwise.

Echoing some of Bovee’s criticisms, critic John Motley wrote in OregonLive.com:

Regardless of the curators’ intentions, the result is a kind of echo chamber: a show created by arts professionals, who assess work through the lens of contemporary art trends, exhibited within the art world for a viewership trained to interpret such an attempt at inclusivity as an artistic end in itself. There’s nothing wrong with looking for greatness in unexpected places, but, sadly, I suspect the People’s Biennial will not significantly impact the artists it features. That is, Fletcher and Hoffmann’s careers will continue to advance, but the names of the ‘people’ will likely remain unknown.<sup>34</sup>

Motley’s comments are thoughtful, but overly cynical, and I would suggest he has a reductive vision of the role of the curators, whom he argues were ‘orchestrators, somehow superior to the artists who have no network of exposure’ rather than the more generous view, which would be that Fletcher and Hoffmann used their experience to assist artists to gain exposure.<sup>35</sup> His use of the term ‘viewership’, rather than the more commonly used ‘audience’, also hints at elitist associations of ‘connoisseurship’ and suggests that the Biennial’s audience primarily consists of experts rather than the ‘people’ referred to in the Biennial’s title. Both Bovee’s and Motley’s criticisms demonstrate a level of suspicion about the curators’ career-driven motives for showing ‘people’s art’, but moreover, underscore what is for them an inevitable and irreducible metaphoric dividing line between art world inside and outside.

Countering Bovee’s and Motley’s arguments, Fletcher asserts, ‘we wanted to do a project that attempted to be *more* inclusive, not *totally* inclusive but just more than the status quo in either a biennial or in the art world’.<sup>36</sup> To this end, the titling of the biennial as a ‘people’s’ exhibition was not:

intended to be entirely democratic or anything like that. It was meant I think in relationship to our understanding of what traditional biennials are like that tend to focus

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<sup>33</sup> Bovee, 36.

<sup>34</sup> John Motley, “Art with an attitude: The People’s Biennial showcases overlooked and undiscovered artists,” *OregonLive.com*, Friday September 24, 2010, accessed August 8, 2016, [http://www.oregonlive.com/art/index.ssf/2010/09/art\\_with\\_an\\_attitude\\_the\\_peopl.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/art/index.ssf/2010/09/art_with_an_attitude_the_peopl.html).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Indeed, the most recent People’s Biennial (2014-15) did just this.

<sup>36</sup> Fletcher, interview by author, Portland/Melbourne, January 31, 2012.

on an elite sphere of the art world and that a lot of people are left out of that, and that in general, in the art world, a lot of people are left out for various reasons.<sup>37</sup>

It should also be pointed out that Fletcher and Hoffmann selected several ‘sub-curators’, which removed them from some of the curatorial decisions. These individuals were already connected to local creative events prior to the People’s Biennial. For example, the organiser of the aforementioned Mutant Piñata Show, Beatrice Moore, selected the Biennial’s piñatas herself.<sup>38</sup> A student of Fletcher’s, Ally Drozd also participated in the exhibition as a sub-curator. Along with staff from Portland Community Court and the court’s Judge Evans, Drozd curated the group of court paintings mentioned earlier in this chapter. Additionally, Fletcher and Hoffmann included displays of works that had been conceived of independently to the exhibition. For example, a collection of African American ‘Negro-bilia’ owned by local woman Andrea Sweet had been on display at a Phoenix library when Fletcher and Hoffmann happened to visit the venue. They asked Sweet to transfer the display to the People’s Biennial.<sup>39</sup>

The point that Fletcher appears to make above, and the claim I want to put forward about the People’s Biennial, is that it posits that the ‘line’ or binary designating art world inside and outside is necessarily blurred and moveable. The same could be said about major international biennials such as The Encyclopedic Palace included as part of the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2013. This exhibition curated by Massimiliano Gioni included the work of previously unknown or amateur artists. However, as distinct from People’s Biennial, the scale of Gioni’s exhibition, with its attendant prestige and capital, can be seen to recoup or co-opt the ‘outside’ and therefore to underscore its own institutional ‘prowess’. Critic Gregory Sholette has written about a kind of institutional recouping of what he calls ‘dark matter’, the mass or glut of creative labour by amateur artists and other individuals that the contemporary art world has otherwise systematically ignored or consigned to failure. He describes one instance of this, the Museum of Modern Art’s archiving of the work of activist collective PAD/D as ‘an internal mark or bruise alluding to a far larger corpus of excluded cultural production’.<sup>40</sup> The far more modest scale of the People’s Biennial arguably mitigates this kind of institutional-level co-option.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Fletcher, interview by author, Portland/Melbourne, February 10, 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Another exhibition space opened up in conjunction with the People’s Biennial. Sited in Mission, a district of San Francisco, People’s Gallery was intended as a temporary space with the aim of giving People’s Biennial artists more in-depth, solo exhibitions in a professional format. This gallery came with a range of added extras, including public workshops, community events and People’s Bikes, a community rental service that allowed visitors to hire bikes by donation to explore Mission’s gallery network and local neighbourhood. “Info, People’s Gallery,” People’s Biennial, accessed February 8, 2012, <http://www.peoplesgallery.net/index.php?/about-us/>.

<sup>40</sup> Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 69-70.

My claim that the People's Biennial blurs any clear delineation between 'inside' and 'outside' requires further contextualisation. Here I turn to a 2008 exhibition shown at the CCA Wattis Institute in San Francisco titled *Amateurs*, curated by Ralph Rugoff, which included one of Fletcher's works and also ran while Jens Hoffmann was director of the Institute.<sup>41</sup> Fletcher's work, a film titled *The Problem of Possible Redemption* (2003), was shot at the Parkville Senior Centre in Connecticut and features the residents of the centre reciting extracts from James Joyce's *Ulysses* from cue cards (Fig 24).<sup>42</sup> The film 'reads', at times, like a home movie. Some of its 'actors' are more skilled than others; some are obviously reading their lines as their eyes can be seen moving from side to side. At times the camera shakes. The *Amateurs* exhibition included a number of other works, which invite ready comparison with the works in the People's Biennial.<sup>43</sup> For example, Jim Shaw's curatorial project, *Thrift Store Paintings* (1990s-early 2000s) brings together a large assortment of paintings that the artist purchased from thrift stores and flea markets or which were loaned to the project by collectors of amateur art.<sup>44</sup> Largely untitled and undated, Shaw gives the paintings crude and often humorous titles, referring to some of their most obvious features, such as *Woman's Hand with Dark Red Ring*, *Fuzzy Sleeve* and *Man with No Crotch Sits Down with Girl*.<sup>45</sup> The project archives, scrutinises and also celebrates these peculiar, fascinating and at times comical works by 'no name' artists.

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<sup>41</sup> Grace Kook-Anderson and Claire Fitzsimmons, eds., *Amateurs*, (San Francisco: California College of the Arts, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> An excerpt of this film is available on the artist's website, accessed on February 3, 2012, at [www.harrellfletcher.com/](http://www.harrellfletcher.com/).

<sup>43</sup> Hoffmann observes that the idea for People's Biennial arose out of a conversation with Fletcher that occurred after *Amateurs* was exhibited. Hoffmann, "Voices of America", 16

<sup>44</sup> Metro Pictures Gallery, "Press Release: Jim Shaw Thrift Store Paintings September 12-October 12 1991," Metro Pictures Gallery, accessed February 7, 2012, <http://www.metropicturesgallery.com/exhibitions/1991-09-12-jim-shaw/>.

<sup>45</sup> A number of the works are reproduced in Jim Shaw, ed., *Thrift Store Paintings: Paintings Found in Thrift Stores* (Hollywood, CA: Heavy Industry Publications, 1990).



(Fig 24) Harrell Fletcher, *The Problem of Possible Redemption*, 2003, still from DVD, 13 mins, 25 secs.  
Courtesy the artist.

A second comparable project is Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane's *Folk Archive* (2000-2005), which exhibits what Deller and Kane term 'popular art' from around the United Kingdom. The *Folk Archive* brings together a huge array of work from disparate genres, from painted fast food signs featuring overstuffed hamburgers, to crop circles, to handmade protest banners.<sup>46</sup> While Jim Shaw's project is relatively tongue-in-cheek, the more earnest-seeming *Folk Archive* recalls the People's Biennial's ethos. Indeed, write Deller and Kane:

We decided to avoid what is often called 'outsider art'. Our artists are mostly quite clear on how their work will be read ... . We mostly applied the same wide-ranging criteria for deciding as we would normally bring to viewing any art ... . The one aspect common to all contributions is that they have been authored by individuals who would perhaps not primarily consider themselves folk artists.<sup>47</sup>

In his catalogue essay accompanying the *Amateurs* exhibition, Rugoff affirms that several generations of artists have disputed the pejorative associations of the term 'amateur', playing up its antithetical position in relation to the marketable cultural products that fall under the banner of high art. Rugoff cites twentieth century instances including the amateur films of Warhol, Duchamp's chess playing and the experimental and 'investigatory' practices of some Conceptual artists as examples of the lineage of amateurism as a mode of both cultural

<sup>46</sup> Works from the archive have been exhibited in venues including London's Barbican and are also available to view as a virtual tour at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/folkarchive/folk.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, "Preface," in *Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK*, ed. Bruce Haines (London: Book Works, 2005), 2.

production and critique.<sup>48</sup> For Rugoff, the artists in *Amateurs* ‘exploit the failure of their amateur performers to perfectly reproduce artistic conventions that we normally accept as “natural,” thereby drawing attention to the arbitrary and artificial character of the cultural codes that structure the production, and reception, of aesthetic products’.<sup>49</sup> The same rhetorical aim clearly underpins the People’s Biennial (though Rugoff’s use of the term ‘exploit’ is perhaps unfortunate here, suggesting amateurs are being taken advantage of by their artistic superiors).

The art historian John Roberts furthers the discussion in the same exhibition catalogue. Roberts argues that in contemporary art, as in modern art, the artist who either adopts amateur ways of working or who engages with amateur art can never actually ‘risk *being* an amateur as such’, otherwise they also risk being ‘invisible or subject to the very ridicule that the artist is challenging’.<sup>50</sup> Thus, in this view, Roberts argues that artists’ engagement with amateurism is always performative. This paradox would seem to be what raised Bovee’s and Motley’s ire about the People’s Biennial, described above—the idea that Fletcher and Hoffmann can never be amateurs *as such*, and thus they reproduced the very structures of power that designated the Biennial artists as amateurs or outsiders in the first place. The more generous view is that, rather than posing as amateurs, Fletcher and Hoffmann used their professional status to further the careers of lesser-known artists. Roberts goes on to suggest that the distinction between amateur and non-amateur has steadily lessened, and that this is due largely to technical developments, which have allowed so-called non-professionals to gain proficiency in the techniques of art production. Secondly, he argues that it has become accepted practice—a kind of *modus operandi*—of contemporary art to stage ‘failure’ and incompetence as ‘one aspect of art’s struggle for autonomy after the avant-garde and art’s assimilation into the “culture industry”’.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, while the work of amateurs and non-amateurs may be distinguished somewhat on a conceptual level (on the level of artist *performing* as amateur), the playing field is markedly more even overall. As Roberts writes:

it would seem that the idea of the amateur as “other” to the professional artist is now largely an empty conceptual category, and, therefore, that one [the artist] *can* risk being an amateur, for there is no longer any ignominy associated with its exclusions.<sup>52</sup>

I have some reservations about such claims, about which Roberts does not elaborate in detail.

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<sup>48</sup> Ralph Rugoff, “Other Experts,” in *Amateurs*, eds. Grace Kook-Anderson and Claire Fitzsimmons (San Francisco: California College of the Arts, 2008), 9-14.

<sup>49</sup> Rugoff, 11.

<sup>50</sup> John Roberts, “The Amateur’s Retort,” in *Amateurs*, eds. Grace Kook-Anderson and Claire Fitzsimmons (San Francisco: California College of the Arts, 2008), 21.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

The abovementioned critiques by Bovee and Motley clearly indicate a level of ignominy associated with being one of the ‘excluded’. Roberts himself might admit that his own argument is both overly generous and truncated, as he actually notes that ‘the “democracy” of market distribution is not equivalent to a democracy of ideas’, effectively pointing out that there is a level of professional difference between artist and amateur at a conceptual level.<sup>53</sup> Yet, he goes on to contend that artists like Jeremy Deller (of the *Folk Archive*) may see themselves as cohabiting with amateurs in a shared ‘free space of production’, where ‘all that separates the professional artist from the nonartist artist is simply the extensive power of nomination that he, as a professional, possesses’ and that it is ‘the job of the artists to redistribute these powers’.<sup>54</sup> I want to accept Roberts’ argument as a possibility, and in particular the idea, as it manifests in Fletcher’s works, that the amateur as ‘other’ to the professional artist could be redundant. Indeed, my argument in this thesis is that artists like Fletcher complicate the binary, perceived in the Biennial by Bovee and Motley, between the art world and the public ‘beyond’. This is so particularly from the viewpoint that Fletcher and Hoffmann use their ‘powers of nomination’ to interrupt the perceived delineation between professional and non-professional. I extend this discussion into the next parts of this chapter by relating the Biennial to the theoretical concept of dissensus. I also develop the discussion of the ‘ordinary’ by exploring an earlier photographic work by Fletcher with his long-term collaborator Jon Rubin.

### **Ordinary people, everyday lives**

In 1998, Fletcher collaborated with the Pittsburgh-based artist Jon Rubin on a participatory photographic project titled *Pictures Collected From Museum Visitors’ Wallets* (alternatively titled *Wallet Pictures*). Despite being made more than a decade prior to the People’s Biennial, *Wallet Pictures* provides an instructive point of comparison with the Biennial. Commissioned by San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) Fletcher and Rubin asked visitors to SFMoMA whether they could photograph the pictures they carried in their wallets. The artists set up a medium format camera inside SFMoMA and Rubin notes that he and Fletcher spent about ten minutes with each visitor, who ‘docented them through their wallets’ and effectively tried to convince them why their photographs were interesting enough to be in the exhibition.<sup>55</sup> During a period of six hours, the artists shot around 150 photographs. From there, ten were

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Jon Rubin, “Podcasts: Jon Rubin on Pictures Collected from Museum Visitor’s Wallets,” (podcast), published November 2008, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, accessed February 6, 2012, [http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/podcast/aop\\_tour\\_422](http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/podcast/aop_tour_422).

selected and these were enlarged to 101.6 x 76.2cm and were acquired by SFMoMA for their permanent collection.

The series of photographs includes one that is titled *Judy's Daughters (A Long Time Ago) Kara, Valerie, and Dana* (Fig 25). This is a posed studio photograph of three girls aged between about five and ten. They stand huddled together, smiling and looking in the same direction. They each wear a white blouse, distinguished by a differently patterned and coloured trim. It is the kind of posed family picture that many people would be able to relate to. The inclusion of the phrase '(a long time ago)' in the photograph's title evokes a sense of its owner (Judy) trying to remember the date the picture was taken and forgetting it, substituting the date with the vague phrase 'a long time ago'. There is also *Sandy's Son Chris*, another studio portrait featuring an angelic-looking blonde boy of about eight years old. He sports a 'bowl' haircut—the childish haircut popular in the 1970s and '80s and a style that would likely be familiar to many viewers. Chris wears what looks like a First Communion suit, an all-white outfit comprising jacket, shorts, long socks and shoes. Other photographs in the collection include *Martin's Dad Adolf*, *Orlando When He Was Four or Five*, *Maybe Younger* and *Eugenie's Mother Virginia's High School Graduation Picture*. Many of the titles are expressed in a similar style of vernacular language to *Judy's daughters (a long time ago)*.

The titles of these photographs are telling. None of the named individuals are given surnames, a gesture that implies familiarity, as if we already know Stan and his wife. The syntax of the titles mirrors the kind of conversational language that a person may use when showing others their family photo albums, for example, 'This is Mum's sister, Pat'. The titles of several of Fletcher's other works suggest a personal conversation that the artist is holding with 'us': *The Sound We Make Together (Melbourne)* (2010-2011), *With Our Own Little Hands* (2005), *If I Wasn't Me I Would Be You* (2003), *These Fine People* (1998) and *Some People We Met* (1996). The titles' use of conversational language suggests homeliness, friendliness, neighbourliness; the latter two titles imply that we, the viewers, are being introduced to 'these people'. Additionally, the somewhat formulaic nature of many of the photographs in *Wallet Pictures* engenders a sense of familiarity with the typology of our own family photographs: the high school graduation picture, the First Communion picture, and so on. Here, we might identify with the clothing and haircuts of the photographs' subjects, their poses, or the structured settings of the studios where they were taken. What is certainly familiar is the act of carrying photographs of family and friends, although these days, of course, the mobile phone captures and stores our 'wallet pictures'. In some of the photographs, like *Deborah's Cousin Matt*, the subject (Matt) looks directly out at the viewer, returning the gaze that was, perhaps, meant only to be shared between



him and a very few others, not by thousands of unknown museum visitors. In their familiar style of presentation, *Wallet Pictures* elicits a feeling of commonality between unrelated individuals—the idea that we, as viewers, are included as one of the people addressed by this work.



(Fig 25) Harrell Fletcher and Jon Rubin, *Judy's daughters (a long time ago) Kara, Valerie, and Dana*, 1998 chromogenic print; 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase through a gift of the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation. © Harrell Fletcher and Jon Rubin.



This is to suggest that the ‘people’ in *Wallet Pictures* represent ‘you and me’ in the sense of an ‘everyman’ type. *Wallet Pictures* and indeed the later project, People’s Biennial, follow a long artistic lineage of representing ordinary, ‘everyday’ or ‘common’ people in various guises. The works of Breughel, Caravaggio, Courbet, Millet, Manet and Degas are but a few earlier examples.<sup>56</sup> *Wallet Pictures* and People’s Biennial are, of course, a world and a time away from the abovementioned artists. While less explicitly romantic, *Wallet Pictures*’ and People’s Biennial’s valorisation of so-called ordinary people—earlier represented by Courbet and others as the under classes and the proletariat—ascribe a sense of celebratory significance to the ‘overlooked’, albeit in a more deadpan way. Like the later People’s Biennial, *Wallet Pictures* also inverts the notion of art world ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. The series conflates a number of roles traditionally taken up by audience (to spectate), artist (to create) and institution (to nominate). In this project, museum visitors became artists as well as curators, via small-scale ‘exhibitions’, which they perhaps unwittingly curated inside their own wallets. Simultaneously, participants and their family members, wrought larger-than-life in the blown up images, became the subjects of the works. Further, SFMoMA endorsed a space in which visitors were asked to contribute very actively as participants rather than as spectators of creative work. Commenting on the project, Rubin notes:

at the most basic level it inverts the expectation of a museum visitor. You ... expect to go to a museum to discover some artistic genius or some vision of someone who you’ve given the authority to create vision in the culture, and what we basically wanted to say is that perhaps what is miraculous is already in your back pocket or your handbag ... [t]hat this notion of who is an important cultural producer is nebulous; it’s decided by institutions on a somewhat ad hoc basis.<sup>57</sup>

Rubin’s comments of course recall Marcel Duchamp’s legacy: his radical skepticism of the museum as the arbiter of official culture and the notion that art can exist in the ‘everyday’. *Wallet Pictures* contests the distinction between artist and curator, between professional and non-professional artist and between everyday ephemera, amateur production and art.

In a conceptual sense, the series engages broadly with the anti-bourgeois aspirations of Fluxus and the democratic ambitions of elements of the earlier twentieth-century avant-garde.

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<sup>56</sup> Although written over three decades ago in 1969, George Boas’s historical essay on ‘the people’ contains some valuable historical summarisations of how the people has emerged as a subject in the arts, not to mention within history and politics. He writes about the progressive romanticisation of the people, and of their representation in painting in religious, moral and ideological contexts: ‘Whereas the *populus* [sic] in literature was for many centuries the butt of jokes to be used for comic relief in serious drama, it became an object of pity and later of aesthetic charm.’ *Vox Populi: Essays in the History of an Idea* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1969), xiii. Boas lists the works of Breughel and Caravaggio, among others, who portrayed working people, peasant people, the marginalized, the downtrodden, and “natural man”—God’s image in the “handiwork of nature”.

<sup>57</sup> Rubin, 1:07.

Specifically, John Roberts (mentioned previously) writes that the Russian Revolution and the avant-garde of the Weimar Republic pioneered the idea that ‘those who were deemed to be without official cultural and artistic skills were able to play a part, as producers, audience members, or “social actors”, in a culture produced in their own name’.<sup>58</sup> Clearly, an ideological and often a propagandist agenda underpinned much of this art making in the name of proletarian revolution.<sup>59</sup> Famously, the Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin appealed to writers of the early twentieth century to consider the political function of their art in terms of the proletarian cause.<sup>60</sup> Benjamin’s 1934 lecture, “The Author as Producer”, delivered at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris, argued that the working classes were seminal producers of creative work during the era of proletarian revolutions that had taken place in Western Europe and in Russia. Notably, Benjamin critiqued the bourgeois intellectual writer whom he branded as a form of pretender within the proletarian revolution because ‘the bourgeois class gave him, in the form of an education, a means of production that, owing to educational privilege, makes him feel solidarity with it, and still more it with him’.<sup>61</sup> Thus, according to Benjamin, the task of the intellectual (the specialist) is to consider how he uses the means at his disposal toward a genuinely productive engagement with proletarian politics, otherwise he will be a mere ‘benefactor...an ideological patron—[reside in an] an impossible place’.<sup>62</sup> This sentiment recalls Roberts’ claim discussed earlier in this chapter that professional artists can only ever *perform* at being amateurs. Against this view, I would argue that in *Wallet Pictures*, as in the People’s Biennial discussed previously, Fletcher and his collaborators aim concertedly to level the playing field with respect to expert and amateur, promoting the non-artists spectator to artist-producer.

Notably, Benjamin saw the printed press as a primary avenue for fostering writing by members of the public that would contribute productively toward the proletarian effort. He cites the example of the Soviet press, which witnessed a reduction in ‘high quality’ writing (according to bourgeois standards) at the same time as it began to publish the writings of workers:

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<sup>58</sup> Roberts, 17.

<sup>59</sup> However, historian Willi Guttman argues that this was not always so clear-cut in the work fostered by some of the ‘arts councils’ that formed in post-war Weimar Germany. Not aligned with specific party politics, these councils of artists and intellectuals ‘represented neither class nor party and only wished to ensure that all available artistic talent was used for the well-being of the whole community’. (W. L. Guttman, *Ideology and the visual arts in Weimar Germany*, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 67-68).

<sup>60</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 768-782. Also see Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), for a discussion of Benjamin’s lecture, especially 42-50.

<sup>61</sup> Benjamin, 780.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 773.

For as writing gains in breadth what it loses in depth, the conventional distinction between author and public, which is upheld by the bourgeois press, begins in the Soviet press to disappear. For there the reader is at all times ready to become a writer—that is, a describer, or even a prescriber. As an expert—not perhaps in a discipline but perhaps in a post that he holds—he gains access to authorship. Work itself has its turn to speak.<sup>63</sup>

We can read in Benjamin's lecture one of the core arguments of what was, some three decades later, to become Roland Barthes' renowned post-structuralist essay "The Death of the Author" (1967). Benjamin identified a radical set of substitutions in the process of creating literary work: reader for writer, and, moreover, *worker* or *work* for bourgeois expertise. In the People's Biennial if not in *Wallet Pictures*, Fletcher and Hoffmann also indicate their predilection for *work* as Benjamin names it, work that could otherwise be termed artisanship or craftsmanship in the absence of theoretical and intellectual qualification. This can be seen in the curators' choice of works such as Bernie Petersen's *Soap Carvings* mentioned previously, works arguably merit-worthy on the basis of Peterson's impeccable technique rather than their conceptual underpinnings. Fletcher and Hoffmann's preference for 'immediate' and 'spontaneous' art once again suggests their interest in work without the affectations, real or imagined, of art world intellectualism.

*Wallet Pictures* and the People's Biennial lack Benjamin's keen socialist political motivations. Indeed, it is perhaps the Biennial's perceived lack of action leading to 'radical change in the existing system' (to recollect Bovee's critique of the exhibition) that aroused the criticisms I discussed earlier in this chapter. However, if we are to understand the 'art world' as a sphere of politics, I want to argue for a discernable politics in Fletcher's works that does not rest on a radical 'overhaul' of art's institutions but instead enacts a form of dissensus that I outlined in Chapter One. Indeed, Chantal Mouffe makes the crucial distinction that dissensus should not replace one political system with another, as in the Marxist view of the proletarian revolution, as this merely replaces one form of hegemony with another. Mouffe writes:

today artists cannot pretend any more to constitute an avant-garde offering a radical critique, but this is not a reason to proclaim that their political role has ended. They still can play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities. In fact this has always been their role and it is only the modernist illusion of the privileged position of the artist that has made us believe otherwise.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 771.

<sup>64</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art and Research* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2007), accessed August 10, 2016, final para, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>.

Clearly, *Wallet Pictures* and People's Biennial display little of the radical avant-garde approach that Mouffe mentions above. (Rather, this lineage is reflected in Claire Bishop's own avant-garde approach to supporting artists she sees as practicing relational antagonism, critiqued in Chapter One). My argument in this thesis is that artists like Fletcher interrupt institutionally ordained and sedimented forms of power by reconfiguring subjectivities attached to notions of 'the people' and 'the public'. Fletcher and his collaborators stage new relations between art, artists and non-specialists through projects that, as in *Wallet Pictures* and People's Biennial, reconfigure these relations, their attendant roles and perceived capabilities.

Jacques Rancière theorises the notion of dissensus somewhat differently to Mouffe in his discussion of the 'aesthetic regime'. In his book *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (2004) Rancière approaches the relationship between art and social class through his rejection of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's argument about cultural distinction, discussed previously in this thesis. To recap, Bourdieu's book *Distinction* (1979) linked cultural 'know how' with early access to cultural education in the home, with the result that '[t]astes function as markers of "class"'.<sup>65</sup> However, Rancière suggests that dissensus characterises the contemporary aesthetic regime and that:

this disorder does not only imply that the hierarchy of subjects and of publics becomes blurred. It implies that artworks no longer refer to those who commissioned them, to those whose image they established and grandeur they celebrated. Artworks henceforth relate to the "genius" of peoples and present themselves, at least in principle, to the gaze of anyone at all.<sup>66</sup>

Rancière's argument, which also recalls art theorist Thierry de Duve's notion of art's 'universal address', is that the aesthetic regime disentwines the sensible realm, consisting of images, sounds and so on, from their correlation with the social order.<sup>67</sup> The aesthetic regime thus breaks with what Rancière has termed the 'representative regime', which connects the sensible realm with particular roles in society, or with what he also terms the distribution of the sensible. It accounts for Benjamin's observations in "The Author as Producer", described above, where

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<sup>65</sup> Ghassan Hage, "Key Thinkers: Ghassan Hage on Pierre Bourdieu," *Slow TV* (online video), The Monthly, recorded 2009, accessed June 3, 2010, <http://www.themonthly.com.au/key-thinkers-ghassan-hage-pierre-bourdieu-1504>; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans., Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1979).

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>67</sup> See Thierry de Duve, "Do artists speak on behalf of all of us?," *The Life and Death of Images*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willson (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 134-156. Here, de Duve argues that art's address to a universal audience is its shared mandate. That is, art does not have an otherwise pre-existing mandate to create experiences for sharing. If it addresses 'me' it also addresses 'you', which is the 'you' singular and the 'you' plural.

‘the conventional distinction between author and public’ begins to disappear.<sup>68</sup> The aesthetic regime underscores modernity, beginning perhaps with Émile Zola’s novels, Duchamp’s sardonic ‘piss takes’ on the place of art in the institution or Bertolt Brecht’s plays, while Fletcher’s projects are also characteristic of the regime Rancière describes in their complication of social hierarchies associated with art.

The aesthetic regime promises a social equality, Rancière argues, and yet there is a paradox here. The ‘anything goes’ forms of art that constitute the current regime promise a new form of social order based in equality and yet this same art is ‘held responsible ... for having misled us with its fallacious promises of the philosophical absolute and social revolution’ (and, at the risk of reading too much into Bovee and Motley’s criticisms of the People’s Biennial, the ‘radical change’ to which they allude is symptomatic of art’s ‘misleading’ tendencies, to which Rancière refers).<sup>69</sup> However, this is the very notion of aesthetic dissensus that Rancière describes: that art remains as art because of its very difference from politics. As Rancière continues:

aesthetics ... contains a tension between two opposed types of politics: between the logic of art becoming life at the price of its self-elimination and the logic of art’s getting involved in politics on the express condition of not having anything to do with it.<sup>70</sup>

With respect to my own selection of artists in this thesis, I have been drawn toward the works of artists like Fletcher that avoid staging overtly political activities, instead focusing on what happens when artworks underscore and complicate political subjectivities like ‘the people’ and evoking what Rancière variously refers to as an ‘aesthetics of politics’. As Fletcher observes:

there are intended outcomes but...they’re not attempts to fix something exactly.... I want to be able to do something that just turns out to be sort of silly or interesting in some other way....<sup>71</sup>

We could also align Rancière’s notion of dissensus with the concept of ‘potential’ as I have used it in this thesis to describe the public—this is, the concept of the public disrupts coherent forms of subjectivity so readily attached to it, while suggesting new and unknown iterations to come.

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<sup>68</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 29; Sophie Berrebi, “Jacques Rancière: Aesthetics is Politics,” *Art & Research* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2008), accessed August 10, 2016, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/berrebirev.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Rancière, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>71</sup> Harrell Fletcher, interview by author, Melbourne/Portland, Jan 31, 2012.

### *Learning to Love You More*

The idea of the public as a form of potential underpins another work by Fletcher, this time in collaboration with the artist and filmmaker Miranda July—*Learning to Love You More* (2002–2009). *Learning to Love You More* engages in yet an additional way with the notions of the public and the people, and also returns us to the subject of ordinariness developed in my discussion of *Wallet Pictures* and People’s Biennial. *Learning to Love You More* is perhaps Fletcher’s most widely documented project: a Web-based participatory work spanning eight years and which, by the time it concluded in 2009, had involved over 8000 participants.<sup>72</sup> The project comprised the random distribution of 70 creative assignments to anonymous members of the public. Authored by Fletcher and July, with the exception of one, the assignments were disseminated predominantly over the Internet, where they were picked up and completed by willing people. The completed assignment ‘reports’, which included photography, writing, craft-making activities and one-on-one engagement with other people, were filed by respondents and presented in exhibitions, on radio broadcasts, and archived extensively on the project’s website (now in the collection of SFMoMA).

The assignments are in turn banal, humourous, hopeful, sad, whimsical and peculiar in their straightforwardness (Fig 26). They include Assignment #50: ‘Take a flash photo under your bed’, Assignment #9: ‘Draw a constellation from someone’s freckles’; and Assignment #15: ‘hang a windchime on a tree in a parking lot’. There is also Assignment #70: ‘Say goodbye’; Assignment #40: ‘Heal yourself’; and Assignment #31: ‘Spend time with a dying person’. Although mostly distributed to participants through the project’s website at [learningtoloveyoumore.com](http://learningtoloveyoumore.com), assignments were also disseminated through artist-run workshops and through the public programming efforts of art institutions. Each assignment includes short, specific instructions. One example is by individual named Elisabeth from Auckland, New Zealand, who responded to Assignment 43: ‘Make an exhibition of the art in your parent’s [sic] house’. Elisabeth responded by photographing a painting belonging to her parents, a roughly painted and blue-skinned female figure adorned with a halo of light and celestial-looking objects. The painting sits above a domestic mantelpiece. Below her photographic documentation of the painting, Elisabeth has provided a short, written commentary, explaining how much she used to hate it.

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<sup>72</sup> The assignments, reports and documentation of exhibitions featuring the reports can still be viewed on the project’s website which was acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2010. A book of the same name was published in 2007 and contains a selection of reports.

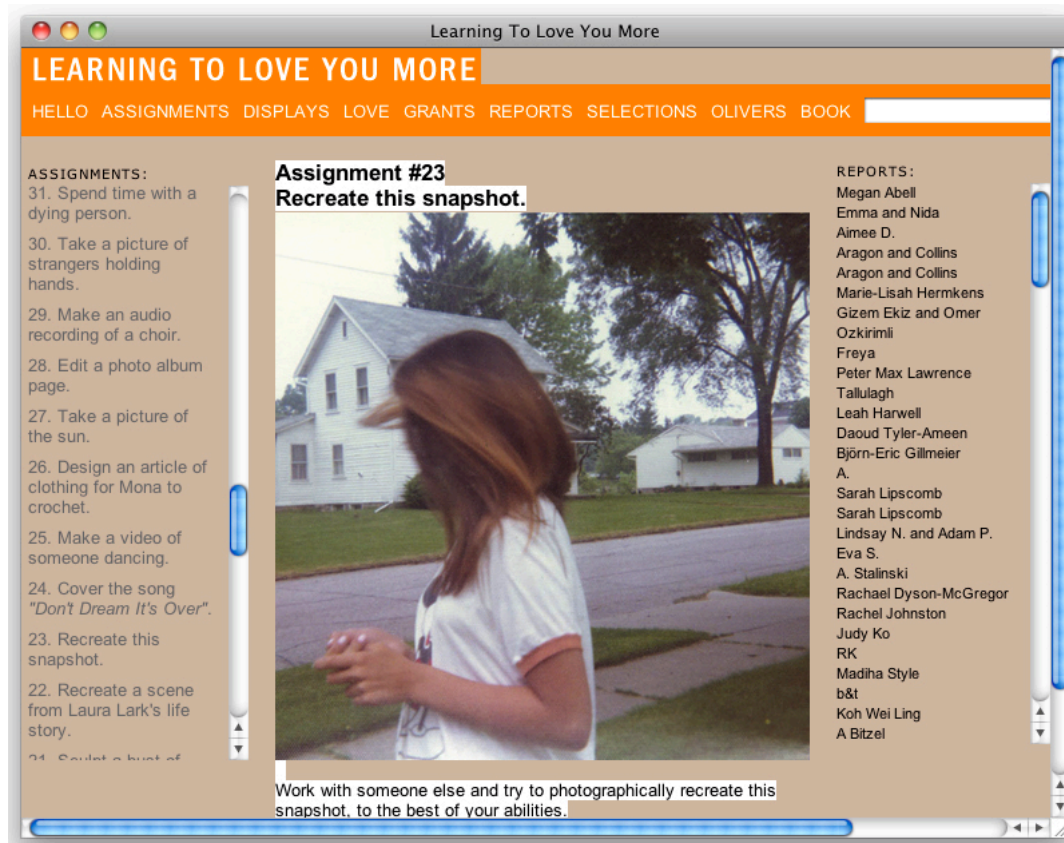
*Learning to Love You More* proposes art assignments that are publically accessible in the sense that ‘anybody’ can complete them. Encouraging craft- or hobby-based projects using home-style materials, the project supports and even celebrates amateurism; as in the earlier *Wallet Pictures* and the later People’s Biennial, *Learning to Love You More* encourages creative practice by a broad stratum of non art-specialists. Assignment #63: ‘Make an encouraging banner’, for example, instructs respondents to use construction paper or large squares of fabric to make encouraging phrases. Assignment #16 asks respondents to ‘Make a paper replica of your bed’ using ‘paper, cardboard, coloured pencils, glue and/or tape’. In his book *Thinking Through Craft*, historian Glenn Adamson notes that contemporary amateur craft is a ‘public and classlessness phenomenon’— anyone may practice it—in contrast to its eighteenth century associations with the leisure classes.<sup>73</sup> Adamson also contends that craft practice has been absorbed into contemporary art as a rhetorical device; this seems apparent in Fletcher and July’s aspiration toward democratising art making, as it does in the other projects by Fletcher described previously.<sup>74</sup>

Despite using the Internet as a platform for widely distributing and displaying the project, *Learning to Love You More*’s amateur aesthetic is actually defiantly anti-hi tech, and this is not just because the work was conceived in 2002 during the infancy of Web 2.0. It rejects the disembodied and remote forms of the Internet and its web of abstracted and unknowable publics to instigate accessible forms of art making where every participant has a name. In an important sense, then, the project’s craft or ‘do-it-yourself’ aesthetic is intensely personal and individualising, mitigating the connotations of the Internet public as impersonal and abstract. And yet, despite its naming of each individual, the work’s seemingly unbounded form recalls the imagined spaces of the Internet as an indeterminate ‘web’ of interconnected users. Thus, the work can be considered as an exploration of people *both* in their individuality and as members of a loosely connected network of individuals via the Internet.

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<sup>73</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 140.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.



(Fig 26) Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July, *Learning to Love You More* (screenshot), 2002-2009 web project (www.learningtoloveyoumore.com) and archive. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase. © Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July.

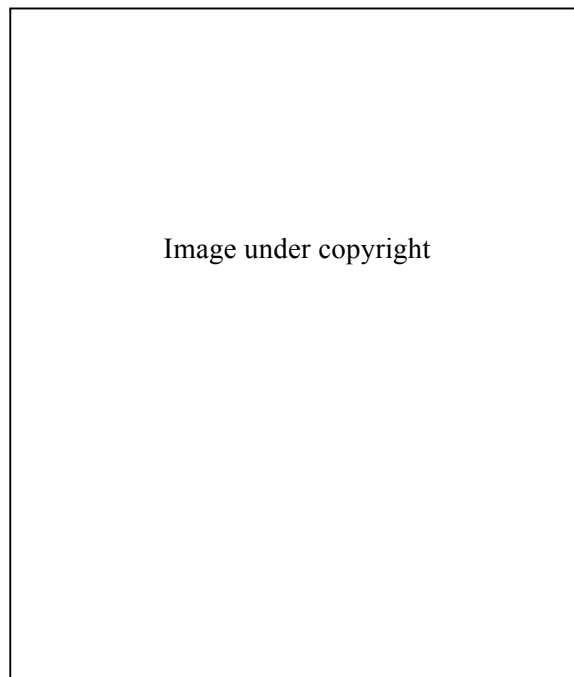
Expanding on these ideas in a more abstract manner, we can also consider the ways in which *Learning to Love You More* conceives of its public in a constitutive sense. In her book *Evictions*, Rosalyn Deutsche describes the ways in which a public may come to form around ‘public art’—works situated in the public sphere (in which we can include *Learning to Love You More*). Deutsche writes: ‘public art as art operating in or as a public sphere...means that an art public, by contrast with an art audience, is not a preexisting entity but rather emerges through, is produced by, its participation in political activity’.<sup>75</sup> Of particular relevance to the current discussion is the way that Deutsche conceives of this public for art, a configuration of the public that is highlighted in *Learning to Love You More*. Deutsche suggests that art may *empirically* form a public consisting of participants or individuals seeking to engage with it in one way or another.<sup>76</sup> For viewers, as for participants, *Learning to Love You More* forms a gradual picture of the public in the making or *in progress* through their interaction with the project. Scrolling through the projects on the website, or turning the pages of the book of the

<sup>75</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions, Art and Spatial Politics* (Chicago, IL and Cambridge, MA: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and The MIT Press, 1996), 288.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



same name, the form of the work (multiple people, multiple assignments) is both cumulative and seemingly open in terms of the number and breadth of participants.<sup>77</sup> This aligns with both Deutsche's and Mouffe's democratic arguments discussed in the Introduction for a non-normative and non-essential public that is perpetually contingent. In my terms, this is a public of potential.



(Fig 27) John Baldessari, *Commissioned Painting:*  
*A Painting by George Walker* 1969,  
oil and acrylic on canvas, 150.5 x 115.6cm

Fletcher has said that his work 'points at' the ordinary, making it visible through subtle gesture:<sup>78</sup>

My dad has always liked pointing things out. He literally points to things with his finger—a tree, a building, a cloud, and then he will tell you what he knows about the thing he is pointing to. When I was about ten years old my parents bought me a used 35mm camera and I started walking about taking pictures with it. I realized that it was a way for me to point like my dad at things that I found interesting and then capture them to talk about later on.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July, *Learning to Love You More: Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July* (Munich: Prestel, 2007).

<sup>78</sup> Jon Davies, "Two Versions of Engagement," *CMagazine* (Fall 2007): 9.

<sup>79</sup> "Harrell Fletcher," *Reframing Photography: Theory and Practice* (excerpt from book), Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, accessed October 21, 2011, <http://www.reframingphotography.com/content/harrell-fletcher>.

The effect of this pointing at is actually to ‘point out’, depicting objects and people in relief—individuated against their environments. Works such as *Learning to Love You More* and *Wallet Pictures*, along with a range of other work by Fletcher from recent years, focus on the commonplace, the overlooked, and the shared. They suggest that we, as viewers and as ‘ordinary people’, are connected, if not necessarily united, by our ordinariness.

There is a direct link between Fletcher’s practice of ‘pointing out’ and the work of North American Conceptual artist John Baldessari, who produced a series of works in the late 1960s showing a photographed or painted hand pointing at various objects. The idea behind Baldessari’s *Commissioned Paintings* is the pejorative phrase attributed to abstract expressionist painter Al Held, that ‘all conceptual art is just pointing at things’.<sup>80</sup> In a dead-pan lampooning of this statement, Baldessari commissioned 14 ‘Sunday painters’ to paint a range of photographic slides that he provided them with; all featured a friend’s hand pointing at various un-extraordinary or obscure items or surfaces (Fig 27). Baldessari asked the painters to reproduce the slides as realistically as possible, and to include their name on the canvas underneath the image. In a description that could also apply to some of Fletcher’s work (namely, *People’s Biennial’s* engagement with amateurism), curator Rainer Fuchs writes:

Baldessari elevates the banal to the status of art by having conventional pictures painted by others, in other words, by appropriating this scorned art form [Sunday painting] and thus illustrating that it is not the painting technique that decides the value or worthlessness of a painting, but only the context in which it is used. It is not the things or the meanings in themselves which are his theme, but the senselessness of such assumptions and the possibility of amusing himself with them in a disarming way and of using them as a basis for playing a game that involve purposefully confusing meanings and values.<sup>81</sup>

While many of Fletcher’s works follows elements of a Conceptual art tradition, they are far less interested in Conceptualism’s rigorous explorations of language and other representational systems and far more oriented toward a human dimension. Fletcher’s envisages the public or ‘ordinary people’ in his projects as active subjects who are interesting and who are worthy of attention in their own right, not as passive or downtrodden individuals. His works are political

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<sup>80</sup> Rainer Fuchs, “John Baldessari: A Different Kind of Order (Arbeiten 1962-1984),” in *Geschriebene Malereien und fotografierte Farben (Written Paintings and Photographed Colours)*, ed. Rainer Fuchs (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2005), 32.

<sup>81</sup> Various accounts are given of the process of creating these works, and I have deferred to an interview between Baldessari and curator Jessica Morgan, “Somebody to talk to,” *Tate Etc.*, no. 17 (2009), accessed October 2, 2015 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/somebody-talk>, and a Sotheby’s catalogue entry for a work in the *Commissioned Paintings* series titled ‘A Painting by Edgar Transue’ (1969). Rainer Fuchs also describes the process of making these works, but adds that Baldessari also commissioned the amateur artists to paint a series of ‘motifs’ that were then subsequently photographed before being handed back again to paint. See Fuchs, 32-33.

on a small scale because he animates modest stories of ordinary people whose art and whose lives are unspectacular but whom he believes are worthy of making more public.

### **Some people**

This chapter has sought to examine the notion of the people and the public as they manifest in Fletcher's works. It has linked Fletcher's projects to specific historical and political associations attending the concept of 'the people' as a way of locating this artist's particular interest in the people with whom he works. Elements of Fletcher's works resonate with an ethos of early twentieth-century avant-gardism: its interest in class and social hierarchy, in individuals 'from below' and in collective and collaborative practice, but without much of the urgency of this era's socialist politics. Broadly speaking, Fletcher's practice is underpinned by a form of humanism also apparent in the socially engaged and community-oriented practices that burgeoned in North America in the 1990s, described previously in this thesis, but also without this art's overt imperative toward social and political change. Fletcher's interest in people is less about fostering 'people power' in the political sense and more about a sensitive and nuanced engagement with individual people and their lived experiences.

In this chapter, I have argued that Fletcher's works draw on the political and historical associations attending 'the people' but metaphorically speaking drop the definite article to refer to 'some' people distributively—'people' in the popular sense of the term.<sup>82</sup> People in their personal environments, rather than 'the people' collectively, are thematically central to Fletcher's works. It is through his intense concentration on singular cases of overlooked people—their contexts of being in the world—that Fletcher is most political. In this (loosely Marxist) view, it is the ordinary people, 'the public', excluded or marginalised by institutions such as the art industry, who are the legitimate source of talent and of interest. Crucially, his representation of 'some people' is distinct from large collective bodies of people such as 'masses' or 'populations'. I demonstrated in Chapter Two that such collectives of people have been considered objects of power with limited or no political agency. In contrast to this, 'people' suggests political agency while 'some people' qualifies this small and random sample size as non-universal. The next chapter turns to work by the English artist Jeremy Deller, which further develops the notion of 'ordinary people' around ideas of the vernacular, the folk, the working classes and industrial history. It frames Deller's work in a more explicitly political

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<sup>82</sup> Boas, *Vox Populi*, fn 4.

context, where it scrutinises the viability of the British public in the wake of neo-liberal politics since the 1980s.

## Chapter Four

### ‘The Public World is My Studio’: Jeremy Deller’s Public Vernacular<sup>1</sup>

It is one of the peculiarities of the English that the history of the “common people” has always been something other than—and distinct from—English History Proper.

— E.P. Thompson, “History from Below”, 1966<sup>2</sup>

In 2009, the English artist Jeremy Deller travelled between New York City and Los Angeles with the rusted and deformed shell of a car that had been destroyed by a bomb in an Iraqi street. With the wreckage tied on the back of a trailer, Deller stopped at multiple sites along the route to hold conversations with passers-by. The unusual cargo—part of a project titled *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*—travelled from New York to Kansas City before heading as far south as New Orleans, then on to Houston, Texas, west through New Mexico and Arizona before arriving in Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> In a very different type of scene three years later, crowds of adults and children ran and jumped onto Deller’s to-scale, inflatable replica of Stone Henge, *Sacrilege* (2012). Swathed in mysterious, ancient history as one of England’s venerated heritage icons, the standing stones in Deller’s version were instead rushed upon, bounced against, and perhaps most importantly, enjoyed by the public.<sup>4</sup> In a variety of ways over the last decade, Deller’s public, participatory works—which are at times sobering like *It Is What It Is* and just as often filled with levity and humour like *Sacrilege*—have explored diverse dialogues with the public as an idea and an actuality.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning with an analysis of Deller’s conversational piece *It Is What It Is*, this chapter explores Deller’s unique approach to the notion of the public through his engagement, in various forms, with the vernacular. Critics of Deller’s work, and indeed Deller himself, have

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Deller, quoted in Stuart Hall, “Jeremy Deller’s Political Imaginary,” in *Joy in People* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2012), 82.

<sup>2</sup> E.P. Thompson, “History from Below,” *Times Literary Supplement*, Thursday 7 April, 1966, 279.

<sup>3</sup> GRITtv, “Laura Flanders, Interview with Jeremy Deller, Nato Thompson, Jonathan Harvey and Esam Pasha” (online video), GRITtv, aired March 26, 2009, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://blip.tv/grittv/grittv-march-26-2009-1933190>.

<sup>4</sup> The bouncing castle toured various locations from Glasgow, Scotland to Sydney, Australia.

<sup>5</sup> A version of this chapter, titled “‘Annoying, Funny and A Bit of A Mess’: Jeremy Deller’s Public Projects” was presented as a paper at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand conference ‘Image Space Body’ in Brisbane in November 2015.

observed his interest in the vernacular as an alternative to the 'official'.<sup>6</sup> Deller presents the vernacular as an 'other' to official histories, bureaucratic discourse and professional art. In this chapter I argue that Deller's approach to the vernacular is also an attempt to revive an ailing notion of the public in the political context of neo-liberal Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. Related to this, I also seek to describe the ways in which Deller's engagement with the vernacular in his works from the early 2000s onwards revisits and complicates a similarly ailing idea of 'community' in contemporary Britain.

### ***It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq***

One of Deller's most open-ended and overtly political public projects to date, *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq* (2009), had two components. The first was an exhibition held in three institutions across the United States in 2009: the New Museum in New York, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. The centrepiece of the project was the rusted shell of the car destroyed in 2007 in a well-known Baghdad market precinct, Al-Mutanabbi Street.<sup>7</sup> This bombed-out marketplace was considered the hub of Baghdad's cultural and intellectual life, the site of tea houses, auction houses and bookstalls where artists and intellectuals mingled with other visitors. Thirty-eight people were killed and hundreds more were injured in the blast.<sup>8</sup> *It Is What It Is* also included a seating area in the gallery where experts on Iraq could converse with museum visitors about issues in the region. Also included were two wall-drawn maps, one of Iraq that featured the names of cities in the US and a map of the US that displayed Iraqi cities. Here, Deller continued his project of fictively twinning warring nations through their towns.<sup>9</sup> Towns were first twinned in the post World War One period to forge connections between devastated nations. This initiative was extended after World War Two to rebuild relations between former enemies, and in Europe to pair former Eastern bloc nations with western cities.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Hall, 87-88.

<sup>7</sup> Information on the attack from the Imperial War Museum in London, to which Deller later donated the vehicle, reads:

No terrorist group has ever claimed responsibility for the explosion. There is no evidence of human remains in the car and it was unlikely it was occupied. The car was exported from Iraq in May 2007 (with the permission of the Iraqi government - see papers on file) by Jan Gruiters of IKV Pax Christi (a Dutch Christian aid organisation). They passed it to Dutch artist Robert Kluijver. He in turn donated it to the New Museum in New York, who commissioned the artist Jeremy Deller to turn it into an art installation. Imperial War Museums, "History note," Imperial War Museums, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/70000413>.

<sup>8</sup> Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is*, 1st ed. (New York: Creative Time, 2010), back cover.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the work *Twin Towns (UK/Iraq)* exhibited as part of the Hayward Gallery's exhibition of Deller's work titled *Joy in People* (2012). This work 'twinning' the UK and Iraq.

<sup>10</sup> Council of European Municipalities and Regions, "History," CCRE/CEMR, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.twinning.org/en/page/history#.ViWXT2QrL-k>; European Commission, "Europe for Citizens

The project's second iteration is, however, more relevant for the purposes of my discussion.<sup>11</sup> Between exhibiting the car in New York and LA, Deller toured the bombed-out vehicle across the US on the back of a trailer led by an RV (Fig 28). A simple sign accompanied the car that read: 'This car was destroyed by a bomb in a Baghdad marketplace on March 5, 2007'.<sup>12</sup> Deller was joined by three individuals: Jonathan Harvey, a US Army reservist who had served in Iraq, Esam Pasha, an Iraqi refugee and artist, and Nato Thompson, the project's curator from supporting public art organisation Creative Time. Deller, Pasha, Harvey and Thompson stopped in public spaces in over fourteen locations to talk with the American public about Iraq or about any other topic that arose. The four men handed out flyers introducing themselves and the project.<sup>13</sup> They also set up a basic marquee with a table featuring various materials to spark conversations. These included the scarf of an Iraqi soccer team and playing cards illustrated with educational messages about Iraq, developed for the US military.<sup>14</sup>

Inevitably, many of the public discussions centred on the Iraqi/American conflict, although Deller and his collaborators have pointed out that these conversations ranged widely, from religion to music, family and culture, to the type of tea that Iraqis drink.<sup>15</sup> In some of the project's documentation, we see Harvey and Pasha front the discussions with the public, recounting their personal experiences of life in Iraq and during the war. In one instance, Pasha speaks with an African American Gulf War veteran named Rodney Blake. Pasha tells Blake that America should have stayed out of Iraq: 'I don't like the army invading my country; they made it worse'.<sup>16</sup> Pasha's statement is provocative, to be sure. However, despite the emotive subject matter, Pasha does not launch into a political diatribe. His conversation with Blake is just that: an exchange of questions and answers and a comparison of experiences. Blake replies: 'So what

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Programme," Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, accessed October 20, 2015, [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/citizenship/programme/action1\\_measure1\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/citizenship/programme/action1_measure1_en.php).

<sup>11</sup> The touring and conversational component of the project is well documented in a comprehensive catalogue, also titled *It Is What It Is*, and on video (a version of which was subsequently shown alongside the bombed-out car during Deller's 2012 retrospective at London's Hayward Gallery).

<sup>12</sup> Deller recalls that *It Is What It Is* evolved from an original proposal for the bombed-out car to be displayed on the fourth plinth as part of the Fourth Plinth public art project in London's Trafalgar Square. His proposal was rejected, but he suggests that this may have been a good thing as the proposal was perhaps irresponsible. Jeremy Deller, "Public Art Now Live Event" (online video). Public lecture delivered May 4, 2014, Bristol (Situations, 2014), accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.situations.org.uk/watch-jeremy-deller-lecture-public-art-now-live-event/>.

<sup>13</sup> This reads:

This exploded car is part of a traveling project about the ongoing situation in Iraq. The RV and car will travel from New York City to Los Angeles stopping in cities across the United States offering an opportunity to discuss Iraq itself. On hand to answer questions are Jonathan Harvey, a reservist in the military who recently served in Iraq, as well as Esam Pasha, an Iraqi artist who sought asylum in the United States in 2005. Feel free to ask them questions or look at materials from Baghdad on the tables. Deller, *It Is What It Is*, first frontpiece.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>15</sup> Deller, "Public Art Now Live Event". Also see comments made by Esam Pasha, in Matthew Cunningham, "It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq" (online video), accessed October 20, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/7207286>.

<sup>16</sup> Deller, *It Is What It Is*, 103.

should we have done?’ to which Pasha responds: ‘I don’t think Iraq posed a threat, so nothing.’<sup>17</sup>



(Fig 28) Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is*, 2009, view of the car on tour. Image courtesy the artist.

In turn, members of the public recount their experiences of war in Iraq and elsewhere as soldiers and veterans, Iraqi-US citizens, refugees and civilian contractors who served in Iraq. Others have had no direct experience with war yet are still indirectly affected. In New Orleans, Pasha and an individual named Ronald Lewis (Founder of the House of Dance and Feathers, a museum dedicated to the culture of New Orleans marching parades) agree on the basic similarity of human suffering and displacement.<sup>18</sup> They compare the experiences of New Orleans natives after Hurricane Katrina with those of Baghdadis affected by the war. They note how in both places, outside contractors were hired to clean up ‘the mess’ as a money-making initiative, rather than having locals with an invested interest fix up their own cities. The conversation draws links between the two countries at an unexpectedly individual and personal level, rather than at the broad and impersonal stratum of national politics. Pasha observes:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 91-94.



A lot of people criticized Iraqis after the invasion, when the looting happened, because there was no police force. And people were hungry after thirteen years of a suffocating embargo. In New Orleans, this also happened, so Iraqis are not so different from them.<sup>19</sup>



(Fig 29) Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is*, 2009. Image courtesy the artist.

These conversations are only two examples out of many and we can presume that the documentary publication and videos (some of which are available on YouTube and on Deller's own website) are edited versions of the original exchanges. However, if these reflect some sense of the original conversations then these rather generous and open discussions arguably represent the overall feeling of many of the exchanges in *It Is What It Is*. This comes as a surprise given the morbidly visual nature of the project. The car, rusted and malformed, was paraded on the back of a trailer through both 'red' and 'blue' states but Deller never made the project's politics

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 93.

explicit, although he admits to being terrified of what the public response to the work would be.<sup>20</sup> Describing this unpredictability Deller writes:

It goes without saying that to be in the public realm radically changes a project like this. You tend to lose control of the immediate environment almost instantly; you are at the mercy of the elements and of the general public. This makes the experience more random and unexpected—you literally do not know what, or, more to the point, who you will encounter next.<sup>21</sup>

*It Is What It Is* maintains a deliberately ambivalent stance on the pros and cons of the Iraq war.<sup>22</sup> Deller himself has claimed that the work is about the war but is not simply an anti-war piece because these arguments were already too late by the time the work was realised in 2009 (the war officially commenced in 2003).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that it is Deller's seeming political ambivalence, rather than any pro- or anti-war statement, that is so provocative—and also risky. *It Is What It Is* is confronting in its silence about Iraq and about America, especially given the usual bombardment of official narratives of war, frequently from the US government or global media outlets, and anti-war protests that are so often monological and dangerously reductive, even while complex public discussion and debate abounds. Deller's ambivalence is perhaps even more striking because he could be seen as a British interloper, albeit the fact that he is also a citizen of one of the 'coalition of the willing' nations, whose involvement in Iraq mirrored that of the US at every step.

In an insightful comment that addresses this ambivalence, the US Army reservist Jonathan Harvey observes that his input in *It Is What It Is* was only ever partial, and could only reveal one side to a massively complex story about war:

There is no monolithic monopoly on truth. Everyone's experiences have been separate. For example, my experience was totally confined to north-west Baghdad ... it's going to be very different from every other service member who was in Iraq at the same time, very different from the Iraqis and what the truth is, if there is some sort of external truth, is some sort of messy conglomeration of all of these anecdotal experiences.<sup>24</sup>

As I have observed elsewhere, this 'messy conglomeration of anecdotes' astutely describes Deller's approach to facilitating, collecting and documenting public dialogue in *It Is What It*

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<sup>20</sup> Jeremy Deller, Nato Thompson, Jonathan Harvey and Esam Pasha, "Talk at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, Feb 2013" (online video), Jeremy Deller, accessed December 12, 2014, [http://www.jeremydeller.org/ItIsWhatItIs/ItIsWhatItIs\\_Video.php](http://www.jeremydeller.org/ItIsWhatItIs/ItIsWhatItIs_Video.php).

<sup>21</sup> Deller, *It Is What It Is*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> Arden, "'Annoying, Funny and A Bit of A Mess'".

<sup>23</sup> Deller, "Public Art Now Live Event". Also see Creative Time and New Museum, "Interview with Jeremy Deller" (online video), uploaded February 23, 2009, YouTube, accessed October 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Zf8tDg-l7w>.

<sup>24</sup> GRITtv.

*Is*.<sup>25</sup> What I mean by this is that the work allows the unofficial, anecdotal stories of war to be voiced by individuals for whom the experience of war might be irreconcilably different; together, their stories of war represent the heterogeneous and usually anonymous voices of the public who are not the government officials and journalists who speak and write the vast majority of discourse about the war. In a parallel fashion, and also anecdotally, Deller notes that ordinary Americans are very different to the way that they are often portrayed in the media; in person, he says, they are very ‘generous and rational’.<sup>26</sup> According to Nato Thompson, the project also allowed people to ‘talk across racial and ideological boundaries in public’.<sup>27</sup> Based on these comments, we can recall Jürgen Habermas’s idealisation of the modern public sphere as an egalitarian forum for debate, but crucially, without the drive toward consensus that Habermas emphasised.<sup>28</sup>

The importance of the work lies in its veritable silencing of official narratives in favour of a different kind of ‘public voice’—not the one frequently publicised via the news media, but a more local and subjective voice.<sup>29</sup> The work forefronts ‘the people’ in whose name the war was supposedly fought, but it does so over and above nationalistic ideological agendas. Similar ideas re-emerge in Deller’s recent ‘war’ work, *We’re Here Because We’re Here* (2016), which commemorated the centenary of the Battle of the Somme on July 1, 2016. A collaboration between Deller and Rufus Norris, Director of the National Theatre, *We’re Here Because We’re Here* organised for around 1,400 volunteers dressed in World War One military uniforms to occupy public spaces around the UK including streets, beaches and shopping centres. Each volunteer represented a fallen British soldier in a haunting historical ‘re-enactment’; each was equipped with a card that could be handed out to members of the public. The cards named a soldier, the age they were on the day they died (July 1, 1916) and the name of their battalion.<sup>30</sup> *We’re Here Because We’re Here* also references Deller’s earlier *It Is What It Is* through a syntactical relationship between the works’ titles, with the later work poignantly reincarnating the fallen soldiers as living, breathing people.

Again, it is crucial to distinguish between ‘the people’ and ‘the public’. As discussed in Chapter Two, ‘the people’ in its ideological sense is very often directly associated with the construction

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<sup>25</sup> Arden, ““Annoying, Funny and A Bit of A Mess””.

<sup>26</sup> Deller, Thompson, Harvey and Pasha, “Talk at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, Feb 2013”.

<sup>27</sup> Deller, *It Is What It Is*, 166.

<sup>28</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans., Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> Arden, ““Annoying, Funny and A Bit of A Mess””.

<sup>30</sup> Documentation of the event can be found at 14-18-Now, “We’re Here Because We’re Here,” 14-18-Now: WW1 Centenary Art Commissions, accessed 7 August 2016, <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/>.

of nationhood.<sup>31</sup> This is especially true of the United States (whose constitutional preamble begins ‘We the people of the United States...’) and particularly apparent in discourse around war.<sup>32</sup> The point here, also made previously, is that ‘the people’ is another discursive construction, frequently used in governmental framings of national identity. This ideological framing of ‘the people’ is arguably what Deller criticises when he makes the observation that:

[a]s soon as artists start talking about making work that is ‘reflecting society’ or is for ‘the people’ or about ‘the people’, that to me is like art made by dictators or under oppressive regimes.... There are artists in Britain who talk about ‘the people’ or about ‘this is a portrait of the nation’.... That to me sounds Nazi or Communist ... totalitarian basically.<sup>33</sup>

In contrast, *It Is What It Is* is avowedly anti-nationalistic. The work forefronts ‘the public’ in its most open-ended sense: as heterogeneous individuals living within particular locales, and who not only have diverse relationships with nationhood, but also strong identificatory connections with other nations such as Iraq. *It Is What It Is* facilitates contemporary story-telling about Iraq and America that link both nations’ pasts and presents through the individuals who tell these stories; thus the so-called ‘Iraq war’ is retold as a vernacular narrative of subjective, lived experience.

Here, then, it is worth dwelling on Deller’s engagement with the vernacular, which is an engagement with the public in a virtually synonymous way. This may seem like a large and even paradoxical claim. In one sense, the vernacular and the public are at odds: the former suggesting something local and specific to a particular group of people *in place* and the latter suggesting something common or shared on a wider and even unlimited geographical basis. According to a standard dictionary definition, the vernacular as it relates to architecture is ‘concerned with domestic and functional rather than public or monumental buildings’.<sup>34</sup> By extension, if the public connotes ‘officialdom’, in the sense of public buildings, for example, the vernacular suggests the unofficial (‘non-public’). However, in this chapter I want to explore the ways in which Deller’s work links the concepts of vernacular and public. As I have established, my use of the term public in this thesis, at it relates to cultural forms, is an inherently open and unstable formation that contests ‘official’ culture and the institutionalisation and formalisation

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<sup>31</sup> Tony Bennett. “Marxist Cultural Politics: In Search of ‘the Popular’,” *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no. 2 (December 1983): 2-28, Culture & Communication Reading Room, Murdoch University, accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/readingroom/serial/AJCS/1.2/Bennett.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Legal Information Institute, “Preamble,” Cornell University Law School, accessed February 24, 2015, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/preamble>.

<sup>33</sup> Deller, Track 5, “Political Art,” in *Social Surrealism*, ed. Robert Eikmeyer and Alistair Hudson (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst 2011).

<sup>34</sup> See definition of “Vernacular,” Oxford Dictionaries, (online site), accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/vernacular>.

of cultural practices. In a way that recalls Harrell Fletcher's work discussed in the previous chapter, 'the public' called up by works such as Deller's *It Is What It Is* revolves around the idea of everyday, lived experience by 'ordinary individuals' outside of institutional or formal contexts, while Deller's works are also frequently based in and explore specific local settings. I suggest, then, that Deller's works engage with the idea of a 'public vernacular'. In Deller's case, this is frequently a British public vernacular, rather than an American one. Thus I now turn to the British context.

### Popular art and sacrilege

Deller's later work, his inflatable Stone Henge titled *Sacrilege* (2012), continues the artist's vernacular approach to 'the official' (Fig 30). The work's title playfully acknowledges the widespread public affection for Stone Henge and the artist's suspected future outrage at his 'lowering' of the British, or English, national icon to appeal to the 'masses'. The work was commissioned, in part, for London's 2012 Olympic Games and it can be suggested that *Sacrilege* wryly builds on the manner in which Britain (and indeed any nation hosting one of the world's biggest sporting events) presents its nationhood to a global audience. Deller says that he titled the work *Sacrilege* before someone else had the chance; meanwhile, his treatment of the landmark can be seen as particularly disrespectful given that the public can physically bounce all over it.<sup>35</sup> That said, documentation of public interactions with the work indicates that it was immensely popular with a huge number of people, children and adults alike.<sup>36</sup> The work demonstrates an irreverent disdain for, but also a playfully affectionate connection to, both English national history and the tourism that keeps it alive as an enormously popular destination for masses of visitors. *Sacrilege* is an undeniably populist piece that might literally be called Pop art.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Deller frequently refers to his meeting Andy Warhol—art's 'king of Pop'—as a young artist and to the time he spent with Warhol at the Factory as a turning point in his own career.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> "Jeremy Deller, *Sacrilege*, Part 1 - The Making Of," (online video), Jeremy Deller, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.jeremydeller.org/Sacrilege/Sacrilege.php>.

<sup>36</sup> "Jeremy Deller, *Sacrilege*, Part 2 – Glasgow Launch" (online video), Jeremy Deller, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.jeremydeller.org/Sacrilege/Sacrilege.php>.

<sup>37</sup> See the discussion on populism and popularity in Emma Gifford-Mead, ed., *English Magic: Jeremy Deller* (London: British Council, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Jeremy Deller, Track 12, "Andy Warhol," in *Social Surrealism*, ed. Robert Eikmeyer and Alistair Hudson (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst 2011). In 2014 Deller also curated an exhibition at Modern Art Oxford, titled 'Love is Enough' featuring the works of Andy Warhol and William Morris, both of whom he cites as being extremely influential on his own practice.



(Fig 30) Jeremy Deller, *Sacrilege*, 2012. Image courtesy the artist.

Deller's interest in popular culture, frequently explored in his work through rock and heavy metal music, 'low' artforms and local art, also runs through his work with non-professional art practice.<sup>39</sup> This is perhaps most notable in a project completed prior to *Sacrilege*. *Folk Archive* (2000-2005) is a touring gallery exhibition and a collection of objects and ephemera curated by Deller with Alan Kane (mentioned briefly in Chapter Three). In the curators' words, the items in the exhibition have been 'authored by individuals who would perhaps not primarily consider themselves artists'.<sup>40</sup> The *Archive*'s objects and performative events, each made by British people or performed in Britain, are vast in number and type, but could commonly be described as vernacular forms of creative expression.<sup>41</sup> They include (either in object-form or as

<sup>39</sup> Stuart Hall describes how Deller's work (in a not unromantic way) celebrates the often-overlooked creativity of everyday people:

there is something deeper in the 'vernacular' that profoundly animates his imagination...that people who are sometimes considered to be unimportant, or not worth listening to, matter. They are creative but often have their creativity denied or taken away from them. He believes they should be valued for what they are —their voice heard, their practices celebrated... . Hall, "Jeremy Deller's Political Imaginary," 88.

<sup>40</sup> Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, "Preface," in *Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK*, ed. Bruce Haines (London: Book Works, 2005), 2.

<sup>41</sup> James Brett's the Museum of Everything (which appeared in the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2013 and included work by Carlo Zinelli, a self-taught artist who had been institutionalised for his mental health) is yet another recent

documentation) hand-made shop signs, performance rituals, parades and competitions, memorial tributes to the late Princess Diana and customised cigarettes. Many of the inclusions have ancient historical and local lineages, such as the annual November ‘tar barrel rolling’ festivities of Ottery St Mary in Devon, where locals carry flaming wooden barrels on their shoulders (the origins of which are uncertain). Others are more contemporary. A comprehensive catalogue of the project includes documentation of such oddities as a St John’s Ambulance Pin Cushion (1999) by an individual named Rachel Williams from North Yorkshire, crop circles near Wilton Windmill in Wiltshire, ornately embroidered wrestling costumes from Cumberland and Westmoreland (Fig 1), and a 2004 march by the Fathers 4 Justice group who campaign for equality in family law.

*Folk Archive*’s subtitle, *Contemporary Popular Art from the UK*, is telling for the purposes of this discussion. In their description of the project, Deller and Kane use the terms ‘popular’ and ‘folk’ interchangeably and, in doing so, situate the historical associations of ‘folk art’ within a contemporary framework of everyday, common experience. We can also relate the term folk to the German word *volk* meaning ‘people’, in another connection with Fletcher’s practice discussed in Chapter Three.<sup>42</sup> *Folk Archive* catalogue essayist Jeremy Millar writes that, ‘what has come to be known as folk art shares much with what has come to be known as everyday life, and they [folk] are often similarly defined as that which escapes or lies outside specialised activities’.<sup>43</sup> Even so, we can also consider the *Archive* works to be made or performed by specialists of a certain kind, in the sense that some of the items or events derive from only one location or from centuries-old traditions, or are otherwise so rare and unique as to literally be specialist examples. *Folk Archive* references the long history of vernacular creative and artisanal production in Britain and its lasting influence on contemporary creative life. Of particular interest to Deller himself is the British Arts and Crafts Movement, which he has since referenced in other projects, including his English Magic exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2013. In one of Deller’s British Pavilion spaces at the Biennale, a wall painting depicted a giant, Neptunian figure of William Morris, socialist and father of the Arts and Crafts Movement, throwing Roman Abramovic’s superyacht into the Venetian waters. Abramovic, the Russian billionaire and owner of London’s Chelsea Football Club ostentatiously parked his yacht

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example where works by amateur artists are exhibited within the framework of a professional exhibition. The key difference between these recent exhibitions and the modern fascination with works by ‘primitives’ and the mentally ill is, arguably, an attempt at contemporary legitimisation of these works ‘as art’.

<sup>42</sup> Thanks to my associate supervisor Rex Butler for pointing this out to me. It is also worth noting the historically nationalistic connotations of *volk* as ‘the people’, for example during the Nazi regime. Alan Bullock and Baron Bullock, “Adolf Hitler, Rise to Power,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed June 3, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Adolf-Hitler/Rise-to-power#ref249686>.

<sup>43</sup> Jeremy Millar, “Poets of Their Own Affairs: A Brief Introduction to Folk Archive,” in *Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK*, ed. Bruce Haines (London: Book Works, 2005), 151.



alongside Venice's Biennale Gardens in 2011, when he and girlfriend, the Russian artist and heiress Dasha Zhukova, visited the Biennale—itsself a hive for the world's wealthy art collectors and patrons.<sup>44</sup>

The 'popular art' referred to in *Folk Archive*'s subtitle can be described as art made and appreciated by so-called 'ordinary people' or amateurs—and a great number of them at that. According to Deller and Kane's use of the term, popular art is 'art for the masses' but in an atypical, non-derogatory way. That is to say, it does not have the derisory, 'low culture' status commonly attributed to popular art by critics associated with the modernist and 'high art' canon, most notably Clement Greenberg. The distinction here is perhaps quantitative as well as qualitative. The objects or ephemera of *Folk Archive* are generally one-offs, rather than mass-produced. However, they are meaningful to many people and frequently utilitarian, perhaps widening even further the basis of their popular appeal. Many of them are undoubtedly 'folksy', but not in Greenberg's pejorative sense of kitsch, of the encroachment of 'bad' consumer culture into the domain of high art.<sup>45</sup> Rather, the objects and practices are based in everyday life or in tradition; in Deller and Kane's framing of the exhibition these are linked in a far more direct or intrinsic way to the lives of individuals and the places where they live. Therefore they are paradigmatically different from Greenberg's definition of kitsch, which he derided as disingenuously affecting the emotions, and insidiously commerce-driven.<sup>46</sup>

As opposed to 'mainstream' art, by which I mean the art produced by professionals, Deller and Kane appear to share the view that popular, or folk, art is both potentially subversive and empowering. They pointedly avoid the term 'outsider art', however, and we may see this is an attempt to show that this art has the broadest possible reach, that it is by and for 'everybody'.<sup>47</sup> Deller has argued in the vein of philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin that folk art inverts order and power and reflects a sense of chaos.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, he asserts that *Folk Archive* is an aesthetic challenge to artists and to the art world, which is but a tiny part of the much wider sphere of art production occurring in contemporary Britain.<sup>49</sup> We can see this kind of cultural subversion in one specific example from the *Archive*, a Blackpool pizza shop sign that reads 'Pizza Rut' (Fig 31). The sign sports atop it a sculpted, oversized and moulding pizza. The shop's punning name

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, reports by Nick Burnham, "Superyacht makes waves in Venice," *Motorboat and Yachting*, June 6, 2011, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.mby.com/news/superyacht-makes-waves-in-venice-23665>.

<sup>45</sup> Greenberg actually distinguishes folk art from kitsch, with the former having its roots in the countryside. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 10. The essay was first published in 1939.

<sup>46</sup> Greenberg, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Deller and Kane.

<sup>48</sup> Deller, "Public Art Now Live Event". Also see Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1997).

<sup>49</sup> Deller, "Public Art Now Live Event".



humorously pits this small, local restaurant located in a popular tourist town against the lucrative, international Pizza Hut corporation. And in a playful display of feigned self-confidence, Pizza Rut mocks the chain of unhealthy, fast food restaurants as much as it does its own culinary offerings.

The example of Pizza Rut is also indicative of *Folk Archive*'s presentation of contemporary British culture, also seen in the ongoing practice of Tar Barrel Rolling in Devon, which has been practiced by local West Country people since around the early seventeenth century.<sup>50</sup> That is, although the *Archive* references the long history of vernacular cultural and artisanal production in Britain, it also shows its influence on present-day cultural life. Additionally, objects such as a George Bush and Tony Blair tank sculpture (part of an anti-Iraq war protest from 2002), and a Tony Blair scarecrow also reference contemporary political goings-on that are beyond the entirely local and purely historical. My point is that Deller and Kane's focus on items from contemporary popular culture, alongside their interest in the creative traditions found in various British locales, means that *Folk Archive* is not just an exhibition of rare, historical oddities. It is one that, arguably, connects to the everyday experience of a number of British people with works also created by a large number of 'ordinary' people. The *Archive*'s objects and ephemera—popularly experienced, 'unofficial' and frequently subversive—are the art forms of the public.

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<sup>50</sup> Ottery Tar Barrels, "History," Ottery Tar Barrels, accessed January 18, 2016, <http://www.otterytarbarrels.co.uk/>.



(Fig 31) Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane, *Folk Archive* [detail], 2000-2005, 'Pizza Rut, Blackpool, Lancashire'.  
Image courtesy the artist.

### **‘Refreshingly direct’: *Folk Archive* and the ‘ordinary bloke’**

My assertion about the ‘art forms of the public’ can be elaborated with reference to *Folk Archive*’s curatorial methodology. In their brief introduction in the *Folk Archive* catalogue, Deller and Kane write of their curatorial rationale for the exhibition:

we have simply transposed the works from one form of public display to the more traditional presentation of art in a gallery ... . We looked for works which have attributes including: humour, modernity, insight, a unique voice or perspective, motifs we recognise and ones we don’t, attempts to tackle ambitious subjects, refreshing directness or effectiveness, endeavours beyond normal expectation, pathos or just something extra.<sup>51</sup>

However, not all critics agreed with Deller and Kane’s approach to their material. Writing in *Art Monthly*, critic Dan Smith argues that the *Archive* lacks a critical framework with which to contextualise the works’ entry into the space of the gallery:

<sup>51</sup> Deller and Kane, 2.

this act of transposition is presented without any sense of how this might be problematic or even complex as a process. It seems wilfully to ignore any sense of representation as a contested discourse, and is obtuse in its negation of anthropological and ethnographic forms of investigation and debate, reflexive or not.<sup>52</sup>

Essentially, Smith is arguing that *Folk Archive* lacks any internal critical framework with which to judge its material and curatorial methodology. This is to argue that Deller and Kane's self-described 'simple transposition' of the works (presumably to maintain their original 'directness') misses, wilfully or not, the fact that this recontextualisation is bound up with a history of ethically questionable practices in the name of science and art.<sup>53</sup>

Smith's is a common type of critical response to exhibitions that frame representations of an unwitting (and occasionally unwilling) 'other'. It recalls the criticisms made of Fletcher and Hoffmann's People's Biennial in Chapter Three, where the practice of working with 'inexperienced' participants is seen as inadvertently, and sometimes even knowingly, exploitative. To make the matter even more pointed, Jeremy Millar notes that, 'at its worst', the practice of folk art history is also:

dependent upon a form of neo-primitivism, in which the object of enquiry (or 'other', in contemporary terms) is remade as somehow 'authentic' or 'real', and yet in its very naivety dependent upon the more sophisticated practice in order to draw out its immanent self-identity.<sup>54</sup>

This is to assume, in the vein of early modernism's obsession with the work of 'primitive' peoples that the work is 'waiting to be discovered'. With a special significance invisible even to its own creators, it requires the learned, experienced eye of the historian/ethnographer to unlock its secrets.

Could Deller and Kane's representation of vernacular art in their *Archive* be a contemporary version of modernism's fascination with the primitive? Indeed, this would at times seem to underscore the curators' search for work that is 'refreshingly direct' and their inclusion of many objects and practices that are not only beguilingly straightforward but whose history predates industrialism.<sup>55</sup> To be sure, *Folk Archive* is anthropological, in one sense of the term. Deller and Kane treat their own culture anthropologically, seeking to unearth in culture some kind of core of Britishness or Englishness—however broad and indeterminate. This is in contrast to the

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<sup>52</sup> Dan Smith, "Folk art? Dan Smith queries the status of Deller and Kane's Folk Archive," *Art Monthly* 299 (2006): 2.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Millar, 151-152. Hal Foster's essay "The Artist as Ethnographer" is also a key text on this subject. See Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass and London, England: MIT Press, 1996), 171-203.

<sup>55</sup> Deller and Kane, 2.

history of anthropology's interrogation of other cultures (not one's own), which in the worst cases has resulted in overly determined and simplified views of culture. Deller and Kane's 'ethnographic' approach is, however, far too non-specific, diverse and broad ranging to warrant Smith's criticism. While the exhibition appears to seek out the roots of culture or nationality in the 'ordinary', the meaning of ordinary is aligned less with the 'authentic' or 'real' and more with the 'everyday'; these are objects or events that are part of the lifeworld of any number of British people. The idea of an authentic Britishness is complicated and made uncertain.

Deller and Kane's *Archive* presents an array of items chosen in a seemingly haphazard way: old and new, humorous, memorialising, locally and global focussed; here, any notion of what Britain is or who British 'folk' are, is likewise indeterminate. We can also recall a sense of uncertainty around the idea of a distinct national identity in Komar and Melamid's paintings, discussed in Chapter Two, given the paintings' sameness across the series. In their *Folk Archive*, Deller and Kane favour forms of culture made by the 'ordinary' individual: the non-professional artist, the worker, the hobbyist—those individuals who, for one reason or another, make art independently of elite forms of dissemination and connoisseurship. As the exhibition's title suggests, this is popular art as distinct from institutionalised art. These are works made by and for an unidentifiably large public, rather than the usually smaller numbers associated with galleries and museums.

Nevertheless, if we can adopt the notion of 'primitivism' in a fairly unconventional way, then the exhibition could be described as neo-primitivist in its approach, inasmuch as it focuses on a nation's folk culture, much of which is somehow 'out of time' or 'old-fashioned'. Curator Ruth Kenny, writing in the catalogue for Tate Britain's own recent, historical exhibition of 'British Folk Art' (2014), argues that 'folk art is often thought to represent a robust normality' of the 'ordinary bloke' (a gendered term that resonates with the idea of historical, male-dominated social space and masculinist discourse). She also writes that 'the idea that such "ordinary" people—the "folk"—exist is a romantic and alluring one'.<sup>56</sup> In terms of historical exhibitions of folk art (like the Tate's), this may be so. However, my argument is that Deller and Kane's representation of the contemporary 'folk' alludes to the idea of ordinary people *in general*. Additionally, Jeremy Millar makes the important point that the works in the *Archive* 'were made quite specifically for forms of public display...and are not simply objects or activities that have been taken from a hidden corner of everyday life and that now stand, rather awkwardly,

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<sup>56</sup> Ruth Kenny, "'Wallflowers at the Dance of Civilization': The Limits of Folk Art," in *British Folk Art*, ed. Jeff McMillan, Ruth Kenny and Martin Myrone (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 132.

for our attention'.<sup>57</sup> Suffice it to say that the focus of *Folk Archive* is so broad ranging and encompassing of types of cultural practice that it would be difficult to say that it primitivises any one form of practice or any particular community or individual.<sup>58</sup> It seeks, rather, to present British vernacular art in all its diversity and the idea that ordinary people (or more accurately, the public) produce forms of creative expression that are every bit as noteworthy as the work typically shown by institutions of art.

### ***Procession: a working history***

Deller's later work, a public street parade titled *Procession*, is yet another example of his approach to the public—and national—vernacular. Held during the British summer of 2009, *Procession* literally took to the streets. It involved hundreds of participants, drawn from several boroughs of the northern English city of Manchester, who marched through the main city street of Deansgate in front of crowds of some 25,000 people.<sup>59</sup> Where *Folk Archive* celebrates the British public's creative output, in this section I want to demonstrate the ways in which *Procession* appears more pointedly to attempt to revive an idea of an ailing British public. The parade itself was large and diverse. In contrast to typical parades of the military, commemorative or sporting sort, *Procession* included a range of unorthodox floats that referenced local, vernacular activities. These included homeless Big Issue magazine sellers, a float representing Manchester's industrial history, a replica of a local 'greasy spoon' café complete with people drinking tea (Fig 32), a Sikh bagpipe band, a local scout troop playing The Fall's 1988 song *Hit the North*, Emos and Goths, a group of Unrepentant Smokers (Fig 34) and a float designed by a local schoolgirl that pictured Manchester in the year 2050.<sup>60</sup> Assembled in the parade, the floats made a surreal procession of Manchester's local past, present and future—a mixture of sombre realism and humorous fantasy.

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<sup>57</sup> Millar, 152.

<sup>58</sup> In an *Art Monthly* review, critic Patricia Bickers also criticises Deller for his ethnographic approach to the work exhibited in his *English Magic* exhibition at the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2013:

It could...be argued that from the first Deller has taken something of 'an anthropological approach' to subjects in his work, most overtly perhaps in 'Folk Archive'...but also in 'English Magic' for the British Pavilion. It has always been an aspect of the work—of all work that uses so-called real or ordinary people, whoever they may be—that makes one uneasy, the more so when the subjects are genuine outsiders marginalised not through choice but through circumstances beyond their control. Patricia Bickers. "Venice inside Out," *Art Monthly*, no. 368 (2013): 13-16.

I disagree with Bickers' argument because I do not agree that Deller and Kane's 'subjects' are actually 'outsiders'.

<sup>59</sup> Manchester International Festival, "Procession: Jeremy Deller," Manchester International Festival, accessed March 1, 2015, [www.MIF.co.uk/event/procession](http://www.MIF.co.uk/event/procession).

<sup>60</sup> Manchester Evening News, "South Bank art lovers enjoy 'social surrealism' of the greasy spoon café from Bury market," *Manchester Evening News*, March 13, 2012, accessed 2 March 2015, <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/south-bank-art-lovers-enjoy-684232>.



(Fig 32) Jeremy Deller, *Procession* [detail], 2009, 'Valerie's Snack Bar installed on the back of a lorry'. Image courtesy the artist.

Manchester was a centre of the British Industrial Revolution for coal mining, railroads and textile mills.<sup>61</sup> The mines of the north, including Manchester's, were devastated during the Conservative government rule of the early 1980s, when the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher sought to close what were in the government's view uneconomic pits and tens of thousands of miners went on strike in protest. Eight years after the 1984 strike, not a single pit remained in the Lancashire area and the trade union movement was significantly weakened.<sup>62</sup> The 1980s also saw the closure of the Salford docks, with over 3000 jobs lost.<sup>63</sup> *Procession* makes several clear references to this industrial past. One of the floats celebrated 'The Adoration of the Chip, Oldham', referencing the northern borough that allegedly housed the first ever chip shop and was frequented by urban factory workers; in Deller's words, this was 'a

<sup>61</sup> Arden, "Annoying, Funny and A Bit of A Mess".

<sup>62</sup> Manchester Evening News, "Miners' strike – 25 years on," *Manchester Evening News*, March 5, 2009, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/miners-strike---25-years-912447>.

<sup>63</sup> See Alec Herron, "This charming Manchester: is Morrissey's city still recognisable?" *The Guardian*, February 4, 2015, accessed October 16, 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/feb/04/manchester-morrissey-the-smiths>; and Salford City Council, "Salford Quays Milestones: The Story of Salford Quays," Salford City Council, accessed October 16, 2015, [http://www.salford.gov.uk/d/milestones\\_v2.pdf](http://www.salford.gov.uk/d/milestones_v2.pdf).

new type of citizen created by the industrial revolution'.<sup>64</sup> Other floats included 'The Last of the Industrial Revolution', constructed to look like a mill complete with steaming chimney and carrying former mill workers.<sup>65</sup> Ed Hall, a frequent collaborator with Deller who has made countless campaign banners for British union and political protest movements also made all of the parade banners.<sup>66</sup>

As a cultural form, parades (or the related form of marches) have a long history with respect to Britain's labour class. Historian Emmanuel Cooper describes the numerous types of parades that marked the burgeoning Industrial Revolution in Britain. The imperatives of these were varied but, asserts Cooper, they tended to establish a firm sense of identity for tradespeople and their rights as skilled workers.<sup>67</sup> The amateur, nineteenth-century English artist Robert Greethhead provides a sense of this in his highly detailed illustration (c. 1831) of a litany of tradespeople who parade under such banners (carefully subtitled by the artist) as: 'gardeners' [sic], 'shipwrights', 'smiths', 'coach workers', 'coach smiths', 'cork cutters', 'carpenters' and 'pipe makers' (Fig 33).<sup>68</sup>

Deller's interest in industrialisation and in post-industrialisation is illustrated in yet another, more recent, exhibition from 2014 titled *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*.<sup>69</sup> Curated by Deller with James Hutchinson and Lesley Young, both the exhibition and its accompanying publication represent the diverse effects of the Industrial Revolution on everyday lives, both past and present, through photographs, paintings, objects and music (Judas Priest, Black Sabbath, the Happy Mondays and Slade). The exhibition includes the Parliamentary Papers of 1842, which document the impoverished working conditions of young children in the mines, to celebrations of factory life and burgeoning technology, as illustrated in self-taught artist James Sharples' homage to the industry, *The Forge* (1847). *All That Is Solid* recognises the impact of industrialisation on contemporary Britain, in the sense that it is not just history but coterminous

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<sup>64</sup> Deller, quoted in Lesley Young, ed., *Procession* (Manchester: Cornerhouse and Manchester International Festival, 2010), 65.

<sup>65</sup> Manchester was the hub of the cotton industry in early nineteenth century Britain. See Museum of Science and Industry, "Cottonopolis," MOSI: Museum of Science and Industry, accessed October 16, 2015, <http://www.mosi.org.uk/explore-mosi/explore-revolution-manchester/revolution-manchester-themes/cottonopolis.aspx>.

<sup>66</sup> British Council, "Ed Hall – The Collection Banners," March 19, 2013, British Council – Visual Arts, accessed December 7, 2015, <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/news/all-news/ed-hall-the-collection-banners/page/2>. Also see Emine Saner, "Jeremy Deller's Venice all-stars," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2013, accessed January 30, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/may/30/jeremy-deller-venice-biennale-allstars>, where Hall observes romantically that trade union banners 'have this spiritual nature: the aspirations of the working person'.

<sup>67</sup> Emmanuel Cooper, *People's Art: Working Class Art from 1750 to the Present Day* (Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 1994), 83-84.

<sup>68</sup> Reproduced in Cooper, 83.

<sup>69</sup> Jeremy Deller, James Hutchinson and Lesley Young, *All that is solid melts into air* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013). Several of Deller's works referencing similar issues such as manufacturing and worker's rights were included in Okwui Enwezor's exhibition *All the World's Futures* at the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 2015.

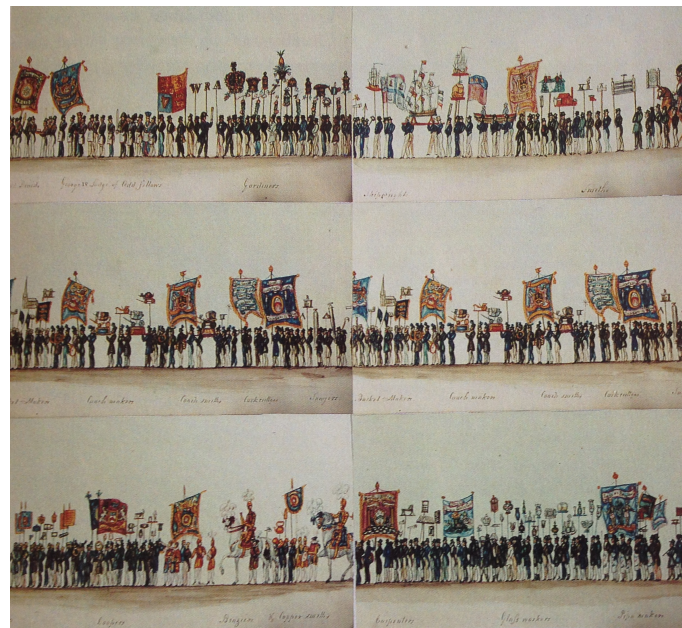


with the lives of present day individuals.

The exhibition's title, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, is drawn from Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* from 1848, where they describe the effects of the bourgeoisie's incessant desire for production and change on the lives and selfhood of proletariat man:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.<sup>70</sup>

The evocative line 'all that is solid melts into air' is also the title of a well known 1982 book by political philosopher Marshall Berman, subtitled *The Experience of Modernity*, which charts the history and experience of modernity from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. In his introduction, Berman describes the cataclysmic changes brought about by modernity, including a burgeoning sense of the public as a cornerstone of modern existence, beginning with the French Revolution.<sup>71</sup>



(Fig 33) Pages from Robert Greethhead's sketchbook showing a detail of the trade procession held in Bristol in 1831

<sup>70</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), Australian National University, accessed February, 24 2014, <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).



I refer to these texts by way of returning to the discussion on Deller's *Procession* because I am suggesting that the work gestures rather romantically toward the public who emerged with Manchester's industrial history. *Procession* represents a view of historical, working-class Manchester that is coterminous with the post-industrial contemporary city, as the city's industrial roots 'live on' in its contemporary citizens.<sup>72</sup> If we recall the Marxist historiographer E. P. Thompson's quote at the beginning of this chapter, we can see *Procession* as continuing a twentieth century project of revisionist historiography. During the mid-twentieth century, Thompson and his contemporaries were involved with writing a 'history from below', a history of the industrial class—a subject I come back to in Chapter Six in my discussion of Natalie Bookchin's work. *Procession* is not the first time Deller has engaged with historiography, or what could be described historical 'reincarnations'. His renowned performance work, *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), re-enacted in painstaking detail the 1984 miner's strike and devastating police battle in this Yorkshire town. A film directed by Mike Figgis documents parts of the re-enactment by ex-miners, policemen and professional re-enactment specialists in a field near the original site, seventeen years after the event occurred.<sup>73</sup> Figgis's film also includes interviews with key figures from the original strike as well as original media footage. The film's politics is concerted anti-Thatcher and pro-union, describing in moving detail the devastating effects that the closure of the mines and the subsequent picketing had on individuals and communities alike.

In a similar process of historical excavation, *Procession* draws a parallel between the figures of the nineteenth century Mancunian worker or labourer and today's Mancunian public (a more recent temporal overlap is vivid in *The Battle of Orgreave*). Deller's framing of the public is sympathetic, and even nostalgic, about post-Enlightenment, and especially Marxist, discursive formations of the proletariat as burgeoning members of a dissonant public.<sup>74</sup> In *Procession*, the vernacular—here represented through local histories, customs and people—is a link to the past, to a 'pre-history' of Britain, especially prior to Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal agenda imposed on the nation in the 1980s.<sup>75</sup> My point is that Deller taps into vernacular cultural forms as a way of picturing, and even reviving, a notion of the public—past and present. While modern industrialisation saw the privatisation of public land and assets, the closure of unprofitable work sites and radical changes to the British landscape (natural and industrial) *Procession* gestures to Manchester's grassroots, 'worker' history, which lives on in this representation of the present-

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<sup>72</sup> Arden, "'Annoying, Funny and A Bit of A Mess'".

<sup>73</sup> *The Battle of Orgreave*, directed by Mike Figgis, DVD (Artangel Media, 2001).

<sup>74</sup> Arden, "'Annoying, Funny and A Bit of A Mess'".

<sup>75</sup> Kobena Mercer, ed., *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures, Annotating Art's Histories: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in the Visual Arts* (London: Iniva and MIT Press, 2007).

day public with enormous vitality. Processions, or parades, are where the public may still ‘reclaim the streets’.

### **‘Annoying, funny and a bit of a mess’**

Accounting for the diversity of groups in *Procession*, from the traditional Carnival Queens to a group of modified car enthusiasts, Deller acknowledges that he aimed for *Procession* ‘to be a little like living in Britain, annoying, funny and a bit of a mess.’<sup>76</sup> He also asserts:

I was...hoping to include elements that would not just show a smoothed out Manchester, as big cities inevitably have complicated histories and contradictory presents, presents in which certain group activities are lazily referred to as anti-social when in fact they are the exact opposite.<sup>77</sup>

One such contingent included a group of ‘Emos, Goths and Moshers’. According to a report in the *Manchester Evening News*, these young people had protested against the proposed plan by developers to turn their sole ‘hang-out’, Manchester’s Cathedral Gardens, into an urban beach with bars. In the words of one of the group, this is the only place where they ‘aren’t attacked and teased about how we look’.<sup>78</sup> We can see *Procession* as an attempt to capture Manchester in terms of its ‘messy’ or ‘annoying’ heterogeneity, to bring into the mix social groups who are generally thought of as anti-social but who are, perhaps more accurately, misunderstood or marginalised. Indeed, Deller asserts that the Emos, Goths and Moshers are eminently ‘social’, even while deviating from accepted standards of societal behaviour.<sup>79</sup> His gesture in *Procession* can be seen to undermine any normative measure of the ‘social’ or of the constitution of ‘society’ as such. (Even so, it must be distinguished from Margaret Thatcher’s (in)famous stance on individual economic responsibility: ‘there is no such thing as society’.)

Unlike many formal parades, which aim to display public cohesion, *Procession* overtly courts a parade of public disunity, or perhaps more accurately, frames this disunity so as to animate it and make it visible. By their very nature, public parades rely on the performance of social unity: a representation of ‘oneness’ rather than diversity. The nationalistic parades held after a major sporting event fall into this category. Parades can capture commonly held emotions: celebratory, mourning, or otherwise, and frequently offer an official view of the public, both of the people

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<sup>76</sup> Young, ed., back cover. Additionally, the Bakhtinian inversion of the social order through the ‘carnavalesque’ is observed by Dawn Ades, “Jeremy Deller’s English Histories,” *Parkett*, 95 (2014): 153.

<sup>77</sup> Young, ed., 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

on parade and the individuals watching. We can consider, for example, the spectacular displays of Britishness during the Queen's Diamond Jubilee parade and Thames flotilla in 2012 and in the 2012 Olympic Games mentioned previously. Parades regularly choreograph individual bodies into performing prescribed movements, and the extremist political ramifications and occurrences of this are not lost here. Parades and processions have also variously featured in contemporary art: we can consider, for example, Francis Alÿs's *The Modern Procession* of 2002, in which:

three famous artworks from the collection, along with the artist Kiki Smith, were carried on hand-held wooden palanquins, like religious effigies in Catholic rituals, as a brass band played a solemn tune and rose petals were strewn along the New York sidewalks.<sup>80</sup>

This faux-serious procession, in which the marchers walked in semi-unison, dressed in matching uniforms, also advertised MoMA's temporary relocation from midtown Manhattan to an address in Queens. Far more than Alÿs's work, Deller's *Procession* highlights the very construction of the public in public events such as parades. It underscores the way in which social groupings are tested and performed, often forcing the issue by bringing together individuals who may not identify as, or with, a group.

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<sup>80</sup> Anna Dezeuze, "Parades and Processions," *Art Monthly* no. 328 (Jul-Aug 2009): 27. Also see documentation of *The Modern Procession*, directed by Francis Alÿs and Rafael Ortega (online video), MOMA, 2004, accessed January 20, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/130940305>.



(Fig 34) Jeremy Deller, *Procession* [detail], 2009, 'The Unrepentant Smokers', featuring banner designed by David Hockney and made by Ed Hall. Image courtesy the artist.

In Deller's more 'open' or disunified conception of the public we can see an explicitly agonistic political project.<sup>81</sup> To recall Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonism, this represents a way of understanding public space as articulated by perpetually disunified relations between individuals. Mouffe, however, reckons with this as a generative idea, rather than one that serves to eradicate disagreement through antagonistic conflict. Agonism is the maintenance of disagreement and the understanding that conflict can never be fully reconciled, while also eliminating the violence and fanaticism that can accompany antagonistic relations. It is not, however, synonymous with conciliation and consensus, which in Mouffe's view would remove the antagonistic element.<sup>82</sup> In short, agonism presupposes the perpetually irreconcilable nature

<sup>81</sup> Hal Foster also notes that:

[Deller's] sense of the *polis* hinges on the actual antagonism of different groups as much as on their political solidarity: for Deller, as for latter-day Gramscians such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, democracy is also *dissensus*. This dissension has its light side too, as captured in such projects as *A Social Parade* (2004) and *Procession* (2009). Hal Foster, "History Is a Hen Harrier," in *English Magic*, ed. Emma Gifford-Mead (London: British Council, 2013), 14.

<sup>82</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Some Reflections on an Agonistic Approach to the Public," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: ZKM, Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe and MIT Press, 2005), 805.

of relations within public space, which Mouffe also notes is not a singular entity, but a ‘multiplicity of discursive surfaces’.<sup>83</sup> She argues that the work of artists can challenge the vision of public space as one where consensus emerges, even singling out Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave* as a salient example of this.<sup>84</sup> Deller’s *Procession* can be seen to undermine the ‘smoothed out’ and unified image of the Mancunian public body, drawing, in Deller’s words, on a vision of England as a ‘bit of a mess’. In very recent British history, the public debate captured in international and social media over the Brexit, the 2016 British exit of the European Union, also underscored this messy and divisive terrain of agonistic conflict. This at times turned to extreme antagonism when the Remain supporter, the British Labour MP Jo Cox, was murdered by a fanatical nationalist. I would argue, however, that for Deller, this ‘mess’ is meant in a more generative, rather than pejorative, sense. That is, *Procession* appears to foster difference and disorderliness over unity and consensus as inherent to the notion of the public; here, Deller’s messy public is constitutively ‘open’, even as it purports to ‘represent’ the people specific to a locale. *Procession* celebrates a lively public space populated by a heterogeneous and still vital public; this, I would argue, is a form of ‘revival’ as against the widespread decimation of many facets of the public during Deller’s own lifetime. These observations also speak, more specifically, to the type of *art public* conceived of in Deller’s works. For example, the *cross-class* public conjured by *Procession*—mill workers, chip eaters and Emos alike—is one that stands in contrast to the enduringly bourgeois public frequently associated with contemporary art.<sup>85</sup>

### **The end of community?**

If, as I have argued, Deller’s work seeks to revive a notion of the public through his approach to the vernacular, then what about the notion of the community? It is worth dwelling on the concept of community given Deller’s specific interest in place, in localism, and in the vernacular, which can also suggest a locally spoken language or dialect. Deller, however, sees his work less as ‘community art’ and more as a form of ‘public art’, as the following conversation with Chris Dercon, former Director of the Tate Modern, demonstrates:

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<sup>83</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Art and Democracy,” in *Open: Art as a Public Issue*, no. 14 (2008): 10. Mouffe actually singles out Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave* as a salient example of where an artist has challenged the notion of public space as one where consensus emerges, (13).

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>85</sup> My thanks to the anonymous reviewer for making this point about the ‘cross-class public’ during the review process for my paper on Deller, presented at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand conference ‘Image Space Body’ in Brisbane in November 2015.

Chris Dercon: Should one describe your work as ‘community art’?

Jeremy Deller: I just wouldn’t want call it that, because the word ‘community’ in Britain has so many negative connotations now. The word ‘community’ is usually employed when the community is under attack or dying.

CD: What would be a better term then?

JD: Public art. Art with the public. Art in the public realm. Who knows?<sup>86</sup>

Deller gives the impression here, however questionable, that the notion of the public is somehow more ‘innocent’ than ‘community’ or has been less corrupted by political interference. He appears to allude to the way that the arts in Britain and Northern Europe have been used within reconstructive government policy to aid ‘communities in need’. Similarly, Claire Bishop argues that British community art has transformed from a counter-cultural movement to a remedial activity via its almost complete decimation during the Thatcher government’s arts funding cuts.<sup>87</sup> Since this time, and even now, community art projects funded by government tend to be instigated by welfare and ‘community access’ initiatives, as a look at the British Arts Council’s website will show.<sup>88</sup> Bishop charts the rebranding of the original egalitarian initiatives of the community arts movement toward a focus on artists ‘introducing the community’ to elite culture ‘by letting them find out (through first-hand participation in a creative project) what they had been missing by not attending operas and museums’.<sup>89</sup> This situation was mirrored by New Labour’s funding of various participatory and socially engaged art projects in the period from 1997-2010.<sup>90</sup>

The wider picture of ‘community’, Bishop argues, is that it has been eroded because of the neo-liberal ideology underpinning the policies of a succession of British governments. According to this view, the ideal of community as ‘commons’ has faded under the individualist, free trade mandate of neo-liberal capitalism. On this point, Stuart Hall writes:

Margaret Thatcher, well instructed by Keith Joseph, grasped intuitively Hayek’s argument that the ‘common good’ either did not exist or could not be calculated: “There is no such thing as society. There is only the individual and his (sic) family”.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Jeremy Deller, Chris Dercon [and Anonymous], “There’s nothing too wrong with repressed emotions: A conversation between the artist, an art lover and the museum director,” in Emma Gifford-Mead, ed., 92.

<sup>87</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 163-191.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, the Arts Council’s “Family and Community Focused Toolkit,” 2012, Arts Council England, accessed January, 20, 2016, <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/>.

<sup>89</sup> Bishop, “Artificial Hells”, 188.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>91</sup> Stuart Hall, “The Neoliberal Revolution,” *Soundings*, no. 48 (2011): 11.

Bishop also points out that in more recent years, Prime Minister David Cameron's notion of 'Big Society', whereby individuals are asked to take responsibility for social services previously managed by the state, is a thinly veiled attempt to cut back on welfare and force all members of society to be 'self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatised world'.<sup>92</sup>

It perhaps comes as little surprise, then, that the notion of 'community' in relation to art is fraught, at least in the British context, and may be a difficult one for contemporary artists like Deller to readily identify with. This comes with the added ideological burden of the 'ethnographic', mentioned previously. Critics often apply this term to community arts, where, as I have shown previously, they argue in one form or another that the artist (a constitutive 'outsider') benefits from the particular insights or skills of an otherwise guileless, yet fully-formed, self-aware, community. In a different understanding of the term 'community', the violent debates over the recent Brexit also underscore the passionately differing public sentiments surrounding this idea, based around notions of national sovereignty, economic independence and border protection. Much of the media discourse around the Brexit, both the Murdoch-driven anti-European fervour prior to the vote, and the general handwringing after, has framed it as a class issue that has brought British social and economic inequality to a head, with the so-called working and middle classes using the referendum as their opportunity to 'take back control' of their economic situations from the elite spheres of government.<sup>93</sup> The Brexit frames Deller's own project of twinning towns, mentioned at the start of this chapter, in a new way, and one that now seems perversely anachronistic in the context of Britain leaving the EU.

Despite the various arguments about the loss of community in British history, as elsewhere, I would argue that a presence of community can still be felt in *Procession* but this is not clear cut or without tension. The formal structure of *Procession*—diverse groups parading together in front of a crowd—seemingly suggests the presence of a community, of a 'collective elaboration of meaning' (to use Bishop's phrase), for a celebratory cause. However, and paradoxically, *Procession* also appears vague about the reason or the cause for the procession itself, other than a diverse sense of belonging to a place, to Manchester. Indeed, the work's title suggests, perhaps, that this is 'just' a procession, rather than a procession of anything in particular. The participants parade together, but their 'togetherness' in terms of common values and concerns, that is, their sense of togetherness beyond the fact of where they live, may be thin on the

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<sup>92</sup> Bishop, "Artificial Hells", 14.

<sup>93</sup> Australian Broadcasting Corporation, News 24 television broadcast, June 23, 2016, 7.45pm.

ground, especially when Deller throws so-called ‘anti-social’ groups into the mix. In this way, it can be claimed that *Procession* represents a community without any essential ‘commons’, any shared properties.<sup>94</sup>

We can, however, discern a certain sense of community in earlier works by Deller, such as *Folk Archive* (2000-2005) and *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001). In *Orgreave*, Deller engaged former miners and policemen to restage their conflict of the 1980s. *Orgreave* actively complicated the notion of belonging to a community by having some of the miners role-play as policemen, and vice versa. Deller notes that he was not interested in bringing the Orgreave community together, as is the case in much ‘community art’, but in making them ‘feel more angry...and get[ting] people riled up about what happened in their area, especially the audience’.<sup>95</sup> Here, Mike Figgis’s documentary film of *Orgreave* appears distinct from Deller’s own work in the way that it depicts the notion of community. Figgis’s film presents the mining community in the pre-Thatcher era as a solid unionised entity. Says one miner in the film:

When you think of the solidarity we had in the ‘80s and you look at the solidarity what kids have now [sic], they go and sign a contract and that’s it. I mean, they’re joining a union and it’s like a token gesture....<sup>96</sup>

Thatcher called the striking miners ‘the enemy within’, painting them as the enemy lurking within plain sight, within the ‘boundaries’ of the community, so to speak. Figgis’s film represents the miners as a strong community and this community’s breakdown under the Conservative government so that community remains only a spectre of history.

The notions of community and public are closely related in Deller’s works, but they each manifest as contingent concepts. Community may be sensed in works such as *Folk Archive*, *The Battle of Orgreave* and *Procession*. However, in such works, this notion of community is incoherent and frequently contested. *Folk Archive* presents the work of many communities, but as for representing a ‘British community’, the *Archive*’s curatorial reach is far too unlocalised to represent anything *but* a broad-ranging public.<sup>97</sup> *Procession*, on the other hand, suggests that the idea of community may be strongest in memory, especially as a romantic vestige of pre-

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<sup>94</sup> This recalls Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of the ‘inoperative community’, which Jeremy Millar also adopts with respect to Deller and Kane’s earlier work, *Folk Archive* (Millar, 152). Nancy writes: ‘the thinking of community as essence – is in effect the closure of the political. Such a thinking constitutes closure because it assigns to community a *common being*...’. See Jean-Luc Nancy, quoted in Christopher Fynsk, “Foreword,” in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor; trans. Lisa Garbus, Peter Connor, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney, *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 76, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xxxviii. Drawing on Nancy, Millar observes that the *Archive* ‘does not perpetuate—or even allow for—any coherent sense of what might be meant by a community, although many different communities are represented’ (Millar, 152).

<sup>95</sup> Deller, “Public Art Now Live Event”.

<sup>96</sup> Figgis, *Battle of Orgreave*.

<sup>97</sup> Millar, 152.



Thatcher (and even pre-industrial) Britain. Thus, implicit to Deller's works is a level of cautiousness about what 'community' now means, especially given the history of this concept in recent British politics.

### **The vernacular: a public voice**

This chapter has sought to illustrate the ways in which Deller's works from the early 2000s onwards engage with the notion of the community, despite that term's complexities, and to a greater extent, the public, as generative ideas. My key argument is that Deller's take on the vernacular is an investment in the notion of the public as an open, agonistic and often indeterminate entity. This is to propose a definitional association between the vernacular and the public at the level at which both contrast with the bureaucratic, or more particularly, with the institutionalisation of culture, history and experience. Despite, or perhaps because of, Deller's non-essentialist notion of the public, its potential unpredictability, he is clearly invested in its political currency. As I have shown, the political backdrop to much of Deller's work is Britain in the wake of the conservative Thatcher government and neo-liberal economic policy. For Deller, Britain is a still-raw example of the erosion of many facets of the public within the artist's own lifetime through successive moves under conservative and neo-liberal governance.

Deller's treatment of the vernacular resuscitates an idea of public culture, as well as the idea of a public 'voice', most apparent in his conversational work *It Is What It Is*. Here, we can think of the distinction that Jacques Rancière makes between noise and speech: the idea that political activity transforms noise into speech for individuals whose discourse would otherwise remain as a kind of indiscernible white noise.<sup>98</sup> Deller frames the British public as a public of uncharacterisable difference. Herein, vernacular cultural forms (the parade, folk art) provide myriad alternatives to institutionalised and mainstream culture; they foster a vernacular, and a popular, public culture as opposed to the mass culture propagated by global capitalism. Deller's work recognises the contingency of the idea of the public, but nonetheless appears to clearly acknowledge this same idea as generative as it suggests any number of unpredictable and richly creative individuals.

Arguably, there is a sense of nostalgia in Deller's work around the idea of the public: the public as threatened by neo-liberal capitalism. In a certain sense, Deller's works conjure the public

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<sup>98</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 30.

romantically as a working class formation of the industrial age, setting it within a contemporary era of right-wing conservatism, privatisation and extreme wealth inequality. A related but distinct sense of nostalgia or romance is present in Harrell Fletcher's projects discussed in the previous chapter: its valorisation of the work produced by 'ordinary' members of the public amid art world competition and biennial favouritism. Even Komar and Melamid's more satirical works discussed in Chapter Two appear earnestly invested in the idea of the public as against the elitism of art aficionados. But if the notion of the public is in these same projects contingent or non-essential, then what are these artists romantic or nostalgic *about*, exactly? Deller's works romanticise the public's very contingency as against its multiple forms of bureaucratic and institutional co-option. *It Is What It Is*, for example, conceives of the public as a form of unpredictable and unknowable potential—a politically engaged, agonistic and vernacular public that is evoked in conversation. In the next chapter, I further develop this discussion around the public as a romantic idea, or *ideal*, through an exploration of another conversational work by the Australian artist Stuart Ringholt. Building on Deller's work in the public realm, this chapter also turns more explicitly to the notion of public space as a contested entity.

## Chapter Five

### Stuart Ringholt: Public Exposure

In November 2011, a participatory artwork by the Melbourne artist Stuart Ringholt featured as part of the Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture, an outdoor event based in the centre of the city. The work—*Do You Want To Talk About Sculpture?*—involved the artist in a daily physical and mental ritual.<sup>1</sup> Each day for the two-week duration of the exhibition, the artist travelled to Federation Square in Melbourne's city centre. There, he positioned himself at various sites throughout the precinct, physically demarcating the work with a cluster of chairs and a moveable signboard. Every day, Ringholt tried to engage passers-by in a conversation about sculpture, initiating these encounters with a question: 'Do you want to talk about sculpture?' He documented these interactions in audio recordings and photographs, holding over 200 conversations with random members of the public during the two-week period.<sup>2</sup> As a conversation starter, Ringholt brought with him each day different 'sculptural' objects. Over the fortnight these included a silver disco ball (Fig 35), a tree, a vase containing a bunch of his neighbour's flowers and on other days, the sculptural element consisted of the artist's clothes: a purple outfit on one day and army camouflage on another (Fig 40).<sup>3</sup>

In response to the work, one participant who obviously knew the artist previously, a Melbourne printmaker, wrote that he and Ringholt:

caught up for a recorded conversation about the mirror ball, its cultural significance [,] its pop kitsch... its beauty and why is it so interesting. A conversation with Stuart is always dynamic as his perspective is unique.<sup>4</sup>

On the day I participated in the work, Ringholt had brought with him a small box wrapped in paper, preventing one from seeing whether there was anything contained within it. It became clear after several minutes that sculpture was not the only subject of conversation, or even the principal one. Ringholt did not dictate the topics of our exchange.<sup>5</sup> Already acquainted, we spoke about what we had

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<sup>1</sup> Sections of the text in this chapter have previously been published in Holly Arden, "Participatory art and the impossible public," *Art and the Public Sphere* 3, no. 2 (2014): 105-118.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Ringholt, "Lunchtime Forum," public lecture presented at Monash University, Melbourne, March 20, 2013. To date Ringholt has not done anything with the recordings and photographs.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Also see Melbourne Prize Trust, "The Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture" (online video), shot and edited by Tigh Farley, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/34063085>; Courtney Lynch, "Talking (to) sculptures @ Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture," Weblog *That's Melbourne*, entry posted 9 November 2011, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://blog.thatsmelbourne.com.au/2011/11/09/talking-sculptures/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sinclair Press, "Conversation with Stuart Ringholt," accessed March 31, 2014, [http://www.sinclairpress.com.au/?page\\_id=128](http://www.sinclairpress.com.au/?page_id=128).

<sup>5</sup> My account here is based on my recollection of the event and on the audio recordings of the event, to which the artist later allowed me access.

been doing over the past few years, and our plans for the near future. At one point, after we had been talking about nail polish colours, the artist remarked rhetorically:

“We’re not really talking about sculpture...or are we?”  
“I don’t know! I replied, “maybe not. Expanded sculpture? I don’t know.”  
“I don’t either,” Ringholt said.<sup>6</sup>

Despite my reference to one of the most significant theorists of sculpture, Rosalind Krauss, it became more apparent as our discussion moved along, perhaps because nothing (no *event*) happened, that the conversation itself was the subject of the work. Ringholt’s work posited conversation as a form—even as a form of sculpture.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in his artist’s statement for the Melbourne Prize catalogue, Ringholt acknowledged that the work ‘creates impromptu and transient sculpture by positioning my own body as the sculpture with my voice of conversation the fundamental and working principle’.<sup>8</sup> Conversation is critical here. Conversations are sites where power, knowledge, emotions and ideas are tested, asserted and negotiated.<sup>9</sup>

Through an examination of conversation in Ringholt’s work *Do You Want To Talk?* this chapter scrutinises the current viability of the idea—foundational to the modern, liberal democratic notion of the public—that private individuals can participate in free-ranging discourse in the public sphere. It also examines how *Do You Want To Talk?* sought to de-alienate the public from art; the work involved non art specialists in open-ended conversations about the possibly ignorance-inducing subject of sculpture. Furthermore, Ringholt brings yet another facet to my discussion in this thesis, through a way of working that is quite distinct from the other artists I examine. The artist frequently bases his participatory works around intimate, interpersonal encounters involving conversation or speech and the physical and psychological self; in these he draws on such diverse practices as Indian theosophy, self-help and participatory theatre. Many of his works complicate or upend interpersonal relations of power. They also consider the process of acquiring knowledge (of the self, of the world). In particular, I examine how such works engage with the process of gaining knowledge about art. The following pages trace these aspects of Ringholt’s participatory works from his projects in the early 2000s

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<sup>6</sup> Transcription from recording provided by the artist.

<sup>7</sup> We can compare Ringholt’s *Do You Want To Talk?* with another ‘conversation piece’ by the Australian artist Ross Gibson. This was shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales as part of the 2008 Sydney Biennale, along with another work by Ringholt. Gibson’s *Conversations II* was held in a ten-by-ten foot, three-walled ‘booth’ in the art gallery’s lobby. Each day, five participants—visitors to the gallery—were invited to book in to converse with the artist. Gibson’s blog of the event indicates that the conversations themselves were free-ranging (from art to drinking water to what makes a Bostonian). Gibson’s public was, arguably, smaller and more delimited than the public addressed by Ringholt’s *Do You Want To Talk?* by the very nature of the former’s placement in the art gallery space.

<sup>8</sup> Stuart Ringholt, “Work Description,” in *Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture* (Melbourne: Melbourne Prize Trust, 2011) n.p., accessed August 1, 2012, <http://www.melbourneprizetrust.org/mp2011/downloads/Melbourne%20Prize%20for%20Urban%20Sculpture%202011%20CATALOGUE.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Arden, “Participatory art and the impossible public”, 112.

through to a more recent exhibition from 2014 in an effort to examine them in terms of his broader investment in the notions of the public more generally, and the public for art more specifically.



(Fig 35) Stuart Ringholt, *Do You Want To Talk About Sculpture?* 2011, participatory work with various objects installation view, Federation Square, Melbourne. Photos: courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.



(Fig 36) Stuart Ringholt, *Do You Want To Talk About Sculpture?* 2011, participatory work with various objects installation views, Federation Square, Melbourne. Photos: courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

## Therapy, theatre, public workshops

Ringholt's work spans a wide range of media, from collage and sculpture, to video, artist's books and performance. Over the past fifteen years, his irreverent and challenging performance and participatory works have seen the artist enact a range of situations and encounters that involve anonymous members of the public. A focus of these is their staging in public or semi-public spaces, where individuals become starkly, often uncomfortably, aware of their otherwise 'private' or internal feelings. Between 2001-2003, the artist himself conducted a series of performance works where he deliberately embarrassed himself in public places as a means of physically confronting fear and embarrassment, the same emotions that had crippled him when trying to ask women out on dates as a shy younger man.<sup>10</sup> These situations included putting an apple down the back of his swimming trunks at a swimming pool, standing in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio with toilet paper hanging from the back of his trousers and going out and about wearing a piece of snot on his beard.<sup>11</sup> According to Ringholt, this rather perverse practice had cathartic outcomes, forcing him to face head-on his fearful emotions in public settings so that he might overcome them psychologically and physically. Indeed, each performance focused on the artist's own body and psychological self as its key 'locations'.<sup>12</sup> These early performance works were directly informed by the artist's personal history and emotional life. As he carefully details in his self-published book *Hashish Psychosis: What it's like to be mentally ill and recover* (2006), Ringholt's personal experiences as a young man in Perth, Western Australia, involved hospitalisation for drug-induced psychosis. These experiences led him to experiment with self-help artworks like those described above. Ultimately, Ringholt claims, art helped him to 'improve his life'.<sup>13</sup>

During the mid-to-late 2000s, Ringholt devised a series of public workshops, which aimed to help others confront and potentially overcome negative and suppressed emotions such as embarrassment, fear and anger. His *Funny Fear Workshops* (2004), held at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces (now Gertrude Contemporary) in Melbourne, were designed to 'prepar[e] participants to confront fears and intentionally embarrass themselves in public'.<sup>14</sup> Around eleven participants attended the first workshop session and their exchanges are documented verbatim through text and photographs in Ringholt's editioned artist's book, also titled *Funny Fear Workshop*. In the text, we read Ringholt introduce the workshop by recounting two embarrassing stories of his own which have been seminal

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<sup>10</sup> Ringholt discusses the background to this series of works and the works themselves in his book Stuart Ringholt, *Funny Fear Workshop*, edition 24/45 (Melbourne: The Artist, 2004), 18-20. They are also documented in his book Stuart Ringholt, *Hashish Psychosis: What It's Like to Be Mentally Ill and Recover* (Preston West, VIC: The Artist, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Tutton, "Conceptual Artist Meets Girl: Stuart Ringholt and the art of self-improvement," *Art & Australia* 45, no. 4 (2008): 629.

<sup>12</sup> Ringholt, *Hashish Psychosis*, 107.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>14</sup> This goal was included on a poster at the workshop (a photograph of which is included in *Funny Fear Workshop*, np) and in a card inserted into the book.

to his practice: one where he urinated all over a friend's bathroom because a piece of thread had been stuck to the eye of his penis, sending the urine cascading in all directions, and another where he went to a football match and was alerted by an audience of young fans to the fact that he had toilet paper hanging out of the back of his trousers.<sup>15</sup> Ringholt asks the workshop participants to share with the group their own embarrassing stories. A former schoolteacher, Ernst, recalls that he had been up so late on the night prior to teaching a class of teenagers that he had fallen asleep in class the next day and had fallen on the floor.<sup>16</sup> Ringholt encourages the participants to write down the things they fear, the idea being that embarrassment is an emotion linked to fear. They then leave the workshop and, before the workshop's second day on the Saturday following, try to do something to confront that fear. At the end of the book, however, we discover that only one participant, Paul, returns for the second day of the workshop. Paul's fear is asking out good-looking women. We learn that Paul still has not asked anyone out, but he and Ringholt use the workshop time to devise strategies that Paul could use in future attempts at dating.

Ringholt's later *Anger Workshops*, a series of public, participatory works, were held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales as part of the Sydney Biennale in 2008 and again at the Neue Galerie, Kassel, as part of Documenta 13 in 2012. The *Anger Workshops*:

offered the opportunity [for groups] to lose inhibition and express their anger using voice and movement to the sound of very loud house music. This phase runs for five minutes. In the following phase, participants consider 'love' and express it using statements such as 'I am sorry if I have hurt you' and 'I love and respect you' to the gentle and soft sounds of Mozart. The group then gently embraces each other and hugs [for] another for three minutes [sic]. After the activity, the group sits and discusses their experience.<sup>17</sup>

The *Anger Workshops* and *Funny Fear Workshops* also articulate a further sense of the 'public': its relationship to the private ('private parts') or the personal/internal. Such works externalise private feelings as a way of dealing with them in public, suggesting that this public exposure will assist with the therapeutic process.

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<sup>15</sup> Ringholt, *Funny Fear Workshop*, 4-8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Ringholt, quoted in Tali Wertheimer, "Stuart Ringholt: Anger Workshops," *Performa*, August 7, 2012, accessed December 4, 2015, [performa-arts.org/magazine/entry/stuart-ringholt-anger-workshops1](http://performa-arts.org/magazine/entry/stuart-ringholt-anger-workshops1).





(Fig 37) Stuart Ringholt, *Anger Workshops*, 2008 – ongoing. Public workshop, dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, 2012  
Photograph: Nick McGrath. Copyright Stuart Ringholt. Image courtesy the artist.

Despite their familiar links to Western self-help and therapeutic traditions, where the perhaps surreal feeling of participating in Ringholt's workshops evokes the Freudian subconscious, Ringholt claims that his interest in staging his various workshops lies elsewhere, in Indian theosophy. Somewhat surprisingly, the teachings of controversial Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, often known as Osho, are one of the artist's key influences.<sup>18</sup> Osho became widely known in the 1970s and '80s for his Indian ashram that attracted many Westerners to take part in group therapy sessions, not to mention his outspoken views on religion, free sex and partner swapping, with some labeling him a 'sex guru'.<sup>19</sup> Many condemned Osho's cult status, particularly after he spent the fortunes he had collected from his communes on lavish cars and jewellery.<sup>20</sup> Osho devotees, often known as the sannyasins or the Orange People because of their orange clothes, were involved in lengthy, collective meditations designed to bring awareness or consciousness to multiple coexistent and transient emotions associated with both 'positive' feelings such as laughter and love and 'negative' feelings

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Ringholt, Interview by author, Melbourne, May 26, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> *Compass*, "The orange people: The Sannyasins [sic], or the Orange People as they were so called because of the colour of the clothes they once wore," aired August 18, 2013, on ABC1.; AAP, "Escaping the Bhagwan, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 11, 2009, accessed August 16, 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/escaping-the-bhagwan-20090410-a2vp.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



such as anger and sadness.<sup>21</sup> After Osho's death in the late 1980s, his devotee Vereesh, founder of the Humaniversity Therapy program in the Netherlands, created a shorter meditation known as the 'Aum', a group meditation that raises consciousness of many different feelings, including love and anger.<sup>22</sup> Ringholt notes that the *Anger Workshops* were developed out of his own experience of the Aum, a film of which also plays in the workshops themselves.<sup>23</sup> The impassioned, expressive gestures visible in documentation of the Indian meditations—undoubtedly heightened by the collective or perhaps public experience—can also be observed in documentation of Ringholt's *Anger Workshops*.<sup>24</sup> Ringholt's interest in the Aum, and his early cathartic works with embarrassment, inform his observation that art has helped him to confront fearful emotions and 'improved [his] life' and he hopes that it can also be 'useful' for others in this way.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond Ringholt's declared interest in Indian theosophy, and more generally in 'helping others', his works may be also framed in terms of Western traditions of art as therapy. On a day-to-day level, art and music therapy classes are a regular part of life in prisons and hospitals.<sup>26</sup> Ringholt's works also join a long lineage of art that has sought to effect transformative social change. A key figure in this history is Joseph Beuys, whose legendary traumatic experience as a WWII fighter pilot led to his life's work as an artist; for Beuys, art's healing power was broad ranging, an antidote to the effects of war and modernity.<sup>27</sup> Various forms of therapy have occupied other artists worldwide over the last century, including Felix Gonzalez-Torres, whose work, conceptually and aesthetically, references the HIV virus and its pharmaceutical treatments and Lygia Clark's participatory, 'therapeutic' objects used on the body. Over the last decade, the Serbian-born, New York-based artist Marina Abramović has devised collective, meditative exercises involving large groups of anonymous members of the public, while the Australian artist Hiromi Tango incorporates therapeutic techniques into her community-based practice.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.; Tutton, "Stuart Ringholt: Conceptual Artist Meets Girl", 626; Stuart Ringholt quoted in Tali Wertheimer, "Stuart Ringholt: Anger Workshops".

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Ringholt, quoted in Tali Wertheimer, "Stuart Ringholt: Anger Workshops".

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Osho Humaniversity, "The Humaniversity AUM Meditation" (online video), YouTube, published December 16, 2008, accessed December 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIKlcFHkmgg>.

<sup>25</sup> Ringholt, *Hashish Psychosis*, 109. Indeed, Ringholt has stated that his participatory works stem from a question posed to him by a curator: 'how is your work useful for others?' Stuart Ringholt, public lecture presented at Monash University, Melbourne, April 9, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Young, "Stuart Ringholt, A Naked Truth," *Art AsiaPacific*, no. 78 (May / June 2012): 87.

<sup>27</sup> Stéphanie Molinard, "Joseph Beuys," in *Pulse: Art, Healing and Transformation*, ed. Jessica Morgan, (Boston: Steidl and The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2003), 77.

<sup>28</sup> In very recent times, Alexander Melamid, discussed in Chapter 2, has opened the Art Healing Ministry in Manhattan, which aims to cure participants using art. When this author and partner visited the Ministry in SoHo in 2011, suffering from a bout of constipation caused by a month's worth of travel, Melamid sat my partner and I in a reclining chair in his shop-cum-clinic. He asked us a range of questions, including what we had been doing during our travels. When we replied that we had been seeing a lot of art in the major American museums, he diagnosed us with a blockage caused by trying to digest too much art in big museums. The 'cure' was a trip to a smaller museum, the Frick Collection, which we did that afternoon. This absurdist work by Melamid undercuts the earnestness of quasi-religious, utopian projects like Beuys's with a post-modernist cynicism about faith in art and in religion.

In the South American context, the Brazilian theatre director and ‘worker’s politician’ Augusto Boal developed in 1971 the public, participatory theatre called the Theatre of the Oppressed. This exposed Brazil’s under-classes to the machinations of the powerful so as to instigate political change ‘from below’. A later iteration of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed combined theatrical techniques with catharsis and drew on Freudian theories, among others.<sup>29</sup> Known as the Rainbow of Desire, Boal developed techniques to deal with the ‘less concrete oppressors’ of First World democracies such as societal alienation and communication problems that might nonetheless pose institutional restrictions on the self and on society.<sup>30</sup> North American-based theatre companies have adopted Boal’s techniques, including the Philadelphia Theatre of the Oppressed, who assert that: ‘the Rainbow of Desire goes beyond the goal of helping us “get over” our past experiences; as in all branches of Theatre of the Oppressed, these workshops strive to vanquish ongoing oppressions, transforming individuals, relationships and society as a whole’.<sup>31</sup>

The focus on participation by some contemporary artists has been read by critics including Claire Bishop as a disingenuous or naïve, ‘ameliorative’ response to neo-liberal capitalism.<sup>32</sup> This criticism recalls Adorno, for whom popular culture offers only compensatory pleasure for alienated labour. Bishop’s criticisms derive from what she sees as governmental instrumentality of the ‘participatory’ rhetoric, particularly under New Labour in Britain in the name of full ‘social inclusion’:

the social inclusion agenda is therefore less about repairing the social bond than a mission to enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state and who can cope with a deregulated, privatised world.<sup>33</sup>

In this neo-liberal economy, Bishop argues, participation actually means less reliance on welfare; it is used to suggest that one should strive toward reaching the goals of full employment, disposable income and self-sufficiency.<sup>34</sup> This chapter considers Ringholt’s participatory practice in terms of its unique approach to ‘healing’ and to art’s ‘usefulness’, in the artist’s words—focusing specifically on Ringholt’s particular ‘remediation’ of a notion of the public. However, my analysis contests Bishop’s criticisms of participatory art’s instrumentalisation, as well its repressively ‘ethical turn’ (its turn toward social usefulness, so to speak). Bishop borrows the concept of the ethical turn from Jacques

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Dwyer, “Though This Be Madness...? The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy,” *Applied Theatre Researcher*, no. 8 (2007): 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.; Leigh Anne Howard, “Speaking Theatre/Doing Pedagogy: Re-Visiting Theatre of the Oppressed,” *Communication Education* 53, no. 3 (July 2004): 218; Adrian Jackson, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Augusto Boal, The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), xviii-xxvi.

<sup>31</sup> Philadelphia Theatre of the Oppressed, “Rainbow of Desire Workshop Series,” Philadelphia Theatre of the Oppressed, accessed December 14, 2015, <http://tophiladelphia.blogspot.com.au/2011/10/rainbow-of-desire-workshop-series.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 277.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Rancière. She mobilises it to critique participatory art that ‘enters a realm of useful, ameliorative and ultimately modest gestures’ at the expense of aesthetic concerns, a criticism she also levels at her contemporary Grant Kester’s theoretical engagement with this art.<sup>35</sup> I will return to these arguments later in the chapter after a more thorough discussion of Ringholt’s recent public works.

### **Fear, loathing and no clothing**

From 2011, Ringholt began an ongoing series of works that asks participants to expose not only their emotional or psychological selves, but also their physical bodies. Collectively titled *Preceded by a tour of the show by artist Stuart Ringholt (the artist will be naked. Those who wish to join the tour must also be naked. Adults only)*, the participatory works, as their title suggests, involve the artist in leading tours of art galleries where the artist and all participants are nude.<sup>36</sup> This work has been performed multiple times at Australian venues including the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane (2011), the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2012), and the Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA), Melbourne (2014). The MUMA work, held during Ringholt’s touring survey exhibition *Kraft*, took a group of around 26 anonymous participants, including this author, on an artist-led tour of the exhibition. My interest in *Preceded by a tour* lies in how it altered relations between individuals, and with the artist, within the gallery environment. The work also highlighted formal aspects of the ‘public body’ that had gathered to experience this work.

The MUMA group gathered on an April evening to participate in *Preceded by a tour*. The gallery had blacked-out its windows. Each participant cloaked all personal belongings and signed an agreement stipulating numerous conditions, including refraining from ‘lewd behaviour’. After undressing in separate male and female change rooms we met Ringholt—already naked and seemingly entirely comfortable with it—in MUMA’s foyer. A show of hands revealed, perhaps unexpectedly, that only a few participants identified as being from the ‘art world’ or art students; a significant proportion described themselves as nudists already comfortable with their nakedness.<sup>37</sup> Ringholt asked for questions from the group in a gesture that seemed to make the work more ‘transparent’ and a little less intimidating. One woman asked ‘how is this art?’ Ringholt introduced his exhibition in simple terms, explaining the meaning of terms like ‘curator’ for those with little knowledge of the profession.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>36</sup> I am using the words ‘nude’ and ‘naked’ almost interchangeably here. I believe the work suggests ideas associated with both words, for example, the nude as an artistic subject and the feeling of ‘naked’ vulnerability that may arise from participating in Ringholt’s tour. Clearly, the artist uses the latter term in the titling of this work.

<sup>37</sup> I had been expecting most of the participants to identify as being from the ‘art world’. However, as it unfolded, the work was embraced enthusiastically by the nudist community, many of whom appeared to be around retirement age. Most of the participants appeared to be Anglo-Australian. These observations beg further questions about the publics drawn to such a work and perhaps to nudism more broadly: their age, demographic and ethnicity.

Thereafter, he guided the group through the *Kraft* exhibition, which displayed his recent sculptures, collages, artist's books and installations. The tour included the installation *Club Purple* (2014), a full-scale 'daytime disco' installed in the gallery space, complete with lights and a digital jukebox holding over 6000 songs. The 'only' requirement was that, as in the nude tours themselves, participants must be naked. The disco was open for solo, mixed (co-ed) and ladies-only dance sessions. Ringholt has spoken about *Club Purple*'s liberating or healing mission in therapeutic terms, where apparently: 'being able to dance during the day without your clothes, with complete abandon and with complete joy is recovery and is healing'.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps most obviously, *Preceded by a tour* and the accompanying disco dancing in *Club Purple* underscored the mixed and highly charged emotions provoked by this most 'public' of public gallery tours: fear, joy, embarrassment, dread, liberation, or otherwise. In this author's experience of the work, a mild sense of panic and an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability (literal nakedness in public) gave way to an increasing feeling of liberation and then pride that I had 'done it'.

*Preceded by a tour* also gave a specific form to its public that coincided with a broader interest in formalism apparent in many other works exhibited in *Kraft*. Ringholt has discussed in some detail his interest in the formal qualities of the nude body reduced to its bare physicality, the history of the nude in Western art and the idea that, in *Preceded by a tour*, individual formal differences are greatly diminished in the absence of clothing and adornment.<sup>39</sup> The work also underscored the very physical sensation of coming together, naked, as a public 'body'. In a formal sense, the work drew attention to the specific 'choreography' of its nude public in the gallery—a public whose members might mistakenly touch, butt in or completely ignore one another, but were now thoroughly, even overly, aware of their physical relationships with each other.<sup>40</sup> At times our bodies moved very closely together as we listened to Ringholt discuss his work, but the awareness of maintaining sufficient distance from one other remained heightened. At times, practical physical movements such as waiting one's turn to pass through a doorway (recalling Abramović and Ulay's naked doorway work, *Imponderabilia*, 1977/2010) became overly emphasised so that individuals refrained from touching. Despite this distance, one could feel waves of heat from others' skin as we passed through draughty gallery spaces.

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<sup>38</sup> Stuart Ringholt, quoted in Kane Daniel, "Stuart Ringholt, Kraft," *Three Thousand*, February 12, 2014, accessed February 21, 2014, <http://thethousands.com.au/melbourne/look/stuart-ringholt-kraft>.

<sup>39</sup> Stuart Ringholt, "Lunchtime Forum". Ringholt also discussed these issues during the tour.

<sup>40</sup> I acknowledge my participation in Dr Chris McAuliffe's conference panel 'Choreography of the body *en masse*' at the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand Conference (2015) that led to this idea about Ringholt's work.



(Fig 38) Stuart Ringholt, *Preceded by a tour of the show by artist Stuart Ringholt, 6-8pm. (The artist will be naked. Those who wish to join the tour must also be naked. Adults only.)*, 2011 – ongoing. Gallery tour and drinks, Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney 2012. Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney [gallery also exhibiting Rivane Neuenschwander, *Continent Cloud* 2007] Photograph: Christo Crocker. Copyright Stuart Ringholt. Image courtesy the artist

Ringholt has asserted that his work is driven by a desire toward ‘learning through feeling’ rather than ‘learning through the intellect’.<sup>41</sup> Thus, although Ringholt’s nude tours follow a fairly standard pedagogical format, they also emphasise knowledge gathered through physical and emotional feeling (for example, the heightened physical relationships with works, described above). In yet a further way, *Preceded by a tour* could be seen to ‘expose’ members of the public, ‘non-expert’ and ‘expert’ alike to contemporary art—and in a most primal and humorous way. The nude body, according to the artist, eliminates the formal distractions of clothing, allowing for heightened visual and sensory encounters. As the artist recalls: ‘I remember in Brisbane [during one of the nude tours] there was a Peter Tyndall painting and that was the only red in the room...and you can...begin to ask yourself “is clothing noise to a Peter Tyndall painting?”’<sup>42</sup>

*Preceded by a tour* touches on two important aspects of Ringholt’s broader practice. The first is the

<sup>41</sup> Interview by author.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. I experienced *Club Purple* twice throughout the exhibition’s duration, the first time alone. This was an unforgettably uncomfortable experience, where I chose not to remove my underwear because of the irrational, even paranoid, fear that I was being surveilled in a kind of nightmarish Foucauldian scenario, and most probably laughed at by gallery staff hiding behind one of the room’s blackened walls. I hastened out of the disco after five minutes feeling manipulated by MUMA and by Ringholt himself, despite his professed benevolent intentions.

psychological and physical vulnerability or discomfort that may be experienced from participating in his works, despite their seemingly benevolent aims. Indeed, the creation of moments of displacement—a cognitive, physical, and, at times, emotional jarring—is arguably a *modus operandi* of Ringholt’s wide body of works that also extends beyond the participatory. For example, in his artist’s book of collages, *Circle Heads* (2005) (Fig 39), Ringholt ‘defaces’ photographic subjects, replacing single or multiple facial features, or even entire heads, with features taken from other sources. The effect is ghoulish, unsettling and at times violent. And, as described above, when I participated in the nude tour at MUMA, I felt a range of emotions, surreal, pleasurable and deeply unpleasant. This is somewhat at odds with Ringholt’s own claims for the work, where he asserts that *Preceded by a tour* is about overcoming fear and anxiety and ‘making people happy’ just like other nude activities such as making love and showering.<sup>43</sup> Bearing in mind Ringholt’s theosophic interests and his works’ links to Boal’s cathartic theatre, one can suggest that self-awareness and the therapeutic are reached only via sojourns into discomfort and confrontation.<sup>44</sup>



(Fig 39) Stuart Ringholt, *Circle Heads*, 2005. Book, 21.5 x 30.5 x 1.8cm, edition of 5 and 1 S.P and 2 A.P.  
Image courtesy the artist

<sup>43</sup> Artist’s talk at the beginning of *Preceded by a tour*.

<sup>44</sup> Ringholt notes that the nude tours were originally designed for artists and art world professionals to inhabit the gallery in a new way, but that they were then opened up to the public. Interview by author.



Related to this is a second aspect of Ringholt's broader political project: its irreverent engagement with perceived art world power. To this end, his works frequently, satirically address the balance of power between artists, curators, gallerists and public, to which the audience/participant may either bear witness or recognise themselves as active stakeholders. Curator Hannah Mathews aligns the fear of nudity experienced in Ringholt's *Preceded by a tour* with the sense of exposure felt by most artists each time they exhibit their work to the public:

the work's prerequisite of nakedness reduces all participants to their bare selves, evening out any perceived imbalance of power between them and perhaps even placing the audience in the artist's 'shoes'; making the viewer as vulnerable as the artist who 'bares' all when sharing his work with an audience.<sup>45</sup>

The state of vulnerability through equality to which Mathews refers upends the idea that the art-viewing audience wields any power as spectators: here, they are participants (rather than spectator-adjudicators), and nude participants at that. Likewise, *Preceded by a tour* upsets the modernist notion of the artist as a powerful aesthetic authority or genius figure. Despite Ringholt's own staging of the tour, it also relies significantly on the physical and emotional investment of its participants.

Moreover, in both participatory and non-participatory works alike, Ringholt overtly challenges the modernist category of 'high art' and its associations with art world power and cultural capital. His broad practice draws from 'low' popular culture including magazines, music, pornography, science fiction and, of course, self-help therapies. This is the case in his series of video works *Starring William Shatner as Curator* (2010), also included in *Kraft*, that recast Star Trek characters in the art world roles of artist, curator and dealer. Each work presents a short scenario taken from the original TV series, which, when viewed in light of the characters' new roles, offers a humorous retelling of art world relationships in 'another dimension'. In a recent series of collages also shown in *Kraft* and titled *Nudes* (2013), pages from pornographic magazines are spliced together with reproductions of 'fine' artworks so that the artworks mask or substitute the models' genitalia. In one collage, Ringholt seamlessly substitutes the porn star's genitals with a work by the artist Tracey Emin, *enfant terrible* of the Young British Artists, in what is a wry metaphor for 'the money shot'. Curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev writes that:

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<sup>45</sup> Hannah Mathews, "Power to the People: Contemporary Conceptualism and the Object in Art," in *Power to the People: Contemporary Conceptualism and the Object in Art*, ed. Hilary Ericksen (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art: Melbourne, 2011), n.p.

Ringholt is suspicious of high art. Although he navigates the official art world astutely, he never quite fits in. He connects with the audience, but he reacts almost allergically to power—the institutions, galleries, and curators he must engage with to get his art made.<sup>46</sup>

Despite frequently taking place in art galleries (or near art galleries as in the case of *Do You Want To Talk About Sculpture?*) Ringholt's works like *Starring William Shatner* reflect a level of scepticism towards the institutionalisation and insularity of the art world. Indeed, the sense of vulnerability induced by the prospect of walking naked around MUMA could have for another participant been a liberating expression of 'up yours' to the notion of the institution.

Ringholt's playful mockery of the art world was apparent in yet another of his recent sculptural works, *Cur8or* (2014), a beaten-up old red Daihatsu Charade bearing the number plate 'Cur8or'. This sat outside the entrance to MUMA during *Kraft*, its nose pointing towards the gallery's front entrance. Containing some old clothes and accumulated detritus, the car wore a very human sense of forlornness. Looking every bit the kind of car a student might drive—or indeed a 'struggling artist' like Ringholt—its numberplate moniker indicates that it is the curator, not the artist, who has been left outside on this occasion. In this instance, the balance of power has tipped away from the curator (along with his or her sleek, black 'finish') and toward the artist. This irreverence concerning power, particularly art world power, also underpinned Ringholt's slightly earlier work from 2011, *Do You Want To Talk About Sculpture?*, to which I now turn back.

### **Public conversation: *Do You Want To Talk About Sculpture?***

In the vein of Ringholt's other 'therapeutic' works, *Do You Want To Talk?* could be seen to mimic the notion of 'the talking cure': the healing power of free-ranging talk in a therapeutic setting, which has become the basis for psychoanalysis.<sup>47</sup> Therapist John Launer writes: 'we live now in a world that is united, if at all, by the idea that talking does indeed cure. Whether as doctors or therapists, our daily experience is that letting people talk does make a difference'.<sup>48</sup> Despite Ringholt's unusual opening question, 'Do you want to talk about sculpture?', the work was arguably less confrontational than the artist's other participatory works described in this chapter. His opening question was relatively unassuming and open-ended, while Ringholt's conversations with the public over the work's two-week duration appeared not to follow any set patterns.<sup>49</sup> For example, during the conversation I had

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<sup>46</sup> Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "On Anger, Fear, Laughter and the Art of Healing," in *Stuart Ringholt: Kraft* (Melbourne and Brisbane: Monash University Museum of Art and Institute of Modern Art, 2014), 11.

<sup>47</sup> A version of Ringholt's *Anger Workshops* was included in a group exhibition titled *The Talking Cure*, curated by Aileen Burns and Johan Lundh at the Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, Ontario, between March 2 – May 11, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> John Launer, "Anna O and the 'talking cure'," *QJM* no. 98 (2005): 466.

<sup>49</sup> Based on Ringholt's unpublished recordings and photographs of the conversations.



together with Ringholt, a friend of the artist's, a staff member from the nearby National Gallery of Victoria, sat down and joined the discussion. Then another friend of Ringholt's, an artist named Bruce, came along and the conversation turned to alternative (and often silly, joking) questions Ringholt could ask members of the public instead of 'Do you want to talk about sculpture?' There was a lot of laughter. Perhaps because of our previous acquaintance, the conversation seemed to flow smoothly. There were no awkward silences. Ringholt was a sensitive and careful listener, considering what I had to say before responding and then posing further questions.

*Do You Want To Talk?* took place in Melbourne's Federation Square (known as Fed Square), a major international and community destination located adjacent to the Yarra River and opposite Flinders Street Station, one of the CBD's major railway stations.<sup>50</sup> It is an architecturally striking precinct (sometimes controversially so) and a spectacle that is frequently host to events attracting tens of thousands of visitors, who attend events, eat and drink at the on-site restaurants and bars, watch sport and other programming on a giant screen or visit the National Gallery of Victoria and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image.<sup>51</sup> It is now the site for informal public gatherings and regular, occasionally impromptu protests by community and political groups. Otherwise, many of the events held there are highly orchestrated with the assistance of management staff; these range from product promotions and ticket sales for the Australian Open, to community festivals, craft fairs and New Year's Eve celebrations. Security staff man the site 24/7. Much of the public activity is sanctioned public activity and Federation Square is a highly managed public space.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Arden, "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public", 113.

<sup>51</sup> Federation Square received nearly 9 million visitors in the 2010-2011 financial year. See Fed Square, "Fed Square Annual Report," June 2011, Fed Square, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.fedsquare.com/wp-content/uploads/Fed-Square-Annual-Report-June-2011.pdf>. The Square is managed by Fed Square Pty Ltd, a company owned by the Victorian State Government and which in turn operates on a semi-commercial basis.

<sup>52</sup> Arden, "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public", 113.



(Fig 40) Stuart Ringholt, *Do You Want To Talk About Sculpture?* 2011, participatory work with various objects installation view, Federation Square, Melbourne. Photos: courtesy the artist and Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

As described in Chapter One of this thesis, the practice of democracy has long suggested the need for public spaces or squares. As historian Graeme Davison observes, the first call for a public square for Melbourne was made in 1850 just prior to Australia's gold rush, which established many of the nation's major cities, including Melbourne, and brought with it a huge influx of settlers, particularly from Britain, Europe and China.<sup>53</sup> As in Europe and America, Melbourne's governing classes sought the need for public places to 'provide a sense of community and civic morality that overrode the individual commercial interests of the inhabitants of the city'.<sup>54</sup> Advocates for a public square argued that it would provide Melbourne with a sense of community, as well as 'the pleasure of the promenade free to the poorest' and a space for political life.<sup>55</sup> Even so, Melbourne's Federation Square did not open until 2002, after many decades of commercial and planning conflicts over other potential sites.<sup>56</sup>

Bearing this context in mind, I want to briefly map the ways in which conversation or discourse has been central to conceiving of the public sphere, and to examine the ways in which Ringholt's *Do You Want To Talk?* engaged with the notion of Federation Square's public through conversation. For the renowned conversationalist, the sixteenth-century French writer Michel de Montaigne, conversation was akin to a fight between minds that could succeed in improving one's own intellectual strength:

If I am sparring with a strong and solid opponent he will attack me on the flanks, stick his lance in me right and left; his ideas send mine soaring. Rivalry, competitiveness and glory will drive me and raise me above my own level...<sup>57</sup>

Beyond the level of conversation between private parties, the power of a discourse sustained between many people and within public spaces has long been acknowledged. For example, in his book *The Fall of Public Man* (1992), sociologist Richard Sennett observes the relationship between public discussion and political action in post-Enlightenment Europe. According to Sennett, revolution stemmed from get-togethers between workers in public spaces. 'Thus,' Sennett writes, 'laws like those of 1838 in France came into being which forbade public discussion between work peers, and a system of spies was set up in the city to report on where the little molecules of laborers congregated'.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Graeme Davison, "Public Life and Public Space: A Lament for Melbourne's City Square," *Historic Environment* 11, no. 1 (1994): 4-5.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Lionel Lindsay, quoted in Davison: 6.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Michel de Montaigne, quoted in Stephen Miller, *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2006), 1.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge, London, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 214.

As described in Chapter One, the post-Enlightenment public sphere developed in tandem with burgeoning forms of public discourse. Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* emphasises the 'critical-rational debate' that demarcated the various spaces comprising the modern public sphere—the numerous conceptual and physical spaces of which geographic public space is one. The public sphere influenced ruling forces through its ability to summarise the public opinion or *opinion publique*, which is explained by Habermas as 'an opinion purified through critical discussion in the public sphere to constitute a true opinion'.<sup>59</sup> This 'purified opinion' was also deemed to be rational because its arguments had been tested in the public arena. Habermas argues that it was through such a discourse that interlocutors from varying social strata reached agreement or consensus over matters of common concern. For Habermas, conversation in the public sphere was founded upon adherence to a form of egalitarianism where social status was disregarded in the interests of the common good.<sup>60</sup>

With respect to art, conversational forms underpin a number of contemporary artworks that Grant Kester describes as 'dialogical'. Drawing this term from the work of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom 'the work of art can be viewed as a kind of conversation—a locus of differing meanings, interpretations, and points of view', Kester examines dialogical art as practice that allows productive social, political and ethical outcomes to be negotiated between interlocutors.<sup>61</sup> In his book elaborating on this concept, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), Kester finds in Habermas's theorisation of the public sphere 'certain performative rules that insulate this discursive space from the coercion and inequality that constrain human communication in normal daily life'.<sup>62</sup> Kester suggests that, when applied to the production of dialogical artworks, such discursive 'rules' may be useful for effective communication between interlocutors so that we may 'see our views, and our identities, as contingent and subject to creative transformation'.<sup>63</sup>

Kester's argument informs but also differs from my own in terms of how *Do You Want To Talk?* created the conditions for conversational exchange between Ringholt and participants. Kester describes how dialogical works create conversational spaces that are based not on rupturing meaning and confrontational encounters in the vein of the works that Claire Bishop endorses, but on 'openness', empathic listening 'and...a willingness to accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator'.<sup>64</sup> Underpinning Kester's argument

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<sup>59</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans., Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 95.

<sup>60</sup> Habermas, 36; also see Grant Kester's analysis of Habermas in his *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 2004), 109-110.

<sup>61</sup> Kester, 10.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

is his engagement with Kant's philosophical ideal of *sensus communis* ('a metaphysical principle that links us in a community at the level of our senses and our bodies').<sup>65</sup> The antithesis of *sensus communis* is the disjunction brought about by the avant-garde, which, Kester argues, was concerned with shock and dislocation—elements of which are discernable in Ringholt's participatory works and collages discussed earlier in this chapter as distinct from the much 'gentler' *Do You Want To Talk?*<sup>66</sup> *Conversation Pieces* focuses on politically activist projects, many of which find some kind of resolution in the form of a concrete outcome, for example, the creation of boardinghouses for drug addicts in Kester's description of work by the Austrian art collective Wochenklausur.<sup>67</sup>

Conversing in a productive or meaningful way is, of course, the ideal scenario. However, despite my positive encounter with *Do You Want To Talk?* it may be safe to speculate that at least some of the other participants experienced a less positive situation. Some passers-by refused to engage in the work at all for one reason or another. According to Melbourne art blogger Mark Holsworth, on the day he visited the work, he had been the first person to agree to participate: 'He [Ringholt] said that it was difficult to get people to talk about sculpture'.<sup>68</sup> In another article, Courtney Lynch notes that as she left Ringholt's work she also left 'Stuart chasing a reluctant conversationalist'.<sup>69</sup> We can assume that many of the passers-by were busy and did not care to speak with a stranger. A sceptical proposition is that people were in some way embarrassed by Ringholt's question, 'Do you want to talk about sculpture?'. This view holds that the work created an awkward encounter between strangers, perhaps because it fostered a position of disparity between artist and participant: the artist who knows about sculpture and the participant who does not. Seen from this perspective, the work created, or even reiterated, a disparity between individuals based on knowledge, where the act of posing a specialised topic for discussion closed down the opportunity for comfortable discourse.

While it is necessary to accept that the work naturally put the artist in a position of 'authority' over the participant by virtue of the fact that Ringholt designed and posed the opening question, this contention is problematic because it already assumes a *lack* on the part of some of the participants. However, an alternative possibility is that Ringholt's work engendered the potential for a more equal type of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 26, 57-58.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> WochenKlausur's *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women* (1994-95) facilitated a series of dialogues between a group of drug addicted sex workers and local media and authority figures. The subject of conversation was the various difficulties experienced by the women, which included having to turn to prostitution to fund their habits. Kester asserts that the different groups would have little chance of being able to discuss such issues in the 'real world'. Therefore, WochenKlausur arranged for the conversations to take place on a pleasure boat, removing them from the frame of everyday life and thus from the preconditions of each individual's social status. This provided for a more open form of dialogue to take place, in Kester's view. The result was a measurable outcome: a 'modest but concrete response to the problem: the creation of a...boardinghouse, where drug-addicted sex workers could have a place to sleep, a safe haven and access to services...'. *Conversation Pieces*, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Mark Holsworth, "Urban Sculpture @ Fed Square," Black Mark, Melbourne Art and Culture Critic, accessed August 1, 2012, <http://melbourneartcritic.wordpress.com/tag/melbourne-prize-for-urban-sculpture/>.

<sup>69</sup> Lynch, "Talking (to) sculptures", para.4.

conversational encounter between the artist and non-expert members of the public, supported by the possibility that non-experts are capable of engaging in dialogue on the specialist subject of sculpture. I dwell here on Rancière's theoretical proposition of the equality of intelligence of all people, mentioned briefly in Chapter One. In his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, published in French in 1987, Rancière details how inequalities in the pedagogical system are supported by the presumption of some lack or gap between the schoolmaster's knowledge and the student's ignorance—a gap that needs closing and thus only serves to reinforce the original 'lack'.<sup>70</sup> Rancière recounts the story of 'the ignorant schoolmaster', the nineteenth century French professor Joseph Jacotot, who theorised that pedagogy is based on a system of inequality. The presumption that a master can transfer the content of his knowledge to his ignorant students assumes a radical distance between the intelligence of each that only the master can fill. While Rancière addresses pedagogy specifically, his argument about a fundamental assumption of equality (of intelligence, of power) extends through his theoretical work. It is the foundation on which political action can happen, based on specific disruptions to the sensible order, or dissensus.

Kester himself is critical of Rancière's work, arguing that the latter valorises cognitive disruption and aesthetic autonomy as features of the avant-garde and of contemporary art.<sup>71</sup> There is, however, a compelling congruence between Kester and Rancière—both see contemporary art as fundamentally destabilising and rearticulating social and political identifications, albeit in different ways. Specifically, Kester contrasts dialogical art's media and its forms with those of the high modernist artworks so valorised by critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. In his critique of Fried, Kester notes the former's sanctification of the object status of art, which 'present[ed] itself immediately and all at once' as a fully formed object.<sup>72</sup> Thus, in Fried's account of modern art, 'meaning is given over to the viewer pure and fully formed through an immaculate perception, rather than constructed in the messy space between the viewer and the work of art'.<sup>73</sup> This purist approach differs from Kester's theorisation of dialogical art, which is created over time or *in time*, in this way inheriting elements from process art and from Minimalism.<sup>74</sup> It is not based on the production of objects and exists *as* instances of exchange between artist and participant, rather than as a pre-formed work presented to the viewer by an individual artist.

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<sup>70</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Jacques Rancière, "On Ignorant Schoolmasters," in *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, with Jacques Rancière (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 1 – 24.

<sup>71</sup> Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 60-61.

<sup>72</sup> Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 48.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 60-61.



Ringholt's work intersects with Kester's text at a number of different points. *Do You Want To Talk?* situated sculpture as a concept or as a conversation, rather than as an object. This is to suggest that sculpture *as conversation* was actively negotiated between Ringholt and the various participants in the work, not presented by the artist as a finished object to be considered by a viewer. In posing a question to participants: 'Do you want to talk about sculpture?', Ringholt opened up the topic to a range of possible responses and interpretations, allowing also for the response: 'no'. In addition to this, the work actively complicated the notion of sculpture itself. The objects that Ringholt brought with him to Federation Square (the wrapped box, the purple outfit, a plastic children's seat, and so on) could be seen to have undermined 'traditional' notions of sculpture based on pre twentieth century traditions.<sup>75</sup> Such objects may have left participants (at least, those unfamiliar with the notion of the Readymade) wondering whether what they were seeing was sculpture or not. The artist presented the various objects as not necessarily sculptures in their own right, but as objects that aided the conversation to occur. Thus, sculpture itself was posited as an elusive concept that perhaps could never quite be known or spoken about directly—as something that could only be spoken *around* in a kind of circumlocution or deferral.<sup>76</sup>

This suggested that Ringholt, even as the artist, did not hold the answers about what sculpture is, and that the definition of sculpture may only exist in terms of what was agreed to on a case-by-case basis between artist and participants. Nevertheless, the work fell short of uncovering any 'essential nature' to sculpture, instead suggesting that it exists in a state of flux or contingency.<sup>77</sup> To this end, the verbal sculptures created in *Do You Want To Talk?* only came into existence in the moment of their creation by both Ringholt and participants and, as such, necessitated the contribution of both. Moreover, Ringholt has noted that many of the conversations revolved around 'everyday' items of jewellery worn by participants on the day, the idea being that jewellery as a sculptural form is intrinsic to the lives of most people.<sup>78</sup> Thus, seen from the most generous point of view, the work facilitated a sharing of knowledge and ideas, or what Kester has called 'sharing a substantial collective knowledge of the subject at hand'.<sup>79</sup> In my experience of *Do You Want To Talk?* the subject at hand was anything I wanted to talk about. As in the other works by Ringholt discussed in this chapter *Do You Want To*

<sup>75</sup> Arden, "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public", 114.

<sup>76</sup> This is not the first time that Ringholt has practiced the art of deferring knowledge. In his artist's book from 2005, *Circle Heads* (Fig 39), Ringholt made a series of collages in which he defaced a series of portrait photographs sourced from the Internet. He cut out details including entire heads, eyes, noses and mouths and substituted these with precisely cut-out images of heads and faces sourced from different photographs. The new features are positioned roughly according to their typical location on the body, but—with the original visual information missing—they look wrong, and they deny a 'complete' picture either of the original photographs or the substituted ones. Similarly, in a series of Untitled works from 2012, Ringholt painted a single circle of coloured acrylic into the centre of a mirror. This does not stop a reflection from being seen altogether in the mirrors, but instead defers an instantaneous and complete picture.

<sup>77</sup> In Claire Bishop's reading of Laclau and Mouffe, the 'decentered' or 'incomplete' self is a condition on which antagonism is based. Laclau and Mouffe do not believe in the idea of a unified self. Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* no. 110 (Fall 2004): 66-67.

<sup>78</sup> Stuart Ringholt, interview by author.

<sup>79</sup> Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 111.

*Talk?* also complicated the acquisition of knowledge through the intellect, foregrounding the physical and psychological aspects of the encounter between Ringholt and participants. Viewing this work in the context of Ringholt's interest in an unusual version of formalism, also covered in this chapter, we could argue that the content of the conversations was far less important than were the formal aspects of the discourse shared between two individuals, where in Ringholt's words, the artist posited his own body as the sculpture and his voice 'the fundamental and working principle'.

While ephemeral and transient, the 'result' of Ringholt's work differed markedly from the types of works Kester describes in *Conversation Pieces*. While the political projects that Kester examines often result in concrete 'outcomes' (as in the example of Wochenklausur's boarding houses) there was no discernable outcome to *Do You Want To Talk?* That is, the work emphasised open-ended conversation as the outcome, rather than as the 'means' to an end. For Ringholt, the space of conversation as a transient space created, negotiated and sustained between him and participants was where the 'work' happened. Habermas's ideal of discourse within the public sphere leading to consensual decision-making was short-circuited by Ringholt in a kind of conceptual 'emptying out' of the philosopher's ideal.<sup>80</sup> In Ringholt's work, conversation in itself seemed to be enough. The end result was less important because nothing, no object, was made. This 'emptying out' could, of course, be seen as rather trivial, 'useless' and even perverse when compared with the issues that Habermas envisioned as the subject matter of public discourse.<sup>81</sup> *Do You Want To Talk?* also seems somewhat vacuous when compared with the sobering political issues that occupy many of the artists in Kester's book—especially given Ringholt's professed ambition to make 'useful art', noted previously. Considering Ringholt's interest in formalism we can also recall Kant's concept of beauty in his *Critique of Judgement* as 'purposiveness without purpose' or 'uselessness'.<sup>82</sup>

Indeed, perversity, contrariness and disjuncture are common elements within Ringholt's practice, which, as I have described previously, instigates nude disco dancing and foisting embarrassing situations on oneself. Returning to Claire Bishop's argument around useful and ameliorative art mentioned at the start of this chapter, I would venture that despite *Do You Want To Talk?*'s seeming 'uselessness', the project was underpinned by an earnest desire to converse with a broad public about art, or about anything at all. We can also note that during the two weeks of the project, Ringholt

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<sup>80</sup> Arden, "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public", 113.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> The translations of Kant's notion of 'purposiveness' differ. For example, James Creed Meredith's 1952 translation of *The Critique of Judgement* translates 'purposiveness without purpose' as 'finality without an end'. The phrase 'purposiveness without purpose' appears in the later edition revised by Nicholas Walker, published in 2007 (57). Meredith's version brings a slightly different inflection to the passage: 'the beautiful, which is estimated on the ground of a mere formal finality, i.e. a finality apart from an end, is wholly independent of the representation of the good. For the latter presupposes an objective finality, i.e. the reference of the object to a definite end'. Immanuel Kant, "The judgement of taste is entirely independent of the concept of perfection," in *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. and with analytical indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 69.



moved between various sites at the square but remained outside of its two major art institutions, where he conceivably engaged with a much broader public than in his gallery-based workshops. The open-ended conversational approach of *Do You Want To Talk?*—the way it seemed to ‘call up’ the broad public—allowed one to imagine the public as a heterogeneous and innumerable potential, and therefore also as unpredictable. The work’s evocation of this incoherent or impossible public is the antithesis of the knowable, rational and exclusive public subject of modern, liberal society, as envisaged by Habermas. However, in its rather perverse way, Ringholt’s *Do You Want To Talk?* seemed to invest in the idea of a more radically open-ended and broader public for art—one that opened up the process of conversation as a site in which knowledge about art or about anything is asserted and reconfigured.

Just as the idea of the public has, in certain contexts, been subsumed by the state and the marketplace, so too has public space—but more concretely and more noticeably. Philosopher Nina Power has gone so far as to argue that ‘there is no more public space, only public order’.<sup>83</sup> Further, artist Eric Moschopedis contends that all types of public space, from parks to civic plazas, malls to markets ‘conspire to homogenize the public sphere and related civic discourse by way of ordinance to the exclusive benefit of the market’.<sup>84</sup> This has more or less been the fate of all public space in recent decades.<sup>85</sup> Even from its modern iteration in post-Enlightenment Europe, its contingency *as* public space has consistently been tested on two accounts: against its co-option by private/commercial/statist interests and against an ideal of the public *as such* that itself only ever actually existed in compromised form. As discussed in Chapter One, Jürgen Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere was notoriously provisional, gender-exclusive and classist. This is, the public invoked by the modern public sphere was, in the majority, landed businessmen, to the exclusion of the poor and some women who did not constitute the public who opined on fiscal and other issues of common concern. This provisional state of public space is, however, where a ‘genuine’ democracy can occur, according to art historian Rosalyn Deutsche. Public space necessitates a continual testing of its inner borders, and:

once an essential basis of coherence is attributed to public space—whether that foundation resides in the supposed possession by the public of objective moral values or in the fact of simply living, housed, in the immediate vicinity—that space is converted, and not in an economic sense alone, into private property.<sup>86</sup>

Drawing from Deutsche, it can be claimed that Ringholt’s *Do You Want To Talk?* brings into view the

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<sup>83</sup> Nina Power, “BMW Tate Live: Spatial Confessions – Speaking Part. Is the Public Going to Be Instituted?” (online video), discussion at BMW Tate Live Spatial Confessions symposium, Tate Modern, London, May 24, 2014, accessed August 17, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/conference/bmw-tate-live-spatial-confessions-speaking-part>.

<sup>84</sup> Eric Moschopedis, “Public Dreaming and the Transgression of Neoliberal Borders,” *Public* 23, no. 45 (2012): 196.

<sup>85</sup> Arden, “Participatory Art and the Impossible Public”, 113.

<sup>86</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche, “Art and public space: Questions of democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 33 (1992): 38.

‘coherence’ of Federation Square as a commodified and highly managed public space (that is, its contingency as a public space). Despite this, the work also competed with a cacophony of traffic noise, the flash and chatter of programmes broadcast on the large screen and the ambient conversations of passers-by—in other words, a sensory landscape that was at times overwhelmingly incoherent.<sup>87</sup>

Such considerations of Federation Square as a public space must also bear in mind the specific context of the work’s inclusion as a finalist in the Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture. In its 2011 iteration, the majority of finalists focussed on ephemeral and performance based works, identified by the Melbourne art critic Shelley McSpedden as ‘offer[ing] a more experimental and provisional vision of sculpture within the public realm’.<sup>88</sup> The term ‘urban sculpture’ otherwise resonates with allusions to the monument and to ‘plonk’ style civic sculpture. The latter is work that, at worst, does not engage with its environment, context or audience and tends to take an authoritarian approach to ‘bettering’ its surroundings and its audiences in a veiled expression of capitalist values.<sup>89</sup> Such sculpture has been criticised for its one-way communicative transmission, from artist (or state authority) to viewer. *Do You Want To Talk?* formally contested the notion of official sculpture, often derided as ‘plonk sculpture’, that is frequently designated for spaces like Federation Square. In a statement that recalls this tradition, the Prize for Urban Sculpture’s organisers write that it aims to ‘focus on the urban environment and the importance of sculptural practice, in all its forms, and its role in informing and enriching public life and our civic spaces’.<sup>90</sup> Ringholt’s work, however, downplayed many of the formal and conceptual characteristics associated with such art including collective memorialisation, didacticism and place making, allowing instead for the emergence of the contingent and the colloquial.

We can conclude by proposing that Ringholt’s *Do You Want To Talk About Sculpture?* looks to the notion of public space not as lost or damaged—or as something that needs ‘healing’ as in Ringholt’s other works described in this chapter. Rather, it looks to what public space *could be*, even if we ‘only’ converse about sculpture, not politics or democracy per se. This chapter has illustrated how *Do You Want To Talk?* complicates any coherent notion of the public. Nonetheless, and even paradoxically, this work genuinely and even earnestly aspires to conjure an idea of the public for art; it ‘calls up’ the unknowable potential suggested by the notion of the public as I have described it in this thesis. The modest scale of this work belies its broader aspirations: its ‘performance’ in the public square gestures

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<sup>87</sup> Arden, “Participatory Art and the Impossible Public”, 114.

<sup>88</sup> Shelley McSpedden, “Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture,” *eyeline*, no. 76 (2012): 83.

<sup>89</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another, Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>90</sup> Simon Warrender, “About the Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture 2011,” in *Melbourne Prize for Urban Sculpture* (Melbourne: Melbourne Prize Trust, 2011), n.p., accessed August 1, 2012, <http://www.melbourneprizetrust.org/mp2011/downloads/Melbourne%20Prize%20for%20Urban%20Sculpture%202011%20CATALOGUE.pdf>.

toward an unknowably large and diverse public.<sup>91</sup> The importance of this work to my argument lies in its assumption that any anonymous member of the public has the capability to engage in sustained dialogue about the relatively specialist subject of sculpture. It critically engages with the exclusions inherent in the discourse surrounding art, and, by extension, how this excludes large portions of the public.

As such, the conceptual and aesthetic open-endedness of *Do You Want To Talk?* evokes and tests a certain *ideal* of public space: its theoretical invitation to anyone and everyone within the wider public in a way that recalls Jeremy Deller's *It Is What It Is* discussed in Chapter Four. This is despite the fact that public space has been severely compromised, or perhaps more accurately, that it has never existed for the wide public suggested by Ringholt's work. Nevertheless, and much like Deller's conversational work, *Do You Want To Talk?* also animates as a continued possibility and as a crucial political idea the open-endedness associated with the public. Certainly, *Do You Want To Talk?* is one of the more idealistic works discussed in this thesis, an idealism I explore more fully in the Conclusion. In the next and final case study of artworks, I extend the discussion of public space and its viability from the physical to the digital in the works of Natalie Bookchin.

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<sup>91</sup> Arden, "Participatory Art and the Impossible Public", 115.

## Chapter Six

### Natalie Bookchin: The Public in Repetition

Five sets of heads and shoulders appear in a single row on an otherwise black screen. One of the figures, an African American woman, looks down at her lap as if searching for an answer to a complex question. ‘Um...what does the general public need to know about living with limited resources?’ she asks, looking up as though attempting to frame a response. The woman to her right, middle-aged with long hair, quizzically repeats the phrase ‘the general public’ before her words trail off. At the end of the row of heads, a third woman cuts in. ‘That’s a big question, yeah,’ she smiles. The man to her left offers little more by way of an answer. ‘I’m going to pass on that one,’ he says. Such are the opening moments of New York-based artist Natalie Bookchin’s film *Long Story Short* (2016). This elicited the participation of individuals experiencing poverty and homelessness in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles. According to a 2015 US income and poverty survey, a significant number of Americans, around 15%, live below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> Bookchin spent two years in the San Francisco and LA areas in 2012 and 2013 in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, where she interviewed over a hundred participants in homeless shelters, food banks, adult literacy programs and job training centres. There, she attempted to ascertain ‘how they define [poverty], their everyday experience of it, misperceptions they face, and what they thought should be done’.<sup>2</sup> Bookchin captured her participants’ responses on webcams and laptops. These mirror the direct and amateur quality of the vlog: the video diary or video log format now so ubiquitous on the Internet in forums such as YouTube and Vimeo. In this form of user-generated, web-based television, individuals share personal content with a frequently anonymous public.



(Fig 41) Natalie Bookchin, still from *Long Story Short*, 2016, film, 45 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.

<sup>1</sup> Carmen DeNavas-Walt and Bernadette D. Proctor, “Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014,” United States Census Bureau, accessed 21 August, 2016, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2015/demo/p60-252.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Long Story Short*, 2016, explanatory statement made in an opening frame of the film.

This chapter is different from the previous ones in the sense that it is less concerned with the notion of the public *for art* and instead expands the discussion to consider how an artist conceives of the public in a broader sense. It may already have been apparent that wider concerns relating to the public's aesthetic, political and historic dimensions underpin each of the works discussed previously. However, here I want to more explicitly develop this discussion as it relates to Natalie Bookchin's work. Since the late 2000s, Bookchin has worked repeatedly with vlogs to create films and video installations. Typically, she uses found, rather than newly created, videos sourced from social media platforms including YouTube. Bookchin takes portions of this footage and meticulously splices it: footage in which individuals have recorded diaristic, expository and intimate pieces to camera. In Bookchin's works, multiple individuals publically voice overlapping and related narratives about issues including unemployment, poverty, race, fame, power, weight loss, sexuality and using medications for psychological disorders. Besides *Long Story Short*, this final chapter of the thesis focuses on two of Bookchin's previous works: *Mass Ornament* (2009) and *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See* (2012). In relation to her works I ask a broader question: how viable is the notion of the public in digital and social media, particularly given these platforms' significant cooption by commercial interests? I want to argue that Bookchin's works takes a distinctive approach to contending with this fact.<sup>3</sup> Central to my discussion is Bookchin's evocation of the public in economic and class terms.

### ***Mass Ornament: an economy of the body***

Bookchin's first major foray into video installation, the seven-minute, single-channel installation *Mass Ornament* comprises hundreds of moments of user-generated footage captured from YouTube (Fig 2 / 42).<sup>4</sup> It features individuals dancing in their homes and in front of their cameras. In kitchens, narrow hallways, bedrooms, living rooms and a bathroom, and in front of mirrors, Christmas trees and doorways they gyrate, tap-dance, twirl, twerk, kick and perform handstands. Each segment of the YouTube footage is displayed inside an individual, rectangular frame against an otherwise black screen, the frames often multiplying in a row or multiple rows across the screen to show several dancers at once—a format that resembles the look of YouTube with its many thumbnail-sized videos.<sup>5</sup>

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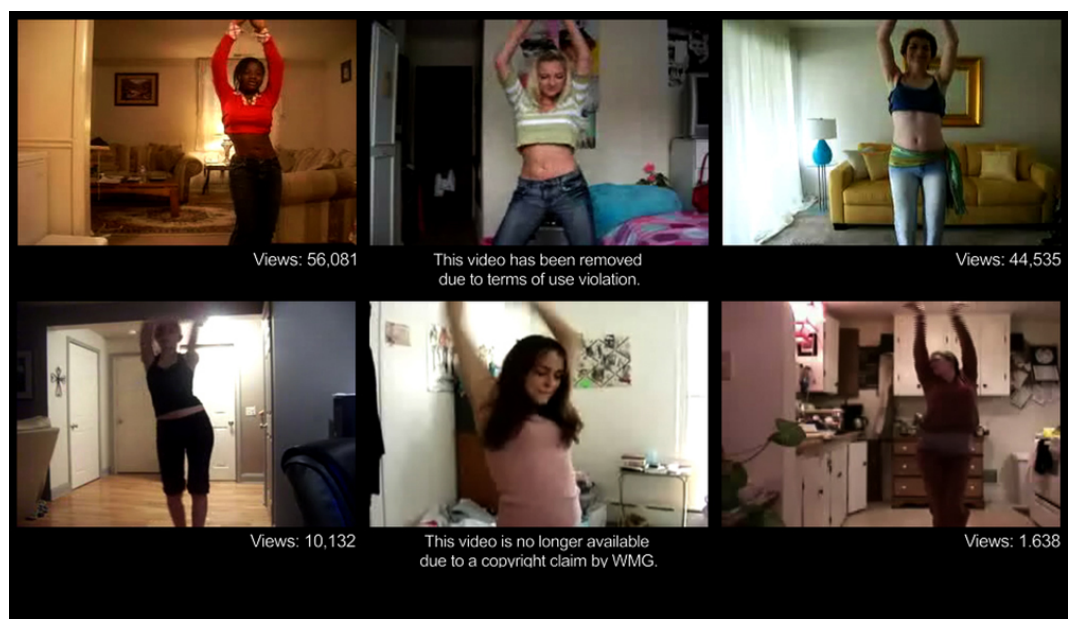
<sup>3</sup> Notably, many of Bookchin's works are available in full to be publically viewed on her personal website or Vimeo site without the commercial considerations that would frequently apply.

<sup>4</sup> *Mass Ornament* has been exhibited at multiple international venues. This includes Australia, where the film was displayed as part of the 2012 Experimenta International Biennial of Media Arts. In that year, the exhibition was subtitled 'Speak to Me' as a meditation on themes of relationality and connectedness in and through digital media.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Kane, "Dancing Machines: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin," *Rhizome*, May 27<sup>th</sup> 2009, Natalie Bookchin artist website, accessed August 21, 2016, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/may/27/dancing-machines/>.

Under each frame, a number and the word ‘views’ indicates how many times that video has been publically viewed on YouTube (a mark of its popularity), while other videos have since been ‘removed by the user’. *Mass Ornament* is set to sound and music sampled from the videos themselves: individuals turning on their cameras, cars driving by and the background hum of cicadas. In addition, we hear the alternately triumphal and jaunty strains of music from two Depression-era films from 1935: Leni Riefenstahl’s piece of Nazi propaganda *Triumph of the Will* and Busby Berkeley’s musical comedy *Gold Diggers of 1935*.

The multiple rectangular frames that appear and disappear throughout *Mass Ornament* operate as though they are ‘windows onto the world’, a kind of virtual screen-capture of the amorphous Internet public brought together at a single time and in a unified screen space. Here, as on YouTube itself, we experience seemingly authentic, documentary encounters with the lives of others, in this case, hundreds of dancers inside their homes. Bookchin edits her footage to create an exacting visual synchronicity between the individual YouTube clips, while the sound track, which includes the intense, exacting rhythm of tap-dancing from Berkeley’s *Gold Diggers*, aurally unites the footage. In one such moment early on in the work, a young woman dressed only in tight, white pants and a cropped top walks across her bedroom to turn on her webcam in readiness for her performance. In a rectangular frame to the right of this, a second woman in short shorts does the same. Three more frames appear one after the other across the remainder of the black screen; each contains a young, scantily dressed woman who moves toward her webcam. The woman in the white pants begins to sexily gyrate her hips, cocking her arms at right angles as she dances.



(Fig 42) Natalie Bookchin, still from *Mass Ornament*, 2009, single-channel video installation, 7 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.

Bookchin has written about and discussed her own work in significant depth, and *Mass Ornament* has already received considerable critical attention. However, one element that has not been explored is how *Mass Ornament* considers the notion of the public, and specifically its current shape and viability in the digital realm. At a basic level, YouTube itself might readily be considered a kind of public, reality television, where ‘the public’ can be understood as any number of non TV-professionals who can readily access and contribute content. This is despite the fact that much of this content is not produced by amateurs, but by advertisers, entertainment companies and media corporations. YouTube and other platforms including Vimeo and dailymotion feature innumerable vlogs, which, because of their diaristic nature, seem to thoroughly blur the distinction between private and public forms of communication. Indeed, as Bookchin has noted in relation to *Mass Ornament*: ‘The YouTube dancer alone in her room, performing a dance routine that is both extremely private, and extraordinarily public is, in its own way, a perfect expression of our age’.<sup>6</sup> Bookchin describes how social media’s permeation into the everyday lives of much of the world’s population has obscured our lived experience of the private and public. Moreover, our perceptions of being in, or a part of, the public, are frequently created within private domestic settings via social media. Vlogging platforms have allowed viewers access to imagery and experiences shared by an unprecedentedly large and broad public. *Mass Ornament* itself trades on the voyeuristic nature of YouTube: the work itself is utterly absorbing in its presentation of unselfconscious individuals and their dancing which, by turns, is funny, extremely skilful, and tragically amateurish. Bookchin maintains the amateur qualities of the videos themselves, replete with bad composition and moments where their makers fumble around with the technology. These elements preserve the videos’ apparent authenticity as documents of ‘real life’.

What of the dancing itself? Many of the dance steps that appear in *Mass Ornament* are recognisably drawn from mass- or popular culture—culture that has become vastly more publicised in the era of the Internet. Moreover, since the dawn of Web 2.0 in the mid-1990s, popular culture has become readily available for appropriation by the public. The ‘viral’ video is perhaps the current zenith of the Internet’s permeability, suggestive of its enormously broad public reach, yet aided, undoubtedly, by the most dominant of media corporations with the capital to maximise such opportunities through well placed advertisements and by boosting search rankings. The ‘twerk’, a dance step seen in the opening moments of *Mass Ornament*, has not so much ‘gone viral’ but it can be readily seen in user-generated dance videos, as these comprise one facet of popular cultural distribution *en masse*. Twerking is predominantly associated with African American hip-hop dance culture and, at least in tabloid media, with its lewd and purportedly incorrect appropriation by the white singer Miley Cyrus on MTV’s

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., para.5.



Video Music Awards in 2013. Later in *Mass Ornament*, several of the dancers perform steps from Beyoncé's music video *Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It)* of 2008. This was widely mimicked and parodied, notably by fellow performer Justin Timberlake on an episode of *Saturday Night Live*.

We can consider in this vein the work's title, *Mass Ornament*, which finds contemporary relevance in the context of popular culture and fashion as frequently involved with 'surface' or shallow concerns, with the superficiality of the 'ornaments' so readily consumed and reproduced by the 'masses'. Images and their circulation are prime currency within this extension of the capitalist economy. *Mass Ornament* engages with such economies of social media. It plays on the ways in which YouTube produces, transacts and reproduces images of culture—images of, and for, the 'masses'. In its depiction of individuals responding to and consuming mass culture, *Mass Ornament* invites ready comparison with the fan-culture works of South African born artist Candice Breitz. For example, in Breitz's earlier video installations *King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson)* (Fig 43) and *Queen (A Portrait of Madonna)*, both from 2005, devout fans perform the entire albums of, respectively, Jackson's *Thriller* and Madonna's *Immaculate Collection*. *King* and *Queen* are portraits of their performers rather than of the superstars named in the works' titles. Breitz recorded each of the fans individually, but their performances, much like those of Bookchin's dancers, are synchronised into mass cultural chorus-lines. The key difference is that Bookchins' videos are 'found' rather than carefully shot in a studio.



(Fig 43) Candice Breitz, still from *King (A Portrait of Michael Jackson)*, 2005. Shot at UFO Sound Studios, Berlin, Germany, July 2005. 16-channel installation: 16 hard drives. Duration: 42 minutes, 20 seconds. Ed. 6 + A.P. Image courtesy the artist.



When viewed within an historical context, the idea of the ‘masses’ and of the ‘mass ornament’ has a much more somber or sinister underpinning. The mass ornament is associated with various modern totalitarian regimes, namely Stalinism and Nazism, which, as discussed in Chapter Two, considered their publics as veritable ornaments shaped by political will.<sup>7</sup> These seemingly malleable publics found their creative expression in such mass crowd scenes of, for example, Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (from which Bookchin appropriates the musical score and its attendant—albeit more extremist—suggestion of manipulable bodies choreographed *en masse* at Nazi rallies). In the late 1920s, the German cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer developed the concept of the mass ornament in an essay of the same name, published in 1927. Kracauer’s essay does not refer to the European or to the Soviet political contexts of the time (although the analogies it draws would become stark) but to the ‘massification’ and deindividualisation of society under the economic machine of Western capitalism.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1920s, Fordism (named after the industrial processes developed by the Ford Motor Company) had revolutionised early twentieth century factory production through its pioneering of mass production techniques. Kracauer’s “Mass Ornament” deals with the notion of ‘body culture’ through a discussion of the Tiller Girls, a series of formation dance troupes formed in the late nineteenth century by the dance manager John Tiller in the English industrial city of Manchester.<sup>9</sup> Tiller Girls sought to move in total unison and they were also matched to perfectly accord with similarities in height and weight to form a cohesive unit of movement.<sup>10</sup> According to Kracauer, culture, and ‘body culture’ in particular, is an expression of the current social order, and the Tiller girls represented veritable cogs in a machine, a representation of capitalist society where the individual is subsumed by the insensible mass in the process of mass production. The machine-like uniformity of the Tiller Girls was reflected in other forms of dance of the time, including in the striking Busby Berkeley tap-dance scene that features toward the end of *Gold Diggers of 1935*, from which Bookchin appropriates sound and music (Fig 44).

Bookchin’s *Mass Ornament* explicitly borrows from Kracauer’s essay to consider forms of ‘body culture’, namely contemporary forms of mass subjectivity instigated by new technologies. However,

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<sup>7</sup> Michael North, “The Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament,” *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 4 (Summer 1990): 867. See also Adolf Loos’ 1908 essay “Ornament and Crime,” *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> North: 867.

<sup>9</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays,” translated, edited and introduced by Thomas Y. Levin (np: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1995), 75.

<sup>10</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum, “The Tiller Girls,” V & A, accessed August 21, 2016, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/8361>.

in the current post-Fordist era of networked technologies, the labouring ‘bodies’ once rooted in place on the factory floor are globally dispersed. As Bookchin herself observes:

If Fordism once described a social and economic system that focused on large-scale factory production, post-Fordism describes a shift away from the masses of workers in the same space, to smaller scale production by workers scattered around the world. These workers are linked by technology rather than an assembly line... If the machinery of the Fordist era was mechanical, post-Fordism is digital.<sup>11</sup>

In Bookchin’s own words, *Mass Ornament* focuses on ‘the ways that new technologies expand our capacity to control, track, regulate, and rationalize bodies’.<sup>12</sup> Her observations recall philosopher Michel Foucault’s theoretical work on disciplinary power as enacted by modern governance and presided over by technologies.<sup>13</sup> Foucault theorised that ‘disciplinary societies’ emerged as a modern means by which to control the body through forms of surveillance, and he included ‘the worker’ as one such body.<sup>14</sup> YouTube could be considered the zenith of Foucault’s disciplinary epoch. As its users seemingly volunteer, ever so eagerly, to turn the camera on themselves in acts of ‘self-surveillance’, they also open themselves up to surveillance by others. Here, any privacy afforded by the domestic setting is notably absent as users willingly collapse the distinction between private and public space. With respect to Bookchin’s *Mass Ornament*, this is a form of public surveillance wrought *en masse*. Extending these ideas, we can consider the ways in which Kracauer and Foucault, to name only two writers on this subject, describe the modern body as utterly objectified and frequently made abject by technologies of the economy and of disciplinary power. Here, the individual subject is wilfully absented or unacknowledged, as in Kracauer’s evocative description of the Tiller Girls, where he decries that: ‘These products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters’.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bookchin, quoted in Kane, para.6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, para.16.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, [1977] 1995). See also Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3-7. Deleuze updates Foucault for the digital era.

<sup>14</sup> Evelyn Cobley, *Modernism and the Culture of Efficiency: Ideology and Fiction* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 73; James Muldoon, “Foucault’s Critique of Neoliberalism,” lecture delivered at Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy, Melbourne, February 9, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Kracauer, “The Mass Ornament”, 76.

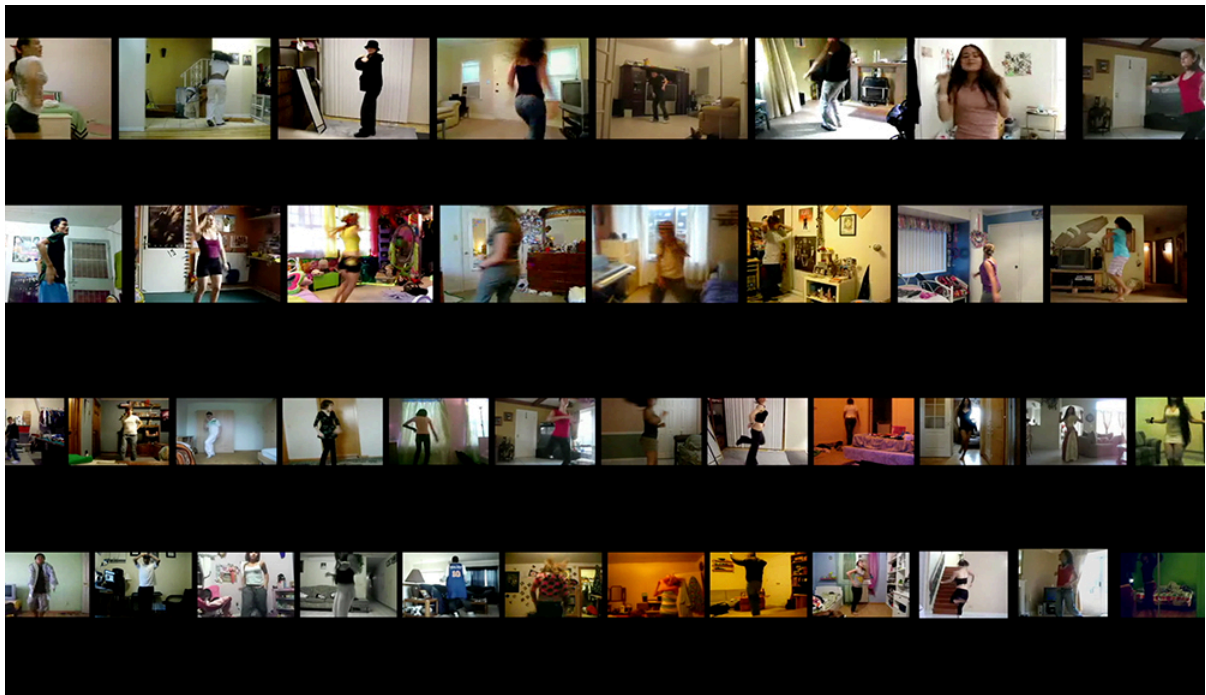


(Fig 44) *Gold Diggers of 1935* © Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.  
All Rights Reserved.

*Mass Ornament* draws an historical analogy between the machine-styled body of the early twentieth century and the self-styled uniformity of the dancing bodies on YouTube. Both forms of bodily representation can be viewed as rooted in popular culture and ultimately in capitalist profit making at the expense of a certain notion of individuality, also observed by Kracauer above. While the concept of individuality is readily associated with the neo-liberal valorisation of the individual's 'journey' toward economic self-sufficiency, it may also be understood in the context of Bookchin's *Mass Ornament* as a form of uniqueness or distinction from 'the mass', one that disrupts the mass's formal homogeneity. In the case of YouTube, a single popular cultural referent may be reproduced and modified any number of times in ways that aim to perfectly match the original. The other side to this, however, is the way in which users appropriate the original and extend its frame of reference through homage, parody, satire and otherwise. For example, a recent search on Beyoncé's *Single Ladies* video, the recognisable steps of which are performed by dancers in *Mass Ornament*, returned 415,000 results. These included multiple versions of the singer performing her hit, babies dancing to the song in front of TVs, a duet performing an acoustic version of the song and a video titled "Dwarfs do Single Ladies".<sup>16</sup> The tension between mass culture or the 'mass body' and the individual body underpins *Mass Ornament*. Bookchin highlights this through her use of single frames of footage, each containing a single dancer. One by one or in groups these frames appear in rows across the screen before

<sup>16</sup> Search results as at March 17, 2016.

disappearing. The effect of this is to draw our attention to the similar yet nonetheless distinctive way in which each person moves, or to the differences between their domestic settings: a striped couch here, a yellow one there, a door here, a door there. And, as Bookchin writes, the dancers' 'bodies don't conform to mass ideals, and their sometimes awkward interpretations undermine the "mass ornament" produced by synchronizing their movements'.<sup>17</sup> At times, individuals in the work slip, trip up or stand motionless for overly long periods of time as if waiting for their videos to start recording. Film theorist Jaimie Baron writes that part of 'the pleasure of the piece lies in the play of differences that derive from the contingent elements of everyday existence that are visible seemingly in excess of the performers' intentions'.<sup>18</sup> *Mass Ornament* gestures toward the 'imperfections' of human movement and to the individual idiosyncrasies that distinguish human bodies from the uniformly 'machined' bodies that were condemned by Kracauer, above.



(Fig 45) Natalie Bookchin, still from *Mass Ornament*, 2009, single-channel video installation, 7 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.

<sup>17</sup> Natalie Bookchin and Blake Stimson, "Out in Public: Natalie Bookchin in Conversation with Blake Stimson," *Rhizome* March 9, 2011, accessed August 21, 2016, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/mar/9/out-public-natalie-bookchin-conversation-blake-sti/>, para.10. Bookchin observes that:

I added sounds of bodies moving about in space, thumbing, banging and shuffling, as well as ambient sound emphasizing geographical differences, from crowded urban dwellings to the suburbs. Dancers push against walls and slide down doorways, as if attempting to break out of or beyond, the constraints of the rooms in which they seem to be encased.

<sup>18</sup> Jaimie Baron, "Subverted Intentions and the Potential for 'Found' Collectivity in Natalie Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*," *Maska* 26, no. 143-144 (Winter 2011): 34.

Nonetheless, Bookchin deliberately seeks out footage that, when brought together, reveals its visual synchronicity, as the dancers perform near-identical steps within familiar domestic settings. At times, even their clothing is similar. In one moment of the work, for example, we see flashes of red worn by each dancer across multiple frames. At another moment, each dancer is seen performing in front of a Christmas tree. The ‘sameness’ of these clips is as compelling as it is humorous precisely because each dancer seems driven toward performing better than anyone else, to showing off their ‘unique’ talent. In other words, Bookchin’s editing explicitly creates the sense of a ‘mass ornament’ from hundreds of YouTube clips that are linked, we can assume, only through their common ‘tag’ that allows YouTube users to find them. Bookchin’s editing invokes the homogeneity of these videos.<sup>19</sup> As such, *Mass Ornament* oscillates between invoking the homogeneity of popular culture, and those moments that appear to have ‘escaped’ such uniform cultural cooption, wittingly or not.<sup>20</sup>

I want to dwell on the play between homogeneity and heterogeneity, or between the mass and the individual, in *Mass Ornament*. This point can be extended by way of a further historical analogy present in the work concerning the specific economic circumstances of the 1930s (to which *Mass Ornament* alludes through its musical scoring) and 2009, when *Mass Ornament* itself was made. Both periods experienced economic depressions; *Gold Diggers of 1935* was made just after President Roosevelt’s ‘New Deal’ of 1933, while *Mass Ornament* was made in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. We can consider the ways in which popular culture has provided entertainment and escapism during these periods in particular. Film theorist Barry Keith Grant writes about the potential for escapism offered by the genre of the 1930s musical film, the period in which *Gold Diggers* and a number of other films like it were produced.<sup>21</sup> Grant observes that:

[I]n the 1930s, musicals proved to be a particularly amenable genre for at once both addressing and escaping the urgent problems of the Great Depression, into which the United States had precipitously plunged... Bursting forth in song implied optimism, an important message at the time, and the very nature of dance suggests a sense of social harmony, for dancing partners move in step with each other. And while dance was a useful metaphor of communal order, the lavish spectacles created by Hollywood musicals also took audiences’ thoughts away from the economic deprivations in their own lives.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jamie Baron writes:

*Mass Ornament* begs the question of whether the democratizing force of the digital archive, where anyone can post anything, is not also a force for conformity—or at least a reflection of the conformity that mass media attempts to impose on individuals as it transforms them into consumers. The bodies of these dancers seem to have been colonized by the same hand—even before Bookchin’s hand entered the picture. Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 152.

<sup>20</sup> Bookchin herself comments on this aspect of her work in her interview with Blake Stimson, para.10.

<sup>21</sup> Including *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *Gold Diggers of 1937*.

<sup>22</sup> Barry Keith Grant, “Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933),” in *The Hollywood Film Musical*, 1st ed. (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012), 56.

Grant highlights the way in which Hollywood films of the 1930s moved in step with the political agenda of the time, to relieve American citizens of the pressures they felt while Roosevelt implemented his New Deal.<sup>23</sup> We can also read in Grant's description of 'communal order' elements of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's bleak description of mass culture under capitalism in their chapter titled "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). The Marxist theorists illustrate the ways in which art and culture had fallen victim to capitalism, to become another of its ideological arms in the form of the 'culture industry'. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, escapism from work is merely an extension of work itself.<sup>24</sup> In their view, culture itself had become characterised by its sameness (a 'sameness' also seen in Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*) and its capacity to recuperate any instances of difference or 'non-conformity' into its overarching cultural schema. Appositely, we can recall this same 'sameness' in Komar and Melamid's critique of art under Socialist Realism, discussed in Chapter Two, which suggests how ideology—socialist and otherwise—permeates and shapes cultural activity, especially so in times of perceived economic crisis.

While "The Culture Industry" is outdated, the prevalence of digital culture renders this text more so, particularly in terms of Adorno and Horkheimer's ready assumption of audiences' passivity.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, it can be argued that YouTube represents a contemporary pinnacle of 'audience activation', an almost complete collapse of the distinction between cultural producers and consumers. As art critic Christopher Knight writes:

vlogging turns the consumer into a producer. Barely more than a decade old as a medium and more unfettered than anything on the nightly network or cable news, it possesses at least the potential for vast reach. Vlogs feature voices that can be as maddening, insightful, surprising or inane as any highly paid anchor or correspondent reading from a prepared script.<sup>26</sup>

And yet, as Bookchin's *Mass Ornament* suggests, this seeming 'public sphere' of cultural production is replete with commercial popular culture, which uses YouTube as yet another means of publicity. YouTube itself is a commercial venture, owned by Google, the largest and most profitable of global media corporations. With its former tag line, 'Broadcast Yourself', YouTube purports to help users create and express a 'unique' self, all the while recuperating this uniqueness as part of a neo-liberal fiction of individual empowerment.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 109.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Knight, "Art review: Natalie Bookchin at LACE," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 2012, accessed June 22, 2016, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2012/03/art-review-natalie-bookchin-at-lace.html>, para.9.

As I argued above, *Mass Ornament* appears perhaps perversely to force the point about cultural homogeneity and cooption, or to stage it as a *fait accompli*. Bookchin actually finds or creates a ‘mass ornament’ out of what is otherwise a much more incongruous and dispersed public of YouTube. However, as Baron writes:

if these mass ornaments can be “found” rather than produced from above, then the potential for collectivity and collaboration—rather than simply co-optation—lurks within digital archives, awaiting a moment in which users may join together for their own purposes.<sup>27</sup>

Baron’s argument is compelling and aligns with my own argument in this thesis around the public as a form of potential. That said, *Mass Ornament* also highlights its dancers’ aspirations toward being noticed, not as a collective, but as one out of the many millions or billions of others that constitute the Internet public understood in its widest sense. The work underscores a key ‘quality’ of the public seen through the ‘screen’ of the digital: its anonymity, its dispersion and nebulousness, its lack of mass (where the notion of mass now seems anachronistic in the context of *Mass Ornament*, an idea that belongs to the heavy industries of twentieth century Fordism observed by Bookchin, above). Herein, the individuated public depicted in *Mass Ornament* appears, on one level, entirely, blithely, unaware of its relation to any collective. Each dancer appears inside a single frame, separated in Bookchin’s work in a way that suggests each person’s distance from the other in physical space. Nevertheless, the work’s multiplying frames, meticulously synchronised, also gesture toward the potential for collectivity engendered by the digital realm and within this, to the potential of an emergent public.

Indeed, within Bookchin’s practice more broadly, her works return time and again to evoking the viability of the public in spite of, or even because of, its digital mediation or mediatisation. Here, I expand my use of the term ‘public’ to refer also to the idea of publicising something, making it visible, open for viewing, or ‘transparent’.<sup>28</sup> As described above, *Mass Ornament* is punctuated by moments where discordant and fumbling movements undermine the mass ornament’s unity. The work suggests that, at least in these seconds, we see ‘flickers’ of a more transparent or documentary reality—one that somehow ‘escapes’ mass cultural cooption.<sup>29</sup> I turn now to exploring these ideas in a later work by Bookchin, which represents what she calls ‘a public body in physical space’.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Baron, “Subverted Intentions”, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Brian Willems discusses the idea of visibility in Bookchin’s *Mass Ornament* but in a different way to my own. Brian Willems, “Increasing the Visibility of Blindness: Natalie Bookchin’s *Mass Ornament*,” in *Video Vortex Reader II: Moving Images Beyond YouTube*, eds. Geert Lovink and Rachel Somers Miles (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011), 293-305.

<sup>29</sup> Also see Baron, “Subverted Intentions”, 36. Baron argues that the contingency of the dancers’ movements may suggest that Bookchin captures ‘traces of everyday life, whose colonization is always incomplete’.

<sup>30</sup> Bookchin and Stimson, “Out in Public”, para.9.

### **‘A Public Body in Physical Space’: *Now He’s Out in Public and Everyone Can See***

*Now He’s Out in Public And Everyone Can See* (2012) (Fig 46 / 47) is a 16-minute looped video installation displayed across eighteen monitors hung at different heights within the gallery space. Bookchin immerses the viewer in vision and sound, offering no single perfect position from which to experience the work all at once. This ‘partial’ experiencing of the work is echoed in the work’s content. Across the multiple screens, individual vloggers engage in monologues about a series of high profile African American men without ever naming them. The vloggers are men, women and teenagers of multiple ethnic backgrounds, vlogging from numerous locations, including desks, lounge chairs, laundries, in front of the American flag, behind lecterns and on the edges of bunk beds. Vision and sound of the individuals is fragmentary and fleeting. We see close-ups of faces and hands as vloggers speak directly into the camera, faces often lit by the computer screens in front of them. We hear only snippets of their monologues:

Here’s *my* birth certificate...he may or may not be born in the US...he wasn’t born in the US ...where’s yours?...he doesn’t know if he’s black or white...I don’t see any proof...there are a lot of questions...he’s just as much white as black.

As in *Mass Ornament*, *Now He’s Out in Public* is often rhythmic and meticulously synchronised, but this time through sound rather than vision. The same words and phrases are voiced seconds apart (‘facts’, ‘rich’, ‘money’, ‘spotlight’, ‘on a pedestal’, ‘god’, ‘messiah’) or completely in unison (‘he’s black’). And, despite these quick grabs of words and the partial vision, the identities of the men quickly become clear. The deceased pop star Michael Jackson can be identified through the multiple references to his charges over sexually abusing minors. US President Barack Obama is described through the controversy over his birthplace and citizenship. Golfer Tiger Woods is identified through the story of his now ex-wife Elin Nordegren beating his car with a golf club. As the work progresses, vloggers launch into more sustained monologues about ‘blackness’, crescendoing at one point with a collective qualifier: ‘I love black people ... *BUT*’.

Although the vloggers’ monologues are incomplete and only seconds long, their messages are undoubtedly familiar, reiterated countless times in the news and entertainment media. As art critic Jacqueline Bell argues, *Now He’s Out in Public* relies on the fact that its own audience knows exactly who the vloggers are referring to, as the identities of the men have been virtually reduced to vox pops,



catch-phrases and sound-bites.<sup>31</sup> Even so, as the fragments of monologue above demonstrate, phrases audibly weave in and out of each other, so at times it becomes difficult to discern just which of the men the vloggers are referring to at any one time. Perhaps, Bookchin seems to suggest, this does not much matter where stereotypes and racial generalisations are concerned.



(Fig 46) Natalie Bookchin, installation view of *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See*, 2012, eighteen-channel video installation, 16 minutes (looped). Image courtesy the artist.

The spatial arrangement of screens in *Now He's Out in Public* creates the impression that one is surrounded by, or walking through, a busy crowd in a public space, witness to its multiple strands of speculation and gossip. Further, Bookchin's treatment of sound and language in the installation reflects the auditory experience of being amongst a crowd of people. The vloggers talk over, repeat and interrupt each other:

He has problems yeah...he makes mistakes...he's rich...who doesn't have problems? ...what would you do if he was rich?...it's just really sad, you know?...if you were rich?...I guess when you got that much money...because the more money you have...you just gotta go and fuck shit up.

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<sup>31</sup> Jacqueline Bell, "Vloggers, Celebrities, Gods and Kings: The Politics of Publicness in Natalie Bookchin's *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See*" (masters thesis, University of Southern California, 2013), 26.

In terms of this spatial and auditory experience, Bookchin has written: ‘What I am trying to do through my editing and compilation is reimagine these separate speakers as collectives taking form as a public body in physical space’.<sup>32</sup> But what kind of public body, of public experience, are we witnessing here? As in *Mass Ornament, Now He’s Out in Public* presents the public as a kind of ‘found entity’, seen and experienced through vlogs. This is, the experience of using YouTube can be described as encountering an amorphous public, but one that somehow already exists ‘out there’. As in *Mass Ornament*, this public is enormously diverse and separated in time and space, and yet seems to cohere on social media as if it were a public body, to use Bookchin’s words. Indeed, one of the work’s most compelling aspects is its depiction, seemingly, of a snapshot of the public in all its diversity, as opinionated, ignorant, knowledgeable, crass, funny, outrageous, thoughtful and eloquent. This public body in physical space is made more complex if we account for the fact that *Now He’s Out in Public* depicts a potentially global public; Bookchin acknowledges that she used English search terms to source videos for this work and for *Mass Ornament*, but could not limit these to North America.<sup>33</sup> Both works gesture toward the presence of a global public, and the implications of the Internet as an international marketplace are not lost here. However, for all its presence, its seeming temporal immediacy, the global public in *Now He’s Out in Public* is simultaneously atomised in space and in time.

The work’s title evokes the ‘coming into’ the public spotlight, where some truth will be revealed under the public’s watchful eye. Here, we can imagine the *demos* of the Roman forum or the Greek agora described in Chapter One, which opined on and collectively bore witness to scenes of emergent publicity. Indeed, Bookchin has variously spoken of the vloggers in her works as a form of contemporary Greek chorus, which is both ‘set apart from’, yet reflects ‘the action of the drama’.<sup>34</sup>

[I]n Ancient Greek theatre the choruses were made up of ordinary people from the community who acted as a bridge between the kings and the gods and the audience... They weren’t seen as agents of change but more as...responding and commenting on and reflecting and interjecting in what was happening. And I kind of see...these video impulses that people have as...doing a similar thing.<sup>35</sup>

Bookchin also observes that her vlogger-choruses can be equated with the idea of the people or the masses in the sense that we do not hear directly from the celebrities at the centre of the discussion.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Bookchin and Stimson, para.9.

<sup>33</sup> Natalie Bookchin, email to author, June 16, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Bookchin and Stimson, para.15.

<sup>35</sup> Bookchin, “Now He’s Out in Public and Everyone Can See. Natalie Bookchin Presents Recent Work” (online video), Vera List Center for Art and Politics, The New School, uploaded November 7, 2012, accessed April 1, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/53005216>, 14:42 mins.

<sup>36</sup> Bookchin and Stimson, para.16.

This recalls the passivity and manipulability of the mass ornament in the artist's previous work. At moments within *Now He's Out in Public* this chorus harmonises, as if exemplifying the result of public debate à la Habermas. At others, it is fragmented, multitudinous and contradictory. However, Bookchin argues that much of what we hear in *Now He's Out in Public* is not personal opinion as such, but is 'socially scripted'. In other words, it originates in and is mediated by the news and entertainment media.<sup>37</sup>



(Fig 47) Natalie Bookchin, still from *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See*, 2012, eighteen-channel video installation, 16 minutes (looped). Image courtesy the artist.

Despite this, certain vloggers appear to be overtly aware of the media's perpetuation of racist opinions, and of their own 'meta' place as interlocutors within discourse surrounding race. As one young man notes: 'I'm not going to make race an issue', while another remarks: 'aside [from] all the crazy media stuff, all the tabloids, he has problems'. It can be argued that the vloggers reference not only the debates circulating in the media, but also the discourses of other commentators—the so-called water-cooler talk among peer groups and in vernacular culture. Further, art historian Blake Stimson observes that, even while the vloggers seem to speak the language of the press, the work powerfully highlights

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<sup>37</sup> Bookchin, "Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See. Natalie Bookchin Presents Recent Work."

their humanity, making it difficult to see their social scripting solely as an affect of the media.<sup>38</sup> And yet, at times, it is also largely impossible to discern the origins of what we are hearing, with the possibility that the more dominant media has so engrained in the individuals its cacophony of messaging that the individuals voice their opinions as if they were self-originating. Further confounding the ability to decipher any discursive starting point, the film itself is looped in a seemingly never-ending cycle of feedback and chatter.

More explicitly than in *Mass Ornament*, *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See* considers the notion that YouTube is a form of public sphere. This concept is taken up by the critical literature on the Internet that tends to either extol its democratic virtues, or emphasise its compromised nature. For example, digital media theorist Yochai Benkler is optimistic about the democratic potential of the Internet within liberal democratic societies because of its capacity for multitudinous currents of conversation as opposed to the more monological and centralised discourse propagated by the mass media.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the infrastructure of the Internet, as distinct from many spheres of the mass media, has heralded individual, anti-authoritarian, and nonmarket contributions to public discourse.<sup>40</sup> Benkler argues that blogging platforms, among others, behave as a public watchdog, 'a source of salient observations regarding matters of public concern, and a platform for discussing the alternatives open to a polity'.<sup>41</sup>

However, new media theorist Zizi Papacharissi points to the fact that the Internet is not a form of public sphere in the way that Habermas envisaged it in his seminal work of the 1960s, discussed in Chapter One. For one, Papacharissi contends that the Internet is too discordant a vehicle for the types of rational debate that Habermas idealised, arguing that '[s]cholars routinely point to online political discussions that are too amorphous, fragmented, dominated by few, and too specific to live up to the Habermasian ideal of rational accord'.<sup>42</sup> Papacharissi goes on to argue that while the Internet is a public space (which may enhance discussion) it does not enable a public sphere (which, ideally, would enhance democracy). This is due to various factors, which include commercial monopolisation and the fact that access to information in the virtual sphere does not equal political participation in real life.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Bookchin and Stimson, para.22.

<sup>39</sup> Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), ebook, accessed April 16, 2015, [http://www.benkler.org/Benkler\\_Wealth\\_Of\\_Networks.pdf](http://www.benkler.org/Benkler_Wealth_Of_Networks.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>42</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, "The virtual sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere, and Beyond," in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics*, eds. Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard (London and New York, Routledge, 2008), 235.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 234-236.

Among other reasons, in this line of argument, the Internet is too compromised, polarised, unavailable and used for narcissistic purposes to contribute to Habermas's idea of a 'greater good'.<sup>44</sup>

*Now He's Out in Public* suggests that the unified voice of collective thinking or of public opinion seen in the video installation is a fiction of the most visible, audible and the most powerful individuals (the 'Trump effect', so to speak). These might be popular opinions but, as the work proposes, they do not necessarily represent the opinions of a broad public and may indeed represent those of a minority amplified by the media. Moreover, despite the reality effect of YouTube's vlogs, Bookchin's work underlines their contingency as documents of public opinion, while the artist's own manipulation of the footage underscores this even further. *Now He's Out in Public*, much like *Mass Ornament*, oscillates between depicting a documentary, 'window on the world' view of the public, and underscoring the contingency of the public within the digital sphere. Despite their moments of disharmony, both works appear highly authored and stylised to emphasise patterns of repetition. The significance of this to my argument in this thesis is that, in one sense, both works suggest that the public is little more than a (large) number of vocal or visible individuals who perform publically. The brevity of the clips in *Now He's Out in Public* reveals little of the individuals, as distinct from the intensive, lengthy focus on particular people in works by Stuart Ringholt, Jeremy Deller and Harrell Fletcher, previously discussed. The vloggers also lack something of the agency of the participants in these other works; Bookchin seemingly compromises any association between the public, the nonmarket and the anti-authoritarian. She posits her public within an almost inescapably mediated lifeworld that affects how people move and what they say in the guise of an authentic 'window on the world', or a close encounter with 'public opinion'. This is perhaps a total realisation of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), the idea that the spectacular imagery of capitalism has so saturated our everyday lives that there is nothing left to be 'directly lived'—but this is perhaps not the most interesting way of considering Bookchin's work.<sup>45</sup>

*Now He's Out in Public* invokes its public as a form of 'other', both in terms of the work's content and its installation. It confounds its gallery audience's viewing position. We have no ability to enter into dialogue or debate with this multitude of opinions, despite their frequently hateful nature. The installation immerses us spatially in its crowd scene where we are part of the public addressed in the work, but keeps us at the distance of silent voyeurs (where, in a sense, we are also 'other'). In this vein of the public's distancing and its presencing, we can readily compare *Now He's Out in Public* with an earlier work by the North American artist Gary Hill, titled *Viewer* (1996) (Fig 48). *Viewer* is a video installation in which slightly larger-than-life video imagery of seventeen figures is projected into the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>45</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black and Red, 2000), "number 1".

gallery space in a long, horizontal line. The video features seventeen male workers who gather regularly near Hill's Seattle studio as part of an unorganised, day-labour market.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the vloggers in *Now He's Out in Public*, Hill's workers do not speak, but stand relatively motionless. They look out at the viewer, occasionally blinking, shuffling their feet and repositioning their arms. As performance theorists Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye write, *Viewer* 'presses toward the phenomenon of audience: toward the experience of witnessing and of participating in collective, multiple, and diverse viewings'.<sup>47</sup>



(Fig 48) Gary Hill, *Viewer*, 1996 video installation, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist.

The publics depicted in *Viewer* and in *Now He's Out in Public* are of course separate in both time and space from gallery viewers. Nevertheless, the 'phenomenon of audience' in *Viewer* could be described as a more direct seeming encounter between the work's labourers and its gallery viewers than is the case with the screen-based public in Bookchin's work. I would suggest that this is partly because the workers in Hill's installation stand as though they are waiting to be looked *back at*, to be confronted at some present or future moment. On the other hand, the specific public addressed by Bookchin's

<sup>46</sup> Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye, "Being There: Audience as Agent," in *Audience as Subject*, ed. Thien Lam (San Francisco: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2011), 42.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.



vloggers seems, in one sense, irrelevant to them: the vloggers perform their monologues in ways that are apparently as much for themselves as they are for anyone else. Additionally, they necessarily speak only in monologues, denying any feedback in real time, any conversational entry point. This seems to be a key point that Bookchin is making about the so-called digital public sphere: that this is not a public space in the sense of a democratic forum for interaction, debate and dialogue but a ‘billboard on which messages can be hung and views pinned up for airing’.<sup>48</sup> The vloggers in Bookchin’s work are a ‘public’, but this public is incoherent and frequently contrary. It ‘responds and comments on, reflects and interjects’—not so much to enact change but to make sense of and mirror what is happening around it, as Bookchin observes above.<sup>49</sup>

Nonetheless, it is sometimes difficult to identify with the public opinions expressed in the work, which may be so different to our own. *Now He’s Out in Public* evokes populist opinion in some of its basest forms (while Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous line from his 1944 play *No Exit* readily comes to mind: ‘Hell is other people’). We can consider here additional instances of artistic ‘othering’ of the public: the comic scorn, for example, that Daumier showed toward his depiction of the Parisian salon public, bourgeoisie and lower classes alike, discussed in Chapter One. And yet, *Now He’s Out in Public* also immerses us in the familiarity of this public discourse and in so doing complicates this othering of public opinion. As critic Christopher Knight writes: ‘Bookchin’s installation is titled ‘Now he’s out in public and everyone can see,’ but that sword is clearly double- and even triple-edged: It characterizes the speaker, the subject and the viewer.’<sup>50</sup> There is nothing of Daumier’s scorn here; rather, *Now He’s Out in Public* relates and translates these crossed currents of dialogue, ‘transform[ing] firm beliefs into...doubt [and] uncertainty’.<sup>51</sup>

While clearly sceptical of the idea of the public sphere, Bookchin’s works appear nevertheless invested in its possibilities. I would suggest that this is why her works, as I have described them in this chapter, are structured according to patterns of homogeneity and discordance; whereby incongruous movements destabilise the ‘mass ornament’s’ unity, or where vloggers in *Now He’s Out in Public* appear to ‘step out’ of themselves, to become self-aware about their role within the wider discourse on race. Bookchin evokes the very human and nuanced qualities of her vloggers’ speech: its contrariness, its conviction, its self-reflection. There is a vernacular or ‘everyday’ quality to these moments that recalls Jeremy Deller’s exploration of the vernacular discussed in Chapter Four.<sup>52</sup> Deller’s work conceives of a public that exists ‘beyond’ commercial, official and bureaucratic understandings. As previously described, Deller’s public is tied to economic and class considerations. Additionally, Gary

<sup>48</sup> Alastair Hannay, *On the Public: Thinking in Action* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 128.

<sup>49</sup> Bookchin, “Now He’s Out in Public and Everyone Can See. Natalie Bookchin Presents Recent Work.”

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Knight, “Art review: Natalie Bookchin at LACE,” para.16.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., para.13.

<sup>52</sup> Also see Baron, “Subverted Intentions”, 36.

Hill's *Viewer*, described above, presents something of a confrontation with the working class in his depiction of seventeen labourers. The relationship between the public and economic factors is also made explicit in Bookchin's most recent work *Long Story Short*, to which I now turn back, and which again evokes and complicates a form of public 'othering'.

### ***Long Story Short***

*Long Story Short* premiered at New York's Museum of Modern Art's 'Doc Fortnight' in February 2016 and at the Centre Pompidou in Paris the following month. *Long Story Short* operates much more like an experimental documentary film than Bookchin's previous works, but the 45-minute, single-channel film continues Bookchin's use of the vlog format. Its subjects are shot close up using laptops and webcams to frame their heads and shoulders. Most of the subjects are African American or Latino, indicative of the ongoing inseparability between race and poverty in the US. Throughout the film, the hundred or so individuals describe what it feels like to live in poverty in the United States, from the emotional and physical experiences of homelessness to the practical minutiae of everyday life on the streets. Their footage is raw and intimate, frequently awkward and emotional. One woman explains how it takes her most of the day just trying to get something to eat, while another describes getting ready for a job interview in the toilet of a WalMart. Another woman, Lolita Brinson from Emeryville, California, describes how her mother's house foreclosed in 2008 due to a loan scam (presumably one of many that triggered the Global Financial Crisis). Due to a further disreputable mortgage scheme, the house was sold out from underneath the family's feet, and they had to vacate it within three weeks.

As in *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See*, the individuals are composed within domestic or office settings (Fig 49 / 50). Their footage is set inside individual rectangles or 'thumbnails', which variously appear and disappear in horizontal rows against a black screen. And, as in the earlier work, elements of coalescence or 'sameness' are depicted through Bookchin's exacting, rhythmic use of voice: moments of footage are brought together as individuals speak certain words or phrases in unison: 'backed into a corner', 'minimum wage', 'roof over our head', 'Hispanics', 'Latinos', 'African Americans', 'a liquor store on every corner', 'it's just not enough', 'hungry', 'gangs', 'drugs', 'shootings'. These moments audibly rise and fall throughout the film, as if voiced by a chorus (and recalling the chorus of *Now He's Out in Public*), before the individual participants take over again. However, despite the multitude of voices, one of the most notable aspects of the film is its use of silence. Frequently, we see several frames on screen at one time, but only one individual speaks. The other heads nod, blink, fidget, look straight ahead or sideways. In the film's opening moments, for example, the individuals on each end of the row look back toward the others, as though they are



listening to what is being said. At times, Bookchin leaves both silent and speaking participants on screen for some moments so that, far more than in *Now He's Out in Public*, we have the opportunity to absorb how they look and what they are saying.



(Fig 49) Natalie Bookchin, stills from *Long Story Short*, 2016, single channel film, 45 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.



(Fig 50) Natalie Bookchin, stills from *Long Story Short*, 2016, single channel film, 45 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.

*Long Story Short* confounds expectations or stereotypes of homelessness and poverty. It presents individuals who seem highly articulate, intelligent, resourceful, educated and motivated to work.<sup>53</sup> (Bookchin's politics are explicit here: poverty in the US is not an individual problem but a systemic one, and thoroughly linked to race). Some of the participants have college degrees. Some of them work and are still in poverty or homeless. One woman works in a bank and makes \$12 an hour. It is impossible to afford rent in Southern California on this income, she says. Several of the participants, including Lolita Brinson mentioned above, describe scenarios that can readily be imagined by those living above the poverty line. Many of them grew up in so-called middle class or affluent neighbourhoods, or in neighbourhoods that have since been affected by poverty and crime, and they describe idyllic childhoods. Another participant (this time a white woman, one of only a few in the film) observes that she does not fit the profile of poverty; someone had even told her that her haircut looked as though it cost \$150. As in Bookchin's previous works, *Long Story Short* highlights its subjects' humanity. It focuses on the everyday experiences of finding food and taking a shower, and how difficult these things are to achieve as a homeless person.

*Long Story Short* represents a significant shift away from Bookchin's methodology of using found footage. As described at the beginning of this chapter, the artist and her team directly elicited the material, interviewing over one hundred individuals on the west coast of the United States. Participants were given the chance to create the videos themselves. As Bookchin writes:

during the interview, they saw a live feed of themselves on the screen, and were able to present themselves as they wanted. They could redo sections, skip over questions, and elaborate on topics not included in the prompts. They were treated as the experts, the insiders—and that's something many of them don't feel very often in the eyes of outsiders, where they may feel judged, feared, or not seen at all.<sup>54</sup>

Despite her own manipulation of the footage, Bookchin observes that she gave the individuals the opportunity to frame their own identities, in a process which recalls participatory anthropology or so-called 'participatory action research' developed over the last century—forms of research in which participants themselves are seen to 'own[ ] the discourse: seize[ ] the power!'.<sup>55</sup> Bookchin speaks

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<sup>53</sup> This contradicts some findings of a recent North American report by the Salvation Army (cited by Bookchin in an interview with this author). This recorded 27 per cent of the people surveyed as believing that 'people are poor because they are lazy'. See The Salvation Army, "Perceptions of Poverty: The Salvation Army's Report to America, 2012," accessed April 19, 2016, <http://salvationarmynorth.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/2012SAPovertyReportWEB.pdf>. Also Holly Arden, "Natalie Bookchin in Conversation: Long Story Short," *Video Vortex Blog*, February 19, 2016, accessed August 21, 2016, <http://networkcultures.org/videovortex/2016/02/19/natalie-bookchin-in-conversationlong-story-short/>.

<sup>54</sup> Arden, "Natalie Bookchin in Conversation: Long Story Short". My own interview with Natalie Bookchin commenced before the work's premiere and was one of the first pieces of critical literature to discuss this work.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Kemmis, Robin McTaggart and Rhonda Nixon, *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research* (Singapore: Springer, 2014), 4.

about her own role in the film as ‘that of a careful listener’, while her editing ‘performs a kind of close, subjective listening and distillation of the large body of narrations I collected’.<sup>56</sup>

The title of the work, *Long Story Short*, presents us with a two interrelated ideas. Firstly, that poverty and homelessness in the US are often ‘shortened’ to stereotypes, when in fact, the causes and manifestations of these social issues are long and complex. Indeed, recent reports show that income inequality is widening, as is the band of people associated with the ‘lower middle classes’. Another report shows that one in six Americans live in poverty.<sup>57</sup> These statistics suggest that the root causes of poverty are wide-ranging, and may apply to those individuals who earn an income, but who live just above the poverty line because of the cost of taxes, childcare, health insurance, college tuition fees, or other costs.<sup>58</sup> Secondly, the title reflects Bookchin’s approach to the material, where complex stories are told briefly to mirror the brevity of vlog streams, many of which can only capture short snippets of long stories and which are often told in episodes.

Even more than in *Now He’s Out in Public*, *Long Story Short* is framed as a ‘transparent’ or direct encounter with its vlogger-participants. Bookchin’s preserves her ‘bad’ footage of individuals clearing their throats, covering their faces with their hands in embarrassment, or coming close to tears. The individuals are posited as relatively unmediated; they speak openly in public. Bookchin’s shift in methodology toward soliciting material directly from people would suggest that what we see in this film is precisely a more documentary or indexical encounter—a view from the inside, as it were. Many of the individuals name themselves as they speak, and each of their names is listed at the film’s conclusion. Any sense of the public as an anonymous and abstracted ‘mass’, as in moments of *Mass Ornament*, is absent here. *Long Story Short* presents its vlogger-public as highly individuated. Its subjects get longer to speak, to narrate their experiences, than in Bookchin’s other films. Additionally, whereas the metaphoric chorus of *Now He’s Out in Public* was removed from the central drama, the individuals in *Long Story Short* seem to be very much part of the ‘theatre of life’ which they describe, often in unison. The film appears to suggest that this unified voice is not so much a case of ‘social scripting’ as discussed previously, but a case of collective experience.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Madeleine Cutrona, “A Conversation with Fiscally Sponsored Artist Natalie Bookchin,” NYFA Current, October 22, 2015, accessed April 6, 2016, <http://current.nyfa.org/post/131671329048/a-conversation-with-fiscally-sponsored-artist>.

<sup>57</sup> The Salvation Army, “Perceptions of Poverty.”

<sup>58</sup> See, for example Poverty USA, “The State of Poverty”, accessed 21 August, 2016, <http://www.povertyusa.org/the-state-of-poverty/snapshots-of-poverty/>.

<sup>59</sup> With respect to *Long Story Short*, Bookchin has claimed that the film:

draws inspiration from one of the more promising aspects of network culture—the shift away from a focus on single voices to that of many, and the expansion of who gets to speak in public and of what we now consider expert knowledge.

Natalie Bookchin, “Long Story Short,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 12, no. 2 (2015): 159.

More overtly than in either *Mass Ornament* or *Now He's Out in Public*, *Long Story Short* builds on the idea of the public as a collective entity, as well as on the possibility of a digital public sphere. Now, Bookchin seems to suggest, there exists a viable version of the modern public sphere, where action may be taken for the good of the collective. Certainly, this film has a more activist 'bent' than the earlier films discussed in this chapter.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps most compelling for my argument, however, is the suggestion made by this film that the idea of the public sphere, much like its modern predecessors, is defined by its relationship to those 'from below'. I want to argue that the notion of the public invoked by *Long Story Short* is related to 'otherness' as a factor of class—to the otherness of the poor who are like 'us' (physically and emotionally) but who are not us as gallery viewers, relatively detached from the 'reality' of the situation. I consider this claim that the public is 'from below' in terms of two aspects of the film: its creation of vlog-style imagery and the way in which *Long Story Short* depicts the poor.

### **The public from below**

In a well-known essay by the artist Hito Steyerl, titled "In Defense of the Poor Image" (2009), Steyerl discusses the 'poverty' of certain digital images. She describes the circulation of what she calls 'poor images' in and out of the dominant economy of professional cinematic production.<sup>61</sup> Poor images are bad quality images, frequently pirated, 'distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution'.<sup>62</sup> They are poor images not just because of their low-grade quality, but also because of their lower status in terms of capital. Poor images also have capacity to undermine the economic dominance of professional cinema and to circulate itinerantly. Thus, the poor image:

builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics... It is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools.<sup>63</sup>

Steyerl accounts for the proliferation of poor images as an affect of the neo-liberalisation of culture, the stranglehold of the cinema multiplex and the edging out of small-time film production.<sup>64</sup> While she does not directly address the amateur-style YouTube videos of the type Bookchin draws on or creates

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<sup>60</sup> Bookchin has claimed that she did not mean for this to be an activist film as such, but that it derived from some previous work she did with homeless advocacy groups. Holly Arden, "Natalie Bookchin in Conversation", para.3.

<sup>61</sup> Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *eflux* 10, no. 11 (2009), accessed March 22, 2016, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, para.1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, para.23.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, para.10.

in her vlog works, we can nevertheless consider these as very much within the poor image economy that Steyerl describes. This thrives on its capacity to bring together otherwise completely dispersed ‘new publics’ through networks of common interests, and is interdependent with the economy of ‘legitimate’ imagery.

Appositely, Steyerl also discusses the manifesto “For an Imperfect Cinema”, written by the Cuban film director Juan García Espinosa. This is cinema that Espinosa hoped would transgress class divisions by ‘enabl[ing] some sort of mass film production: an art of the people’.<sup>65</sup> In Steyerl’s words, imperfect cinema could ideally ‘diminis[h] the distinctions between author and audience and merg[e] life and art’.<sup>66</sup> Clearly, the idea of ‘mass’ in Steyerl’s reading of Espinosa refers to the latter’s socialist aspirations, of which Bookchin’s take on the ‘mass ornament’, discussed earlier in this chapter, is explicitly sceptical. The point is that, for Steyerl, poor images are resistant to the dominant economy and can dissolve the boundaries between legitimate producers and audiences.<sup>67</sup>

Bookchin writes that in *Long Story Short*, as in previous works, she again ‘decided to shoot with webcams, to again use a low-res digital image, in part to suggest that these are images that should and could travel across networks, and become a part of our digital image streams’.<sup>68</sup> In other words, Bookchin actively attempts to create poor images and to insert them into the ‘mainstream’ digital network. Additionally, and in a longer passage that is worth dwelling on, Bookchin describes her interest in the clandestine economy of image networks and the ways in which digital images can move between private and public modes of viewing. Referencing Steyerl’s essay, Bookchin writes that her interest in ‘bad images’, in ‘poor images’, so to speak:

came out of series of videos I made between 2005 and 2007 that documented anonymous landscapes I found by looking through online security webcams. I documented my online travels through these cameras, into back yards, alleys, street intersections, inside restaurants, front porches, ordinary private spaces around the world, private space inadvertently made public when a googlebot detected and indexed its url. In relation to that work, I wrote about the poetics of the images I collected—low resolution and highly pixelated—unmanned by a human operator and indifferent to blinding bursts of light or hours of darkness, and how they

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., para.16.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Steyerl cites a list of socialist and alternative filmmaking practices (Dziga Vertov, agit-prop, Third Cinema) as possible precursors to contemporary, digital proliferation of poor images. In this vein, we can also consider Bookchin’s use of what she has called the ‘tools of the sharing economy’. Bookchin uses this term on her own website in conjunction with the works *Testament* and *Long Story Short*. See <http://bookchin.net/projects/long-story-short/> and <http://bookchin.net/projects/testament/>, both accessed 22 March, 2016). The sharing economy refers to the public ‘sharing’, hiring or lending of products and services rather than purchasing them (with key examples being Airbnb and Uber). In terms of media this is often illegal and operates through such networks as peer-to-peer file sharing. This mode of ‘collaborative consumption’ has of course served to radically undermine corporate ownership and associated forms of regulation but it has also provided opportunities for individual and small-business entrepreneurship. See The Economist, “The Rise of the Sharing Economy,” *The Economist*, online version [from print version], 9 March, 2013, accessed 22 March, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21573104-internet-everything-hire-rise-sharing-economy>.

<sup>68</sup> Arden, “Natalie Bookchin in Conversation: Long Story Short”, para.19.

bore the marks of their travels across low bandwidths of electronic networks.<sup>69</sup>

Bookchin appears invested in the idea that the digital realm is one in which images from below: poor, informal, haphazard and—perhaps paradoxically—‘private’ images can operate in an alternative image economy. The poor images that Bookchin creates in *Long Story Short*, imperfect and shot using webcams, suggest this other economy. In her essay, Steyerl indicates that these alternative images can be associated with the rhetoric of ‘the people’ as I have also described it previously in this thesis. In *Long Story Short*, Bookchin’s ‘poor images’ embody the kind of (private) public activity that may be largely unseen in the more dominant digital streams of commercial or institutional media: activity that might be low-grade or amateur, informal, or which is somehow unrecognised within the current discourses on poverty.<sup>70</sup>

There is a further sense in which the public in *Long Story Short* is ‘from below’. The phrase ‘from below’ is associated with the tradition of Marxist ‘history from below’ practiced by twentieth century English historiographers including E.P. Thompson, mentioned in Chapter Four. Thompson and his contemporaries including Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé sought to write the history of English workers’ struggles. This was distinct from ‘English History Proper’, as Thompson wryly observed in his widely cited essay “History From Below” (1966).<sup>71</sup> In this article, published in the *The Times Literary Supplement*, Thompson reviews the literature on Labour history (with a capital ‘L’) to discuss the positive evolution in recent worker historiography from the academic conventions of the time.

However, the historian Martin Lyons has more recently observed that Thompson and his contemporaries represented an ‘old’ history from below in that ‘the actual members of the lower classes remained an anonymous mass’.<sup>72</sup> Lyons argues that, while Thompson and his contemporaries ‘restored a sense of power and agency to the working-classes, they were primarily interested in public action rather than private lives’.<sup>73</sup> He means that the earlier historiographers focused on collective actions and the emerging organised labour movement rather the yet-to-come ‘personalization of History from Below’, which focuses on people’s lived experiences. Lyons observes that the ‘new’ history from below:

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., para.18.

<sup>70</sup> See Jacques Rancière’s notion of the *sans part* or the ‘part without a part’. For Rancière, the *sans part* refers to those individuals who are manifestly outside of being ‘sensed’ by the rest of the community. These include the historical working classes, the proletariat and the poor. See Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, edited and introduced by Andrew Parker (Np: Duke University Press, 2004); and *The Politics of Aesthetics, the Distribution of the Sensible*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2000), which includes a useful afterword by Slavoj Žižek (69-79).

<sup>71</sup> E.P. Thompson, “History from Below,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, April 7, 1966, 279.

<sup>72</sup> Martyn Lyons, “A New History from Below? The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe,” *History Australia* 7, no. 3 (2010): 59.2.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

is new for three main reasons: it re-evaluates individual experience; it searches for the personal and private voices of common people, however they may be mediated through institutional and other channels; and it considers ordinary readers and writers as active agents in the shaping of their own lives and cultures.<sup>74</sup>

By ‘individual experience’, Lyons means those idiosyncrasies used to describe exceptional behaviours and beliefs beyond popular conventions. I dwell on Lyons’ description of this new history from below because it evokes Bookchin’s political project in *Long Story Short*, not to mention Jeremy Deller’s historiographic works discussed in Chapter Four. Although not dealing directly with history, *Long Story Short* invokes and complicates historical representations of poverty, particularly in abject photographic portrayals by such key examples as Dorothea Lange and Paul Strand. As Bookchin writes: ‘I wanted to avoid overused images of poverty, so-called “poverty porn” and to present new images conjured entirely from the language of those on the inside’.<sup>75</sup> Lyons’ above distinction between ‘public action and private lives’ is also worth considering in light of Bookchin’s film. *Long Story Short* is as invested in one as it is in the other: in the potential for digital forms of collectivity and in the lived experience of poverty as told by ‘insiders’.

The ‘new’ historiography described by Lyons is perhaps not quite as new as he suggests. For instance, it clearly underpins Jacques Rancière’s writing from the 1980s onwards. In books such as *The Nights of Labor*, published in English in 1989 and subsequently titled *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, Rancière presents and explores writings by members of the nineteenth century French working classes: ‘locksmiths, tailors, shoemakers and typographers’.<sup>76</sup> Rancière’s project is to reject the Marxist view of classist struggle (supported by his former teacher Althusser, mentioned in Chapter One) wherein the working classes are unwittingly caught in a system of capitalist domination but ignorant of the very structures that keep them there. This is also perhaps Lyons’ criticism of the earlier Marxist historiographers, mentioned above. In *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière describes his surprise at reading the letters of workers from the 1830s, discovering that these texts contain nothing of the workers’ revolts he expects to see, but rather, relate the time taken by workers to ‘enjoy the sunrise on the river’ or ‘discuss metaphysics at an inn’.<sup>77</sup> In short, this is time taken that was otherwise ‘refused to them by educating their perceptions and their thought in order to free themselves in the very exercise of everyday work’.<sup>78</sup> As Rancière writes:

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Arden, “Natalie Bookchin in Conversation: Long Story Short”, para.12.

<sup>76</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury, introd. Donald Reid (London and New York: Verso, 2012), vii; also see the discussion in Jean-Phillippe Deranty, ed., *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 6.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

it became apparent that workers had never needed the secrets of domination explained to them, as their problem was quite a different one. It was to withdraw themselves, intellectually and materially, from the forms by which this domination imprinted on their bodies, and imposed on their actions, modes of perception, attitudes, and a language...<sup>79</sup>

Given *Long Story Short*'s invocation of history from below, how does it relate to the notion of the public as 'other' developed earlier in this chapter? Here, Rancière's theorisation of the working classes as a *sans part* (the part without a part) discussed in Chapter One can be brought into dialogue with the notion of 'the public' under neo-liberal capitalism. Rancière does not mean that the *sans part* of the poor or the working class do not exist at all. The *sans part* refers to the particular worldview, that of the current, sensible order, in which the poor are supplementary, fulfilling only certain roles ascribed to them by the dominant order.<sup>80</sup> *Long Story Short* confounds its subjects' otherness through the artist's attention to the personal, to physical and emotional experiences of humanity that can be readily identified with—and not just by those in poverty. Bookchin's film keenly emphasises the sense of disenfranchisement and systematic socio-economic failures in the US, which are not limited to the film's participants but are experienced by a broad public. Indeed, *Long Story Short* emphasises its participants' commonality, their 'exceptional normality' (to borrow from Lyons, above), acknowledging the widespread rates of poverty in the US. Bookchin and the other artists in this thesis gesture toward the public as a much larger and broader number of 'common people' (to recall Lyons)—to the idea of the public as the *sans part* within the neo-liberal order.

In conclusion, then, this chapter has sought to reposition the concept of the public in terms of contemporary economic and technological considerations, where it diverges almost totally from its modern bourgeois origins discussed at the beginning of this thesis. I have thus sought to distinguish Natalie Bookchin's *Long Story Short* from the romantic lineage of artistic portrayals of the noble working poor. Bookchin is perhaps more sceptical than any of the artists in this thesis about the notion of the public. Nevertheless, her video installations and films locate its possibilities in user-generated digital and social media. Now, they suggest, the public exists in the 'poor image', the subversive image, and in lived experiences communicated publically.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. and introd. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2000), 88. The people are: 'the political subjects of democracy that supplement the police account of the population and displace the established categories of identification. They are the unaccounted for within the police order...'. Also see Jean-Phillipe Deranty, ed., 97.



## Conclusion

In his book *Keywords* from 1976, the cultural historian Raymond Williams observed that '[t]erms of contempt for the majority of a people have a long and abundant history'.<sup>1</sup> As a term signifying the majority of people, the public may be also used with contempt, particularly when intellectuals and others refer to the supposed ignorance of so-called 'public opinion'. But, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the term 'public' is also highly ambiguous. Used in relation to contemporary art, it may suggest entirely opposite polarities of experience, describing the public's outrage over art that may transgress inherently variable standards of morality, or the enormously popular blockbuster exhibitions that attract vast numbers of the public through the doors of major galleries in cities around the world competing for tourism and human capital.

I began this research because of the gulf that I perceived to exist in various facets of the relationship between contemporary art and the public beyond the immediate professional sphere of art making and exhibition. This primarily concerned apparent discrepancies of knowledge and taste—vestiges of bourgeois connoisseurship and enduring signs of 'cultural capital', not to mention capital itself.<sup>2</sup> And yet, it also struck me that there was a steady and growing interest among contemporary artists to engage with members of the public beyond the 'art world' through forms of participatory art. In the last two decades in particular, institutions of art have also latched on to this, and in many cases instigated it, in an effort to appeal to large numbers of people beyond traditional art aficionados. Further, a burgeoning theoretical discourse has explored the art that is made through participatory practices, and the types of human relationships that may result from these art forms. In this thesis, through a close reading of a series of art practices, my argument has been that the theoretical discussions involving these related types of practice have not adequately accounted for a tendency among the many artists who seek overtly to engage with the notion of the public. This public—the one invoked by the artists I have discussed here—is inherently multiple but nonetheless 'coheres' as an open or amorphous totality, frequently indicating those beyond the vicinity of the professional sphere of art.

My aim in this thesis has been to bring some clarity to the discussion on contemporary art and its publics by asking: how is the idea of the public for art explored in various artworks? I was

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (np: Fontana, 1976), 158.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* trans., Richard Nice (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1979).

drawn to the work of six contemporary artists and artistic collaborations that highlighted particular issues, a distinctive set of approaches and a related sentiment toward the notion of the public, allowing me to capture what is specific to these artists' conceptions of it. Importantly, this research focuses on a discussion of artworks more than it does on the public's response to these works, a project that would involve an entirely different research methodology likely including interviews with participants and audiences.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, while I have attempted to participate in as many of the works as possible, the thesis presents only one facet of a very intricate network of relations between artists, artworks and the public. My hope, however, is that this research provides a contribution to understanding how artworks assist in interrogating the nature of these complex relations.

This thesis is underpinned by the assertion of the public's non-specificity and its resistance to being definitively pinned down. Thus, the artworks in this thesis approach the notion of the public, insofar as it suggests any real totalising concept, as a kind of conceptual 'impossibility'. This has allowed artists a certain freedom to be able to pursue participatory works without the ideological burden and widely held qualitative distinction of practice that troublingly delimits individual and group subjectivity, including some examples of community art. Despite this (and not entirely contradictorily) there are two narratives that dominate the works in this thesis: firstly, that the public is incalculably large, indefinable in its entirety and unpredictable, as suggested by Komar and Melamid's mass-produced 'bastard' of a project; and secondly, that the public consists of any number of heterogeneous individuals, as implied by Harrell Fletcher's focus on 'some people', Jeremy Deller's investigation of subjective narratives of war and Stuart Ringholt's collection of one-on-one conversations. In general terms, this public is imagined as an indeterminate entity, which is nonetheless individuated through its encounters with art, aside from in Komar and Melamid's project, where the public remains as an abstraction. Here, we can recall curator and Jorge Ribalta's observation, cited earlier, that 'the public has a double meaning of social totality and specific audiences'.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond this general observation, several of the artists overtly reference a more specific political and economic subjectivity attached to the notion of the public. Indeed, Fletcher's works indicate

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<sup>3</sup> Claire Bishop attempts this very interestingly and effectively when she interviews a number of participants about their experiences with Thomas Hirschhorn's *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*. Bishop, " 'And That Is What Happened There': Six Participants of *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival*," *Thomas Hirschhorn: Establishing a Critical Corpus*, eds Thomas Bizzarri and Thomas Hirschhorn (Bern and Zurich: Swiss Federal Office of Culture and JRP Ringier, 2011), 6-51.

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Ribalta, "Mediation and Construction of Publics: The MACBA Experience," *republicart*, April 2004, accessed August 10, 2014, [http://republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01\\_en.htm](http://republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01_en.htm).

a fondness for the proletarian ‘production’ of the Weimar period and Russian Constructivism.<sup>5</sup> A Centre for Everything’s ongoing series of events is rooted in earlier pedagogic projects by Joseph Beuys and others that have sought alternatives to formal and bureaucratic modes of pedagogy. Deller’s works, too, variously speak to ‘people’s’ histories in both folk culture and industrial labour, as well as to the precarity of present-day employment in the neo-liberal economy, while Natalie Bookchin’s *Long Story Short* overtly addresses poverty in contemporary North America. We can read in these artists’ approaches a long-standing, avant-garde disavowal of bourgeois art and culture and an imperative to retain forms of the public that have been threatened by neo-liberal capitalism.<sup>6</sup> The leaking of the Panama Papers in early 2016 emphasised the economic reality that ‘the one per cent’ owns the great majority of the world’s capital, while the remainder of the world’s population, the vast amount of the public, represents the 99 per cent. The artists in this thesis explicitly frame the concept of the public in economic terms where it contrasts starkly with the public’s modern, bourgeois associations.

It would be historically inaccurate, however, to suggest that the public ‘from below’ as represented by some of the works in this thesis is analogous to the Marxist proletariat or even the industrial-era working classes. There are, of course, a number of factors for this, including the widespread introduction of welfare in the twentieth century and the broadening of access to higher education. Today’s public means something much more akin to the ‘average’ or ‘ordinary’ person, itself a loaded term, which I have sought to unpack. These observations then beg a series of further questions about the nature of the contemporary public. Does the public’s ‘average’ amorphousness, and the perception, perhaps, that the ordinary person is somehow overlooked, equate with political impotence? Does it signal radicalism lost, perhaps amid capital-driven apathy, co-option, or disillusionment with earlier forms of collectivity? I will propose now why this is not exactly the case.

## **The public beyond**

In her conclusion to *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop suggests that the current artistic preoccupation with participatory art is ‘the consequence...of the collapse of really existing communism, the apparent absence of a viable left alternative, [and] the emergence of the

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Mass and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 768-782.

<sup>6</sup> Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 173.

contemporary “post-political” consensus’.<sup>7</sup> Bishop’s view is that participatory art has largely been co-opted by the agendas of neo-liberal capitalism, which has adapted for its own ends many of the formerly political ambitions of participatory art.<sup>8</sup> She continues:

[e]ven though participatory artists invariably stand against neoliberal capitalism, the values they impute to their work are understood formally (in terms of opposing individualism and the commodity object), without recognising that so many other aspects of this art practice dovetail even more perfectly with neoliberalism’s recent forms (networks, mobility, project work, affective labour).<sup>9</sup>

The political co-option that Bishop describes perhaps explains the ‘taming’ of the public (both as a notion and as an affective entity), from its earlier and sometimes anti-authoritarian associations to its current evolution where it often suggests (merely) ‘average’ people. We can again recall political scientist Wendy Brown, who writes: ‘[a]s it dispenses with the very idea of the public, neoliberal rationality recognizes and interpellates the subject only as human capital, making incoherent the idea of an engaged and educated citizen’.<sup>10</sup> Could this be the same incoherence that I attach to the notion of the amorphous, non-essential public in this thesis? Could we suggest that these artistic conceptions of the public are also a capitalist fiction, where forms of the public are no longer distinguishable from economic imperatives, as is now the case with most public space?

I propose not. The works in this thesis are examples of participatory art that demand an alternative reading to that which asserts neo-liberalism’s ideological omnipresence. I have sought to understand these projects as those that inherently recognise their own contribution to, and reliance on, the capitalist economy, but which pursue the idea of the public in ‘utopian’ terms: as akin to a ‘no place’, to recollect Thomas More’s literary depiction of Utopia, but as an ideal still worth imagining.<sup>11</sup> Komar and Melamid’s work considers the historically utopian notion of ‘the people’ associated with the Soviet avant-garde. Other works in this thesis recall a strong tradition of Marxist thought in which hope for a better or a different life is thoroughly enmeshed with the democratic impulse.<sup>12</sup> If the history of participation in art can be understood as a history of utopian thinking, from the Weimar period and the Bauhaus (1920s-30s), to the communal utopias of the 1960s/70s, to the ‘micro-utopias’ of relational aesthetics (2000s), then

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<sup>7</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 277.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 183.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia* [1516], trans. and introduced by Paul Turner (London: Penguin Books, 1965).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (3 volumes written between 1938-1947); Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, 1978; Frederic Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, 2016.

the works in this study also imagine a form of utopian public—this is, any amorphous number of individuals who are not tied to the state and its institutions and to their ways of representing them, variously, as a modern, bureaucratic ‘mass’ or in terms of the totalising concept of ‘the people’.<sup>13</sup> In a certain sense, the works in this thesis could be described as ‘backward’, even nostalgic, in their utopian imaginings of the public. Arguably, there is no longer a public in the sense that it once classically existed. Even then, as well as in the modern era, the public was constituted by partiality and questions around who constituted it; this is despite the public’s long association with democracy. Nevertheless, the non-essentialist understanding of the public, developed in this thesis through my engagement with Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, allows us to think of the public as radically unknowable, and therefore as radically ‘open’—as a form of potential, which the works in this thesis tap into.<sup>14</sup> Mouffe’s work offers a way of thinking through the ‘structural’ forms of the public that lead to its ‘promise’ of instability and unpredictability. Mouffe argues that the (functioning) political public sphere must be open to agonistic forms of conflict, and as such, must be constantly and never-endingly rearticulated. I have also mobilised Rancière’s notion of dissensus as the potential for an aesthetic and political ‘miscount’ of people—namely, of those who exist outside of established ways of ‘being, seeing and saying’.<sup>15</sup> Herein, for example, we can think of Deller’s *It Is What It Is* as a work that overtly fosters dissensus in its sampling of public ‘voices’ from beyond mere bureaucratic perceptions of the public.

As such, a primary concern of the artists in this thesis is to redeem, or more particularly to imagine, a notion of the public where it has all but disappeared, or where it only ever existed in compromised forms. In these works, the public is posited as an ideal ‘other’ which exists somehow beyond institutionalisation—by institutions of art and otherwise. Here, the public both produces and responds to art in ways that are somehow less mediated, less stultified by commercial concerns and theoretical knowledge, and more situated in ‘everyday life’ than the works produced by professional artists and consumed by professional critics. To be sure, this is a romantic redemption of the public, an ideological response to the public’s near decimation by the contemporary economic order. It also resonates rather nostalgically with the avant-garde rejection of bourgeois capitalism. It would also be untrue to suggest that the artists are not aware of their complicity, however minimal, in the very systems they critique. However, the

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<sup>13</sup> Bishop, 276-277; Nina Power, “BMW Tate Live: Spatial Confessions – Speaking Part. Is the Public Going to Be Instituted?” (online video), BMW Tate Live Spatial Confessions symposium, Tate Modern, London, May 24, 2014, accessed August 17, 2016. <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/conference/bmw-tate-live-spatial-confessions-speaking-part>.

<sup>14</sup> A version of this idea was included in my article, Holly Arden, “Participatory Art and the Impossible Public,” *Art and the Public Sphere* 3, no. 2 (2014): 105-118.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. and edited by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 139

power of the works in this thesis also rests in their presentation of the public's very utopian 'impossibility'.<sup>16</sup> As I have repeatedly suggested, the public's definitive excess—the impossibility of pinning it down—is also its potent political and democratic potential, which the works in this thesis make a crucial investment in. The alternative scenario begs the question: what if we could no longer imagine the public as I have described it in this thesis?

### **Further implications and directions for future research**

The artistic approaches discussed in this thesis to the idea of the public signal a number of other, contemporary conditions. Most notable, perhaps, is the burgeoning ubiquity of the Internet over the last twenty years, and particularly the capacity for amateur users to upload and share content since the dawn of Web 2.0. This has clearly extended the spread and scope of private information entering public domains. It has also created new modes of publicity for any number of individuals, generating this public's proliferation into a greatly expanded series of shared spaces online. While many of the works in this thesis do not directly make use of Internet technologies, the ways in which these same works approach the notion of the public as an amorphous and incalculably vast number of people is mirrored by Internet technology's ability to facilitate interactions between an almost immeasurably large number of individuals—an impossibility only two to three decades ago, and now notably aiding the collection of Big Data. The works by Fletcher and his collaborators, along with Deller and Kane's *Folk Archive* exhibition and Bookchin's films and video installations, seem to be conceptually if not also 'actually' informed by the philosophy surrounding user-generated content on the Internet. This is, these works ply the centuries old philosophical and aesthetic debate around expertise and amateurism, a discourse that itself owes much to the growth of Internet technologies in recent years. For example, although neither Fletcher and Hoffmann's People's Biennial nor Fletcher and Rubin's *Wallet Pictures* made use of the Internet in any fundamental sense, the ethos of participation in culture by 'non-experts' has been strongly supported by the growth of user-generated technologies. On the other hand, Komar and Melamid's *People's Choice* was created in the mid-1990s, a period in which the Internet was in its infancy.<sup>17</sup> While this project already critiques the significant divisions between professional art and the public, the ethos of amateur participation in culture has since been vastly bolstered by the new technology.

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<sup>16</sup> Mick Wilson, "Autonomy, Agonism, and Activist Art: An Interview with Grant Kester," *Art Journal* 66, no. 3 (2007): 115-116.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Atkins, "Politics, Participation and Meaning in the Age of Mass Media," in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, ed. Karen A. Levine (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 62.

Overall, this thesis has sought to reposition a number of participatory artworks in relation to an updated theoretical and aesthetic concept of the public. My hope is that it will provoke new inquiries, which could include more practical considerations: how will publically funded institutions of art position themselves in relation to the public? What could a genuinely public gallery of art look like? What would it contain, and how would it function? What is the nature of future, public involvement in art at the institutional and governmental levels? These questions have become particularly urgent in countries like Australia, where ever more public funding is being cut from the arts, and publically funded galleries look to partner with commercial enterprises as they seek to provide ever more ‘engaging’ public experiences in an effort to bring the public through their doors. As such, I hope that this research provides a clearer understanding of what has been strangely absent as a subject within contemporary art, despite its seeming omnipresence: the public.

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## Appendix One

### Interview between Alexander Melamid and Holly Arden via Skype January 27, 2012, 10.30-11.30am

*This interview was transcribed from the recorded interview. It has been lightly edited in places by the author to enable clear comprehension and to ensure a smooth flow of text. Small sections may have been left out where they are deemed irrelevant to the overall interview.*

Holly Arden: Thanks for agreeing to do this...I've been in touch with Vitaly...and I'll be talking to you both about similar sorts of things....

My first questions focus on the People's Choice paintings....

I counted that you made 15 sets of paintings overall...I don't know if you can remember now...[laughs]

Alexander Melamid: I think it's 36. I did this in 17 countries plus the Internet....So it would come up to 18.

HA: So there are some that I haven't seen pictures of.

AM: Maybe I'm wrong then...I thought it was 17 but I can check it out....In Italy there were 3 paintings because the worst painting was done in 2 sizes. It's a copy of different sizes because they were not sure about the size.

HA: So you gave them 2 options. Got it.

AM: [Laughs].

HA: I had read somewhere that you went to some regional areas maybe in regional America and did some [paintings].

AM: Oh yeah, I painted a lot of those, sure. It was for a big painting after town hall meetings...we did a number of town hall meetings and I did a painting for Ithaca, New York, at the Cornell University Museum.

HA: And that was based on the results of the....

AM: The results of the talk with the people. And then there were some for the listeners of the NPR, the New York Public Radio.

HA: So you did surveys with them?

AM: Right, they sent out postcards to their subscribers.

HA: Where could I see these other paintings?

AM: I have them in my archives and I have a stack of polls of course. All the polls are in my studio. Real polls, you know, done by professional companies so it's quite thick material. There's different languages but they are all translated into English as well.

HA: The paintings that you got from the smaller groups in the town meetings — did they reflect the same sort of results as the country-sized paintings?

[Lost transmission for a second].

AM: Oh, you're back. They're huge. So remember Ithaca, then Toledo High then one place in...it was not San Diego but one of those universities...I forget...and then Richfield Connecticut.

HA: So you did subsequent....

AM: Yeah town hall meetings. You can see in the book. I think it's Ithaca.

HA: I read the book. I didn't see reproduction of these paintings though.

AM: They are there. Check it out. There are 4 more [paintings] at least, or five.

HA: Where are the physical paintings now? Are they in a museum or do you have them?

AM: One is in a private collection, you know. The rest, I have no idea. [Bad transmission]. One is in a private collection, the Ithaca painting, Cornell University.

HA: Now, I also noticed that there are a couple of versions of Denmark's Most Wanted.

AM: Different versions, yes, absolutely. Some of them were worked later and improved I don't know for better or for worse, because I decided that they didn't reflect exactly what was needed. So I worked on some, you know. Because all of these paintings were painting by me, myself.

HA: So you went back to the results and you thought maybe the first one wasn't right.

AM: Yes, I somehow retouched the painting. And did you count Ukraine as well?

HA: Yes.

AM: Because you know, this was only a very small part. Because they hadn't all been finished.

HA: When the book was made?

AM: Yes, when the book was made.

HA: So you went back to do this subsequent version of the Denmark painting, did you make it more accurate?

AM: Supposedly [laughs] more accurate.

HA: More reflective of the data.

AM: It seemed to me, you know. Yeah.

HA: And can you tell me about the other works that were produced in conjunction with the Most Wanted and Most Unwanted, the pie charts and the graphs?

AM: The big pie charts. I loved the form of it, just as...you know, it's an abstract thing, which has some meaning, which is always fascinating. An abstract geometrical piece which is actually not what it is, but maybe it is. But then there is some other layer of meaning. So I painted it really because you know with Komar early on I did this thing early on called *Ideological Abstraction* which is where the Russian language, each letter corresponds with a certain colour. So we painted dots and it looks like an abstract painting but you can read it as one of the articles of the Russian...the Soviet Union constitution at that time. That's the same, it's like a totally abstract thing. It doesn't mean anything...only on the label. The first time, the right people were red and the left were blue. [laughs]

HA: Is that right? You mean politically leaning?

AM: Yes, politically, and I wanted it reverse from Russia. [laughs]. That's one of the little discoveries.

HA: You mean that was their favourite colour?

AM: No, pie charts are made mostly in blue and red. ... The charts have nothing to do with reality, just the abstract thing, which would presume [to] reflect reality or depict reality. It was one of the very strange things. [Materiality?] through abstract images which have nothing to do physically with what reality is. So, and the blue and red was mostly used with no reason whatsoever. Every time you see the pie chart and colour it has nothing to do with reality. It's an absolute abstraction, just to make them different. There's no other reason.

HA: Just an arbitrary choice.

AM: Just think about it: we see a lot of charts now, you know, the bond market's up and down and we see them as reality [laughs] and we see them as an amazing thing but they have nothing to do physically with reality. And we are surrounded by these images more and more now because of the economical problems, you know we are bombarded by all this stuff, presumably meaning something. I'm not sure it means anything actually, but some people think it does. You have to read Hume....he said it all. About our perception of reality and what reality is and how we connect to reality.

HA: I was just interested in why you asked the respondents for the demographic data. I mean, obviously it didn't come into the final paintings. Why did you think that was a necessary part?

AM: It's a take on the idea of consumer research. It's very popular. I think it's the most important sociological tool and we totally believe in that, and of course it's totally biased. I didn't take any part in the construction of the questionnaire. They ask me every time on the road when they work on the questionnaire, you know the pollsters, but I always say 'yes' because I didn't want to get involved at all. I wanted to be as objective as possible. They did it according to what they considered to be right.

HA: I see.

AM: It's not my poll; it's their poll. That's what it is, it is a realistic thing. That's what the people do, I mean the pollsters. And that's how we imagine the world. They created the image of the world which we believe is true.

HA: So they split the world into this series of questions.

AM: Yeah. And of course, there's no objective questions either. It's very biased and mostly really stupid [laughs] but that's what it is. I don't want to improve on anything. That's what it is, that's how it works, and...the whole work shows this enormous prejudice of our time I think because the polls are so important, so widely spread, so influential. We believe in them, and medical research and everything, but they all lie, it's another form of lie....of total deception.

HA: Following on from that, and obviously you said you didn't even write the questions, but is there a particular reason why certain survey questions were differently worded in different countries and in some countries they weren't asked at all?

AM: Again, when I hired some pollsters, or the people that sponsored hired the pollsters, they always talked to me first and I said, 'listen, you have to do it according to your science of polling...I trust you, I only work with the numbers you present to me and I need to know the texture or the colour or whatever in order for me to paint it.' And I didn't interfere in the process at all. The only thing I asked them to do because they asked for the size of the paintings

in inches and said ‘no, no, no, people wouldn’t understand inches, let’s do it you know the size of real objects they’re familiar with like the size of a refrigerator, the size of a dishwasher, the size of a TV, that was my input, the only input, to make it more familiar, more realistic let’s say. That’s what the people know really for sure, the sizes of a refrigerator, or a wall or a TV and stuff like that.

HA: OK, I just have some broader conceptual questions now. It’s some years since you did the People’s Choice now and I understand obviously that you and Komar no longer collaborate, but hypothetically speaking, is People’s Choice a project that could be repeated, and if it were, what sort of results would you expect get today? Would there be any difference.

AM: I am very curious to find that out, myself. That would be really interesting. But I have no answer to that. I read that somewhere, you know, about a great realistic painter Diego Velasquez, you know the Spanish guy? And he was supposedly saying that he didn’t care about whom he would depict. They didn’t exist for him as human beings. They existed as the objects of painting. That was the same for me. I didn’t care about the results. I only followed the results. I was trying to be as neutral as I could be. Again, neutrality is impossible maybe, but, I mean, you can strive at least.

HA: We are following your Republican nominations here through Jon Stewart.

AM: [Says something, unclear]. I’m not a participant.

HA: [Laughs] With the Internet sweeping [through the world] it’s much easier to get poll results more than ever.

AM: The Internet already existed [when the project was carried out] but it was not as widely spread of course as it is now. So it was done door-to-door. Here in the United States and European countries it was done by the telephone. But I know in China and in Kenya it was done door-to-door. I think it was one of the first public opinion polls ever performed in China. And it was done by the sociology department of Beijing University.

HA: And I read your comments in the book about how with the Chinese people there were a lot of “I don’t know” [‘don’t know’ responses to the survey questions].

AM: You have to read one more thing, it can be found on the Internet. Because the first thing before the book was published, the interview was in The Nation magazine. They devoted most of the one issue to that. So it was a cover story of the magazine. And you can find it in the archives. I think it’s a better take on this. So try The Nation magazine.

HA: I know the magazine and I’ve read the interviews with you and Komar. Are you saying that there’s a reproduction of the survey?

AM: No, if you read the interview in The Nation magazine, I think it’s better than in the book. And it was done by the same interviewer....

HA: JoAnn?

AM: Yeah, JoAnn.

HA: And she expanded it for the book right?

AM: Yeah, she inserted something of her own [laughs]. But in some ways it’s more pure in The Nation magazine. It’s more concise, it’s more conceptually right.

[PAUSE – ALEX’S PHONE RINGS]

HA: In the “Painting by Numbers” book there’s an interview with you and Komar (that we’ve just been talking about) and in the interview you actually comment, Alex, that the survey questions ‘used the word “art” as little as possible, because the word rings the wrong bell’. Why did the questions use the word ‘art’ as little as possible, and does this assume, perhaps, that art in inverted commas is somewhat of reach by ordinary citizens?

AM: No, it’s mostly because ‘art’ is an ideological construct. And people have an ideological take on it, OK? I wanted the real wishes of the people, not their ideology. ‘I am against abstract art, I am for realism’ or ‘I am against realism, I am for abstract art’, ‘I don’t like that art’...It’s like an ideological battle between Republicans and Democrats, it has nothing to do with what you really think about things. It’s like you’re a fan of this sport team or the other sport team.

[ALEX’S PHONE RINGS AGAIN]

HA: So it was more about breaking through any preconceptions that people might have about what they should think about art?

AM: Ideologically, yeah. Because I was afraid that simple people will go with their idea what [they think] art should be.... Same with more sophisticated people. It’s ideology, it’s a different story, which I didn’t want to touch on.

HA: OK, I see. This leads on from that: considering your experiences with the People’s Choice project, do you think that ‘the people’ or ‘the public’ are empowered to consume fine art?

AM: There is one point only. We believe that the democratic system in which we both live, whatever it means, it means mostly that people vote for their leaders, so the majority wins, even if the majority is very slim, by one vote. But it always wins. So the point is that we believe this system works really well and that it’s the best system available. So if we believe that’s it’s a really great system, why not apply [it] to art? If we believe that we can choose our leader and it will a fair choice, then why not art, why not some other stuff as well? So the problem is...

[ALEX’S PHONE RINGS AGAIN]. [Laughter].

AM: If a democracy works...the one thing we know about a democracy is that we are entitled to choose our leaders, but not ‘we’, the majority [gets to choose], the majority wins. And if we believe that it’s a fair and the only possible great system of ruling, then why not apply [it] to other spheres of our world. Why not choose it by vote? We know that great books are popular books. Maybe not popular in the beginning but in eventually they are very popular. So in a way, literature is being part of the same democratic process. Only, fine art is totally immune to that. It is the hands of a very small clique of people: you know gallerists or buyers or museum curators, which are all connected to each other. It’s one group of people with one interest....So in a way it is anti-democratic. I am not saying it is bad or it is good. But, I am not sure why different principles apply to different entities. So maybe one principle would be good enough.

HA: So good literature is literature is popular literature.

AM: I am not saying that artists can’t be popular. Artists can be popular too. [Unclear section – sounds like ‘museums covet individual artists’]. People go to a museum mostly, not to see an artist, but to see a museum. A museum is a holy place, it’s a cathedral. And we go to cathedrals and churches to look at art and go to museums to worship. It’s really more or less...it makes no difference what is in it...maybe that’s an exaggeration...[it makes] little difference. A museum is a museum whatever it is showing. Bilbao is a very good example: there is no collection to speak of. There is nothing to look at, or something [but not much] but people flock to it...not only to see the museum from the outside but to get inside, to worship, to get enlightened, to get this spiritual blah blah blah.

HA: I have some questions for you about that in just a minute. Now I have quite an abstract question so please bear with me! [Laughs] This is going to the very crux of what I am trying to look at within my work. So in the People's Choice paintings you were trying to represent this quite abstract or elusive concept: this idea of 'the people' and I think you proved how difficult it is for polling or market research to get it absolutely right. And these tools, these market research tools or polling tools end up representing a partly distorted image or a very distorted image of the people's needs or opinions or wants. I am very interested in terms like 'public opinion' or 'public pulse', these terms that are used that suggest this overarching public consensus. Do you think it is possible for 'the people' to speak with 'one voice'? Isn't it just a case of the majority?

AM: I think there are two problems. First of course, we are talking about the majority. So we talk about 55% think this way, therefore the country wants that thing. That's how it works in the polls. So if 55% of people want this thing, then 45% of people don't want the thing. Same with the [way the] American people chose their president. It's not all the American people. It's only a small tiny majority of the American people, because only 40% of people vote in the American election so you get proportions like only one third of people choose the president. So the same is everywhere: what is the voice of the people? If everyone wants the same thing, that I understand, but if even one dissenter it's not the voice of everyone. And it's impossible to quantify. It's an illusion. For each of our deeds, we need a justification. It used to be that the people in Europe at least used to justify their deeds by referring to the Bible, by theology, so from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on we referred to science. We say 'it's scientific'. And we say 'ah it's scientific, it must be true!'

[ALEX'S PHONE RINGS AGAIN]

In a way, we have the same now in the universities' political science departments. What the *hell* is political science? [Laughs] But it came from 19<sup>th</sup> century. People left and right, they've got this Nobel Prize in economics. I mean, come on guys, there's no science in economics, as we now know for sure.

HA: Absolutely!

AM: We can't predict anything. Science is something which can predict the event. That is what science is about in the first place. If you're mistaken once, it means that your science is wrong. We have to recalculate. So in a way, scientific methods are taken from science and applied to something, which is...you know, belongs to the social sphere or the artistic sphere, and trying to justify its existence and saying that what we're doing is true because it's scientific, not biblically correct anymore.

HA: So we've moved from justifying things based on the Bible through to [science].

So, obviously you and Komar remained the ultimate decision makers as far as painting the works were concerned, but how did you reconcile the decision to be the ultimate 'authors' of the works with trying to make the works as democratic as possible? And how did you...

AM: [Interrupts] I want to make a point about myself and Komar. We worked together till maybe 1999 and then we signed our works together, but we worked completely separate.

HA: OK.

AM: OK, so the People's Choice was done by me, from the beginning to the end. He didn't take any part in it, none. Zero.

HA: None? Oh OK.

AM: He talked a lot about it when publicity came but in a way he was always against this work. In a way we had a conflict because I didn't like what he was doing and he didn't like what I'm



doing. So it was a normal conflict. He didn't like this project. But when publicity came he was taking part because he understood that publicity's a good thing. So that's what it is. But I made all the decisions.

HA: You made all the decisions.

AM: And I'm sure I made it wrong, but...

HA: That's the risk you take [laughs].

AM: David Hume will explain everything [laughs], because you cannot make it right. There is no way for us to make it right. We are biased at every point of our steps. We are confined by our ideology, by our social status, by our feeble minds, you name it. But it's a point in time, the whole work, you know: when people understood truth in polls, and that's how they conducted most of the business and political life. And now you know, especially in the United States, of course, now what is going on with the election cycle and polling [laughs] [Bad transmission]. [They can] predict for a couple of hours before the election what would happen in the election by polling people and spending a lot of money. Why do you want to know half an hour before, can't you wait...? [laughs]

HA: It's instant gratification!

AM: The most idiotic enterprise ever [laughs], but that's how it works nowadays. It would work differently but this is the point in history and that's what was considered to be true and revealing and that's what it is about, the whole work. ....nobody wants to acknowledge or to tell what art is, and lately, I just understood: modern or contemporary art is the invention of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Because before that, art for art's sake, along with Mormon religion, theosophy, Christian science, Communism, Freudianism and stuff like that. So that's one of the inventions. You know, it has not a long pedigree. It is a cookie enterprise in the first place, the same as Mormon stuff, or Freudian, or Communism, or theosophy, it's kind of a cookie construct, most of which is alive and kicking. [Bad transmission]. It's one of the cookie constructs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

HA: So to go back to what I was thinking before: you're obviously trying to be as open and as inclusive and as objective as possible with these results but you're obviously aware that there is no way that you can be completely objective.

AM: I remotely can, but it tells about myself, about the polling, about myself as an artist who came from Russia, blah blah blah. There is a whole story behind this, which is kind of hidden maybe, but it's there. And that's the only way to explain it. It's not an objective truth but a point in history of this country which I live in, which is the United States...that's how it was understood, and that's how it was presented and that's what it is. And it would be very interesting to conduct the poll again of course....with an amount of money I happen to raise [laughs].

HA: Well I had an idea of how you could conduct it again. You know how we were talking about polls happening in real time? So you'd have to set up a whole lot of canvases around the room and you'd have to do it really quickly and the results would change every five minutes and it would just be this...factory.

AM: Would you like to cooperate on this project?

HA: I'd have to empty my piggy bank! [laughs] It's a very cool idea.

AM: We can do it very differently with no professional help.

HA: That's right, you could just pop it up on the web!

AM: Maybe we'd find out some other way to find the people; maybe it would be a good discovery in political science [laughs] and social research.

HA: Well this is real social engagement isn't it? I mean if you could put it through Facebook or Gumtree and it could just branch out that way....

Now I want to talk to you about faith, and the idea that art can be sacred for people with no traditional faith. Did People's Choice teach you anything in particular about people's faith in art. For example, I read that many people or some people were quite outraged by the results of the paintings, or by the paintings, as if you'd sort of trampled on their faith.

AM: Yeah, of course. People have blind faith. Because if you start to think about your faith, it destroys your faith because it's absurd. Look at Christianity or Mormon faith, I mean, it's nonsense from a logical point of view....So I mean of course people didn't like it because again, it's a sacred matter. You cannot talk about it, you can only pray [bad transmission].

HA: So what does for you as an artist that people have faith in what you do.

AM: You know, I have a definition of art which I'll send you.

HA: And what about faith in relation to the Art Healing Ministry?

AM: It helps. Now I work in a hospital, with real patients. Psychiatric patients.

HA: That's real faith.

AM: So I tell them, if you want to feel better, you have to believe it what I'm telling you. And as soon as you believe, you will feel better. It's been proven by the same statistical research that the people who go to church and pray and blah blah blah live a little bit longer and are happier. I think it's a lost religion.

HA: What, art?

AM: Art, yeah. A big religion. There are many small religions, like yoga, for example, or something like that. But in a way it is a religion because we were told that it is good for us to see art, somehow it is good. I was trying to ask the question 'why is it good?' 'What exactly is good?' Nobody could answer. People were smiling. And I said 'why are you smiling?' 'You believe that art should be taught at schools.' And said 'why, what is it for?' 'What does it do good to you?' And then I realized if it's really a faith, it must heal you, like holy water. And I'm trying now to organize medical research of art on people. So that's another project for you if you want to take part [laughs]. Doing this will have a fuller picture of what art is.

HA: The Art Healing Ministry was, you know, in some cases not so serious. But what about the patients you're treating now? That's a very serious endeavour and you are really talking about faith now.

AM: There was an article in the New York Times about the Clinic. And I said to the interviewer: 'truth is funny. Whatever is not funny is not true. Not everything which is funny is true but if it is not funny it is not true. Period.' It is funny, even idiotic, to put it this way. But the same we can say about any religion, about Christianity or holy water or Lourdes when people come for treatment. I was in Turkey and I saw very little remnants of a temple of Asclepius, which was the god of health. And they digged out a lot of small figurines, which healed people. People who were healed brought back [the figures and said] 'thank you god you cured me'. So they were cured! There are thousands of figurines discovered showed that people were cured. The traveling was difficult and so they were cured enough to go *back* to the same temple, god knows where, to bring the thing and thank god. So in a way, Asclepius was a very good god to cure people. It's been proven. It's as good as holy water. And of course you know

about the placebo effect. Which nobody can explain but it works, there is no question about that. Whatever it is, nobody knows what a placebo effect is, but it's clear that people who believe in the healing power of a provider — a health provider — they get better, and sometimes they get cured, completely.

HA: So the work you are doing with the people at the hospital in Queens: are they making work? How does that process work?

AM: No, the same, I show them works of art. The same exactly as what I've done. I project the images, I show the images, touch the images. Then I ask them to go to museums and stuff like that. They are really medically sick people, whatever it means. Psychology is like political science, it's like imagination at work. There is no scientific foundation for it. You have to read an article a couple of months ago in the New York Review of Books about psychiatry. I'll send it to you.

## Appendix Two

### Interview between Harrell Fletcher and Holly Arden via Skype January 31, 2012, 11–12.15pm

*The interview was transcribed on 31 January 2012 from the recorded interview. It has been lightly edited in places by the author to enable clear comprehension and to ensure a smooth flow of text. Small sections may have been left out where they are deemed irrelevant to the overall interview.*

Holly Arden: [Gives introduction to the project and to the use of the term ‘the public’ in the thesis]. One of the key applications of a term like ‘the public’ is its political application. And there’s a strong political angle to many of the works that I’m interested in — and many of the works engage with themes of democracy, elitism and equality, and things like this. So these are the sorts of things that led me to your work, and particularly to your project with Jens [Hoffmann], People’s Biennial]. So I’m interested in things like the political and historical lineage of the project, which I know you go into in some detail in the catalogue; and what it means in today’s political climate to have a ‘people’s’ art project.

Just a straightforward question: given that the People’s Biennial is a biennial, I imagine that there’s plans to repeat it in two years time?

Harrell Fletcher: Yeah, that’s kind of a complicated question actually and the simple answer is yes, there are plans. [Laughter] They’ve changed several times and I’m not quite sure what the plan is at the moment. We actually have plans for the next two but we’re not going to do them with ICI so we’re sort of trying to re-figure out how that’s going to work. We’re sort of starting to of run out of time also !...

The origins of the project ... I feel like in some ways, probably, the title was kind of a working title and we probably should have changed it and we didn’t and it sort of brought up this question and an assumed follow-up that I’m not quite sure was so important. So the original idea when it was conceived wasn’t going to be ... it wasn’t going to happen in the way that it’s happening. It was going to be in relationship to an existing biennial. So it was a proposal for an existing biennial that takes place in a particular city and then I was going to do a series of small exhibitions around the world that happened in regional spots with regional work and then there would be one venue at the biennial where examples of that work would be shown together. And so that was why it was going to be called the People’s Biennial in that case. And so in that sense, it wasn’t supposed to be reproduced as a biennial, it was just meant to be like an alternative to the existing biennial. But then that didn’t end up happening and Jens decided he wanted to just do it anyway and so we re-figured out a different mode, but I kind of wish we’d changed the title at that point also. It’s a little bit messy, the whole thing.

HA: You would have changed the title away from the focus on the ‘biennial’, or from the ‘people’s’ part?

HF: Probably both. Both of them in a way have been problematic and I think that wasn’t ever really the point of the project. The problematics that have come up are sort of tangents to what we really wanted to talk about, so it hasn’t been really that productive to have that title that [makes] people have these certain questions, and they’re not really the ones we were so interested in, so we probably should have come up with a different name. But anyway, it’s too late for that! We have a conference that we’re doing in Philadelphia as part of the final exhibition, which is at Haverford College ... and it’s a one-day conference and we’re bringing in various people to talk about some of the issues that I guess we’re more interested in, in

relationship to the project but then sort of broadening it out and applying it to other people's practices and larger concepts.

HA: You said before that with the titling of the project, people focussed on something else ... what was the focus for you as opposed to the focus that was taken up by [other] people.

HF: By using 'people' ... by using 'people's', there are a bunch of assumptions about what that might mean. I mean, in reality, and maybe I talk about this in the interview in the book, if you looked in the phonebook here in Portland, there are actually dozens of businesses and things that use the word 'people's'. I was somewhere the other day and a truck pulled by and it was like 'People's Moving Company'. And there's 'People's Co-op' and 'People's Yoga' and there's like zillions of these 'people's' things. And in those cases, nobody goes to them and says 'oh, so you're representing *all* of the people', or 'this is meant to be totally democratic' or anything like that. They sort of understand that they just mean it as a friendly term implying like we want to interact with you, as customers or as shoppers or as co-op members or whatever it is, kind of implying that maybe there's more focus on the people, the users, than there is on bottom line issues, those kinds of things, which I think are consistent with what our interest in the project was. But we didn't mean it to imply that we were somehow representing all of humanity. Or that it was intended to be entirely democratic or anything like that. It was meant I think in relationship to our understanding of what traditional biennials are like that tend to focus on an elite sphere of the art world and that a lot of people are left out of that, and that in general, in the art world, a lot of people are left out for various reasons. And so we wanted to do a project that attempted to be *more* inclusive, not *totally* inclusive but just more than the status quo in either a biennial or in the art world. And then the biennial part: like I said, it was kind of a remnant. I don't think we were really thinking about it too much when somehow that happened. [Laughs] For me, it was pretty important than once we had stated that, that we do it every two years. For some reason, for Jens, at least at some point, he didn't seem to care about that any more. And, because it was a collaboration, it took a back seat for a while and then his argument was like 'well, the Biennial lasted for two years, so the next one can start 4 years after the first one started'. And I was like 'well, that's not a Biennial anymore'. So we're still discussing that and trying to sort that part out. The project on a whole has been positive in many ways and then there were some problems, which happens with projects, especially when you take on projects that have so many different moving parts and so many different people who have responsibility, investment, ownership in it. It's part of the territory of working in this way, that it doesn't always go totally smoothly and I can't force my desires entirely on it, I have to be willing to roll with some things and sometimes that means that something that seems inconsistent or missing or a problem just ends up happening. But that happens, and that's normal. I don't think it's at all like a failed project .... And I just got pictures back from Haverford and it looked like people were really happy with it, so I think in many ways it is working. There are just some issues along the way, too.

HA: This picks up on what we were talking about before, in terms of what you were trying to do with the meaning of 'the people' in the People's Biennial. There's a softly spoken sense of activism in the project, and particularly given its association with the Howard Zinn book. I find this cropping up in many of your projects: a 'people doing it for themselves' kind of approach, which you could call 'grassroots' or even anti-capitalist. Is that too strong a thing to say?

HF: No. That seems consistent.

HA: I guess this anti-capitalism thing was what I was taking from the meaning of 'the people' within the People's Biennial.

HF: Yeah, I mean it's tricky because I mean maybe 'anti-capitalism' is not exactly right. It's largely right, but I feel also that it's not anti-capitalist to the point of 'I'm not going to participate in capitalism'. I understand that it is a dominant system that is very hard to escape and so some of the projects that I have done in the past have actually tried to play with that a bit

or just tried to alter ... tried to throw off that system; do something unorthodox within it. But it's still sort of using it. And, you know, I'm someone who gets paid to do the projects I do. I basically am a capitalist. I'm just a sceptical capitalist and I think that there are forces at play when capitalism is dominant and in the art world there are so much market forces going on that I'm interested to [value] other things and other people and work that doesn't find its way into that system ... [area of bad transmission]... I'm sceptical and I'm trying to provide other ways of doing things I guess.

[Section of bad transmission] I'm a sceptical capitalist and it's good to be at least aware of the system and in some cases provide alternatives to it. But I'm not saying it should be destroyed. I just think it's out of balance.

HA: This is just another question about this term 'the people'. I noticed that it crops up in quite a few of your other projects: *Some People We Met*, *These Fine People*, and so on. And possibly I'm putting an unfair emphasis on it because it's my area of interest. But I guess I was interested in the different ways [the term] was being used in the works and in these projects it's perhaps celebrating the everyday or 'ordinary' people — just like 'you and me'. Do you see that happening across the body of work?

HF: Yeah. Definitely. And I think in those earlier titles I guess the emphasis was different or something. The problem that happened with the People's Biennial was that for some reason that by saying People's Biennial it made people jump to these conclusions about representing *all* people as opposed to, like, 'these fine people', or 'some people', where it's very specifically a *set* of people. I like the word 'people', I don't know why; it's just a word I like and I mean, a lot of the work is about people. It just fit well. I think somehow or another ... this usage of it ... [bad transmission] threw some people off and it's kind of an art world thing. Nobody cares when it's like 'People's Yoga' ... [bad transmission] It's sort of setting up an idea that if we're going to challenge something like this, that we have to do it in some kind of huge way and maybe it didn't accomplish that. It just felt like we ... set ourselves up for something that we could have avoided. In those other cases, I like the titles, and I like the word 'people' and I like people and I think it is consistent with the kind of work that I do.

HA: It [the sound] cut out a bit before but I think you were saying it [People's Biennial] set up expectations that you were trying to achieve a world-changing thing and that's not what you were trying to do?

HF: Yeah. It's one of these things also that when you do something unorthodox people are really critical of it. When you do something within the orthodoxy people are not critical of it in the same way. And so by setting ourselves up as an alternative so specifically, it just seemed like it made that a question that could have been handled differently. And I don't have a better title in mind at the moment, I just sort of wish we could have come up with something different, but I don't know what that would have been. But I do like the word 'people'. And I think it would have worked in the original context of how it was supposed to have worked, in relation to an existing biennial ... because the challenge would have been clear. It would have been in relationship to this international biennial that is very sort of art world elitist and so then it would have made sense. But doing it independently, it doesn't have that friction, that direct friction. So instead it's about a general idea and for some reason it doesn't work as well. I'm not sure.

HA: I understand that the curatorial approach that you took to the People's Biennial received a bit of critique and particularly from writers like Katherine Bovee. I don't know if you've seen her piece in *Art Papers*. Katherine argued that the projects ends up reiterating an 'insider/outsider' model of curating precisely because, to quote her, it 'is largely about the condition of being on the margins'. How would you respond to that sort of critique?

HF: Um, well I don't know. I don't quite see how that can be a critique. That just seems to be a condition. If most things [are] not in the margins that are done in the art world, then that kind of

[represents] the status quo. And then we did something that yeah, was about being on the margins but that was because that was what we wanted to focus on. And it achieved that. So, I don't quite understand the critique of it. Yeah there is an insider and an outsider. I don't really like the term 'outsider art' but there is clearly an insider/outsider dynamic within the art world. There are some people in it and there are other people out of it, just like in the business world or the political world or whatever. And the focus of this project was to look at people who were not insiders. So we could have done something that was inclusive of everybody. I mean, it *kind* of was. There were people in the show who had MFAs and have shown a bit before, but most of our interest was in showing people who hadn't already exhibited very much or at all, and so since that was the focus, that's what we did and that's what we wanted to do. It doesn't seem like much of a critique to me, I guess. Although I never read those kinds of articles, so I probably won't read it.

HA: She [Bovee also] talks about what she calls a 'top down' approach to exhibition making because you and Jens came into the communities and selected people. I know in other projects like *Come Together* you've actually got other people to curate the show.

HF: I don't know, I just think there's different ways to do things. It doesn't mean that one is right and one is wrong. It's just different. And in this case, and there are many other cases, where I particularly selected people who I've worked with ... . We definitely worked with the local curators to have them help guide and suggest where to look and who to look at and those kinds of things. Although we also had these totally open calls where anybody could come in and bring their work in for us to see. But in the case of *Come Together* it's just like an event: it happens and it's over with and part of the beauty of it is that if one of the presentations amongst the presentations isn't very good it's just sort of over really quick. But [with the] show it seemed like it was important ... to have some upper management control over it or something, to say we want to put these things together very consciously and so it just made sense to do it that way. We could have done a different kind of show ... . If you do something like this you want it to be mostly [things] that you feel really strongly about. You know, you don't just want to just include random things, or things that somebody else selected that you may not agree with. You want to create a good argument for the inclusion of more marginalized people into the art world. So in a way this is like an argument, saying like, if you're not including this wider array of people, then you're missing out on all this good stuff. And if we couldn't back it up as being actually good from our points of view, our subjective point of view, then it didn't work any more. And so it just felt important in this scenario to do it that way. I don't know, this is another one of those things where if you do something in an unorthodox way then everyone sort of jumps on you, that you didn't take it to the *most* absolute unorthodox. It's really strange to me that people can't delineate, and see, well, I made the choice to do it this way. I don't have a responsibility to do it in some sort of absolute way just because I veered off a little bit. Maybe that's all I wanted to do was *that* much of an alternative. And to me that was important. So we were pretty conscious about it. We could have done it any which way we wanted. Maybe we will do it in different ways in the future ... once again, I just don't even understand how that's a critique. That just seems, like, silly to me.

... . I think there are things to critique the project about, but those ones don't seem like interesting critiques to me [laughs].

HA: What would you critique the project about?

HF: Well, I think there are things that we could have done that would have made people in the local sites more invested or something. Part of the idea ... was that by making a group exhibition that travelled to the five places where the work had come from ... that was one of the strongest parts of it [because] each place it went to there was a local set of artists included and then because of that there was a local audience that was attached to it. But we could have probably built in more things that would have accentuated that or drawn that out more and somehow or another that didn't happen. We had ideas about that and it didn't quite happen.

And then, within the selection process, we wanted to do this open call idea and then for some reason ICI balked at it and didn't think it was a good idea, and so we didn't do it in Portland and I think we really missed out on doing that there. We didn't do it in Arizona either initially, and then we went to South Carolina and we did it and it was like a really great success and then we went back and re-did it in Arizona. But at that point I couldn't go, just scheduling wise, so Jens had to do that alone and I think that started to bring in some of the problems too. I guess the way I collaborate is different to the way that Jens collaborates or something. And so sometimes there were selections that were made, probably from both of our perspectives, that we didn't individually agree with, [that] we had to just go along with. But we kind of divided it up like that: like I got to select from certain cities and he got to select from certain ones and then you wound up with some parts that I just wasn't interested in, and probably the same thing for him. And so that's one of the problems I guess ... It was like a problem of time and space. We couldn't actually spend that much time together doing these things. So it resulted in some, like, shortcuts that I wasn't, like, thrilled with.

HA: You hinted before that the communities where the people were drawn from could have been more invested. Was that a challenge, trying to get the wider community involved, not just the people and their immediate families and friends?

HF: Yeah, that was something that pretty much became the responsibility of the individual art centres in those places by getting press and engaging broader communities. I think in some cases they did that better than probably others. And that was something we could have tried to structure more. And we have some ideas for future versions that might include more of that. In some ways we probably left it up to the institutions too much and didn't give them enough support or suggestions on how they should do that. But the basic premise of it did work quite well, that the people who were directly involved, the artists who were selected, they did come to the openings and they invited their friends and family and there were local news organisations that wrote about individual people, usually focussing on their own local people. So, it worked to some extent.

HA: Several writers have commented on the complex ethics involved in curating some of your projects. How do you know tread this ethical ground between 'enabling' less advantaged people to display their works and their stories, and potentially highlighting disparities?

HF: Well, I want to highlight disparities so I think both those things go hand-in-hand. All of these questions of ethics or whatever, I am just dismissive of them because I've never read one or encountered anyone who had a good argument around that stuff. [Laughs] So, it's just largely meaningless to me. It doesn't really relate to any of my experience. And to me it just seems like if they actually did their research they would actually realise how off the mark they were. I haven't run into a single ethical dilemma in any of the work I've ever done. It's not there. So whatever ones they've conjured up are just like complete fabrications. They don't have anything to do with the reality of the projects. So I don't know, it's just weird to me. I think it has to do with a bias that artists are somehow bad people in society and it's OK if they do their bad things in their studio but if they do their bad things in public then it's like exploitation.

HA: This [criticism] comes out of an ethnography discipline I suppose and all of the baggage that comes with the bad parts of that.

HF: Right. But most of the work that I do attempts to address that dilemma by being site-specific. So the problem with that stuff was that you would go to some place, extract something out, and then show it, deliver it, present it in some other place, and the people who were the actual subjects never got to comment on it or see it. And so if you do it site-specifically in the place where it comes from then you automatically have to take them into account. And unless you're willing to just piss people off and then deal with it, which is not my interest at all, then you're not going to do something that's going to do that. And they do get to comment ... I mean, I always try to bring people in as much as possible so that they know what's going on



during the process of the project too. So I've just never really run into that as a problem. But I think that if you looked at another discipline like theatre and you looked at all the regional theatres across the world where there might be a sort of professional director, someone who's gone to school for it and is maybe being paid by the regional theatre to do that. And then there's a bunch of volunteers who do stage sets, and lighting and acting, and costume design and maybe they get paid and maybe they don't. But they're doing it because they want to do it, and it may not be their job normally but it's something that they take part in ... in those cases, nobody's ever saying 'oh, that director's exploiting those people'. You know, it's understood, it's been normalised.

HA: They're willing participants.

HF: Yeah. And it's largely seen as valuable. Like, 'oh they get to participate in this thing, and they seem to like to do that and there's seems to be some cultural value for them in that'. So, I don't know why the kinds of projects that I'm doing are any different from that. Like, I'm not twisting anybody's arm to do it. They're doing it willingly. And, hopefully, they're getting some kind of experience out of it that's valuable. I mean, if it was turned around and, for instance, somebody saw me who was a choreographer and said 'oh, I like the way you walk, I want to include you in this dance performance that I'm doing'. Even though I'm not trained in it, and I wouldn't necessarily get any sort of monetary value out of it, I might just do it because it was an interesting experience and because the person had said they valued something about me and that I got to experience this thing. And I wouldn't feel exploited, I would feel like I was given an opportunity, and that it was a life experience and that I would take that with me, even if I never did a dance performance again the rest of my life. You know? I would be glad of having had that experience. So I don't know why it should be any different in the kinds of projects I do with people.

HA: Do you think of your practice as a type of story telling and what are the stories about?

HF: Yeah. That's one way of viewing it is the story telling idea, for sure. I like the idea of story telling both in [terms of] people writing stories, literature ... and films and theatre and all of those classical forms of story telling. I also like oral histories and radio documentaries and various ... I'm drawn I think especially to non-fiction, or first person stories and those can either be self initiated ones or ... interviewing people or *This American Life* that is like a documentary program here ... . So yeah, I think that that informs what I do. I mean, obviously because my projects aren't happening in those forms ... if what I was doing was making just documentaries or radio documentaries or books, then the story telling part might be a greater part of it, but because it's fitting in to exhibitions and public art and events and things like that, I have to work it a little differently and so they're not so dominant. I think it's like a kind of pillar of what I do but it's not a mandate, it doesn't always happen, and it happens in various degrees I guess.

HA: There is an interesting discrepancy between the size of the audience or the publics for your works which goes from being in the hundreds of thousands in the case of *Learning to Love You More* to works that you might call quite hermetic and might have an audience of only two or three maybe. Who are the audiences for these latter works, these smaller works (I'm thinking of the *Reports*).

HF: Um, those were actually shown and distributed at a few different exhibition venues like the Drawing Centre and they were part of a show in San Francisco at New Lincoln Arts [?] and so they were distributed that way. But they were also just sort of put around, like in Laundromats or used bookstores and things like that. So they were like a little free journal kind of thing ... . The person themselves would get copies so they could distribute them if they wanted or use them however they wanted to use them. I guess I ... don't only value large audiences, so in my practice I try to ... that's not the main point: hitting a large audience. It happens in some cases when it seems like that's appropriate or [when] that's a resource that's available. But I can value

something that has a really small audience or set of participants pretty much just the same as I value one that has a large one. So the ... numbers part isn't what I'm valuing. It has more to do with circumstance. If it's on the Internet then that becomes part of what it's about I guess. And that's the reason to do it on the Internet. But if it's a different circumstance then it can be really small and contained and that can still be really valuable. Like I just did a project not too long ago in a grocery store in Indianapolis and yeah, there might have been less than 100 people that actually experienced it, but it felt like a really significant project to me.

There is something I always think about also though. For me, there is a primary audience which is the participants in a project, and that could be one other person, or dozens, or thousands in the case of *Learning to Love You More*. That's a primary audience and they have a certain relationship to the work that's more involved. And then there's a secondary audience, which is the people who witness it but don't participate. So there were participants in that project in Indianapolis — about maybe 20 or 30 — and then there was another 70 people who just witnessed it. And then there is a tertiary audience who witnesses a mediated form of that. And so they can see documentation of a project through a lecture or on the web or written about in a magazine or book or something, or they can just hear about it through word of mouth or somebody else [that was there, other than me] could have taken a photo or a video of it ... all of those ways that people could experience something that's more mediated. And I am interested in doing projects that have all three of those components, functional, in them, typically ... . Typically I like to hit all three of those audiences and also I value them in that same sequence: the primary one is the most important to me and the one that I'm most concentrated on when I'm doing the project. And the secondary one is next and then the third one is still important but it's much less important than the first one and even the second one.

HA: What about the place of pedagogy [in the work]? This idea of people teaching people? I know that you have an interest in alternative education.

HF: Yep, so I think that's just one of my interests ... . My mother was a teacher and studied a lot of alternative education ... . Once I was in college I really started becoming more and more interested in it, partly out of a sense that I wasn't totally convinced that conventional educational systems, which are largely what I had experienced myself as a student ... [were] the best ways to teach things and so I tried various other things myself as a kind of learner and then wanted to offer those possibilities to other people. I think largely I still sort of see my own work as opportunities for me to learn about things and so, since that is my primary way of understanding what it is that I'm doing, then education just becomes part of it. It's like, I'm learning something and then I also extend it to other people.

HA: When you go into these communities it's all about learning and teaching, learning and teaching, and finding out / research[ing]. That seems to be the model that drives a lot of the different projects, right?

HF: Yeah, and a big part of that though is also not sort of following conventions as to what would normally be thought of as valuable teaching [bad transmission] ... it doesn't have to be someone with a PhD, it doesn't have to be in an institutional setting, it doesn't have to be someone who's been validated through published articles or something like that. It's really sort of my own realisation that I can find people and things to learn about in all sorts of different circumstances and they don't have to be validated in those ways and so I'm using whatever sort of strange credentials I have to help validate those people and processes and places and subjects wherever I go.

HA: I've been looking at Jon Rubin's work a bit. I know that you two have collaborated in the past. I was drawn to something he wrote about his Waffle Shop project. I guess you know it: the talk-show project that is broadcast from a waffle diner? Jon writes about the project in quite an evocative way. He says, 'the ... challenge was getting people just to cross the threshold, which

is kind of the fundamental issue about art in the public sphere'. And he asks, 'what is that threshold, what defines it, and how is it bridged?'

Obviously you have a lot of experience with working on projects with people who could be considered outside of the art world. Can you talk a bit about some of the processes that you use to try to connect with people who might not normally be involved with art? How do you bridge this metaphoric threshold, if it exists?

HF: I think my main way of doing that is to personally invest people in the projects, so it's just like a really basic methodology. I was just talking to my class about this earlier. If you look at an example like a school yearbook that happens in whatever high school ... I assume you guys have these things?

HA: Impoverished versions!

HF: They may be dying off a little bit partly because of social media taking their place in various ways, but the idea of the yearbook was that it's the same form in every school; it's the same style of yearbook basically, but the content is specific to that school and so you yourself as a student appear in the book and then your classmates who you have connections to and your classes and your instructors and the teams or whatever. And so that book is of interest to you, but not because it's a yearbook in the way that other books work ... you're interested in this topic because it's about you. You're personally invested in it. So it's working very site-specifically, even though the form is generic and is replicated all over the place. The individual book is made relevant to the people by its content and so if you take that kind of idea and apply it to an art exhibition or public art project or whatever it happens to be, then people will automatically be willing to sort of cross the threshold. They are interested because it's about them. And that was something that Jon and I developed when we were working together in graduate school and have just sort of continued to use in various ways. [If you] get the people to participate in some capacity in [something] that is done well and that they value, then they will come. They will be interested. It's really basic but it's pretty much the opposite of the way that most art works, which is I'll make my individual art in my studio here in Portland and then show it in New York and the only reason people will come is that they truly love that work for whatever reason or they are coming because they've heard about me or read about me in some magazine or something, [or] I have a reputation. But it's not because they feel they have a personal connection to it in this other way, whereas if you go to New York and you work with the people in this neighbourhood where the gallery happens to be and you put on a show that includes them, then automatically you'll get people who wouldn't ordinarily be interested in art coming into this gallery space because they have a direct reason to do that, a personal reason. So that's kind of the basic thing that I tweak in various ways from project to project but that basic methodology happens over and over again.

HA: And the site-specificity being the ultimate, important thing.

HF: The work has to be really good, too. So I'm not someone who feels like the process is the only important part of the project. I feel like the process and the product both equally have to be really good and that if you have bad product it'll reflect poorly on the process and it'll sort of like negate whatever good thing you've done. You have to actually have a good product, too. I studied farming also and the thing that one of my farm managers when I was studying farming said was, 'in any situation you can use compost and compost will pretty much help any kind of situation. If you're soil's too dry, it will help'. What I mean is that site specificity is *sort of* the same thing. It's like, you can use it in any situation and it's going to work. At the very least, it's not going to hurt anything. There are circumstances in which you want to do other things and that's fine too, I mean, for other people it's not their interest, but as a general rule of thumb, if you're interested in gardening or farming, add more compost and it will help almost any possible problem ... You can't add *bad* compost ... compost actually has to be good compost, and so in the same way you have to do a good site-specific project, but the site-specificity by its

nature will fix a *lot* of problems that are sort of inherent in the art world all the time. So, it's a general fix; it's a really useful general fix that for some reason, most people don't use at all. It would be as if the whole gardening world didn't know about compost or something like that. They'd be struggling trying all of these different techniques and it could just be adding more compost ... . And it's more interesting too. I mean, that's a big part of it for me, it's just more interesting than doing general work in a studio and then sending it out ... .

HA: Can you talk to me about the presence of so-called craft or hobby or vernacular practices within the projects? I'm thinking about many of the assignments that you and Miranda [July] set people in *Learning to Love You More* and of course in the People's Biennial also there was a strong presence of this sort of work.

HF: Yeah, I mean once again for me, a lot of what I do within my projects is I sort of imagine how I want things to be and then I just treat everything as if it was that way. And so for me, I don't really have a distinction about what's art, what's craft — not in any sort of pejorative sense. So I just don't value things in that way. In the same sort of way that people have asked about age difference, like the inclusion of older people or younger people, I just don't have a fetishisation on twenty-year-olds that the art world seems to have. Like, I'm interested in a much more diverse range of people and experiences. Similarly, I just don't have any sort of pre-determined idea about what kinds of processes or objects are of value. I sort of try to treat those things really situationally, individually, and so I can run across something that would normally fit into a craft category by other people's definitions and it may just seem to me like the best thing ever, you know, whatever it happens to be, like carved soap. If it's really good carved soap then that's all I care about, you know? And it doesn't matter who made it ... like it doesn't have to be that it was made ironically by some person who just graduated from Columbia. I can actually evaluate it on its own terms, whoever it is, they don't have to somehow persuade me through their qualifications. So I believe that; I know it's not conventional, but I just go about life anyway as if it was and just try to bring everybody along with me through like, my own power of belief or something ... . To me, it's as silly as racism or something like that. There's no real intrinsic reason for this stuff. It's all cultural constructs. And if I don't believe in those cultural constructs then I don't need to go along with it. And I'll just do whatever I need to do within that and if people can see that as an example then hopefully it starts to change that. I just can't come up with any reason, other than commercial ones, market-based ones ... I think so many things are really about market values that are somehow being given to the practitioners, the makers of these things, who then sort of support those ideas, even though they're not beneficial to them.

We have this book that was written here in the US called *What's the matter with Kansas?* and it's about how these people in the mid-west and the south vote against their own interests. You know, they'll vote [for] Republicans who don't want them to have health care or who want to like, give rich people tax breaks, or something like that. And they vote for it because they've been convinced somehow or another but it's totally against their own interests. And I sort of feel like artists are the same thing: that they've been convinced by market conditions to believe various concepts that are actually against their better interest. They don't benefit at all by perpetuating the idea that some people make craft and some people make art and that 'this is what art is' and 'this is what art is'. I think they would really be benefitted from a broader, more-open ended perspective on all of those things. 'Cos what if they change at some point and want to make something that is called craft, you know, by a lot of people in a pejorative way? Then it could be a disservice to them that they've perpetuated that idea in the first place.

HA: And what about terms like 'amateurism' because I'd suspect that you feel similarly but I know that your work actively contests those sorts of terms. And you were in that exhibition called *Amateurs*, which was more about the *positive* side, the democratic side, of amateur work ... the collective side.

HF: You know, I think there's a difference between artists and doctors and lawyers and things like that. I mean, in the past, you could be an amateur doctor or lawyer and still function in society. Nowadays, you would be sued and thrown in jail if you attempted to do that. You actually have to have a law degree and a licence and all that kind of stuff ... For artists, that just is not the case, and it's never going to really be able to be the case ... There are too many precedents of people who don't have degrees that are still functioning at high levels within the art world, and ... there just isn't any reason for it. I think becoming academically educated and professionalised is a choice that you can make but it's not an imperative, it's not a mandate, and so ... that's a *great* thing about the art world is the people who fall under the category of amateur can still function at a really high level. It's more about the connections that you make through those things ... Personally, I'm actually drawn more to people generally (this is just a general statement, not absolute at all) who haven't been highly trained in making art. I'm more drawn to their work than I am [to] the ones who have gone through [the] full professionalisation process of making ... There is an indication, at least from my point of view, subjectively, that there is something going on in that process that negatively impacts the work that's made. It's something that I'm a little wary of, and especially being in the position of a perpetrator of that on my own students — it's something I'm very conscious of and [of] trying to find workarounds so that whatever it is that I'm doing in the classroom isn't somehow negatively impacting them as artists ... It's kind of like somebody who maybe was an MD, who was trained that way, who then goes back and looks at folk remedies and traditional approaches and finds that there's actually some value there and that maybe it doesn't make sense to always prescribe a drug for each thing when it turns out that there's other methods that might work ... I realise that it's strange for someone who has already been trained to then take that position but maybe that's what allowed me to see it or something, too. But yeah, I understand the difference between these terms and you could decide that an amateur is just someone who wasn't trained academically or professionally or who doesn't make money doing it ... but I mean, most MFA students who graduate from school don't make money out of art. Does that mean they're not professional? We can make these delineations, but ultimately, they're not that interesting to me. I mean, my main interest in that is the damage that's caused to the people who go through these systems ... not that the people who don't get that are somehow lacking — they seem to be doing just fine. Their main problem is they just don't have any connections.

HA: I've heard your art labelled as 'social practice art' which is kind of an evocative term and me thinks that society itself is a practice — this idea that we're still practicing to learn how to live together. I want to ask you what role your art can take in social practice but I know that's a very loaded question. I get the impression that you don't go into your projects expecting particular social outcomes or social change ...

HF: For me it's [social practice] an academic term that's mostly useful in that it separates out from studio practice ... I've actually found the term to be quite useful and it was one that didn't exist when I was at school or for most of my career ... It's kind of nice to have this term that's somewhat neutral at this point because it doesn't have a single proponent the way that Relational Aesthetics did — it's not sort of owned by a certain theorist or a set of artists ...

But yeah, as far as the thing about whether there's intended outcomes: there are intended outcomes but generally they're not about, like, some sort of quantifiable 'goodness'. They're not attempts to fix something exactly. It's more about augmenting something ... I don't know though, I'm actually a little bit torn on this, and it's something I'm kind of experimenting with. In a way I would love to say 'yeah, my work does good, it helps people!' But I've always felt sceptical about saying that, and I didn't really want people to expect that. So, if it happens, I'd be very happy that that was the case, but I don't want people to sort of assume that I have that, or that I can control that. Because I also — in a more traditional art sort of way — I don't want to know what I'm doing, exactly, as I'm doing it. I want to, like, keep it open. So if someone said, 'ok you can come in here but the issue you've got to work on is *this*', I would have a hard time with that, as opposed to 'come here to this place and figure it out what you're going to do'.

And it could be that it then touches on various issues but I haven't ever felt comfortable being so specifically ... especially politically or social service style ... the attempt of doing good. I feel like I'm not a social worker, I'm not a doctor, or whatever. I'm just not quite sure what it is that I'm doing that is good. I think there is something good about it but it's not so specific and quantifiable as the way that other people [who] do good things do them.

HA: So not specifically prescriptive.

HF: Yeah, it's really tricky though and I'm thinking about it, because some of my students do want to do things like that I don't want to deter them but I also don't want them to be, like righteous ... it's really tricky terrain for an art-trained person to have to deal with that somehow or another. I feel like I need to take some time off and think about that some more and evaluate what's gone on so far ... right now I feel confused about that subject, and my tendency is to somehow avoid it with the kind of unsaid hope that there might actually be something good that happens. For some reason I feel uncomfortable stating it and making the expectation of it. And I want it to be still valid even if I don't do that. I want to be able to do something that just turns out to be sort of silly or interesting in some other way but there's no actual, like, good that we can find in it.

[Harrell's battery runs out]