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Democracy in America at the Convergence Center
Docent Reader

Introduction to Democracy in America
by Anne Pasternak, *Creative Time President and Artistic Director*

There is little question that we Americans are living in a historic moment. From the most exciting election season in recent U.S. history to what may be seismic shifts in the scale of our economic and military power, from global issues such as war in the Middle East to breathtaking environmental change, these are events that challenge and shape a nation. These are times that demand our attention and participation. But I suspect that the media have has virtually killed the public's enthusiasm for this historic moment. A few nights ago, for example, a program on CNN called No Bias, No Bull could not have been more biased or disseminated more bull. It was an overt assault on the intelligence and goodwill of our public. In an era when the death of reality television star Anna Nicole Smith consumed the news media for months while the ongoing realities of war, human rights abuses, and environmental disaster went all but unmentioned, itís no wonder that I thank goodness for artists who care, artists who bother to ask questions, share concerns, and encourage us to think in "unpolarized" ways. And I thank goodness that I am blessed with a job that allows me to take their probing views into the complicated and fascinating public sphere to promote independent thinking and maybe even collective dialogue, activating public space for its intended democratic function.

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. In the 1970s, for example, Creative Time produced exhibitions in derelict and vacant urban sites, responding to the city's rampant decay and promoting visions for its revitalization. In the 80s and 90s, we took the alternative arts organizations activist spirit outdoors, with socially conscious projects in mass-media spaces to raise awareness of timely issues like AIDS, racial injustice, and domestic abuse. Despite the onslaught of the American culture wars, Creative Time took to the streets in support of freedom of expression when other organizations censored artists and turned away from their missions out of fear. In the new millennium, Creative Time has supported artists interested in reflecting on pressing social issues at a time when there seems to be a noticeable decline in politically engaged art. We published our first book, Who Cares, to investigate artists evolving relationships to social action. We have undertaken all of this because we believe in the potential of art to further understanding; to ignite conversation, debate, and action; and to call attention to injustices, contribute to public opinion, and right wrongs.

The past eight years have truly tested the idea of democracy in this country. People nationwide and around the world are confronting fundamental questions about the

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nature of war, freedom, justice, and American-style democracy. With an election season upon us, and our country questioning its future, Creative Time decided that the time is now to give artists platforms from which to share their views about our nation and its future and help counter society's amnesiac tendencies in considering our history. This is a critical moment in which art has a powerful role to play in shaping our awareness and understanding of contemporary events.

So we conceived a national initiative that would support artists in sharing their views on America's evolving relationship to democracy and disseminating their work to broad and diverse, local and national audiences. Democracy in America: The National Campaign is perhaps Creative Time's largest and most multifaceted initiative to date. The project bridges nine cities from coast to coast, commissions six public projects, reaches communities in both red and blue states, and features more than 100 artists.

Democracy in America unfolds in five major efforts. It launched last spring in five cities across America, from Baltimore and New Orleans to Chicago, Brooklyn, and Los Angeles, with town hall-style gatherings in which artists, grassroots organizers, and activists discussed the ways that local action effects change. Next, four performative public art commissions by artists Sharon Hayes, Rodney McMillian and Olga Koumoundouros, Steve Powers, and Mark Tribe took place in six cities across the nation: Austin, Denver, Los Angeles, Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Oakland, and, of course, New York. Leading up to our big finale are two additional public projectsóone by the Center for Tactical Magic, the other by Angel Nevarez and Valerie Tevere, which travel throughout neighborhoods in New York City's diverse boroughs. Then, from September 21 to 27, artists will converge in the stately historic rooms of the gorgeous landmark Park Avenue Armory, with works that confront fundamental questions about the nature of war, freedom, justice, and how we define democracy. Simultaneously, artists and cultural critics will "perform" democracy through speeches and information sharing in the Armory's massive drill hall. This book is, of course, the final component of our ambitious undertaking.

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Exhausted? It might be democracy in America.
by Nato Thompson

"Exhausted? It might be politics." So reads a sign by the Chicago collective Feel Tank in one of their "protests for the politically depressed." As dismal as their sentiment might appear, I find myself warmed by a shared sense of political fatigue. How much more can we take? I know these thoughts are also shared by many artists in the United States today, as the numerous affronts to human rights and social justice take a collective emotional toll. As a recession sets in, a war in Iraq rages on, and an arts community becomes increasingly privatized, the political art community grapples with the overarching project of democracy. Forced into a corner, artists are searching for alternatives.

The title of this book and project comes from Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal 1835 book *Democracy in America*. Visiting the United States to study its emerging prison system, the French politician and sociologist came away with distinct insights concerning the emerging project called "democracy." De Tocqueville noticed that democracy was more than just a political arrangement in this primarily agrarian society, and that in fact deeply sociological forces helped shape it. "Among democratic peoples men easily obtain a certain equality, but they will never get the sort of equality they long for. That is a quality which ever retreats before them without getting quite out of sight, and as it retreats it beckons them on to pursue," he writes. De Tocqueville believed that the political process of equality had taken hold of the American sense of self in every aspect, ranging from the domestic to the public, from the demise of the aristocracy to the rise of the values of farmers (though he did not interrogate its primary rebuke, slavery). What becomes evident to him, however, is that some of the basic principles of the democratic tradition are held with deep conviction by citizens in the United States across political persuasions. Freedoms that accompany the Bill of Rights (assembly, speech, an independent judiciary) are felt as strongly as the commandments in the Bible. For many American citizens, these rights are the material of their ethical code.

Still today we find tensions and resolutions that evade the typical partisan arguments that so define the American political landscape. From 1835 to now, the realm of state power and finance has gone global, and so too should the practical and theoretical manifestations of a democratic project that began, after all, with the city-state of Athens in the 5th century BC. The project of democracy is mutating, and this book looks to artists for an understanding of what forces may be at work. As the first decade of the 21st century begins to round out, and the political mood of the United States becomes anxious, many questions arise. What are art activists focusing on today in lieu of a robust social movement? How has the war on terror and its accompanying policies affected the work and practice of political artists? What is to be done with the legacy of 1968? How do collectives and alternative arts organizations fit into a broader infrastructure of cultural production? What are the political-cultural formations necessary

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to produce social justice? These questions and numerous others inspired this book, and the works, essays, and artistic responses included provide clues to solving them.

We can divide plethora of political art responses in this book from into three distinct categories: the historic, the suspension of basic rights (often referred to as the state of exception), and participatory forms of artistic production. Each artist grapples with the complications of the democratic project in quite different ways, but viewed collectively their works shed light on complications in empire, neoliberalism, and the battle for the visual representation of the past.

The Creative Time project *Democracy in America* was a multi-phased initiative geared to take the pulse of a country grappling with democracy and its relevance today. We facilitated conversations in five cities with cultural producers who consider their work activist. As a follow up to the series of dinner conversations initiated in Creative Time's *Who Cares*, a series of conversations on artists and politics in 2005, we teamed up with *AREA* magazine editor Daniel Tucker to take the question of cultural production and activism to those who not only do the hard work of local activism but often do not participate in the microcosm referred to as "the art world." These discussions came out of a desire to hear from a broader community whose work is clearly political and cultural but may not be defined as contemporary art. That is to say, possibly the term "contemporary art" is problematically exclusive. In talking with artists and activists who work with mural movements, youth media, alternative theater, spoken word, local community spaces, and video collectives, we found that—in terms of geography, race, class, and gender—political diversity increased dramatically, and that what could be constituted as a potential political community became far more productive and inspiring. Issues such as audience, local histories, national organizing, and fiscal concerns were shared among participants, and thus in shifting the language from a specific art discourse, we hoped to find a productive commonality that broke through the limiting boundary of what constitutes political art.

We commissioned the artists Mark Tribe, Rodney McMillian and Olga Koumoundouras, Sharon Hayes, and Steve Powers to organize performances in cities across the country on the subject of democracy in America. Stepping outside the confines of Manhattan, the artists sojourned to different parts of the country in an attempt to look at how the local could tie into the national and the global. Their work took on such critical contemporary and historic issues as the legacy of the new Left, the role of the prison industry, the queer figure in its relation to national politics and identity, and torture. Finally, the project culminates at a "convergence center" located at the Park Avenue Armory, where more than 70 creative citizens (artists, philosophers, community activists, anarchists, educators, and any combination thereof) will gather and exhibit in an effort to produce a space for considering new forms of cultural production in relation to the question of democracy. The convergence center not only offers an opportunity to reflect

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on the past eight years of art activist production but, more important, offers yet another opportunity to create a political community.

This book arrives during an election period, a time during which the texture of politics takes on a traditional electoral spirit. Conventions, campaigns, primaries, and the presidential nomination dominate the political sphere, and the media jump into the fray with riveting play-by-play accounts of the unfolding political drama. Mainstream organizations rally around get-out-the-vote drives, dinner conversations turn vitriolic, and the art communities chip in with their quadrennial political zeal. Politics in the governmental sense becomes the new craze.

This time around we are in the grips of an historic election as an African American man runs as the Democratic candidate for president. Packing stadiums and lecture halls with his supporters, Barack Obama has rapidly caught the imagination of a clearly fatigued country. The media circus around this particular election seems to know no bounds, and at times seems obsessive. What does he eat? Light cuisine. What does he watch? *The Wire*. What does he play? Basketball. Addressing this political Lollapalooza, artist Kenneth Tin-Kin Hung creates videos of Jon Stewart in a karate outfit, Karl Rove mutating into a dancing pig, Hillary Clinton transforming into a multiheaded robot, and Obama prancing around in a Borat-inspired green G-string while racing into the arms of the holy mother Oprah Winfrey. The madness of the images (a hybrid of Terry Gilliam's Monty Python, the video artist Paper Rad, and Fox News) produces an acute sense of how media driven the electoral process actually is. Politics cannot escape the tone and tenor of reality television and sensational entertainment news.

At the same time, as we enter into the zeitgeist of electoral politics, we are experiencing a closure of the past two terms of President George W. Bush. Artists' responses to the doom and gloom of the past eight years are palpable. In their video *Twenty Reasons to Pay Attention to Emotion*, Feel Tank provide a psychological approach to the agonies of being an activist during the past eight years. The task documented in this video is to acknowledge a specific psychological condition: political depression. How do you remain positive when you hold protests no one attends? Produce flyers no one reads? Hold meetings where no one meets? As the political stakes have increased dramatically during the Bush era, the political sentiment has been one of near paralysis. Where do we begin? The antiglobalization movement that so forcefully made itself known in Seattle petered out rapidly after the brutal assaults in Miami at the 2003 FTAA demonstrations. When an anti-Iraq war rally, before the war even began, drew a record number of protesters across not only the United States but the entire world, President Bush dismissed them as a "focus group." The numerous affronts to basic conditions of democracy—the total failure of the press corps to accurately cover the run up to the war, the usurpation of the right of Guantánamo Bay detainees to habeas corpus, the total infrastructural failure of New Orleans, and the phenomenon of gentrification in the '90s—have made being an activist in this country akin to being a member of a

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grassroots organization trying to rebuild New Orleans. There is simply too much wrong with too few resources.

After eight years of the Patriot Act, an endless, pointless war, wiretapping, subprime mortgage recession, torture, rendition flights, and privatized military operations, the country is suddenly united in its antipathy. As the war wears on, and President Bush's approval rating sinks into the mud, everyone is suddenly against the current administration. Scott McClellan, the press secretary for the Bush administration who came out against its "lies," is the embodiment of a new political subject. As the eulogies for Tim Russert scroll across the screen, we see the media washing their hands of the crime of journalistic weakness by remembering Russert as a man of tough questions: no longer a man who let the question of weapons of mass destruction slide by, he is now the man who put Vice President Richard Cheney to the test. Suddenly no one was ever in favor of the past eight years, and all were simply doing their job.

The present situation is clearly frustrating for political artists. Maybe so much so that it obscures vision. Without focusing too much on the evolving electoral situation, this book steps back to glean insights from artists' reactions to the overall question of democracy. Their techniques vary, and each has its merits and failings. Ineffectiveness has become an obsession in political-art discussions, and focusing too much on the potential failings of each project to make political change might indeed be depressing. Better to view their efforts as a whole, to consider that these projects have been created by an evolving community and ever-changing practices, the outcomes of which still remain to be fully seen. The production of a political art community whose political and personal goals can effect social change has yet to coalesce in America, but the tools are clearly available. The following is a list of three tendencies that might benefit from seeing their works in relation to each other as well as within a larger global order of neoliberal (the free-market economic system promulgated by Chicago economist Milton Friedman) empire.

History Again

Let us begin with the desire to make the past the present. As Walter Benjamin said of history, we are blown backward into the future with our eyes always looking into the past. What constitutes the present is an amalgamation of our interpretations and social productions of time passed, so when artists tackle the subject of history, it is important to bear in mind the desire to make sense of the present. When artists dig into the visual representations of what we describe as history (presidential portraits, for example), they are not only unearthing the language of history but the visual language of nationhood.

As reenactment has grown into an emerging genre in contemporary art—one whose novelty in the art world may quickly erode but whose poignancy to a larger public will remain—the challenge is to understand its critical importance. As when faced with any new genre and stylistic choice, we must ask ourselves, why now? I posit two

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reactionary, and productive, answers. First, we must reclaim a narrative of progress from the "end of history" postulations by the neoconservative movement. Second, we need to address the desire to fight back against the visual assault of patriotism that swept post-9/11 America.

In 1989 the conservative political writer Francis Fukuyama posited that history had ended, and the great ideological battles between the socialists and the capitalists had been resolved. After the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Soviet empire, the great war of ideas had reached its resolution. Between socialism and capitalism, capitalism had won and the modern quest for evolution as a society had reached its plateau. True or false, this sentiment was in tandem with policy decisions around the globe to increase privatization and kiss good-bye the aspirations of socialism.

Such a victorious and absurd declaration by the Right could not possibly exist without a reaction from the Left. The history of the Left is over? This deserves a crafty response, one that reminds the Right of the histories that still remain relevant, the battles yet to be resolved, and the legacies that will not be smoothed over. Mark Tribe's *Port Huron Project* reenacts new Left speeches at the sites where they occurred. On July 19, 2008, Tribe cast performance artist and Net activist Ricardo Dominguez as the United Farm Workers organizer Cesar Chavez to reenact Chavez's speech from 1971 in Exposition Park, Los Angeles. In this rousing speech, Chavez addresses how the plight of farm workers in the United States is sympathetic with the plight of farm workers losing their lives in Vietnam. He argues for sacrifice and struggle on the part of parents to show their children that war is not the answer, but that the fight for social justice is, in fact, the true battle to be fought. These words are still uncannily relevant in light of our current war in Iraq and the plight of American farmers today. The speech haunted the gathering of 175 onlookers in 2008, who, for a moment, may have felt that time and space had collapsed.

The shadow of 1968 looms large. From the American tradition of civil rights, to the free speech movement, the women's movement, the renegade poetics of the Situationists, and the Prague Spring, we find solace in an era in which cultural and social movements transform the political terrain. Images of street protests with musicians and artists working collectively to overthrow the status quo pour out of magazines, books, videos, documentaries, and theoretic texts. This vast visual history dominates the imagination of social change and the practices of many artists. When we scan the country for signs of resistance, we sometimes mistakenly search for the precise echoes of what was occurring in the '60s. We wonder, Where are the large-scale protests, the songs of resistance? But our counterculture cannot be so obvious. The year 1968 is perhaps the last moment in which one could see resistance so clearly represented in the media. The growth of cultural production under neoliberalism and the radically altered global economy point toward extreme shifts in power and the symbolic language we operate in. But that doesn't mean that the counterculture does not exist.

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Immediately following our desire to reclaim the function of history as progress, there is the desire to battle the symbolic warfare of nationalism—particularly the nationalism that fueled post-9/11 hysteria. The American flag jumped onto the scene like an aging rock star with an incredible makeover. As photographer Greta Pratt documents, flags suddenly appeared across the American landscape. Her series *Flag a Day* depicts 365 days of flags, including flag images on key chains, barn doors, Chevy hoods, baseball caps, and beer cozies. The visual lexicon of the new American art movement—a kind of American surrealist patriotism—swelled to unprecedented proportions: bald eagles weeping, firefighters mimicking the soldiers at Iwo Jima, the Twin Towers hovering over Old Glory. News broadcasts' title screens filled with American flags evoked a continual state of emergency, and there were gung-ho-sounding leads in new broadcast titles, such as State of Emergency; America in peril; shock and awe.

The war of history, via the war of images that represent history, kicks into full swing as political-cultural producers rapidly attempt to respond to this iconographic minefield. *The Colbert Report*, for example, begins with a bald eagle descending on the screen and Stephen Colbert waving an American flag. Artist Allison Smith interrogates the history of craft, the domestic, the queer, and the masculine history of the Civil War. Duke Riley launches a reproduction of an 18-century submarine, the *Acorn*, into New York Harbor, where he is then apprehended by the Coast Guard. According to Riley, his work "addresses the prospect of residual but forgotten unclaimed frontiers on the edge and inside overdeveloped urban areas, and their unsuspected autonomy." Replete with the visual signifiers of patriotism and American ingenuity, Riley's work challenges the language of empire as a form of American democracy.

State of Exception
"Democracy, it is true, remained an incomplete project throughout the modern era in all its national and local forms, and certainly the processes of globalization in recent decades have added new challenges, but the primary obstacle to democracy is the global state of war." ---p. xi., Hard and Negri, *Multitude*, 2004, p.xi.

We are at war. Without question, the condition of war has shaped the recent years dramatically. Unpopular now, this war began in a clearly contentious political atmosphere. As the United States dismissed the findings of U.N. weapons inspectors, the renegade American government became synonymous with what Giorgio Agamben describes as the state of exception, the prolonged condition whereby normal forms of rights and laws are no longer applicable. The government's rationale was that because the United States is a force for freedom and justice around the world, it can sidestep global inconveniences of freedom and justice. The end justifies the means. Similar to how they have to respond to Batman in the box office hit *Dark Knight,* Americans have to operate as vigilantes for the begrudging benefit of an ethically naive world. Under this rationale, we have seen the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan deteriorate into profound chaos, the basis for torture argued in the courts, the demands for wiretapping on

civilians become common practice, and the terrorist watch list grow to 1 million names as of July 2008. How can such blatant contradictions to the tenets of democracy not damage the language around the democratic project? How can the idea of democracy in America not sound tragically ironic?

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in their book *Multitude*, written on the heels of the Iraq war, that the current obstacle to global democracy is the perpetual condition of war. Empire, they assert, is the political project of capital. Empire is a form of rule in which all political subjectivities answer to one force, as they did during the Roman Empire. After the cold war, the gates opened for a massive political repositioning, and the United States found itself to be the major military force in the world. While empire is not embodied by nation-states, it is embodied by the forces that battle on behalf of global capital. As empire spreads beyond national boundaries, all war has become civil war.

"The state of exception is a concept in the German legal tradition that refers to the temporary suspension of the constitution and the rule of law, similar to the concept of state of siege and the notion of emergency powers in the French and English traditions." ---Hard and Negri, *Multitude*, 2004, p.7

What the condition of empire further exacerbates is the state of exception. As the World Trade Center collapsed and anthrax-laden envelopes circulated among the American media, the Bush administration put the country on red alert. In a state of crisis, all bets were off and civil liberties, in the name of security, were placed on pause. This condition, whereby the basic principles of human rights are not applicable, became a phenomenon that shows how empire is anathema to the project of democracy. In the space of this contradiction, artists find a rich terrain to expose the political reality for what it is, and in doing so, produce a new political consciousness.

Artist Steve Powers took the logic of the state of exception to its logical extreme. Focusing on the interrogation method of waterboarding, Powers set up *Waterboard Thrill Ride* in the bleak carnivalesque atmosphere of Coney Island. Consisting of a clumsy animatronic simulation of an interrogator waterboarding a detainee, the display requires a visitor to insert a dollar into a slot in order to witness the latest craze in human abjectness. Taking the cynical to the level of absurdity, Powers aggressively asserts the primeval violence that has been condoned as part of routine military operation. "I can't imagine anybody will be offended at the *Waterboard Thrill Ride*," he says. "People have lost the capacity to be outraged, unless sports teams are involved. Hopefully people will chant, 'USA, USA.'"

In his quest for making sense of the geography of a state of exception, artist Trevor Paglen has focused on the remnants of what Dick Cheney refers to as "the dark world." With a budget of $32 billion, this classified military operation is, in fact, a legalized

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undemocratic space of military force. That is to say, it is an expenditure that the citizens who rule over it are not allowed to see. The state of exception is not only a judicial imperative, but a line item on a budget that requires infrastructures and citizens. In his book with A. C. Thompson, *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights*, Paglen investigates the physical reality of rendition flights, planes that transport prisoners across international borders to locations where torture is legal. His work, which includes photographs of American secret prisons and spy satellites, makes visible that physical reality of a massive infrastructure for secrecy outside the realm of law.

One of the most glaring examples of the state of exception is Guantánamo Bay. As of May 2008, Guantánamo Bay detains 278 prisoners captured during the invasion of Afghanistan. Located outside U.S. national borders, on the island of Cuba, this prison physically and legally operates outside the law. The Bush administration vehemently argued that because of their status as non-U.S. citizens and as "enemy combatants," the prisoners at Guantánamo Bay are not privy to basic forms of justice guaranteed under the Geneva Conventions. This argument was eventually upturned by the Supreme Court in June 2006, yet the detainees remain.

In their project to understand this specific political condition and tie it into a larger American project of exception, artists Rene Gabri and Ayreen Anastas traveled across the United States to investigate various forms of camps. Giorgio Agamben argues that the camp is a physical site of exception that makes the rule of law possible. It is both a physical site—such as an internment camp, reservation, or holding cell—and a legal condition, such as being declared an enemy combatant. While literally camping, Gabri and Anastas visited Native American reservations, recovery organizations in New Orleans, Black Panther summer camps, and alternative art organizations to discuss the broad concept of the camp and how individuals relate to it.

The state of exception is not a recent phenomenon, but one that the project of democracy has depended on since its inception. Slavery, colonialism, and the Native American reservation are not minor exceptions to the rule of law, but are, in fact, part and parcel of what makes government function as a mechanism of control. Finding these contradictions in the American tradition allows cultural activists to highlight injustices. In their investigation of the death penalty and prison system, artists Rodney McMillian and Olga Koumoundouros staged a roving guerrilla theater across the city of Austin, Texas. Home to the most executions of any state in America, Texas has been a locus of prison activism, and its population increasingly lives within a permanent state of exception. Unsurprisingly, the state's map of death row inmates and lynchings in American history tells a similar tale. As slavery is clearly the most obvious and haunting legacy of the American state of exception, the growth of the prison industry (the United States by far has the highest prison population in the world, with one in every 100 Americans behind bars) should haunt anyone interested in the dialogue around democracy.

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Sharon Hayes's project *Revolutionary Love 1 & 2* looks to the rhetorical role of the state of exception when it comes to the queer figure. Situating her project at the Democratic National Convention in Denver and the Republican National Convention in Saint Paul, Minnesota, Hayes speaks in the first person, and 50 to 75 queer volunteers speak in unison, a text on love and war in a place where speech around queer identity is highly charged. With *Revolutionary Love: I Am Your Worst Fear*, her title for the DNC piece, Hayes addresses the democratic anxiety over queer culture, with the hope that queer culture will confront politics head-on and not become an outsider community. *Revolutionary Love: I Am Your Best Fantasy*, her title for the RNC piece, places a different emphasis on a party that has benefited greatly from leveraging the specter of the queer for political gain. Gay marriage has often been sited as an issue mobilized by the Bush campaign in 2004. Hayes places the state of exception for gays where it belongs—in the face of both political parties.

The state of exception is a method for understanding contemporary politics, and no law could embody it more than the Patriot Act. Appropriately titled, this reenactment of exceptionalism has expanded the ability of the government to interrogate and prosecute individuals in the United States. Consider Critical Art Ensemble's Steven Kurtz, who after finding his wife had suffered a fatal heart attack, was forced to endure a four-year legal battle on initial charges of bioterrorism. Or the situation of Bangladeshi-born artist Hassan Elahi, who on arriving at the Detroit airport in 2002, discovered that he had been reported as a possible 9/11 terrorist. After six months of reporting to the FBI and remaining on the terrorist watch list, Elahi retaliated by documenting his life in the extreme. Uploading to a Web site images of every noodle dish he ate, airport he went to, bed he slept in, and bowel movement he had, Elahi undertook a strategy of documenting his life so much that the FBI might leave him alone.

Democracy Has a Form
"Our exhibitions and projects are intended to be forums in which multiple points of view are represented in a variety of styles and methods. We believe, as the feminist writer bell hooks has said, that 'we must focus on a policy of inclusion so as not to mirror oppressive structures.' As a result, each exhibition is a veritable model of democracy."
—Group Material From *Democracy: A Project by Group Material*, Dia Art Foundation, 1990.

Beyond a political project, democracy is also a collective social formation. As much as it is often understood in terms of political theory or electoral systems of governance, democracy is also interpreted by artists in terms of the manner in which they make their work.

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Much has been said regarding the term *relational aesthetics*. The idea refers to a form of art production in which participation completes the project. Replicating basic ideas of democracy, these art forms attempt to complicate the idea of a finished product and, inherently, decenter the work toward the experience of the participant. A major stumbling block for much of what has been described as relational aesthetics, and a site for much critique, has been the inability to acknowledge the larger realm of capital that informs such social cohesion. Inadvertently reflecting the democratic project quite closely, these projects promise active participation but allocate the fruits of such cultural production to the few. *Social capital* is the name for the process whereby individuals mobilize cultural cachet for the sake of private economic advancement. The tensions concerning social capital and artists' take on democracy are of no small portent.

Theorist Brian Holmes taps into the difficulty of making political art in a time when representation is a major form of capital production. Holmes points out that the representing of politics should not be confused with the reality of political movements and that certain artists use the energy of real social change for status quo purposes. When is political art really being used for the social good, and when is it being mobilized for neoliberal gains? The answer is not simple. When the production of, and representation of, the self is inherently tied to the acquisition of capital, one must second-guess all cultural production. At the same time, second-guessing can lead to more finger-pointing that productivity. Holmes, in a longer critique of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* at Documenta 11, writes, "How does picture politics work, when it is associated with a proper name and presented within the contemplative frame of the art institution? Invariably it produces statements like these: 'I represent the people,' or 'I represent a social movement,' or 'I represent the excluded' —which are the classic lies of representative democracy when it serves to conceal private interests. Of course this root fact makes myself, a self-styled 'critic' writing in catalogues and magazines about the relations of art and politics, into one of the baldest liars of them all." (Holmes, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms*, 2008, p. 84)

How are artists to produce art that combats power while at the same time being honest about the social capital it produces for them personally? How is the political art viewer to determine when a work is secretly designed for the sole purpose of money (and not for social change)? In an era when the symbols of resistance are critical to understanding the movement taking place, how do we manage our distrust of symbols in general? Surely, investigating this complication might help answer the decade long question of where activism has gone in the United States. The short answer is that we don't trust what we see.

This deep distrust of the symbols in which we trade gets to the root of much ambivalence surrounding political art. And as is often the case with problems surrounding power, the status quo correctly seizes the moment as an opportunity to avoid the tough political questions altogether. Because artists who seek political change

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are so divided, and most work can be dismissed as guilty of the same sort of power-hungry maneuvers that it critiques, questions of justice, rights, and social change via art can be swiftly dismissed. As art fairs draw massive attention, magazines, Web sites, criticism, and academia follow suit, and the infrastructure surrounding cultural production becomes increasingly conservative and protocapitalist. So, how to untangle this web?

In addition to forms of participatory artwork, there exist democratic forms of organizing, such as the collective. Collectives, and counterinstitutional structures, often point toward a form of organizing that attempts to escape the capitalist formation of authorship and the individual. Resisting the source of much art history mythology (the artist as genius), the collective can work toward decentering authorship and producing social formations that reflect larger social movements. There are numerous collectives in the United States—Feel Tank, Temporary Services, Bruce High Quality Foundation, Red76, Critical Art Ensemble, Bulbo, Institute for Applied Autonomy, Spurse, Center for Tactical Magic, dB Foundation, Megawords, Group Material, and InCubate, just to name a handful. The politics nascent to collectives must be understood in relation to their battle with cultural capital and the complications, as a discourse writ large, that arise when creating new forms of cultural production.

The collective also points toward forms of social organizing that escape the role of the individual artist entirely. Counterinstitutional spaces, alternative art galleries, and community spaces that dot this country operate very similarly to the collective model, but generally have a physical location and an eye toward self-financing. During the town hall discussions, we encountered numerous organizations that are attempting to produce counterpower and democratic conditions through their social formations. Often described as "spaces," as opposed to art projects, these cultural organizations—such as Red Emma's 2640 in Baltimore, the Experimental Station in Chicago, the Community Book Center in New Orleans, the Change You Want to See Gallery in Brooklyn producing culture while at the same time wrestling with the power of capital.

Currently there are numerous forms of political art and participation that are wrestling with the topical issues of our time, the historic, along with the self-organizing. These strands, while possibly at odds with each other, do paint a portrait of a country in deep political tension and confusion. Without a doubt, the exhaustion and depression that accompany the recent political turmoil in the United States force us to evaluate not only the democratic ideal in broad terms but also within the discourse of art itself. The world is changing before our eyes. Cultural producers involved in the project of democracy are slowly confronting the next terrain of globalism, and they must find a method for evading the pitfalls created by cultural capital. And while these demands raise the bar on what the purview of the arts should be, they also provide an opportunity to reevaluate what is important in the production of the much larger subject of democracy. For what this

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book, and travels across the country, reveal is that even in politically depressing times, there is widespread commitment to solving these riddles.

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Contemporary Art and the Legacies of Democracy, 2001–2008
by Yates McKee

"Democracy, then, has difficulty at its core."
—Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*

"We do not live in democracies."
—Jacques Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy*

1. In a photograph from Sharon Hayes's 2005 performance-based slide-show *In the Near Future*, the artist, a white woman with short hair dressed in a T-shirt and cargo pants, appears on a street corner in Manhattan holding a placard that reads "I <u>Am</u> a Man." The scene is disjunctive in several ways. Despite displaying a placard, an object typically associated with a collective protest, the woman appears relatively placid and stands alone in addressing the innumerable others who have presumably witnessed her presence in public space—including the camera itself. Further, while somewhat androgynous in appearance relative to conventional norms of femininity, this woman does not appear to be a "man" in the biologically determined sense. Yet it is precisely the public staging of this "improper" identity that is ultimately at stake, an utterance that the woman has appropriated from an earlier scene of improper appropriation in U.S. history. This speech-act comes to her—and us—from archival photographs of the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' strike, where hundreds of black garbage men staged public demonstrations in which each striker displayed a placard bearing the slogan "I <u>Am</u> A Man." The placards did something more than issue a statement or even a finite demand: They constituted a forceful declaration of the workers' status as political subjects vis-à-vis governmental authority, making an egalitarian claim on the part of those not regarded in dominant legal or cultural terms as having the qualification to speak. The displacement enacted by Hayes violates in a certain way the particularity of a past historical experience; yet the experience in question was precisely one in which the particular claims of an oppressed group broke onto the global terrain of the "rights of man," challenging the unequal distribution of the "rights of the citizen" within a national polity—transforming both in the process. Hayes thus pays tribute to a historical struggle for civil rights, but she also suggests the mobility and mutability of this legacy vis-à-vis contemporary scenarios of inequality. Among many such relations of inequality in the contemporary United States is the denial of the civil rights of gay, lesbian, and transgendered people, most often understood in terms of the legal proscription of "gay marriage," but in fact extending much deeper into the economic and social entitlements pertaining to nonnormative modes of partnership and kinship in general.[1] Without fixing the latter as an exclusive point of reference, Hayes's collaging together of her singular body with the placard from 1968 performs a short-circuiting of historical time,

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[1] Lisa Duggan and Richard Kim, "Beyond Gay Marriage," *The Nation* (2005).

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suggesting the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of partaking in the contested democratic heritage of the United States and beyond.

2. The past few years have seen a proliferation of discourse concerning the artistic and political legacies of the sixties, especially given the fortieth anniversary of what Antonio Negri recently hailed in a special commemorative issue of *Artforum* as the "revolutionary process" of May 1968.[2] While works such as Hayes's *In the Near Future*, in which we also witness her publicly remobilizing protest signage pertaining to the U.S. feminist and antiwar movements, clearly engage the democratic aspirations of the sixties, they treat them less as a continuous revolutionary spirit than as a spectral inheritance that makes an enigmatic claim on the present, dislocating our very sense of contemporaneity in the way described by Jacques Derrida in the following passage: "If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it...One always inherits from a secret—which says 'read me, will you ever be able to do so?'"[3] Indeed, the "reading" performed by Hayes is far from transparent, pointing to the late sixties not as a stable historical reference but as a mobile set of questions that for her generation of artists are in fact remediated through the artistico-political legacies of the 1980s. As theorized by Rosalyn Deutsche in her epoch-defining *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, it was during this period that the fraught relationship between democratic public space and what she called the "construction of subjectivity in representation" emerged as a conceptual problematic for artists aiming to complicate both governmental rubrics of "art in public spaces" and leftist demands for "activist art."[4]

The present text aims to outline some problems and tendencies informing the relation between contemporary art and democratic politics in the United States over the past eight years, which is to say, in the era of George W. Bush and his administration's uneasy articulation of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies in the domestic and international sphere alike. I have introduced this schematic consideration of this period with a consideration of Hayes's work, and suggested its indebtedness to both the sixties and the eighties, in order to complicate any simplistic historiographic bracketing of

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[2] See Sylvere Lotringer,"A Revolutionary Process Never Ends: An Interview with Antonio Negri" *Artforum* (May 2008), 306-309.

[3] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 16. According to Derrida, we must think of "democracy...as the inheritance of a promise that exceeds any regulative ideal,"a future-oriented imperative which he otherwise describes in terms of "democracy to come." See Rouges, *Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 82.

[4] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997). Deutsche cites Hayes's project in her discussion of the "transgenerational inheritance" of feminist art in Deutsche, Aruna D'Souza, Miwon Kwon, Ulrike Müller, Mignon Nixon, and Senam Okudzeto, "Feminist Time: A Conversation," *Grey Room* 31 (Spring 2008), 56–57. Also see Julia Bryant Wilson, "On Sharon Hayes," *Artforum* (May 2006); Sofia Hernández Chong Cuy, "Sharon Hayes at Art In General," in Rosalee Goldberg, ed., *Performa; New Visual Art Performance*, (New York: Performa Publications, 2006), 123—125; and Benjamin Young's forthcoming text on Hayes' work in Yates McKee and Meg McLagan, eds., *The Visual Cultures of Nongovernmental Politics*, (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

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either the antidemocratic policies of the Bush administration or the artistic and cultural activities that have emerged in opposition to them. Without denying the massive reconfiguration of the ideological terrain of the United States effected by the attacks of September 11, I think it is crucial to displace the idea that those events are somehow the sole explanatory key to the politicized artistic production of the past eight years, as if the latter constituted at worst a mechanical reaction or at best some sort of fashionable zeitgeist. Indeed, the 2008 Creative Time *Democracy in America* project should be situated not only as a critical response to the voluminous outrages of the Bush administration, but also as a contemporary working-through of the contested historical, theoretical, and political legacies of both democracy in general and artistic engagements with democracy in particular. Among the virtues of the Creative Time project is its close attention to the remarkable emergence in the past few years of an entire subgenre of performance art concerned with counterhistorical reenactment—exemplified by the work of Hayes—that runs against the grain of the nostalgic, monumentalizing, and often nationalistic cultural practice of "historical reenactment" as typically understood.[5] Indeed, *Democracy in America* itself might be interpreted as performing its own form of historical reenactment. First, it polemically appropriates its title from Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 treatise, probing the forms of exclusion, domination, and contestation that continue to haunt market-populist accounts of the "exceptional" nature of U.S. democracy as propounded by the French philosopher and his legatees in American studies during the cold war and beyond.[6]

Second, the current volume stages an archival reproduction of materials pertaining to a landmark artistic project concerned with the problem of democracy undertaken twenty years ago in the months surrounding the 1988 presidential election that ultimately brought George H.W. Bush to power. Produced by Group Material in conjunction with the Dia Art Foundation, the *Democracy* project encompassed exhibitions, round-table discussions, public "town meetings," and, ultimately, a book addressing a series of topics from public education to electoral politics to the AIDS crisis. The project aimed to critically interrogate the relation of contemporary art and its institutions to what *Democracy* editor Brian Wallis described as an "expanded notion of cultural production" pertaining to the various forms of democratic activism that had emerged in opposition to the hegemonic social, economic, and geopolitical policies of the Reagan era.

Group Material began its introduction to the project in the *Democracy* volume with the following lament: "Ideally, democracy is a system in which political power rests with the people: All citizens actively participate in the process of self-representation and self-governing.... But in 1987, it was clear that the state of American democracy was in no way ideal." *Democracy* aimed to displace conventional, official definitions of

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[5] This was the governing curatorial concept of Nato Thompson's 2007 MassMoca exhibition, "A historic Occasion: The Uses of History in Contemporary Art.".

[6] On the contested genealogy of the reception of Tocqueville, see Michael Denning, "The Peculiarities of the Americans: Reconsidering *Democracy in America*," in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2001).

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democracy with a sense of activated participation in a cultural sphere that would at once contribute to the realization of democracy in general and actually embody or prefigure it on a local scale. According to Group Material, in constructing a series of "forums in which multiple points of view are in a variety of style and methods...each exhibition is a veritable model of democracy," it would assert with its very form that "'politics' cannot be restricted to those arenas stipulated as such by professional politicians."[7]

While aiming to re-democratize democracy and de-professionalize politics, in its short theoretical introduction to the volume Group Material nonetheless took for granted the meaning of democracy as a regulative ideal of "self-governing and self-representation," to be achieved by what editor Brian Wallis called "cultural activism[:] the use of cultural means to accomplish social change."[8] Yet the presumed simplicity of this transitive relation between culture and democracy—exemplified according to David Dietcher's critical account of the project by the nostalgic American figure of the "town-meeting"—was belied by much of the material in *Democracy*, and especially by the cover of the book itself.[9] Eschewing any traditional iconography of the "people" as a sovereign, self-governing body, the book cover contested dominant notions of democracy by imaginatively inscribing its viewer into a scenography of force and conflict

The cover combines the title word *Democracy* with a photograph of a line of police officers standing behind a wooden barricade that reads "POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS" erected at the top of a set of stairs leading up to a monumental, geometrically ordered edifice: the U.S. Supreme Court. Shadowed by the spectral outlines of the neoclassical sculpture *The Authority of Law*, the spatial command of the police—DO NOT CROSS—is addressed to both the unspecified group presumably assembled at the base of the barricaded stairs outside the frame of the image, but also to us as viewers of the image and readers of the book at an indeterminate moment in the historical future Fall 2008 for instance). The image thus positions us within a kind of spatial diagram of the incommensurability between what Jacques Ranciere has called "police logic" on one hand and democratic politics on the other. Irreducible to either a specific governmental function or even "policy" as a specific field of expertise—though underlying both—for Ranciere the police is a "partition of the sensible," establishing given positions and identities within the social order. Rather than a procedural technology or a formal ideal to be realized, for Ranciere, democracy involves the unsettling of such fixed positions and identities, the breaking into the realm of what is sayable, audible, and visible as legitimate political activity rather than mere noise or chaos.[10]

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[7] Group Material, "On Democracy," in Brain Wallis, ed., *Democracy: A Project by Group Material* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 2.

[8] Wallis, "Democracy and Cultural Activism," in *Democracy*, 8.

[9] While presenting a highly sympathetic theorization of the *Democracy* project, Dietcher also sounds an important note of skepticism regarding the presumably transparent relay between avant-garde cultural discourses and the highly organized activities and demands of groups such as ACT-UP. Dietcher, "Social Aesthetics," in *Democracy*, 13-34.

[10] Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004). Ranciere has emerged as a key point of reference in artistic discourse over the past few years, as exemplified by the special issue of *Artforum* devoted to his work (March 2007).

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Yet if the *Democracy* cover image projects a kind of abstract diagram of democracy, it is also marked by a significant trace of particularity, as indicated on the inside flap of the book in the photo credit: "Jane Rosett, Civil Disobedience against the *Hardwick* Decision, Supreme Court Building, Washington D.C. October 10, 1988." The decision by Group Material to use this particular photograph, taken by a founding figure of U.S. AIDS activism, is no coincidence considering the ambition of the *Democracy* project to construct what Ernesto Laclau would call a "democratic chain of equivalences" between an otherwise heterogeneous range of struggles against to the policies of the Reagan administration. [11]

The 1986 *Hardwick* decision upheld an archaic Georgia antisodomy law as a constitutionally legitimate proscription of what the Justice, citing the eighteenth-century jurist William Blackstone, deemed a "crime not fit to be named." The democratic struggle against *Hardwick* that emerged in subsequent years was of a dual nature: On the primary front of the legal battle, activists sought to contest the invasive overextension of governmental power in the policing of private sexual practices as a violation of constitutionally protected civil liberties. On the secondary level, however, struggles against *Hardwick* were concerned with the ways in which the criminalization of gay people enshrined into law by the ruling legitimized a broader cultural, ideological, and indeed theological campaign of dehumanization of people with AIDS that ultimately justified forms of inegalitarian governmental neglect, as when Senator and former segregationist Jesse Helms remarked in 1989 that "the government should spend less money on people with AIDS because they got sick as a result of a deliberate, disgusting, revolting conduct."[12] Contesting both the overextension and negligence of governing agencies, the civil disobedience action with which are called to impossibly identify by the cover of *Democracy* thus positions the *demos* as those who neither embrace governmental power as the proper representation of their interests nor oppose it as the corruption of their capacities of self-representation: this is democracy as what Michel Feher has called "nongovernmental politics...a politics of the governed determined to act as such."[13]

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[11] By "chain of equivalences," Laclau means the careful and often precarious linking together of various political struggles that bear no simple relation to one another, but which oppose a common enemy across a differentiated social spectrum of oppression that comes to be articulated in terms of the the democratic "people." On the aporias of this logic, see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005), 67–171. Gregg Bordowitz cites the *Hardwick* decision and the resistance to it as catalyzing moments in his formation as an artist and activist in "My Postmodernism," featured in a special issue of *Artforum* concerned with the legacies of the 1980s (March 2003). Among the few instances of progressive legislative victories during the past eight years was the overturning of *Hardwick* by the Supreme Court in 2003, a ruling with important implications for various struggles concerning sexuality and privacy, including abortion rights and the rights of sex workers. See Richard Kim, "Queer Cheer," *The Nation* (July 2, 2003).
[12] Cited in Lisa Duggan's obituary "Jesse Helms, American Bigot," *The Nation* (July 6, 2008).
[13] Michel Feher, "The Governed in Politics," in Michel Feher, Gaelle Krikorian, and Yates McKee, eds., *Nongovernmental Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 12–27.

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3. All of the problems confronted by Group Material twenty years ago continue to haunt the field of contemporary art today. This is the case not only in terms of the specific sociopolitical issues addressed in *Democracy*, such as AIDS and media consolidation, but also in terms of the specialized realm of art itself. Chief among these concerns is how the discursive and institutional fields of art might be articulated with what Wallis described as an "expanded notion of cultural production." Who or what is the constituency, public, or collaborator for an artistico-cultural intervention or initiative, and what are the institutional, financial, ideological, and technological forces behind the production, distribution, and reception thereof? Considering the recent proliferation of new interfaces, practices, and techniques of democratic activism enabled by digital media, what are the arcs of publicity through which such interventions might circulate, and according to what criteria should we judge their "efficacy" in the political realm? [14] Indeed, how is the "political realm" itself aesthetically demarcated? How might art, as one site of what Chantal Mouffe has called the "mobilization of the passions," contribute to either the enforcement or critique of the line drawn between the *demos* of democracy and its outsiders in an age of globalization and "cosmopolitical" claims for rights, recognition, and redistribution? [15] How might artists negotiate between what Carrie Lambert-Beatty has insightfully described as an "art of protest" familiar within the tradition of the avant-garde and an emergent "art of policy" that would look to the aesthetic as a space of neither revolutionary opposition nor technocratic consensus but rather a site of productively uncertain literacy, debate, and advocacy concerning the rights of the governed vis-à-vis corporate and governmental agencies? [16]

Yet perhaps the most important demand made by the *Democracy* project upon our present situation is that artists, critics, and curators engage democracy at all, rather than cynically dismissing the term, as some on the left have been tempted to do in recent years due to the current administration's mobilization of democracy as a legitimizing principle in the invasion of Iraq. [17]

[14] For an important survey of the complicated negotiations performed by activists between mainstream and alternative media platforms over the past decade, see Megan Boler, ed., *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). For interrogations of the criteria of "efficacy" in politicized artistic production over the past decade, see the special antiwar issue of *October* 123 (Winter 2008), especially the responses of T.J. Demos, 33—37; Rosalyn Deutsche, 38–40; Carrie Lambert-Beatty, 95–97; Pamela Lee, 98–101; and Yates McKee, 110–115.

[15] See the debate concerning the relation between "the people" and "the population" as staged by Hans Haacke's intervention *Der Bevölkerung* at the German Reichstag in Rosalyn Deutsche, Tom Keenan, and Branden Joseph, "Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension: An Interview With Chantal Mouffe," *Grey Room* 2 (Winter 2001), 123, as well as Bruce Robbins, "The Aesthetic and the International: A Response to Chantal Mouffe," *Grey Room* 5 (Fall 2001), 112–117.

[16] Here I am conjugating the arguments posed by Feher, et al. in *Nongovernmental Politics* with those of Carrie Lambert-Beatty in her response to the *October* antiwar questionnaire, 95–97, as well as her discussion of the tactical media groups Yes Men and Women on Waves in "Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 2 (2008).

[17] This neoconservative ideal is given its exemplary articulation by former Soviet dissident and Likud official Natan Sharansky in his best-selling manifesto *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). On the importance of

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Group Material's *Democracy* project responded to a related but distinct ideological conjuncture in which it was also crucial to recognize the contentedness and contingency of democracy. As Wallis pointed out, the Reagan-Bush years launched an attack on what was perceived to be an "excess of democracy" at home while aiming to position itself as the chosen, exceptional model of democracy on the world stage to be exported abroad. Indeed, George H. W. Bush declared 1989 to be the "year of democracy," framing the collapse of the Eastern bloc as an indication of the teleological movement of world history toward the exemplary model of the United States. The first Bush administration thereby presented the liberal-democratic principles championed by the Eastern European civil society movements as bearing an inherent link to the policies of free-market capitalism, anticipating Francis Fukuyama's infamous thesis concerning "the end of history." This thesis provided the broad ideological horizons of neoliberal globalization during the Clinton era, during which time the urgent problems posed by Group Material receded from visibility in the mainstream art world, with only faint traces remaining in the compensatory discourse of democratization posed by Nicolas Bourriaud's paradigm of "relational aesthetics."[18] Yet the Clinton era in fact witnessed a proliferation of forms of cultural activism working self-consciously within the legacy of Group Material, addressing sites issues including the prison-industrial complex, gentrification, sweatshop labor, the Zapatista rebellion, the Palestinian *intifada* and the intensification of the global AIDS pandemic. Often operating under post-situationist rubrics such as "tactical media" and "countercartography," such practices linked themselves to the expanded networks of activist counterpublicity that crystallized with the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization ministerial meeting in Seattle.[19] Operating simultaneously in digital, discursive, and physical spaces, these "interventionist" practices, as Nato Thompson labeled them in his groundbreaking

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Sharansky's ideas for the Bush administration, see Ron Suskind, "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush," *New York Times Magazine* (October 17, 2004).

[18] In "Relational Aesthetics and Antagonism" *October* 110, 65, Claire Bishop cites Group Material's interrogative question, "How is culture made, and for whom is it made?" in her ground-breaking critique of *Relational Aesthetics*, but ends up positing as a "radical" alternative artists operating only well within mainstream circuits of the global art world, such as Thomas Hirschhorn. I criticize Bishop on this point in "Suspicious Packages," *October* 117 (Summer 2006) 109–121, but also question those self-confidently activist endeavors in contemporary U.S. art that would claim to realize democracy in the figure of the anticapitalist street protest.

[19] On tactical media, see David Garcia and Geert Lovink, "ABCs of Tactical Media" (1997) available at www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.htmland. On "counter-cartography" see Lize Mogel and Alexis Bhagat, eds., *An Atlas of Radical Cartography* (Los Angeles: Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, 2007). On the historical links between eighties cultural activism and that of the late nineties and early 2000s, see Ben Shepard, ed., *From ACT-Up to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building During the Era of Globalization* (New York: Verso, 2002). For a general theorization of artico -cultural developments surrounding the Seattle events framed in terms of "anti-capitalism," see Brian Holmes, "Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World," in Gregory Sholette and Blake Stimson, eds., *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945* (Minnesota, 2006), 273–293.

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curatorial survey, laying the conceptual and infrastructural groundwork for many of the most compelling forms of democratic cultural activism of the past eight years.[20]

If the mid-to-late 1990s were dominated by market fundamentalism in the United States, the attacks of September 11 and their aftermath confronted artists and cultural producers with questions concerning the psychic, affective, and legal conditions of patriotism, citizenship, and militarism, especially as pertaining to the insidious new rhetoric of Homeland Security and the broad powers granted to the executive branch of government under the Patriot act and the broader War on Terror. Epitomized by the injunction "You're either with us or you're with the terrorists," issued by the White House in the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration sought to enforce in the domestic sphere its own version of what Giorgio Agamben has called the "protected democracy" characteristic of governments claiming emergency executive powers during states of "sovereign exception" in which the very being of the *demos* is allegedly under mortal — including suspensions of constitutional liberties, extrajudicial trials, expanded forms of unaccountable surveillance, crackdowns on undocumented immigrants, and intimidation and cooptation of the press. [21]

Despite the skillful mobilization of patriotism by the Bush administration leading up to the actual invasion of Iraq in late March 2003, this period witnessed the massive, globally coordinated antiwar demonstrations of February 15th. [22] Hailed by a sympathetic *New York Times* reporter as "the second superpower," the figure of "global public opinion" purportedly embodied by these demonstrations provided the occasion for a brief if highly visible articulation of antiwar cultural politics, bolstered by Michael Moore's Oscar acceptance speech for *Bowling for Columbine* on March 24, in which he "shamed" President Bush as a "fictitious president leading us to war for fictitious reasons" on live national television. The February 15 demonstrations posed the problem of what it would mean to represent what Hardt & Negri called "the global people" and amplified the efforts of artists working on the historical, aesthetic and mediatic conditions of protest activity that had been initiated in earnest with the Seattle demonstrations four years earlier—a development given its most subtle articulation by Hayes in *In The Near Future.*[23]

The public and congressional consensus concerning the war began to unravel in earnest over the course of 2004 despite the ultimate victory of Bush against Kerry in that year's elections and the putative abyss between "red" and "blue" states—an essentialist "cultural" divide deconstructed in Paul Chan's *Now Promise Now Threat,* a hallucinatory video essay concerned with the contested "post-secular" religio-political conjecture of

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[20] Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *The Interventionists: User's Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/MASS MocCA, 2004).

[21] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15. For a broad theorization of the historical, cultural, and ideological ramifications of this condition see Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller, eds., *Exceptional State*: *Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2007).

[22] See *2/15: The Day the World Said NO to War* *(New York:* AK, 2004)

[23] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

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wartime Nebraska in the aftermath of the election. [24] Along with footage of dead U.S. military contractors strung up from a Baghdad bridge, as well as from Moore's record-breaking Hollywood documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11,* among the most high-profile events in the visual sphere contributing to the erosion of the Bush administration's hegemony in 2004 was undoubtedly the release of the photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison.

Far from self-evident documents of torture, these photographs became the site of interpretative dispute between administration apologists, who worked to either casually dismiss or philosophically justify the behavior depicted in the images, and investigative journalists such as Seymour Hersh and activists from Human Rights Watch, among others, who sought to frame the images in terms of a broader "chain of command" connected to the basic state of presidential exception declared after 9/11. While inspiring a range of artistico-cultural interventions drawing upon the iconography of brutality staged therein, the Abu Ghraib images also provided am opportunity for artists and activists to amplify their efforts, ongoing since September 11, to highlight of an array of other sites of systemic rights violations on the part of the Bush administration in its broader "archipelago of exception," ranging from Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay to immigrant detention centers throughout the United States. These activities sought to draw attention to the spectral counterpart of militarized *demos* in the de-realization of those subjects whose lives were marked under the rubrics of the Homeland Security and the War on Terror as being beyond both national and international legal protection— what the Center for Constitutional Rights called "America's Disappeared."[25] Exemplary in this regard would be the work of Naeem Mohaiemen and the Visible Collective, which, working with community organizations and legal advocates, has concerned itself with documenting, archiving, and publicizing the thousands of cases in which Arab, Muslim, and South Asian immigrants have been detained, interrogated, and deported without due legal process in the aftermath of September 11 as a result of xenophobic profiling. In a related vein, Trevor Paglen has detoured the conventions of landscape photography and painterly abstraction in tracing the global network of "black sites" through which the CIA's program of Extraordinary Rendition has been coordinated, inscribing his efforts into gallery exhibitions, academic lectures, Web-based counter-cartography projects, commercially distributed books, appearances on mainstream television and radio, and even legal cases brought by advocates of detainees rights. As Tom Keenan has argued, in his concern with the logic of the photographic "blur," Paglen displaces classical axioms of exposure or revelation with an attention to the non-self-evidence of evidence, insisting on the irreducibly mediatic and discursive nature of public images that do not otherwise speak for themselves regarding the traces of injustice inscribed within them.[26]

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[24] See Yates McKee, "The Prayers and Tears of Paul Chan: Profane Illumination and the Post-Secular in *Baghdad in No Particular Order and Now Promise Now Threat*," in *Paul Chan: The Tin Drum Trilogy* (Art Institute of Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2008).

[25] Rachel Meeropol, ed., *America's Disappeared: Secret Imprisonment, Detainees, and the "War on Terror"* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005).

[26] Thomas Keenan, "Disappearances: The Art of Trevor Paglen," *Aperture*, (Summer 2008), 36-43, Karen Beckman, "Telescopes, Transparency and Torture: Trevor Paglen and the Politics of Exposure," *Art Journal*

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In their attention to archival haunting and missing bodies, practices such as Paglen's have articulated what might be called *an aesthetics of disappearance* attuned to Judith Butler's post-9/11 call for a "critical image" that would "interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, and what we can sense," an injunction she associates with a project of "sensate democracy."[27]

Though specifically concerning the sovereign violence of the War on Terror, Butler's attention to the "emerging and vanishing of the human" pertains more broadly to U.S. aesthetic practices responding to other conflicts and crises of the past eight years. This is especially the case with those practices addressing what Michel Foucault called the "biopolitics of the population," generally understood as the techniques of governmental power to manage the relation between territories, living beings, and material life-support systems.[28] While an exhaustive survey of biopolitical concerns in contemporary U.S. art is beyond the scope of this essay, I would like to briefly consider three topical issues that have proven especially generative for artists and cultural producers over the past eight years: immigrants rights, Hurricane Katrina, and the global climate-change crisis.

For the first, a key point of reference would be the historic mobilization of the rights of undocumented immigrants on May 1, 2006, in which the constitutive "shadow population" of the U.S. political economy intervened in an unprecedented way in the public sphere. An exemplary work of cultural production pertaining to these events was Sergio Arau's 2004 comedy *Day Without a Mexican,* which conjured up a fantastical scenario in which all "illegal aliens" have mysteriously disappeared from the territorial U.S.—a realization of the nativist desires of figures such as Lou Dobbs on CNN—and envisions the crippling impact on everyday economic life in United States such a disappearance would have. Framed by many organizers as a "day without immigrants," the 2006 demonstrations inaugurated what Claudio Lomnitz has called a "politics of visibility" aiming to combat the simultaneous occultation and criminalization to which this disenfranchised population is subjected.[29]

This politics of visibility emerged symbiotically with localized forms of culturally dynamic activism such as the "No Quiero Taco Bell" campaign launched by the Immokalee agricultural workers concerning the wages of subcontracted tomato pickers, the various asylum projects undertaken by rural Midwestern churches in response to the combination of police and immigration activities, the humanitarian service-provision and memorial efforts of groups such as Humane Borders, the site-specific countersurveillance efforts of tactical media activists launched at border-crossings in opposition to the Minute Men vigilante group, and the various forms of experimental

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(Winter 2007), 62-67. and Angelique Campens, Erica Cooke, and Steven Lam, eds., *For Reasons of State* (New York/New Haven, CT: Whitney Museum of American Art /Yale University Press, 2008).

[27] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: Powers of Mourning and Violence,* (New York: Verso, 2003), 151.

[28] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*: *Lectures at the College de France*, *1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

[29] Claudio Lomnitz, "2006 Immigrant Mobilizations in The United States," in Feher, et al. , *Nongovernmental Politics*, 434–444.

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cultural pedagogy developed in the context of the Tepeyac Association in Queens in collaboration with artists such as Pedro Lasch. Such activities complicate the spatial figure of "democracy in America," requiring us to rethink the *demos* in hemispheric transnational terms as suggested by Lasch's project *Road Maps (Arrival New York).* This "new map of the American continent" features the words "Latino/a" printed across North America and "America" printed across South America. The map was distributed to undocumented border-crossers, who then returned them to the artist bearing the indexical wear-and-tear of their physical journey—along with transcribed testimony—in an exhibition at the Queens museum addressed simultaneously to local Latin American communities and to activist spheres of the New York art world such as that surrounding the 16 Beaver Group.

A second exemplary biopolitical site that has provoked a range of compelling of artistico-cultural responses has been New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Far from a "natural disaster," the flooding of poor and middle-class black neighborhoods, the incompetent emergency management efforts of local and federal agencies, and the failure to meet the needs of both displaced survivors and returnees have constituted a variegated but clear pattern of governmental negligence.[30] Comparable to Abu Ghraib in a way, the multifaceted biopolitical disaster visually marked by the camp-like space of the superdome, bodies floating in the streets, and miles of devastated homes further contributed to the unraveling of the hegemony of the Bush administration at a national level. Yet also like Abu Ghraib, the apparent evidence of governmental misdeeds in such images has not translated into justice or assistance for the specific groups exposed to the violence in question, a fact that emphasizes once again the importance of the aesthetic or cultural domain in activating effective forms of public outcry and legislative pressure.

Post-Katrina New Orleans has seen no shortage of attention from cultural producers from domains including journalism, music, theater, architecture, film, photography, and celebrity-culture, some of whom have been more attuned than others to the "right to the city" claimed by activists working on the ground with survivors on particular campaigns.[31] Some outstanding examples would include the following. In Ashley Hunt's video *I Wont Drown on that Levee and You Wont Break My Back* (2006), the artist extends his longstanding documentary-essay work on the U.S. prison-industrial complex to focus on the abandonment and subsequent abuse of prisoners during and after the flood. Later in 2006, Spike Lee produced his *When the Levees Broke,* a more general documentary investigation of the infrastructural and political "preventability" of the disaster that premiered on HBO, received numerous awards on the global film circuit, and was presented as part of the 2008 Whitney Biennial. In the Summer of 2006, a Yes Men agent posing as a spokesperson from Housing and Urban

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[30] Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, eds. *There Is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[31] For a critical assessment of such efforts through the lens of architecture and urban design, see Yates McKee, "Haunted Housing: Eco-Vanguardism, Eviction, and the Biopolitics of Sustainability," *Grey Room* 30 (Winter 2008), 84≠113.

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Development announced to the media a massive federal investment program that would ecologically remediate the urban region, build new public housing, and assist displaced survivors in returning to their homes—an intervention that required the real HUD to publicly disassociate itself from such a utopian scheme, thereby drawing attention to continuing governmental negligence of the city and its most vulnerable residents. If among the most problematically utopian cultural initiatives undertaken post-Katrina has been the Make It Right project launched by actor Brad Pitt to deliver "green" housing prototypes to displaced homeowners in the Lower Ninth Ward, perhaps the most devastatingly bleak—though also somehow uncannily affirmative—has been the collaboration between Paul Chan, the Classical Theatre of Harlem, and Creative Time in staging Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* on abandoned housing lots in both the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly. Chan collaged together the enigmatic, incommunicative aesthetics of Beckett with the unevenly ruined neighborhood landscapes of New Orleans, transforming each into an allegory of the other without fleeing the material urgencies of the specific sites on which the performances were staged: Chan insisted that all the funds raised for the production be matched by donations to local NGOs concerned with the rights of Hurricane survivors.[32] Whether attempting to intervene in the micropolitics of urban governmentality or to conjure the remains of a disaster that quickly passed into oblivion in the national public sphere, practices such as the Yes Men's and Chan's each set out important criteria for judging the quality and effectiveness of the myriad site-specific endeavors soon to be undertaken in association with the New Orleans biennial in fall 2008.

Many of the forthcoming projects in New Orleans will undoubtedly take an interest in the ecological dimensions of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, including its relation to global climate change, a topic that has gained a remarkable level of cultural visibility since the release of Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and the multi-media architecture surrounding it. Gore's film resonates with eco-critic Bill McKibben's recent injunction that "we can register what is happening with our satellites and scientific instruments, but can we register it in our imaginations, the most sensitive of all our devices?"[33] Yet the great majority of artists of the past few decades, in line with both Gore and McKibben, have approached global ecology in terms of an ideal equilibrium between man and nature, failing to interrogate the universal "we" whose survival is purportedly at stake. A key rhetorical theme of contemporary environmentalist discourse is "sustainability," officially defined by the United Nations in 1987 as "development that meets the needs of the present without comprising those of future generations."[34]

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[32] See Tim Griffin, "Waiting for Godot: Paul Chan in New Orleans," *Artforum* (December 2007).

[33] "Imagine That: What We Need Is Art, Sweet Art" (April 21, 2005), www.grist.org/comments/soapbox/2005/04/21/mckibben-imagine/, reproduced in Matt Wrbican, curator/editor, *Artists Address Global Warming: 6 Million Perps Held Hostage* (Pittsburgh, PA: Warhol Museum, 2007). Despite lending credence to McKibben's problematic eco-humanist paradigm, Wrbican's project provided an important platform for critical eco-aesthetic works by artists including the Yes Men and Trevor Paglen.

[34] The World Commission on Environment and Development *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press: 1987), 1.

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Complicating the emergent market-oriented "neo-green" discourse of corporate and Hollywood elites associated with the Gore film, a handful of recent artistic projects— such as Allora & Calzadilla's work with environmental justice activists on the former bombing range of Vieques Island, the Center for Urban Pedagogy's collaborative exhibition design with urban high-school students concerning waste management and uneven environmental risk distribution, and Laura Kurgan's experimental architectural designs concerning "climate-change refugees"—have begun to reinscribe sustainability as a matter of biopolitical democratization, rather than as the planetary communion typically imagined by eco-aesthetic discourse.[35] Deconstructing the distinctions between nature, technology, and society along the lines of Bruno Latour's model of democratic political ecology, such practices exemplify the negotiation between what Lambert would describe as a traditional "art of protest" to an interrogative "art of policy" as discussed earlier in this text.[36]

To end this consideration of the relation between contemporary art and democratic politics over the past eight years with the contested concept of sustainability is apropos in several ways. First of all, it specifically pertains to the crisis of the energy-industrial complex that lies at the heart of the post-9/11 geopolitical conjuncture, which will play an important role in both the 2008 elections and in the policy agenda of the next U.S. president. At a more general philosophical level, sustainability demands a reflection on intergenerational justice, which is to say, the responsibility of the living to those who have yet to come. A missing term in most theorizations of sustainability, however, is the question of the dead, of those who are not present but who haunt us nonetheless with their enigmatic legacies and demands.

As suggested by Sharon Hayes's *In the Near Future*, our present is marked by many such legacies, most especially those of the civil rights movement, in which, according to Jacques Ranciere's analysis of Rosa Parks's act of taking a seat "that was not hers," "the blacks of Montgomery...really acted politically, staging the double relation of exclusion and inclusion inscribed in the duality of the human being and the citizen."[37]

While the civil rights movement was itself irreducible to the realm of governmental politics, its legacies nonetheless shadow the 2008 U.S. presidential elections. Barack Obama has staged a complex, symbolic articulation of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and nationality, strategically tapping into the monumental imaginaries of figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy as much as the vernacular codes of contemporary hip-hop culture. Obama has had relative success in mobilizing the empty signifier of democratic "hope" over and against that of the xenophobic and militaristic "fear" put forward by the Bush administration. It remains to be seen with what specific contents this democratic imaginary will be invested. It will depend in part on

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[35] "Al Gore and the Rise of the Neo-Greens," *Wired* (July 2006). On these critical artistic efforts, see Yates McKee, "Art and the Ends of Environmentalism: From Biosphere to the Right to Survival," in Feher, et al., *Nongovernmental Politics*, 539–583.

[36] Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans., Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[37] Jacques Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Verso , 2006), 61.

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activists and artists sustaining a definition of democracy that is neither about being represented by the best leader, as in typical electoral politics, nor the nostalgic ideal of "self-government and self-representation," simultaneously affirmed and questioned by Group Material twenty years ago. Without neglecting the urgency of the next three months—or the highly contested politics of the U.S. electoral system itself[38]—the challenges put forward by the current Creative Time project promise to sustain a relevance beyond the governmental politics of November 2008, confirming Ranciere's contention that "Democracy really means...the impurity of politics, the challenging of governments' claims to embody the sole principle of public life and in so doing to be able to circumscribe the understanding and extension of public life. If there is a 'limitlessness' specific to democracy [it lies] in the movement that ceaselessly displaces the limits of the public and the private, of the political and the social."[39]

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[38] On the movement for the reform of the U.S. electoral system, see Katrina vanden Heuvel, "Just Democracy," *The Nation* (July 2008).
[39] Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy,* 62.

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Additional Readings

Walter Benjamin. On the Concept of History (1974)
        Text can be found online here:
        http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.html

Alexis de Tocqueville, "Democracy in America",
        Text can be found online here:
        http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/home.html

Group Material, "On Democracy," in Brain Wallis, ed., *Democracy: A Project by Group Material* (Bay Press, 1990)

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, 2004)

Brian Holmes, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (Autonomedia, 2008)

Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, eds., *The Interventionists: User's Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (MIT Press/MASS MocCA, 2004)