

# Subversive Complicity

EG Crichton and Dee Hibbert-Jones

## The Concept

The *Intervene! Interrupt! Rethinking Art as Social Practice* festival broadly focused on art that is engaged in the social sphere. This work is frequently described as interventions, dialogic practices, place-based situations, relational aesthetics, public performance or social practice. Organizers saw this concept of “what intervenes and interrupts” in a variety of ways ranging from direct political confrontation to performance art, collaborative dialogue, satirical infiltration and participatory culture. The *Subversive Complicity* component of the conference specifically zoomed in on artists who use stealth, humor and surprise to disrupt our basic assumptions about the world. Strategies such as collaboration, disguise, service, exchange and appropriation allow these artists to infiltrate political, social and community systems to question the status quo. Their work can take the form of a conversation, a public protest, a mock corporation, a sidewalk service or an interactive archive, to name a few. One way to think of this is that social interaction strategies become the medium of artworks in which content develops through a participatory mechanism. There may be objects, images, sound, a gallery exhibition, a site — or none at all — but the crucial engine driving the work is a process of creative social engagement set in motion by the artists serving as creative catalysts for both subversion and complicity within everyday life and broad structures of power.

## The Conversation

Dialog on Subversive Complicity by co-organizers

In early 2007 Professor E.G. Crichton and I began a dialog that would result in *Subversive Complicity*, a panel discussion and month long exhibition for the *Intervene! Interrupt! Rethinking Art as Social Practice* conference and festival held at UC Santa Cruz, May 2008. We were both firmly convinced that we shared a vision, that we mutually understood what we meant when we spoke about interventionist artwork, dialogic work, relational aesthetics and other related descriptions that house this complex practice. Little did we know how muddy the waters would become, or how long and far this dialog would take us as we engaged with other artists and developed the varied components of the festival. As we launch a Social Practice Research Center in the Arts Division at UC Santa Cruz in 2010, we continue our extended dialog in print for *Viz.*

*Inter-Arts* in the hopes that our conversation will contribute to the dialog surrounding art as social practice.

We chose the somewhat ambiguous title *Subversive Complicity* to suggest a full range of practices from the most direct politically focused work to art projects that appear complicit within the systems and structures of everyday life yet act as subtle subversions. We were especially interested in considering gender and racial parity in a practice that is often seen to be defined by young Caucasian men. Our agenda was to engage in dialog with other interested artists and theorists, and to bring these voices to the table to expand existing understandings of this work. With this in mind, we put out a call for proposals for work that subverts everyday systems, engages public conversation and raises social awareness in subtle, humorous, and radical ways.

We were assisted by curator Heather Mikolaj and assistant curator Clare Haggarty in the selection and installation of an exhibition entitled *Subversive Complicity* at The LAB in San Francisco. Several *Subversive Complicity* artists created new works on campus at UC Santa Cruz during the conference, assisted by UCSC art students. Students also developed and enacted their own interventionist pieces during the conference. Artists Nomi Talisman and Bill Baskin developed an outdoor film screening series connected to *Subversive Complicity* entitled *The Show Starts At the Sidewalk* in San Francisco, Santa Cruz and San

SUZANNE LACY

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Jose. We invited a small group of artists and theorists to extend this conversation on the Subversive Complicity panel discussion during the 3-day conference. The invited artists were Andy Bickelbaum of the YES Men; artist team Bradley McCallum and Jaqueline Tarry, UCSC Professor of Art Sharon Daniel, Associate Professor of Art Laurel Beckman from UC Santa Barbara, alongside Associate Professor of Art E.G. Crichton and myself: Associate Professor of Art Dee Hibbert-Jones from UC Santa Cruz. History of Art and Visual Consciousness Professor Jennifer Gonzalez was facilitator and contributor. Two and a half years later E.G. Crichton and I continue to be fascinated by this category of work.

**Dee:** Perhaps I could begin by asking what is your interest in this type of work EG, and what promoted you to put this specific panel together? Then we could introduce some of the larger questions we have been talking about.

**EG:** My experience as a political activist started young and predates my life as an artist by quite a few years. Ever since I started to call myself an artist, to feel it as a legitimate identity, it's been a struggle to sort out these two passionate parts of my life. At times I needed to keep them separate — to explore forms and ideas that weren't fettered by the dogma of political activism. But as I grew more confident, my social consciousness of course seeped into the work — how could it not? Theories of interventionist art and relational aesthetics offered me a whole new way to think about how my process could engage collaboratively with individuals and communities; how instead of presenting a visual idea as a done deal to an invisible audience - hoping they "get" it - I could invent a process that would serve as a creative catalyst, allowing meaning to emerge from both social relations and tangible art. It's a way of taking control of the process yet giving up control of the final meaning. I love the fact that being an artist can borrow from such a wide variety of interdisciplinary roles, from object maker to organizer, researcher, detective, scientist, writer, you name it. And with total permission to be a dilettante! This has been really momentous in my work; over the past 15 years, I feel like my two selves — the politico and the artist — have finally grown inseparable.

**Dee:** I think my interest in this type of work really began in earnest with my own desire to create work that was a political intervention in public places; that addressed issues about public space, public rights and power. I wanted to make temporal public projects that were interactive social engagements; that talked about and engaged the public in ideas about public space, public rights and the manipulation of the public in new ways. In 2005 I started producing a large-scale project Psychological Prosthetics in collaboration with Nomi Talisman as a way to explore some

of these issues. This desire came about at around the same time as other artists were making work with this type of focus. Also around this time I became aware of *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* exhibition and publication at Mass Moca. It raised a lot of questions for me. I proposed the UCSC conference as an opportunity to engage an interested audience in answering some of those questions.

**EG:** When is art that is called "Interventionist" radical and when is it not? Can interventionist artworks foster radical social awareness and real change?

**Dee:** Interventions or social practice art are, of course, umbrella terms for a wide range of practices, yet these projects do seem to have in common a desire to materialize activist issues in social and public space, which could be defined as radical practices. I do think many of the artists who produce this type of work hold utopian social and political ideals. Although the ways artists engage in these projects can manifest ideas through a range of social or political lenses that are sometimes more and sometimes less directly radical. Michael Rakowitz's PARAsite is a good

example of a radical project that has a grass roots component. PARAsite is an inflatable shelter designed for homeless people that attaches to a building's heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system. The warm air leaving the building inflates and heats the structure. He built and distributed these objects to over 30 homeless people in Boston and Cambridge, MA and New York City.



THE SURVIVABALL  
The Yes Men

Social Practice artworks range widely from themes such as the everyday, to explorations of the meaning of the current globalized world, to ideas of social ecology, play as social engagement and concepts around public space and it's history. These projects are all to an extent radical as they borrow theories and concepts from other disciplines and commercial cultures bringing these ideas into an arts practice that engenders greater dialog around social, environmental and political issues. An example of collaborations across disciplines is Jakob Boeskov's My Doomsday Weapon, created with journalist Mads Brügger and industrial designer Kristian Von Bengtsson. Together they created a fake hi-tech weapon called the ID Super Rifle that could shoot GPS chips into demonstrators, so that the police later could locate them and "apply the punishment." Boeskov actually received positive reactions to his idea from real weapons dealers, politicians and policemen at a weapons fair in Beijing, China.

It is always interesting to me how social artworks are frequently judged exclusively on whether they are "successful" and if they are "radical" enough, rather than judged using the criteria of other art practices. Does the responsibility to make a project work in a social realm exceed all other artistic criteria? Perhaps this desire to engage in the social sphere comes along with

another set of issues or responsibilities that need to be addressed, as there are clearly ethical implications to social art. If so this leads us back to queries that have been raised in community based and new genre public art for the last twenty years about evaluation methods, social responsibility, class privilege and opportunities.

So maybe we should be asking how we can judge the success of art projects that do things such as found alternative networks and economies, claim and redefine social and public space and attempt to alter the social and political landscape? I know that collaboration and alternative methods of artistic production (which are not ideas new to interventions but which are often an integral part of this work) are radical attempts to upstage the art market's definitions of individual artist as genius, although it seems that collaborative practice has also been folded into the art market in some cases.

To my mind the desire to engage in extended dialogs in the public sphere is in itself a radical gesture in a time of corporate control of the media, the decline of print publications and the erosion of the public sphere. Whether this work fosters real change is very hard to say. Clearly art does not hit the same numbers of people as, say an ad on television. On the other hand with YouTube and alternative social media, underground art as communication can reach a wide audience.

**EG:** In an era when the word "liberal" has replaced "radical" in public discourse, I guess we have to define what we mean and ask the question "how does social change happen at all?" My use of the term "real change" in the question belies an assumption, a bias maybe, that some change strategies are *not* real or lacking. I think I was thinking about style, about how easy it is to appropriate the language and images of social concern but much harder to instigate substantial strategies, however those are measured. But just using the word "style" brings up ART, of course, because we need style and design to carry out our cultural intentions. I think a formal aesthetics of object, space and process are quite relevant to how well a piece can engage in the social arena. Just the fact that we are concerned about evaluating art practice at all is a departure from a more standard reliance on the authority of art institutions and critics to measure worth and quality. Or, to use corporate and academic vernacular, *excellence*.

What if the critical discourse around interventionist art was a dialectical merger of theories about social change and aesthetic formalism? What would that look like? It seems entirely possible to me that formalism in this context could take off from relational aesthetics to address what strategies of art intervention are most effective in a particular social setting. How does an artwork succeed in being a powerful social catalyst? What does it look, feel and sound like? How does seduction by art



AFFAIR-ON-THE-GREEN  
E.G. Crichton and Lauren Crux

operate? How much time does it take to unfold? What kind of art emerges in different political milieu? What has emerged in the U.S., for example, in comparison to South Africa or Bosnia or the Iranian diaspora? What emerged in the U.S. in response to crises like the current depression, AIDs, the war in Iraq, 911? And how do the response works of artists in these contexts compare to works developed to engage the public on more entrenched issues such as racism, the environment, sexism and homophobia?

I think what you said about radical gestures in the public sphere in a time of corporate control is really important. When everything around us encourages passivity and disconnection (except to our devices), art that can spark engagement and interaction seems crucial. The Dada and Futurist movements certainly believed this, though often in ways that were hostile to their audiences, not to mention arrogant. But my hope is that the more artists pull together in collective, collaborative and networked ways, the less we depend on institutional authority and measurements, the more we can join with activists across disciplines who are working to change our deadly profit-driven culture. Whew!

**Dee:** There's so much to respond to in your response! I wanted to question you further about your comment on formalism and relational aesthetics, to be sure exactly what you mean. Claire Bishop has spent a lot of energy critiquing social engagement for its lack of aesthetic vision. She sees this work's focus falling too heavily on the artist's process and intentions, to the neglect of the work's aesthetic impact. Or to put it another way that social issues become a focus to the neglect of the aesthetics of the artwork. Are you agreeing with her?

**EG:** No, I think Bishop's critique misses the point of Nicolas Bourriaude's term *relational aesthetics*. To me, this term implies the need for an expanded definition of formalism that includes the social strategies an artist uses; a way to articulate how well a piece is communicating, which can include an aesthetics of the visual, aural and spatial, as well as of social movement. Art, after all, is about communication on many levels. Social practice projects can certainly be judged on how imaginative they are, how they draw people in, how successfully an artist uses different forms and mediums to create a context that is evocative, compelling, powerful.

**Dee:** I think that some of the new MFA's in Social Practice are forging a critical discourse around this work that comes from a merger of theories and arts practice. Questions about the role of aesthetics in contemporary art, retinal or conceptual practices, in opposition to aesthetic, have been with us for the last fifty years and will, I hope, continue to develop in sophistication, becoming more of a dialectic and less of an either/ or option as these new modes of practice develop. The art department's proposed MFA program will approach some of these issues

and begin to develop a critical discourse merging conceptual approaches to contemporary art with research and theories of anthropology, sociology, politics, etc. to form arts practice and a focus on creative change. I do agree that visual thinking which is frequently less linear, more associative or intuitive, making leaps across subjects while simultaneously borrowing research methods and materials from other disciplines can forge new ideas and create new ways to approach issues and problems. That's my hope at least. I'm with you in the aspiration that this way of working can cut across the current ways of thinking, buying and living.

**EG:** What do interventionist practices have to offer other forms of art, other art processes? What can be learned?

**Dee:** This is interesting as your question almost suggests that this type of practice has a didactic or educational component that should be brought into other art practices. Am I interpreting what you are asking correctly? Socially engaged practices and collaboration have been key to many art practices. Considerations of the audience and engagement are an exciting component of this work. In the end though I feel uncomfortable with the line this question takes, as I don't think that all interventions take one process or method but that this work is an open field of explorations in media, process and idea. Which I think is why it gets so very confusing to define and talk about clearly. This is a group of people all engaging in different ways with site-based work outside of the gallery that has a social and or political bent. At least that's how I understand it. What do you think?

**EG:** What I think most interventionist and social practice artists have in common, at least in intention, is a desire to engage people more actively than with traditional notions of audience. To me this implies that the artist is less an expresser of meaning, more someone trying to let meaning emerge from the craft of interaction strategies. Our control hovers not as much over the final product as over the process we set in motion. That's what I was thinking when I posed that question. I usually don't think didactic art strategies succeed and am resistant to the assumption that we as artists have superior consciousness to bestow on our audiences.... that's not what I mean to imply. But it does seem valuable to think about what a growing canon of interventionist practice might have to offer other arts in the interest of increased relevance in the world. Why not? All kinds of art formalisms influence and inform us, so why not think about how more newly formed theories might affect established art practices and institutions such as museums?

As a kind of aside, I've sometimes noticed a puritanical strain that enters the discussion of how artists can become social actors and context providers. This takes the form of suggesting that our (individual artists') pleasure in making art, the inclusion of our own forms of expression, is contrary to the goals of social practice art. I don't think dogma against pleasure, against the parts of our work that involve studio practices or autobiographical content, is positive. It reeks a bit of the guilt of privilege and could work to keep an artist separate, removed or superior to the people one is trying to engage. It's perhaps too close to a social worker model. Certainly for groups of people whose lives have been historically invisible, various kinds of autobiographical story telling have been forceful in the larger society. I don't want to forget the power that cultural works



THE ARCHIVAL LOUNGE  
Coordinated by Dore Bowen

can have as inspiration, provocation, bringing people together, catharsis and joy.

**EG:** Are pranks an effective form of dissent? When and when not?

**Dee:** Humor is an incredibly powerful tool in communicating ideas, and always has been, from Hogarth's prints onwards yes, I think irony has played a powerful role in political satire, and in life in general! Humor can be a great way to turn opinions, spear and opponent and allow a minority group or opinion power. The term prank though is very interesting, it is mischievous trick or practical joke, which in some ways relegates this work to a youthful, goofy joke. I know that there is power in this and that some work thrives on this image, the Yes Men might be a great example of this, yet their work is also satire with a deeply serious underbelly and therefore moves, to my mind beyond the word prank into something much more seriously satirical. Maybe I'm dismissing pranks too easily with this last comment. There is a lot of power in the option to make a joke, but not have it taken as something that needs examining, it gives the maker and the recipient an out- and that's where it gets sticky for me. Does a prank get dismissed, as much as it allows freedom to do anything?

Is it effective seems to be leading us back to the question above. It also leads me to ask what else does this work "do" is it only attempting to overthrow the status quo, highlight errors and right wrongs?

**EG:** This question was inspired by a future CAA panel description that referenced "the art of pranks". The term immediately struck me as relevant to a discussion about interventionist practices. I guess I do have kind of an attitude about art pranks based on a stereotype or generalization: that a prank is quick and dirty, that the artists throw the little grenade then leave, not dealing with the impact. Or that those who can get away with a prank are quite often privileged, able to blend into a setting in which someone darker, queerer, poorer, etc. might get arrested. Maybe I'm revealing a bit of the puritanical in myself here! I don't think of the YES men's practice as pranks, though. I think of their work as taking advantage of privilege to blend in, to carry out incredibly bold transgressive actions at sites of power. One of the main benefits of their work might be that it inspires and emboldens others to infiltrate and use creative satire as a radical art tactic. It's high theatre that has proven pretty effective in exposing the cracks in powerful institutions.



TALK SANDWICH  
Event organized by Terri Cohn and Dee Hibbert-Jones

**Dee:** As social practice artwork becomes institutionalized - brought into the academy, the museum etc. - how can we prevent the work from being compromised? Are there benefits to this institutionalization and if so what?

**EG:** I'm not so certain that's an issue, at least not with work that actually engages toward social change. After all, it doesn't come into these institutions on its own — it happens because individuals working within, generally not without struggle, use their position to have an impact, to make their university or museum more relevant and supportive of social needs. It's also true in the case of museums that financial need has brought an emphasis on sales in the museum store, on blockbuster shows such as King Tut, and certainly (more positive) on social programs and pedagogical strategies targeted to various communities — families, children, cultural groups, etc. But if what you mean is a kind of cooptation of social practice art where the guts are missing, where surface style and glamorous publicity take over, I would pin the blame for that on the all-consuming market, on the politics of the global art world marked by an increasing number of biennials, trends in what foreign art is imported into the U.S., which artists are targeted by savvy agents for movie star attention, which works reach the auction houses. This is generally not true of artists who concentrate on social practice art. Most of us struggle along writing endless grants and proposals, arguing with colleagues over priorities and resources, trying to find time to build our projects in more depth.

**Dee:** Your response raises several other questions: How can artists who practice this work financially support themselves if they are to work outside of the system and remain “untainted” (that is if they don't all have jobs in academia!)? I also started wondering what happens to these works, which mostly reside outside of the museum, when they are brought into the museum as documentation. As Claire Doherty asks about Francis Aly's work (1) “Where does meaning reside in its execution, and/or documentation, in the fledgling idea or in the posthumous circulation of the anecdote?” Does the museum work simply become a record of an outside event? Or a re-hashing for the museum? How to archive this practice? Finally what do you think about the new vogue in some museums of inviting artists to come into the institution and engage audiences and the

collections in new ways, groups such as Machine Project, a loose confederacy of artists who produce shows at locations such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art? Do you consider this work to fit the definition of interventions and is it social practice?

**EG:** I think everyone is tainted! Academia taints us in the sense that we mold many of our art strategies to what works, what gets us tenure, what makes a successful grant proposal, how we can communicate the nature of our practice to an institution that trusts words and publishing more than images and exhibitions. Most artists have day jobs to support their art, regardless of what kind of art they practice — since the market really only sustains a very tiny percentage of artists. But I do think museums can play a positive role for art that is socially engaged, and increasingly do. At the SFMOMA show on interactive art a couple of years ago, some of the work that was restaged for the museum (including by Yoko Ono and Ant Farm) seemed a little contrived in that environment, but I still prefer it to be exhibited than not - as a kind of archive, if nothing else. And I think it's mostly positive when museums are willing to experiment with inviting artists to create “live” work within their walls. Fred Wilson of course comes to mind, but I also think of museums who have shown work that is more directly confrontational such as that of Hans Haacke and the Guerilla Girls. The work of these artists has changed our understandings about museums in significant ways, so yes, I would call it interventionist. And as you mentioned earlier, the Interventionists exhibition that Nato Thompson organized at Mass Moca a few years back was ground breaking in its concept.

**Dee:** How can we address imbalances of power and prevent the exploitation of communities by well-intended, privileged artists? How to bring in diversity?

**EG:** In a society as stratified as ours, these dynamics certainly don't change “organically” on their own. In my experience it takes a conscious concerted effort and targeted strategies to fight for inclusivity, diversity, distributed resources, and humility on the part of those with more privilege. It seems important to remember that all communities have artists in their midst, but most do not operate under the umbrella of the art world or the academy. As a university trained artist and art professor, I carry a fountain of snobbery toward what seem like naïve practices, toward anti-intellectualism in art that honors only self expression, toward people who voice clichéd assumptions about who the artist is, etc. On the other hand, in my role as resident artist for the GLBT Historical Society, I feel I've been able to bring together artists and non-artists, people from both in and outside the university, diverse ages, gender, classes and races. I take pleasure in being a kind of ambassador from the arts to the institution, proving that art can activate the archive in unexpected ways to energize community engagement.

Diversity is something I really think starts at home in the sense that people tend to hang out with others like themselves with whom they feel most comfortable. It takes a little risk, a little outreach, a little awkwardness to change this, to become part of a more heterogeneous community. More privileged artists do often approach diversity like social work, taking advantage of city arts funding or community oriented grants to conduct a project among “others.” Part of the problem lies with

institutional blindness around class and race. But again, part of the problem is more personal I think, a kind of romantic good intention that sometimes rubs the wrong way. I think Allison Smith's work in which she invents structures rooted in American history to bring together crafts people of all kinds (from digital to yarn) in a range of activities is a really good model of creative social practice that promotes diversity. Participants become both teachers and students in home-grown store front institutions as well as art world venues like SFMOMA.

**Dee:** I also think our panelists Jacqueline Tarry and Bradley McCallum's *Endurance* piece which they produced in collaboration with homeless youth in Seattle with the support of the Seattle Public Arts Commission is a great example of a powerful long term collaborative engagement which results in a moving artwork. I really like your response here EG.

**Dee:** Any comments on suggestions that this work will become dated with time and feel less current?

**EG:** Well, modernism has certainly left us with conflicted messages about how to assess art that has lasting "universal quality" versus more fleeting fads! I would hope with the kind of practices we are talking about that artists would continually reassess the social context we work within. For many reasons — to keep abreast of what is happening in the world and in specific communities; to keep alive an awareness of what is working and what is not; to stay in touch with what might touch a need or a nerve. But I also hope that the kind of avant gard progression of styles that the commercial art world continues to market in rapidly shifting waves will not co-opt social and collaborative energy, rendering it as passive spectacle. This occurred to me just this past year when I happened upon several galleries in Chelsea that were filled with installations that suggested an alternative education environment - ones that seemed to have no outside referent. Suddenly the idea of artists creating alternative institutions seemed to be "in the air" and I couldn't help but think "cliché." It's hard to avoid getting tired of the markers of style in a particular period. In my teaching it's difficult to resist a bias against themes and practices that students are drawn to and need to work through (Barbie doll references, endless altars, anything in multiples, etc.). On the other hand, I learn a lot from my students about social networking and emergent technologies that offer new tools, metaphors and arenas for artists.

Artists who function in the world of commercial galleries are under constant pressure to produce what sells, a pressure that sometimes conflicts with what they really want to make. Those of us who operate more in the world of grants, commissions and self-funding also encounter the fashion biases of art world and granting institutions. Within academia, it's hard to get around

the assumption that far away venues are valued over the local, that art that operates outside of museum and gallery exhibition venues is questioned more skeptically, that collaborative authorship is often suspect.

I think awareness of these structures is a first step; building communities of dialogue to keep things fresh and examined is another. It always seems critical to learn and teach our different art histories, to remember that our practices have roots, to make this a global awareness, not just primarily U.S.-based. It's also true that different communities and cultures have different needs for art at any given time. The AIDs Quilt emerged at a very particular point in history when people needed a public visual representation of loss and grief that didn't yet exist. Sometimes what seems passé to us as artists might seem new to another kind of community. I guess I believe that a succession of what is current in art is inherently elitist.

**Dee:** With the rise of the biennale culture and arts festivals, site or site as situation and/or dialogic practice have become subjects that are currently experiencing a focus in art market circles. And

as "cultural experiences" become a focus of urban regeneration, this work has also been given new emphasis and funding. So right now this type of work seems to have the attention of art circles, publications as well as public and museum based exhibitions. The formation of new MFA's and PHD's (mostly in Europe and Australia) with a focus on social practice, public practice or alternative genres leads me to see this work as currently "popular", or perhaps the social/

cultural moment is ripe for an examination of these issues, as our earlier conversation suggested? I agree with you that these practices have been alive and thriving under different names for centuries, and will continue to thrive as artists reflect, reject and respond to the world they live in. I hope that an examination of the role of public space, collaborative practice and social engagement will remain a thriving thread in artistic practice. I can only imagine that this type of work will remain constant, as certain artists reflect on the current social and political climate whether or not the work is in vogue in the art market. I imagine and hope that these practices will continue to evolve and thrive, to build a theoretical and visual history that future artists can respond, reject and build upon.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Thompson, Nato, Gregory Sholette, and Joseph Thompson *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, Mass Moca, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Doherty, Claire, *From Studio to Situation*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2004



ENDURANCE  
Jacqueline Tarry and Bradley McCallum