

# Introduction

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Working at an organization with more than three decades of experience in presenting timely, socially conscious public art projects, Creative Time's staff started to wonder in 2001 why there seemed to be a noticeable decline in "politically-engaged" art over recent years. Our questions mounted into concern as wars ensued and hard-won freedoms were undone, yet it was hard to find evidence of discontent by surveying galleries, museums, and magazines. At this moment of rapid change in American culture and art, *Who Cares* was conceived as an attempt to investigate artists' evolving relationships to social action through the perspectives of artists themselves.

Our primary goal was simple: Creative Time wanted to bring artists together to discuss their views on art's relationship to social action in a safe and free environment, and we wanted to disseminate our findings to a broad audience. But if artists were not terribly interested in this kind of socially engaged practice, why did Creative Time seek them out? We felt that the need for artists' voices in public dialogue perhaps had never been greater. And yet we feared that if fewer artists were making so-called "socially active" works, the power of artists to shape public discourse and social consciousness could diminish and likely already had. Corporations, media giants, and politicians are in increasing control of the dissemination of public information, ensuring that our engagement with diverse perspectives on contemporary issues grows ever more impoverished. We wanted to do our part to shift this trajectory.

We also hoped to provide a source of support for artists whose projects are too time-sensitive and/or content-sensitive for the long grant cycles of foundation, government, and corporate donors. In the process, we hoped our efforts might sustain New York City as a place where artists have the freedom to spark insightful and informed reflections on the world. While there is little support for socially progressive art in this country, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund fortunately stepped forward and underwrote this initiative—from the dinner forums and this book to the commissioning of several timely public art projects.

Throughout Creative Time's history of commissioning and presenting adventurous art in New York City's public arenas, we have helped artists freely address current public issues and embraced difficult, and at times, controversial topics. Creative Time's programs took the activist spirit of our peer alternative arts organizations outside to the dynamic and unpredictable forum of urban public space. In the 1970s, for example, exhibits in derelict and vacant urban sites, such as *Custom and Culture* (1977 and 1979) and *Ruckus Manhattan* (1975), responded to New York City's rampant decay and promoted a more promising vision for the revitalization of the city. In the mid- to late 80s, projects like Gran Fury's bus posters, *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do* (1989), evinced Creative Time's commitment to artists' bold stances on important social issues like AIDS, racial injustice, and domestic abuse through the appropriation of mass-media advertising spaces. And with the onslaught of the American "culture wars" in the late 80s



and mid-90s, Creative Time supported artists like Karen Finley in taking strong platforms on freedom of expression when other organizations turned away for fear of negative consequences (i.e., from media attacks, public protests, and the inevitable threat of withdrawn public and private funding).

But after the “culture wars,” it seemed as though it was becoming increasingly rare to find compelling artwork that addressed timely public issues. Were artists more apathetic or overtly disinterested? Like so many cultural institutions, was it possible they were fearful of negative public reaction or market reprisals? To more deeply probe this situation, Creative Time organized its first artists’ forum in 2001. Participants shared with us their difficulty in finding financial support systems that fostered socially timely work. They expressed frustration at the limitations imposed by project-specific grant programs and long grant award cycles that made it nearly impossible to present time-sensitive projects. They were frustrated that many traditional avenues of support (e.g., government agencies and foundations) stopped funding individual artists—again, out of fear of offending constituents and attracting negative attention.

They also recognized that experienced artists who investigated such artistic pursuits were most often marginalized by the art public—especially the gallery, museum, and collecting audiences—so younger artists were further discouraged and, therefore, disinclined to engage in creating art about public issues. Work with overt social implications also had begun to seem outmoded and was at times dismissed as simplistic rather than thoughtful, layered, and having multiple possibilities of interpretation.

This attitude seemed to be largely a by-product of the assault on artists by conservative interest groups during the “culture wars.” And their efforts took hold. Take, for example, the backlash against Okwui Enwezor’s *documenta 11* in 2002. It was an intelligent exhibition featuring significant works, yet many critics vehemently dismissed the show for the curator’s political thesis. At the same time, with the art market in a fast, unprecedented expansion, art’s value was becoming more and more aligned with money. For many, an artwork’s value as a commodity became at least as important as its message. Despite this situation, Creative Time continued to encourage artists to address public issues.

During this time, Creative Time supported several timely projects that helped us further shape the *Who Cares* initiative. For example, as the United States prepared to invade Iraq, artist Adelle Lutz conceived a public intervention to promote awareness about the direct effects of war on women and children. In a slow, meditative journey through the city’s streets, twelve artists joined Adelle in donning black burkhas silk-screened with statistics about war, encouraging thousands of unsuspecting passersby to pause and consider the likely repercussions of the ensuing war. At the same time, artist Ignacio Morales was compelled in the aftermath of September 11th to create an understanding of how current events are influenced by complex histories of foreign policy with his comic book entitled *9-11/9-11*. Featuring a fictional story of an immigrant family in New York City, this work drew parallels between the events of September 11, 2001 and the Chilean Revolution of September 11, 1973. In both projects, Creative Time assisted the artists with modest financial, legal, and marketing support. But we wished we could do more. So, in November 2003, Creative Time’s staff actively began to design what became the *Who Cares* initiative.

Throughout the course of a year, the staff debated what we could and should do while interrogating the popular notion of artists as leaders of social change. We had many differences of opinion, but we did share a passionate belief in the fundamental idea that art can encourage us to look at our surroundings in unusual, and often profound, ways; that art can foster insightful dialogue on important public issues; and that art can convey and foster a sense of personal involvement and responsibility. We also agreed that it would be best to hear from artists directly on these subjects.

*Who Cares* was thus designed to provide intimate forums where artists of diverse generations and backgrounds could be free to share opinions, debate positions, and incubate ideas and strategies. In thinking about the right person to contextualize and moderate the conversations, we turned to artist, activist, and professor, Doug Ashford. As a principal artist of Group Material, he had excellent experience in creating socially engaged art projects. As a teacher, Doug had lectured and written extensively on radical art practices. And, as an activist, he had strong opinions about the role of art in society, one that he balanced with a generous attitude toward the diverse opinions of others. Enthused to take on this effort, Doug worked with the Creative Time staff to create a list of dream attendees (artists along with a few esteemed writers) and structured the conversations around three core themes: “Anywhere in the World,” “Beauty and Its Discontents,” and “War Culture.” He then wrote an introductory text to illustrate the themes we would discuss over our dinner forums, hoping artists would be as interested in these topics as we were.

Much to our delight, we received an overwhelming response to our invitation to attend the three dinner forums that took place in November and December 2005. Truth be told, each of the discussions strayed from the themes, allowing participants to discuss what mattered most to them. As a result, common threads and views are found throughout each conversation. Some participants were so impassioned by the topics at hand that they dominated conversation; others felt shy, unsure, and even confused and mistrustful of Creative Time’s intentions, and so they participated less. Some participants wanted more meetings; others wanted them to be structured differently. Regardless, each night featured robust discussions and an incredible range of ideas was exchanged. We published this book to share the artists’ thoughts with a wider audience and to do so quickly for the benefit of those who might be craving similar conversations. Our hope was that by producing an inexpensive paperback, artists, students, and scholars alike would be able to engage with its ideas and challenges. Throughout the process, we were open about organizational biases, agendas, and limitations. We respected the participants’ voices, inviting them to shape their contributions to make sure their thoughts had the weight and importance they deserved. We then commissioned four public art projects to be presented in the fall of 2006. (See Appendix 7, pages 168-171, for descriptions of these projects.)

It has been a personal privilege to be a part of these conversations, and I am excited to be sharing them with you now. This effort took the dedication and hard work of many people who cared. Above all, I applaud Doug Ashford and all the artists, writers, and curators who openly and bravely devoted themselves to this process. I cheer my staff, past and present, who helped design this initiative. Carol Stakenas, Peter Eleey, and Vardit Gross

were particularly central to the program's design as was Heather Peterson, our ever-talented Deputy Director. While Peter brought critical insights and creativity to the design and shape of the conversations, Heather expertly guided the project's every detail with the care and respect it deserved. Our communications team of Maureen Sullivan and Brendan Griffiths worked hard with us to make sure the book had the look and feel we desired. All of us were fortunate to be supported by our dedicated interns Emma Curtis, Paloma Shutes, and Lilly Slezak.

Conceiving of the book and managing its contents was a herculean and complicated effort, managed with care, constancy, grace, and a generous spirit by our wonderful managing editor, Melanie Franklin Cohn. Likewise, it has been a privilege to work with Project Projects, the graphic designers for this initiative and this book, as well as with D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers who is ensuring *Who Cares* reaches a broad audience.

I thank Creative Time's fantastic board members who encourage our inquiries and support our risk-taking spirit. Thanks, in particular, are due to our visionary Board Chair, Amanda Weil, and to former Creative Time Board member, Michael Brenson, who has encouraged us to share our inquiries with larger publics. We take a bow to Dillon Cohen, who made sure the dinners would be comfortable by opening his home and heart to our conversations. Finally, my most sincere gratitude is extended to Ben Rodriguez-Cubeñas, program officer for the New York City portion of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's Pivotal Places program, and his colleagues at the foundation, who believe in art and its relationship to social change and, therefore, took a chance on this initiative.