

8. When I speak of "the artist," I do not mean an abstract and universal artist *per se*. Nor am I referring to a particular kind of artist. However, the concept of the artist as a category, and the concrete expression of my experience and conceptualization of what I believe the artist should be, inevitably inform, connect, and unite my concept of "the artist."


---

**What is the responsibility** of the artist to society? It is an open question what role art might play in a society that has all but ceased recognizing the existence of a public arena in which speech and symbolic behavior address important questions for the sake of the common good. Even introducing these terms shows how outdated they are. Instead, the language of cost accounting anchors the discussion of the role of art in public life. This loss of sense of (united) purpose has provided an opening for the right-wing to launch an assault on culture, with various rationales, including the rarely stilled voice of aestheticism, which prefers to see art as a transcendent, or at least an independent and therefore formalist, entity, with no social tasks to accomplish—itself a powerful...
ideological task after all. On the other side is a critique from the left, which is often more open about its desire to tie art to its agendas. But neither left nor right is unified in what it wants of art, and on both sides there is the assertion of the need for artistic autonomy from the prescriptions of political figures. Nevertheless, there always seem to be people unhappy with the degree of autonomy that artists actually manifest. These are the broad terms of what has been a vital argument in the developed West through most of the century. For me, a child of the sixties, the questions of how engaged, how agitational, how built upon mass culture, how theory-driven (my) art should be have been ever-present, the answers never settled, since the terms of engagement themselves are constantly being renegotiated.

The much noted crisis of modern society and culture continues to affect the art world, offering me no reason to change my judgment of twenty years ago that artists have difficulty discerning what to make art about. During the "emancipatory" sixties, many artists looked to the community of artists for an answer and in the process sought what seemed an attainable grail: liberation from market forces, which had been a recurrent goal of artists throughout the modern era. Such liberation, it was believed, would free artists to interpret—or perhaps to interpret for—the wider society. A number of strategies were directed toward this goal, including the circulation of art by mail and the development of happenings, performances, and other Fluxus-type interstitial maneuvers. Soon after, the rhetoric of democratization helped artists gain state support for the establishment of "artists' spaces" outside the market system, to pursue "experimental" forms. It would probably be a mistake to see this as elitism or separatism, as some have done, for artists were likely to identify with a rather vague notion of the common person, over and against art dealers and their clientele.

These "artists' spaces" were therefore thought of as more democratic, more related to the grass roots, than museums and market galleries. The concept of the art world as a system was just then being developed, and thinking about such matters as communicative acts or messages in art, about audiences, or about government aims in giving grants, was often not clearly articulated. The conceptualization of the new set of practices as a space was consistent with the notion of space as created by the practices of social institutions and the state. The alternative-space movement took place in the context of a wide acceptance of the idea of alternative cultural spheres, or countercultures, which was richly inflected through the late 1960s and early 1970s, largely as a result of the antiwar/youth movement and its alienation from modern technological/institutional power. Many young artists wanted to evade dominant cultural institutions: museums and their ancillary small shops, the commercial galleries, on the one hand, and broadcast television, on the other. High culture institutions were criticized for fostering individualism, signature, and careerism, and for choosing expression over communication. Television was castigated for empty commercialism (that part was easy). The institutional critique was also embraced by people who, with populist and collectivist impulses, made videotapes outside their studios in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The anti-institutional revolt was unsuccessful, and the art world has now completed something of a paradigm shift. The mass culture machine and its engines of celebrity have long redefined the other structures of cultural meaning, so that patterns of behavior and estimations of worth in the art world are more and more similar to those in the entertainment industry, particularly as represented by television and popular music. Most artists no longer seek to make works that evade representation and commodification or that will not, in the case of video and film, be shown on television. In fact, the art world has been called a branch of the entertainment industry, and its dizzying bowing to trends, its need for splashy new talent and forms of presentation (acts), supports this view. The end of high modernism has led to the fulfillment of demands for the new in art on grounds other than formal innovation. As the art world moves closer to an entertainment model of cultural production, it is moving toward a closer accord with mass culture in its identification of narratives of social significance.

In contrast to the entertainment industry, however, which, as personified by Oprah, promises that everything will go down easy, even mass murder, art sometimes produces social lectures uncomfortable to interpretation, containing complex significations and seeming to embody uglification and threat. Art is not going to be a successful player if made to compete on the same court. It may be more apt to think of the art world as a branch of the fashion industry because of its characteristic ability to turn substance into style, a maneuver accompanied by timidity and groupthink masquerading as bold new moves. As with clothing fashions, high-end products are custom made, unique, or scarce, and chosen and displayed (worn) by rich people.

When I began working, the two-worlds model of culture was dying along with Abstract Expressionism and high modernism, but the wrecking ball swung into motion by Pop Art hadn't yet brought down the
whole edifice—on which, it seems, stood the artist as teacher (I don’t say visionary, although even McLuhan imagined there would still be such a role for artists in the global village). My politicized practice began when I saw that things were left out of explanations of the world that were crucial to its understanding, that there are always things to be told that are obscured by the prevailing stories. (The defining moment was in coming to understand that reality differed for black and for white people. This realization came not from my own observation but from the black civil rights movement and from black people whom I knew as a child.) The 1960s meant the delegitimation of all sorts of institutional fictions, one after another. When I finally understood what it meant to say that the war in Vietnam was not “an accident,” I virtually stopped painting and started doing agitational works. A further blow to my painterly life was dealt by the women’s movement; I figured out what it meant to do works that were about my own life (read: identity)—that is, I came to understand the idea of “about” differently. But my ambivalence about the telos of art (I thought it had one, I still may) persists; the question was to what degree art was required to pose another space of understanding as opposed to exposing another, truer narrative of social-political reality.

When in the late 1960s Michael Fried argued against the abandonment of modernist presuppositions of transcendence because they could only be supplanted by presence and temporality—by what he called “theatricality”—it seemed to me he was right, but on the wrong side of the question. I had begun making sculpture, but I soon realized that what I wanted wasn’t physical presence but an imaginary space in which different tales collided. Now I understood why I was making photomontages. I want to discuss these works at some length here because their trajectory indicates something about changes in the art world, in which I have participated, though from the margins. I initially began making photomontages of political figures and ones of significant institutional and social sites, including operating rooms and cities viewed from the air. Then I began making agitational works “about” the Vietnam War, collaging magazine images of the casualties and combatants of the war—usually by noted war photographers in Life magazine—with ones defining an idealized middle-class life at home. I was trying to show that the “here” and the “there” of the world, defined as separate, were one. A few of these works incorporated images of American women, contrasting their domestic labor with the “work” of soldiers. Another, related set, more visibly Pop influenced, simply dealt with women’s reality and their representation: women with household appliances or Playboy nudes in lush interiors. In all these works, it was important that the space itself appear rational and possible; this was my version of the real as “a place.”

At the time it seemed obvious not to show these works in an art context. To show antiwar, or feminist agitation in such a setting verged on the obscene, for its site seemed more properly “the street,” or the underground press, where such material could marshal the troops, and that is where they appeared. If the choice was an art world setting or nothing, nothing seemed preferable. During the 1970s I turned to photographic media, including video and photography, as well as installation and performance. Although I never considered showing the photomontages in an art world setting, in giving talks, I showed slides of these works, particularly to art students; talking to artists in the process of defining a practice is critically important.

In the late 1980s, almost twenty after their making, an art dealer surprised me by suggesting we produce a portfolio of the images. What would determine my answer, aside from an allegiance to my long-standing refusal to take part in the financial dealings of the art world? The man making the suggestion had established a practice of showing politicized, sometimes agitational, works on diverse subjects. It had begun to seem important to preserve the antiwar work. I wanted a record, because it was my own work, but also because it was a kind of work that represented a political response to political circumstances. The art world had changed a great deal since the works had been made; by the late 1980s there was little possibility of defining a practice outside the gallery defined art world that still could be acknowledged within it.

Market discipline of the 1980s, enforced in part through the conscious action of the Reagan administration, had stripped away the monetary and ideological cushion for such practices. No matter what the cause, the discourse of the art world in the late 1980s flowed most directly from the gallery-museum-magazine system, but no magazine would devote serious attention to any artist not firmly anchored in a gallery world.

U.S. dealers don’t know much about art or its recent history, so it wasn’t surprising that the man who wanted to publish my portfolio knew neither my work nor my writings. In other words, in the 1980s the commodification of the art object—which a good portion of artists’ energies had been devoted to fighting in the late 1960s and through the 1970s—was complete. As the dealer said bluntly, I wasn’t on (his) art world map. I realized these works would be written into history only by being normalized. The works’ entry to the present was highly “economi-
cal" with respect to time and effort. Soon after their first appearance in a published art world source in the early 1980s in a survey article by a noted critic who had attended one of my art-school slide shows, the works appeared sporadically in other critics' writings. One of these had attracted the dealer's notice. After he published the portfolio and showed the works in his small, out-of-the-way gallery, *Art in America* published a feature article on them during the Gulf War. The whole portfolio was promptly included in a show on war images held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Mexico City. Now they are mentioned and shown regularly, at home and abroad.  
I have dwelled on these works because they illustrate the operations of the art world and suggest the difficulty of establishing a strategy one can comfortably maintain over a long period. The work migrated from the street to the gallery because that seemed to be the only way it might influence present practice. It could be written about only after entering the art world as a commodity. The initial audience had disappeared with the times, and it needed a new one, which might take the work as a historical lesson. In order to have any existence, it had to become part of a much more restricted universe of discourse.

In a contrary movement, quite a few politicized artists who find their existence within the gallery-museum-magazine system use their fame to reach beyond it using the tools of mass culture: the mass-circulation magazine, the billboard, the train station or airport wall, broadcast television. This useful strategy is not without dangers, because rhetorical turns common in the art world may seem cryptic, incomprehensible, or insulting to the general audience, or their wider import may simply be inaccessible. The invisibility of the message can be ignored by art world institutional types, but when community people misread the work, the art world must take notice. (A number of well-known instances could be cited.) The right-wing ability to attack artists so convincingly grows out of the marginalization of elements of high culture are undeniable. Art world subcultural activities that were the main impetus for the formation of the artists'-space movement are furthered, as I've indicated, in small undercapitalized institutions, in boutiques (art galleries), in journals and magazines, in classrooms, and sites of social intercourse, and also to an extent in high-profile, highly capitalized elite institutions, making high art largely invisible to all but a fairly small proportion of Americans. Unlike many other fields of specialized knowledge in advanced industrial societies, art's institutional base is not stable, and art is not consistently useful to the aims of the state. Moral panics may take place in social imposed. (Of the eight or ten invited artists, two local submissions and mine were censored. No other out-of-town artists were curbed.) My substitute proposal, a surreal photomontage with a somewhat vaguely worded critique of television, was accepted without demur. Another instance of the contest of specific and general: A few years ago I was included in a show of "political" artists in New York; the two curators hesitated between a work of mine featuring a life-size photo of Ethel Rosenberg and one using photos of airports as quintessential postmodern public spaces. Which did they choose?

The several roles art serves in society often seem to conflict. People (the daytime television audience, say), who have no difficulty absorbing fantastic amounts of social information and innuendo relating to sexual conduct from the flirtatious through the highly unusual to the criminal, as long as it is transmitted through entertainment media, discover in themselves a streak of self-righteous puritanism when the material in question is produced by people called artists and when government money is involved. How the issue of taxpayer funding figures in the actual reasons for people's negative reactions is hard to ascertain. It cannot seriously be argued that entertainers with risky acts, like Eddie Murphy, are successful because people pay to see them and that that should be the model for art as well. The support for television "personalities" is not so straightforwardly measured, and even the television industry cannot determine with any degree of accuracy a "popularity index" for individual figures, except those at the extremes. It is plausible that people want to punish artists, whom they can easily scapegoat, since they don't (knowingly) run into one too often or have daily-life familiarity with their work. (Or perhaps people simply long for those who have representational magic to use it to create visions of beauty and wonder—like Steven Spielberg—not real-world criticism or exposé.)

The increasing walling off of intellectual activity in institutions and the marginalization of elements of high culture are undeniable. Art world subcultural activities that were the main impetus for the formation of the artists'-space movement are furthered, as I've indicated, in small undercapitalized institutions, in boutiques (art galleries), in journals and magazines, in classrooms, and sites of social intercourse, and also to an extent in high-profile, highly capitalized elite institutions, making high art largely invisible to all but a fairly small proportion of Americans. Unlike many other fields of specialized knowledge in advanced industrial societies, art's institutional base is not stable, and art is not consistently useful to the aims of the state. Moral panics may take place in social
practice (repression of people of color, lesbians and gay men, Jews or Muslims, or even artists, for example) or in the symbolic realm (campaigns or witch hunts against pornographers, blasphemers, and so on). Subcultures with their own publics are mostly insulated from the criticisms of the larger culture or the state. Artists care because of the monetary value attaching to their work, and the mainstream institutions that support them are forced to bray in protest as well when the right engineered a generalized withdrawal of state support.

On the left, hostility to artistic autonomy also stems from the idea that art turns its back on the common folk. The left used to harbor a certain hostility to "vanguard" art because artists weren't sufficiently of the working class, the motor of social change. Since that class as such is no longer united or a powerful enough actor in public life in the States (the union movement, once an important political and social force, now covers under thirteen percent of the labor force), the more contemporary critique from the left often takes the form of a complaint that artists don't address "the people" or "the grass roots" or "the community," with those terms left more or less undefined. (The terms, and sometimes the understandings, are the same as the right populists'.) Left anti-art(ist) sentiments, traceable to Marxian economism, now stems as much from a critique or rejection of the restricted discourse—that is, the community understandings—that artists share. It is a criticism of language and audience, a criticism behind which lie charges of elitism and careerism. Ironically, hostility to artists' failure to occupy the social and moral high ground remains after theories of the proletariat have died.6

Although artists have often allied themselves with the so-called laboring classes since the early nineteenth century, artist subculture has constituted an enduring bohemianism, characterized by a rejection of certain defining working-class characteristics—most prominently, wage labor itself. Yet the shared vision of autonomy helps divide the two groups. The story of the Western tradition in art history has been a narrative of the valorization of personal and aesthetic autonomy, despite the fact that this dream of autonomy generally remained no more than that for the great majority of workers; the same dream thrives in the working class, where its greater unreachability seems to cause hostility to artists because of their relative success. The relationship to authority and power, then, is at issue. Artistic autonomy also led to the suspicion of artists and rejection of "advanced art" by political elites of both West and East. "Bourgeois" values have long been hegemonic in the States, and the working class, in rejecting exponents of sexual license or marital casualness, hedonism, atheism or iconoclasm, is spurning not the practices but their public espousal. People may engage in sexual practices that violate social norms and conflict with religious teaching, such as sex outside marriage, the use of birth control, or the resort to abortion, as long as a certain element of duality—some might say hypocrisy—is maintained. It is a consistent finding that some people engaging in same-sex practices reject the associated label and thus the identity; naming something, writing it into public discourse, is too powerful. To accept the right of "everyone" to live their lives as they see fit or to claim that so-and-so is all right, but that race or gender or sexual orientation do not deserve "special rights" is to accept a policy of informal exceptionalism.8 Artists and activists offend the sensibilities of the rule-bound when they interfere with people's ability to accept things in the private realm as long as they are not made part of the structure of law.

Artists, in turn, are often offended by working-class jingoism, while, ironically, the high-profile allegiances that prewar artists on several continents proclaimed with working-class political movements has led to suspicions that vanguard artists were Bolsheviks. Nativist movements, xenophobic and racist, are constantly recreating themselves among working-class adherents. But such policies of exclusion are not only socially institutionalized (as suggested by the inability of people of color to get jobs or mortgages and other loans compared with similarly qualified white applicants), but also are held by the middle class and enforced by social power elites. The latter, however, don't need to agitate for the maintenance of privilege, since they can resort to increasing behind-the-scenes pressure on institutions such as banks and courts to preserve privilege and manipulating public discourse—and therefore encouraging reactionary-populist attitudes—by deploying coded language. The visible result, however, is that hatred, violence, and exclusion appear to emanate from "the people." Thus, politicized artists are vulnerable to charges from the right that they violate community norms in the practices that they espouse or the groups that they champion and from the left that they don't situation their works in those communities or use language that can be readily understood by them. Since the tendency of capitalist society is toward social divisiveness, many artists have lost interest in instituting a broad discourse; the impetus to do so supplied by black, Latino, feminist, and antiwar militancy in the 1960s has dissipated. A new form of art world politics, "identity politics," has emerged, as I consider later.

As symbolic activity condensing social discourse, art does play an
important social role, though not one accepted with equanimity by those with reactionary agendas. Furthermore, as I suggested at the outset, artists have uncertain epistemological bases for their art. Transcendence is gone, along with ties to religion and the state, leaving an ever-changing rendition of philosophical, scientific, social-scientific, and cultural theory, including iconoclastic readings of identity and religion (Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe were both lapsed working-class Catholics). Authorship, authenticity, and subjectivism seemed no longer supportable by the mid-1960s and remain questionable despite the heroicizing tendencies and aspirations of the regressive painting movements of the 1980s. Culture itself—"society"—continues to be a problem, as it has for artists for centuries. The problem tends to manifest as a series of questions: with whom to identify, for whom to make work, and how to seek patronage. The immediacy of AIDS activism and its evident relevance to all levels of the art world, including museum staff, brought politicized art far more deeply into the art world than, for example, earlier feminist activism had. It led to the inclusion of directly agitational works, including graphics and posters. But the museum/gallery door is open wider for this issue than for most others; it is seen as a sort of family issue in the art-and-entertainment sphere, and public acknowledgment and rituals of mourning first appeared within mass entertainment industries, such as the movies, and in decorative arts, not in the high art world.

It can hardly be easy for artists to discern any responsibility to a society that demands they simply be entertainers or decorators. Those who demand racier material from art tend to be more privileged and educated, and it is those about whom artists are most ambivalent. At the same time, art objects are highly valorized (unique) commodities. Although real estate and other holdings have served to fill out the investment portfolios of the rich and superrich, including corporations themselves, art in the boom 1980s had a number of relative advantages as a safe haven for investment: its value was rapidly multiplying; art was generally portable and easily stored; and it provided a kind of cultural capital no other entity could offer. Nothing else quite suggests both the present and the transcendent, both the individual (touch) and the collective (ethos). Nothing else reflects quite so directly on the social and personal worth of the purchaser. Elites, defining this as art’s existence, recognize that art—and therefore artists—have a certain social necessity:

Alas, poor artists! They pour their life blood into the furrows that others may reap the harvest.

—Louisine Havemeyer, wife of the Sugar King H. O. Havemeyer, patron of the arts, grand benefactor of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, crusader for women’s suffrage; from the address she delivered at the (women’s suffrage) Loan Exhibition, April 6, 1915.

Mrs. Havemeyer was not (consciously) referring to financial rewards. She meant that society was the recipient. For she believed in the uplifting power of art, as did all the progressive elites at the turn of the century. Art and culture were part of the Americanization (civilizing) program for the immigrant hordes, a program whose financial support was part of the noblesse oblige of the rich. Such elites have also understood that if society is to have any degree of coherence and continuity, this sort of cultural production must be preserved. The establishment of the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities marked a recognition that in order for art to be preserved, it must be cushioned to some degree from market forces. In the 1980s, when market forces had again become paramount, this was not so apparent.

The viewpoint of social elites toward art is neither reliable nor consistent. In the early 1980s, the Reaganist attempt to shut down the Arts Endowment was stopped partly through the efforts of Republican elites (the wives, that is), who recognized the importance of saving the subsidies directed to orchestras, opera companies, and museums—and perhaps a little for the artists who fill them. But eventually Republican strategists like point man Leonard Garment tried to engineer a mission for the Endowment of preserving the work of the dead—the “cultural legacy” or “masterpiece preservation” argument—allowing the Republican Party to placate its reactionary-populist fringe by dropping support for living artists.

In contradistinction, critique from the left has been complicated by changes in dominant political discourses, particularly the fragmentation and rejection of “international Marxism”—of the master narratives (grands récits) of politico-philosophical theorizing. The articulation of (the positionality of) those who have been excluded from public discourse—the voices of the previously voiceless or marginalized—means that multiple discourses of difference must be voiced (and be heard) simultaneously. At the moment, they cannot comfortably be harmonized except through a “pluralism of Others,” but numerous contradictions erupt. Although identity appears to be a stable characteristic, a person’s
very essence, people in fact maintain multiple, even conflicting, identities, and positionalities, whose importance shift, advance, or recede, depending on other factors. Art world "multiculturalism" is a reading of identity politics and the so-called new social movements whose rise attended the fragmentation of Marxism. Having been implicated in this "discourse of Others," I find myself, not too unexpectedly, on both sides of the question.

On the one hand, who could possibly quarrel with the need for the articulation of Others, for and of themselves? On the other hand, it is impossibly simplistic to stop there. Art world discourse occurs in a specific time and a place, in the context of a preexisting discourse and a real politics. I want to point to some occlusions entailed by the incorporation into the art world of a version of the discourse of Others: How do you put a patent on a point of view when every identity, and every identity discourse, can be subdivided? How fine do you dice an identity? And what are the exclusions that result from your definition? Feminism in the 1960s and early 1970s was most visibly formulated by straight, white, middle-class women and then by white, middle-class, professional women. Questions of race and class still haven't been answered within the movement, despite years of struggling, and positions on sexual orientation are sometimes precarious. Political positions and movements are constantly being renegotiated from within by the pressures of groups which feel themselves to be excluded, unrepresented, and underrepresented. Inclusion of the previously excluded in the art world, however, doesn't solve the problem of audience. The African American artist Emma Amos says there is no black audience, only a white one, and that black artists must accept this for now. (Careerism doesn't go away when the careers belong to a different set of people.) But if Amos is even partly correct, yet another deformation, another self-Othering, is imposed on artists simply by entering the vital institutions of fame and fortune.

"Identity" in the art world has so far coalesced around race, sexuality, and gender. As I've indicated, (working-) class identity is not a currently powerful mobilizer; it is either despised (by non-working-class people), dismissed (because self-evidently powerless), or denied (by working-class people). A problem with the invisibility of class is that people benefiting from class privilege submerge themselves in identities suggested by skin color or ethnicity without acknowledging their superior access to knowledge and power. But even were this not so, social schisms that shear along class lines are recast as something else.

I recently ran into heavy criticism from a media theorist for a videotape I made on representation and the Baby M "surrogate motherhood" case, for it isn't fashionable among (academic) feminists to criticize the real-world practices of substitute child-bearing in case we foreclose an important option for women. I first codified my thoughts about the court case in a lecture on photography, in which I had rudely asked, which women, of what social class? The videotape I subsequently made with the populist media-activist collective Paper Tiger Television, *Born to be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby M*, has been broadcast and circulated not only in the art world and in classrooms, but also among medical and nursing groups, since it raises the ethical questions that must attend the formulation of social and legal doctrine in relation to newly capitalized forms of reproduction. I think this is one of the things art should do, but I suspect some of the academic border police dislike the fact that the work has the possibility of instrumental use—although its didacticism has nothing to do with its presentational form, which involves some very broad burlesque. My sympathy for the birth mother in this particular case, painfully arrived at, has opened me to some silly charges of essentialism (birth-motherhood is sacred) and even, perhaps, Luddism. Many viewers appreciate the defense of "poor women" and women of color; relatively few applaud it for its class analyses. At the heart of the Baby M controversy was the question of whose identity was going to win out and be recognized: Even the name given the child by the working-class birth mother, who kept her for six months, was expunged by the court.

Looked at from the perspective of a fashion-driven industry, the advent of art world identity politics, or multiculturalism, represents the incorporation of marginal producers, who bring fresh new "looks" to revivify public interest. A couple of handfuls of young artists of color and gay and lesbian artists are drawn into the system for an indeterminate amount of time and have international gallery and museum shows. Some are offered grants and highly capitalized fellowships. A smaller number of somewhat older ones are conscripted to tenured professorships. What differentiates the multiculturalism vogue from the art world's mid-1970s vogue for "Marxism" or "political art" is the scope of those rewards. Powerful cultural institutions like the Rockefeller Foundation and many universities, which didn't care for the older version of political art, have been quick to sponsor multiculturalism, which is, after all, a demand for inclusion rather than for economic restructuring. Multiculturalism accepts that artists are actually representative of non-art world communities, whereas whom did the artist of political critique represent? It is
The only art world response to the installation came from artists living in the adjacent community of Williamsburg. But a pair of documentary filmmakers, Greenpointers who recently did a television show for PBS on the area’s toxicity, saw the press release and attended the show and are trying to find a site for it in Greenpoint.

Were it not for the museum invitation, the work would not have been made. My invitation had come because in 1989 I’d done a fairly ambitious cycle of shows and forums called If You Lived Here..., which centered on homelessness and urban issues, at a high-art venue in Soho. In that case, I had been invited to do a project, for which I chose the theme of homelessness. My topic was acceptable—though only marginally—primarily, I think, because it invoked (trendy) issues of “the city” and because it smacked of charitable representations of social victims of color, despite the fair degree of ambivalence that occasioned. The art world virtually ignored it, and in a sense so did the sponsoring institution—refusing, for example, to share their mailing list with me. But the project’s reputation, nationally and internationally, has steadily grown, proving my rule of thumb about what the art world likes about political issues: long ago or far away.

The shows were messy (the sponsoring institution liked the forums much better) and evaded a number of art world preferences—but in a sense my project spawned the show in 1993 to which I was invited to contribute, in the company of a number of artists whose first art world appearance had been in my own earlier project. That earlier project brought together art world and non-art world artists, community activists, homeless people, photographers, videomakers, filmmakers, architecture professionals, urban designers, and teachers. A book published in conjunction with it, incorporating work from the shows and forums and related material, has given it a new, longer life.

In 1990, asked by a curator at Washington University in St. Louis to exhibit a selection from the shows, I made a new work about housing and homelessness in St. Louis instead. I wanted to find out whether a university setting could be effective in communicating the material. St. Louis was a much harder community to work with; the sizable homeless community was invisible, swept into shelters, facilities, and homes (some seeming quite passable), administered by various religious communities. Local newspapers were generous to the project, but the only mention in the art press was a vituperative review in a minor national magazine. The writer produced the old chestnut on this sort of work: Show it in a bus shelter or somewhere where such people congregate; in other words, get it out of my face. Although this reviewer was politically on the right, his...
criticism is similar to the left-wing populist complaint that artists like me who put their work in art world (or university?) settings are playing to an imaginary audience. I find startling the static conception of audience this implies and the lazy thinking that produced it. Audiences for art are carefully constructed by lifetimes of parental and scholastic preparation, expectation, and guidance. Although this training can't be duplicated in untutored viewers, audiences can be constructed on the basis of a community of interest. This process clearly can work, and even my limited efforts in relation to If You Lived Here... and Greenpoint: Garden Spot of the World had results. I believe these critics are wrong—but I am still looking for a venue for Greenpoint in Greenpoint.

Although I have portrayed myself for the purposes of argument as a constant exponent of class analysis incorporated in heavily narrativized work, in fact I don't recognize myself as such. Were I to define the thematic material that has motivated my work even when I made paintings and Pop constructions, I would claim that the overlay of "place" and "the body" (woman's body) and their relationship to discourses of power and knowledge are my driving issues. This was the impetus behind, say, The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems, which sited a work about socially transient (and déclassé) people, their street locale and photographic representation within the art world discourse in which such representations had come to find a "home." It clearly lay behind If You Lived Here... and the photomontages I described earlier. But it also motivated the mail-work "novels" on women and food and work on anorexia and bulimia, done before the words had entered popular language. With respect to form, sometimes the works have contradictory texts, sometimes they include lists of words, sometimes the texts are quotations, and sometimes there are no words.

A prominent critical response to The Bowery and its accompanying essay "In, Around, and Afterthoughts: On Documentary Photography" articulated the degree to which the work engaged with the question of the presentation of (socially victimized) Others, and, by extension, women and other Others. But as usual, I am located on both sides of this question as well. In 1990 I went to South Africa for a number of months, with one foot in an elite university, the other in a (multiracial) community video production group. I shot many hours of videotape, but when I was nominated for a multicultural fellowship and applied for postproduction funding, I was turned down: What is a white girl doing making a work about South Africa? We may never know the answer, because I haven't been able to obtain the resources to produce a finished work. Not too surprisingly, there was far less questioning of my motives in South Africa's activist communities. When, in a previous year, I had been invited by (the same) high-profile multicultural funder to submit a plan for a work, I outlined a work about a Canadian woman artist who worked with native American themes. But Canada itself isn't "sexy," not sufficiently multicultural. And I am still a white, middle-aged, straight woman whose work is political in the unacceptably hard-edged sense.

I have recently stuck my neck on the same block. Last year I found myself (a) funded in advance and (b) working with native Americans. Invited—along with a number of other artists—by the art commission of Seattle, Washington, to do a public art work, I proposed a work of short radio and television "spots" on the theme "hidden histories." Although Seattle's residents are of many different ethnic origins, and the city has a strong gay community and a venerable labor history, the feel of the place is white and polite. I proposed working with a wide range of ethnic and racial communities, with women, with the lesbian and gay community, and with women's and labor history. Numerous considerations led to my scaling back the project to a single element, and in...
consultation with project adviser Gail Dubrow (whose own work is about the recovery of women's histories), I chose the native American community—feeling a bit odd about it. 23

While I was conducting the on-camera interviews, a number of participants asked that the works not be aired on "educational" television but on the commercial stations. This imposed a powerful new stricture on the work, for those stations, when contacted, said they would be happy to decide whether to show the work after it was completed and if it fit their PSA, or public service announcement, formats: sixty seconds, thirty seconds, twenty seconds, ten seconds! I chose sixty seconds (nothing I'd made before has been shorter than six minutes). I have recently completed a handful of these tiny bites, and they are being reviewed by the people in them. I can imagine what the reception will be by people who believe that I cannot legitimately work with native Americans. They may be right, but I won't know until the works have actually appeared in the venue for which they are intended—which includes but doesn't end with broadcast television. 24

The basis of the anticipated criticism is that people must speak for themselves—but, a friend murmured when I mentioned that I let the native Americans determine their topics of discussion, and they chose to talk about having been robbed of their cultures, their languages, and their spirituality—aren't you worried about pandering to essentialism, to imaginary identities? 25 Worried? The entire cast of criticisms of "people like me" making work about, say, South Africa is essentialist. When "Marxism" was more viable in the art world, people used to grumble about the impropriety of making works about working-class people, especially since the majority of such works were malicious efforts to portray people's unlovely body types, untrendy recreational activities, or poor taste. I have been much cited as an opponent of documentary photography for the way it has portrayed those without power to those in power, although in fact my critique was of the particular way in which particular sorts images are used, institutionally and personally. But others who enthusiastically adopted this criticism took it as reason or excuse to turn away from documentary-style representations, no matter how "extended" a definition of documentary might be in question. Anthropologist Jay Ruby believes that only self-reflexive documentary—"giving the camera" to those represented—evades authoritarian distortion. Others wish to interpret all representations as fictions. I disagree with all these totalized criticisms.

The critique of representations of people of color is more difficult. I am strongly sympathetic here, but as unsympathetic to a blanket prohibition as I was to that against representations of working-class people. The enforcement of regimes of thought may always entail excessive application of rules, policing the borders of meaning, and essentialism is a dangerous pitfall of identity politics. Racism and sexism produce polarities in which a vital step toward liberation is the self-articulation of meaning, and the self-naming, of "colonized" subjects. 26 This long, difficult process may make it necessary temporarily to foreclose the possibility of cross-identity alliances. I don't want men at women's meetings, although I can imagine men collaborating with women on works about women—but could I accept their making such works alone? I'd have to see them first before I could judge them. On the other hand, South Africa (to pursue my own example) is a place, not an identity. As I saw on a recent visit to Russia, the search for authentic expressions of identity can be highly regressive, even delusional, and as the war in the Balkans amply shows, dreams of ethnic autonomy can lead to bestiality and murder. What grounds for exclusion are spurious, criminally so?

A critique of excessive particularism is more easily articulated when it applies to issues other than identity. For example, Alexander Kluge described a situation in which he and his film crew wanted to film an eviction of squatters in Frankfurt. 27 The squatters protest that their eviction cannot be filmed from without, by someone not living and struggling alongside them. Kluge and his crew reply that this point of view copies "the other side" by producing a "nonpublic sphere," a relationship of property and exclusion, whereas what is needed is the ability to disseminate information outside that sphere: "A public sphere can be produced professionally only when you accept the degree of abstraction that is involved in carrying one piece of information to another place in society, when you establish lines of communication." 28 Kluge and his crew were unsuccessful in persuading the squatters, who apparently saw authenticity of experience as a prerequisite to its representation.

I, in contrast, don't seem to be able to learn the lesson that the cat learned from the stove: once burned, twice shy. I feel strongly responsible to try to puzzle out these involvements or obsessions in the best way I can, and as I get older I trust this impulse more. I have to, for otherwise I might do nothing at all.
With apologies to Ian Gevers and the Jan van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht, in whose symposium and publication Place Position Presentation Public I participated in 1992. At the time I kept interpreting their version of PPPP as mine, and, as I discovered when I gave my talk, it was precisely those two last P’s that marked the difference between their understanding of the art world and mine.


2. I certainly said this differently at different times of my life, but I think an earlier self would recognize this particular formulation.


4. Many artists, of course, have nothing to do with the art world. This includes people whose work is situated in various communities outside the dominant culture, often activist artists. Certainly, few media activists place themselves in art world settings.

5. For example, just during this past week, while I was writing this essay in the spring of 1993, two galleries, one in New York, one in Austria, solicited my participation in shows based on this series. One wanted to exhibit the original series, the other was soliciting new work on war.

6. I benefit financially from work that was made with no thought of permanence, let alone sales; oddly, that is still the hardest thing to accept. And now I am stuck with the problem of many requests for twenty-year-old work!

7. Imagine Picasso, Pollock, De Kooning, Hesse, Warhol as tenured profes-
work or urban-planning kinds of issues.

19. *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Activism, and Social Theory. A Project by Martha Rosler.*

20. For example, the airport photographs I mentioned earlier, which collectively go under the title *In the Place of the Public*—and which constitute a body of work that has occupied me for a decade and about which I care deeply—has nothing of the agitational or didactic about it as one normally understands these terms.


22. A fine irony for a culture that developed the government-invested term and concept of multiculturalism in the late 1960s as a way to avoid the riots erupting in their neighbor to the South.

23. Coincidentally, I had been an avid student of Northwest Coast Indian art since my teen years. I used to "visit" elements of it at the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of the American Indian, and the Museum of Natural History. The Canadian painter about whom I wanted to make a videotape lived in that region, and it was those native peoples whose work she studied and appropriated.

Unexpectedly, a foreign friend reminded me that I had been taken to task in 1980 by some audience members at a London symposium accompanying a political-feminist art exhibition I took part in at the Institute for Contemporary Art. The objections were directed at a "postcard novel" I had produced about a fictive undocumented Mexican maid (a composite based on interviews) in San Diego, where I lived. The work was part of a trilogy on women and food production.

24. Although I decided to leave my name off these one-minute "lectures" by native Americans, the city is balking at my unmediated use of the Indian head that is the city's logo. They want an attribution line and a logo tying the work firmly to the Arts Commission and offering its phone number, all in a work whose total running time is sixty seconds; we shall see.

25. I get uncomfortable when I begin to see these "good" lost identities as not so different in kind from the East Bloc ones currently being pursued.

26. Again, see note 13.

27. In an interview with Klaus Eder published as "On Film and the Public Sphere," in *New German Critique* no. 24/25 (Winter 1981/82), 206-220, an excerpt of which was published in *If You Lived Here*, 67-70.

28. *If You Lived Here*, 68.

6

**THE VELVET REVOLUTION AND IRON NECESSITY**

*Eva Hauser*

From 1948 to 1989 Czechoslovakia was under Moscow-oriented Communist rule, and the country experienced many political, sociological, and cultural changes. The first years of the Communist regime were grim and tragic: show trials and executions of the Communists' political opponents (so-called "class enemies"), mass confiscation of property belonging to people who had been marked out as "exploiters" or "the bourgeoisie," and omnipresent fear. However, there were also a number of enthusiastic people who still believed that it was possible to build a utopia, a true socialist state where all people would be equal, no one would suffer, and everybody would be happy and love their work.

This situation changed completely in 1968. A reformist faction within