Finding Cythera: Disobedient Art and New Publics

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> The idea is that the activity we undertake with each other, in a kind of agonistic performance in which what we become depends on the perspectives and interactions of others, brings into being the space of our world, which is then the background against which we understand ourselves and our belonging. I find this a compelling account because it stresses historical activity and human creativity, but without falling into a naive view of individual agency or intentionality. The world made in public action is not an intended or designed world, but one disclosed in practice. It is a background for self-understanding, and therefore something not purely individual. It is also immanent to history and practice, unlike ideas of community or identity, which tend to be naturalized as stable or originary.
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> —Michael Warner, "Queer World Making"[1]

My experiences with the capacity of art to re-create public life through performance and play has been made understandable through a history of collaborations: in classrooms, in the museum, in the street, and throughout the social contexts occurring between them. The conflict between these spaces, and the habits and events that inform them, is the matter that inspired the planning for the conversations that follow. As a consultant on the organization and documentation of *Who Cares*, I was often reminded that the collaborative work artists do to effect public life is intimately linked to the performance and play of conversation—those that we have between ourselves and our audiences. The possibility of transforming a politically silent art system into a collection of discursive and engaged forums has occupied a signal community of artists for many years, as part of a larger desire to obtain and defend a truly public context for culture in this country—a struggle that is far from over.

In helping to plan the *Who Cares* project, I looked for political proposals in an unexpected place: easel painting. Historically, painted pictures have modeled a world decolonized from the constraints of official power and subjective pose by visualizing the social relations that can only be built or arranged in a purely invented place. This idea of a painted picture as a performed invention is perhaps as old as pictures themselves. And the dialogic performance of a picture—the collective speculation in the space we hold between ourselves in the viewing of art, the way an image hanging on a museum wall defines a public forum in front of itself—is also very old, reaching back to the Enlightenment concepts of the public realm, the parliamentary room, and the politics of virtue. Before stumbling back onto the moments of collective speculation that painting once instigated (and still does), I began with the psychogeographic drift of the sixties and I worked back from that era of radical public art practices through other precedents.

Jean-Antoine Watteau,
***A Pilgrimage to Cythera,* 1717.**
Musée du Louvre, Paris

I found painting to be one possible origin of our ability to see contemporary dialogue as an exercise, simultaneously aesthetic and political.

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, many paintings were made based on the liberating effects nature was assumed to have upon social conversation. There were two works from this period in particular that drew my attention: *The Pilgrimage to Cythera* and *The Embarkation for Cythera*, both painted by Jean-Antoine Watteau between 1717 and 1719.[2] Each depicts lovers in transit, interrupting an ongoing public communion they are having with each other and the arcadian setting they transverse. I looked to these images for a way to imagine a resolution to the anxiety I felt (and still feel) when confronted with the conflation of the sensual and political demands we place upon social dialogue: on one hand, we look to conversation for pleasure; on the other, we have trouble considering it apart from its ethical functions, its foregrounded role as the basis of a free society. But these paintings represent more than the traditional salon *parler*.

Although painfully elitist in many ways, these pictures offer the symbolic possibility of conversation leading to collective excursion, a departure from what is expected in an improvised performance. For me, this is an extremely contemporary proposal. Watteau insists that the tension between the drive toward pleasure and the social necessity of politics are intricately linked in the performance of every cultural exchange. When we dance, we pose and reform. When we converse, we challenge and accept. Paintings of social escape and interaction ask that a viewer accept happiness and knowledge as two dialectically interdependent notions.

Cythera is the island where Venus was born from the collision of the son-castrated genitals of Uranus with the foam of the sea. For Watteau and his audience, it is understood as dramatically metaphoric, a figurative place inspiring the reassignment of desire and morality according to the social hopes of the libertine's imagination. The social conversation that generated the period's approach to sexuality was imperative in discussing this transformation, especially in its insistence that we ignore all existing aesthetic and political expectations in the alliance with passion. What is key here, though, is that it was the possibility of conversation as a subjective experiment that was the bridge to this realization, both for love to develop and for knowledge to be produced. Watteau's scenes represent the ambiguity of conversation as a form of free association—talk as performance, conversational address as drag, and discourse as a form of call-and-response—that in turn predicts and parallels the parliamentary social entreaty described in the Enlightenment as a potential basis for emancipation. So these paintings of lovers on a trip are more than signposts to pleasure—they are guides to the challenges faced by public expression. Viewing them, one can imagine how social space must be emptied if it is to be designed to accept the discourse of emancipation. Such an "empty" space—capable of representing dissent and difference—still stands as a metaphor for democracy.

Now that the three conversations of *Who Cares* have taken place, I conjure Cythera again as a reminder of how this project began as a series of meetings separated from the producing and commissioning work of Creative Time, informal spaces that could be somehow emptied of purpose and utility. We wanted participants to be able to speak of the public culture that seemed impossible to speculate and realign. The poverty of responsive, socially active visual culture in New York City was the genesis of Creative Time's proposal and of my involvement. My contribution began as a reflection on artists' insistence for the dialogic nature of art, for art's potential to create contexts in which groups of people could re-design their relation to each other, to fairness, and to happiness. I wanted these conversations to reflect the potential of art to call for non-normative models of happiness, models that resist those profitable pleasures engineered by the increasingly consolidated ownership of culture. Such calls are a consistent character of all countercultural practices: if we want our happiness, we have to design our own forms of interaction, both physical and social.

My insistence on the viability of counterculture as an organizing theme for these meetings was not particularly unique.[3] There have been calls for reprogramming culture and intellectual life in America for more than a hundred years now—from the search for alternatives in museums to free presses, from war resister leagues to commercial-free journalism, from community schools to food co-ops, and more. Such calls are now increasing under a condition of growing intellectual expression management which takes form in things like the anti-abortion and pro-oil lock down on scientific research, the self-censorship of journalists, and the ideological invasion of the academy by censorial "watch groups." Art and its attending institutions have cyclically responded to such crises, but recent cultural repression, dominated by the explicitly dark conflation of a planned deprivation economy and the social terror imposed by our government's relentless sponsorship of war, poses a particularly immense social field of repression.

For many involved in cultural organization and discourse today, the progressive role for public art sponsorship, presentation, and promotion depends on representing often subaltern histories of radical public uses for art—possibilities that are difficult to discern in today's market frenzy. Many institutions of art and criticism seem to have selective amnesia concerning work that questioned the ownership of our economies of production, the use or development of cities, and the social function of urban institutions. The paucity of historical thinking in America is an epidemic any teacher can attest to, but it is curious that the capacity to imagine countercultural discourse has diminished even in New York—a city that has inspired so many re-inventions of self and space and that has seen definitions of pleasure change and adapt to the imaginations of its residents.

Accordingly, even though the participants of *Who Cares* were asked to describe new possibilities for critical visual forms, they spent a lot of their conversation describing what kind of visual dialogical tactics worked in the past. Artists do this. We list and compare, trying to recognize new examples and hoping to mis-recognize official taxonomies of received ideas. Indeed, my inclusion of Watteau on a list of progressive public art practices—which for me includes James Brown, The Guerilla Art Action Group, Archigram, and Louise Lawler—speaks already to this process. One purpose of the *Who Cares* meetings was to compare these lists, to set a new agenda for the possibilities of resistant art rolling into the future, and to collectively build, through conversation, a foundation of examples that could be used by future practitioners. Suitably, this publication includes a partial enumeration of references, definitions, and inspirational examples that can be read alongside

the testimony and inquiry of the three conversations. In other words, as these discussions evolved as performance, the possibilities of the past could be set up for consideration alongside speculation for the future.

The following conversations diverted in another important way from planning expectations. Although I wrote in my letters to the participants that I wanted the evenings to be "working meetings," a central reverberating image for the whole project was not "work" at all. It was play—or at least ludic interaction as a potential form of research. This is something embodied by Watteau's pictures and presented or theorized by other Enlightenment projects, from the French socialist Charles Fourier's utopia of "conviviality" to the "play instinct" identified by German poet, philosopher, and dramatist Friedrich Schiller. Play and experiment is exemplified in many of the practices and problems discussed in these transcripts. For the critical efforts that we have labeled countercultural, much that is important about play begins with conversation. Equally important, though, is an understanding that the emancipatory moment for new communities demands privacy. It is, after all, hard to play in public. Private play, claiming freedom from interference to generate independent discourse, is crucial to developing countercultures. Imagination looks to be separated from the constraints of late capital's mediagenic complicity and the false ideals of "participation" that our neo-liberalism has perfected. Of increasing importance to many activists and artists alike is the achievement of some kind of separation from garish examples of marketing as "interaction," the introduction of a disobedient voice into the consolidation of media ownership into tinier and tinier spheres of self-reflection, and a rejection of the literal selling of electoral outcomes through advertising onslaughts.

Although seemingly in contradiction with our topic of the possibilities for public art, the consideration of social subjects is incomplete without an understanding of privacy—that is, how communities redesign themselves in opposition to, or in separation from, dominant culture. I would like to include all communities in this definition: those seeking to escape normative boundaries for desire and sexuality, as well as those clubs, labor unions, consumer cooperatives, user-groups, and civic associations of all kinds who create new languages and subjectivities out of the possibilities that association gives them. Two generations of feminist and queer social practices attest to the critical relationship that separated non-utilitarian conversation has to power. In order to raise consciousness, we might need to be alone for a while! Importantly, these critical trajectories help us to distinguish between the forms of isolation that are impressed upon us. With financial deprivation and compulsory pleasure regimes being projected from on high, it is important to realize the resistant effect of autonomous programs we can determine and construct for ourselves. More than ever, artists need to be alone to re-think their relation to an industry overwrought with competition and overrun by market promotion.

In a context of increasingly commercialized relations for visual art production, the management of expression has as much to do with implicitly forcing speech as it does to actively squelching it. A repressive apparatus of official censorship not only manages our expressions, it also pressures a population to adopt certain stances and attitudes. It is hard to tell which is worse: being told that certain images or ideas are offensive to the majority by a militarized state, or being told that to be accepted we must speak a certain way or say a certain thing, as illustrated by recent official demands that we speak English, have a flag on our car, or get married in a chapel. This insidious form of public management through compulsive affirmation has a direct effect on artistic practice. As artists we are barraged by signals in our industry to be positive, encourage participation, and "keep the faith."

Private dialogue as experience can be understood as an independent aesthetic product in the re-establishment of privacy and friendship.[4] For my purposes here, it was critical to accept early on that the *Who Cares* conversations would be justified in themselves, separate from any use they might have in the future; and separate, certainly, even from their potential publication. The discussions were justified simply in the bringing together of individuals in a temporary space of mutuality. The private, separated time for conversation is a potential space for multiform inclusion. It is here that we might censor ourselves just a little less than in public. Through the experience of juxtaposition and comparison, the diverse and competing lists of points and ideas that arise in conversation stand in for a larger exercise in democracy. Conversational comparison can be seen as a map or a plan, a proposal or a picture. Abstract and romantic in an art historical sense, this visual form of inclusiveness, as evinced in Watteau, is part and parcel of post-Enlightenment aesthetics—from Schiller's suspension of the self and his notion of the world in play, to the affect of a subjectivity that is always in a state of becoming, what the painter Linda Besemer refers to as the "stammer of inclusion."[5]

Hans Haacke reminded us in the 1970s that "art is social grease."[6] As most of us know, going public is always risky. To the managers of public spaces today, relational practices that are based upon the open-ended inclusion of audiences in art world celebrations fit frighteningly well into the logic of uneven social development. An art festival, a public art program, or an art center might be more persuasive and less expensive than a police officer's baton. Just as meta-advertising designers incorporate leftist progressive political trajectories to sell sweaters and suits, public art projects can legitimate the smooth, uninterrupted authority of urban renewal and its attending erasure of cultural difference. Cities now find distinction through art and its industry's symbolic capital. As Miwon Kwon has clearly argued, public art's currency comes in giving cities the identity they have lost to redevelopment while they continue to redevelop.[7] The expected intervention of what came to be called "new genre public art" under the official guise of community-based art production was arranged neatly during the 1990s to re-enforce the idea of city as a paradigm of controlled and developed appetites. Even this publication, and the process it seeks to engender, risk a dilemma: the linkage of public practices to the policies of development of a new "cultural class," a demographic addicted to an unending consumption of newness and promotion. This narrative for art is now coupled to the design of experiences that form a symbolic foundation of capitalist accumulation.

The difficulty of planning democratic contexts that will effect a replacement of existing discourse is not to be underestimated. Although the discussions for *Who Cares* were planned to make room for the failures that privacy allows, our exchanges often reflected work and careers. The implicit and invisible weight of institutions in the sponsoring and organizing of supposedly speculative critical forums needs to be better understood.

How are these conversations going to be used, and by whom? Artists' collaborative agendas, even if designed in private, can be appropriated into the boutique factory that has become the American city. For many (and specifically, for some who were invited to these talks), any engagement in conversation without the concrete commitment for art sponsorship that allows us to disassociate our work from this spectacle is like polishing silverware in a burning house.

From talk to love to revolt. Since the beginnings of modernity, we have seen the notion of happiness linked to emancipation. Again public conversations are asking what kind of freedom particular public practices predict. If we are free, then what are we free to do? In a way, this is one of the first questions informing the modern disruption of private concerns and public occupation. The members of Watteau's libertine crowds are in a sense "free" to pursue their own subjective transformation in the separated context of theatrical play. In the associative roles they perform, in what amounts to a hybrid private-collective escape, we can find new subjectivities and experimental forms of political understanding. Michael Warner has argued beautifully that the shared performance of private understandings can change broader conceptions of democracy.[8] To make private models into what Warner calls "inhabitable worlds," artists need to convince, seduce, cajole, and strike. For democracy to be modeled in a new way, participants need to be able to speak in dialogue outside of the need for promotion or success. To make private models into inhabitable worlds, artists and all residents of the city need to demand that culture represents the true complexity of their happiness. If that happens here at all in this document, let it be as a model for more.

1 The epigraph to this essay is drawn from Annamarie Jagose, "Queer World Making: Annamarie Jagose interviews Michael Warner," *Genders* 31, 2000, http://www.genders.org/g31/ g31_jagose.html#n11 (accessed June 11, 2006).

2 For a complete discussion see Mary Vidal, *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature, and Talk in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

3 See the full text of my letters to the *Who Cares* participants in Appendix 1, p. 146.

4 See my essay "The Boy in the Park, or The Miniature and the Model" in Wolfgang Tillmans, ed., *Jochen Klein* (Cologne: Walter Konig, 1998), p. 75–92. The essay examines how the discrete art object is equal to the more "respected" process of institutional critique in terms of proposing re-alignments of political and aesthetic thinking.

5 See John Rajchman, *The Deleuze Connections* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000). I connected to the possibility of the "stammer of inclusion" as a radical formal method through Linda Besemer's writing on the politics of painting. See Linda Besemer, "Abstraction: Politics and Possibilities." *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly* 7, no. 3, 2004, http://www.x-traonline/vol7_3/bessemer_abstraction.htm (accessed August 18, 2006).

6 Hans Haacke, e-mail message to author, July 17, 2006, in reference to his work *On Social Grease*, 1975.

7 See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002).

8 I am indebted throughout this essay to Michael Warner's thoughts on performance, politics, and the public sphere: Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter Publics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).