

WORKING:

a conversation between Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes, Ashley Hunt, Maryam Jafri, Kara Lynch, Ulrike Müller, Valerie Tevere, David Thorne and Alex Villar

As an artist I have always understood my work as a combination of different practices. One of them is the ongoing discourse that I have with my colleagues around working, teaching, politics, theory and of course the challenges of every day living. By its nature this discourse is rarely public. Being invited by Carlos Motta, to contribute to artwurl in form of an interview, I suggested that instead of generating a new conversation, I would invite some of my colleagues to formalize some of the already existing dialogues that we have and have had over the years to be contributed to the magazine. What brings this group of artists together, I think, is a shared agency in our work that I hope will become visible in some of its layers over the course of this conversation. Formally we decided to each ask one question which will be answered by everybody else. We will publish the questions in succession over the course of the next issues of artwurl. I would like to thank you Carlos Motta for his invitation giving us the opportunity to develop this dialogue.

— Andrea Geyer

Stage 1:

Andrea Geyer: Has the current political situation in this country lead to a different understanding of your practice as an artist/cultural producer? If so, how?

Ashley Hunt: As the first respondent in this dialogue, I will try to sum up quickly what I think that the current political situation might be: With the (s)election of George W. Bush in 2000, we saw a coalescence the Neo-Liberal re-organization of global economic relations along with the ascendancy of new right- nationalist, ethnic nationalist and religious fundamentalist movements. With this coalescence in the figure of George W. Bush, 9/11 happened, an event, which for many of us exceeded the limits of our imaginations. To simplify, 9/11 has lead to and "justified" a political "situation" that in turn, now pushes the limits of our imaginations and apprehensions alike, breathing life back into the worst tendencies of the Modern era, of imperialist, colonialist, racist and capitalist alike, circumscribing most aspects of our daily lives, our citizenship, protection from and access to power. Most specifically it has heightened the violence and repression that poor peoples and people of color suffer around the world. So within this simplified summation, we as artists seem confronted by complex demands of politicization, immediacy and urgency, critique, dissent, and speech in relation to censorship, among others.

As for myself, one of the largest changes has been distinguishing more clearly between sites of political engagement, largely considering the differences between

"political campaigns" and "social movements." While my impulses have been to seek more effective and committed political engagement in my work, I've also needed to distance myself from political campaign work – the "site" of engagement, which has been my recent concentration. Aside from my problems with many campaigns' operative analyses, this distancing is due to the structure of "a campaign," inasmuch as it constitutes a fixed and inflexible space for intellectual and cultural production. While I think this structure to be necessary temporarily, in circumstances dire and urgent enough, I think the dominance of such models as a sort of de-facto site of political engagement and opposition is a big problem of today's "situation."

So in addition to the theorizing and critique we want to put forth, I've felt we need to help redefine political engagement in general, which is for me where the model of community organizing and movement building – as opposed to the model of campaigns – is a much more dynamic, while still concretely engaged and committed productive space. Conceiving of our work as an engagement in the intellectual production of movement building, even if we're not working in or with communities per se, allows us to maintain certain values essential to a critical political practice, including: finding new sites outside galleries and the art world; articulating alliances of commonality across varied groups according to common denominators and shared concerns; forming identities and representations in collaboration with non-artists and communities and not "for" them; and not focusing on one or two issues in isolation, but concentrating on their complexity and context. Most importantly, it includes building community resources and power from the bottom up, and collaborating in the formation of different visions for all or parts of society, not based solely upon modifications or reforms, but upon transformations of the very structural foundations of today's "situation."



Maryam Jafri: I would add one specific thing to Ashley's summation of the situation: Empire as opposed to American Empire. I think the neo-liberal model Ashley describes results in a very schizophrenic relation to the nation state, or more specifically, to one nation state in particular — the USA. On the one hand neo-liberals have a desire to chip away at the powers of the nation state in the interests of transnational capital. This goes along with the desire for a strong authoritarian nation state, a US that maintains a global hegemony of military force, both within its borders and internationally. Clearly the two are interdependent but I still would argue that proponents of the American empire, Wolfowitz, Cheney, those who signed the "Project for a New American Century" have noted that the tension between transnational capital and American capital is not completely resolved and at times the two are thrown into competition. Perhaps what scares the transnational class of the world, those meeting in Davos for example, is that the Bush cabal often – but not always! – picks the first over the second, unlike Clinton for example, or even Bush the first. Clearly there are multiple tendencies and trends, and counter trends within the current situation, that make it vital that as cultural producers we work as Ashley puts it, not by "focusing on one or two issues in isolation, but concentrating on their complexity and context."

As an artist I feel that perhaps one of the things that the present moment has wedded me more to than ever is my process when making a work. I've always been fairly discursive and research based even if the end result was a short poetic video but at this point I've found myself appreciating more and more the research-based aspect of my process. And for me this engagement takes place from the very start of my process and not just something that is reflected by the finished piece itself. Such a conception also helps me break out of the art versus activism debate that I think many critically engaged artists can actually find quite exasperating.

Kara Lynch: There is some kind of built in guilt that comes attached to the question: What am I actually doing in my work and how does it do the work of politics that I imagine? This guilt, which I know is unfounded but no less real, is a response to an imagined group asking me what I've been doing for the movement. Maryam's comments remind me of a shift that I have already taken: The discursive as a space and a process for engagement, involvement provides a more dynamic ground for what I do and have always done as a cultural producer. It is some other dogma that makes me feel like that is a cop-out. I know better. I know the struggle is real and complex and multifaceted.

Even if I feel as though I am on hiatus from street activism this does not mean that I am not involved in the conversation. At the same time that I am not specifically making work about the presidential elections, the influence of multinational corporations, censorship, the ongoing occupation of Palestine, the ruthless US imperialism in the Gulf or any other hundreds of local and global concerns; I am working in concert with others in an effort to envision the world differently. I like Maryam's acknowledgement of the research and the process of her work as function of the discursive in her work. I also find that in my practice but I would also add performance to that.

Today, as a closing to a conference/festival of art and technology at UCSD called Powering Up/Powering Down, George Lipsitz spoke about performance as an important part of our work and struggle. He reminded us that it is the repositioning that happens when you run the ideas, images, etc through your body that is powerful. Detournement. This kind of vigilance is necessary at this time. Creative and artistic communities have always embodied and enacted democracies that are living and growing. The political climate that we confront right now has not happened because we are weak but because we are potentially strong. I feel that I needed that reminder: Even when I think or when taking a break, concentrating on my work, in the studio or in the library, in the seminar room, on the bus, talking with friends, teaching college students, making dinner, having a dance party, sobbing cause I'm done laughing, that even in these moments that do not look like going to meetings, or demos or collaborating or whatever may constitute art/activism these days, I am still engaged and involved in resistance. Sometimes I need to remind myself that for me to take a break from working myself into the ground can be an active response to the current political moment.



Sharon Hayes: There are many things to address in the question but given the nature of our dialogue, I will speak to just one concern I've been engaged with in relation to the ongoing global political crisis. I feel very strongly that we are all involved in and committed to in-depth, relevant and often very-potent confrontations

with the relentless impact of what Maryam has nicely articulated as the nexus of transnational capital and American claim to global hegemony. We attach ourselves to those concerns in vastly different ways and with very different intentions but I think it is true that our practices can be loosely considered to contribute to a field of resistant cultural discourse. But cultural production is not autonomous to the larger difficulties imposed by that nexus of power and one of them seems to be the insistent compartmentalization and isolation of our practices, both from each other and from other lines of discourse and activism. I'm interested in the consideration of art production in relation to a model of community organizing and movement building but I feel that the institutional frames in which we make, show and sell work, those in which we communicate with each other (newspapers, journals, magazines) and those in which we teach, make the long-term, collaborative discussion, research and organizing that is necessary to such projects extremely difficult. The urgency of the last three years has made the challenge to carve out a space for an ongoing, intensive dialogue even more clear to me.

David Thorne: The question raised generates an interesting set of problematics, and leads me to more questions: How can one respond without succumbing to post 9–11 exceptionalism, or in ways that suggest challenges to the current construction of a political discourse which demands that we all accept the apparently indisputable fact that, post 9/11, the world has changed utterly? How to respond to this question in a way that recognizes the current exceptionalism but at the same time engages it critically and perhaps at certain moments articulates an agitated refusal of it? How to attempt this and not be pegged as “an apologist for terror”?

The question resonates with a Foucauldian common sense, which is to say the assessment of the current situation is something many of us have been trying to engage in on an ongoing basis in response to shifting conditions. One can always pursue “lines of fragility in the present”: “[T]he function of any diagnosis concerning the nature of the present . . . does not consist in a simple characterization of what we are but, instead—by following lines of fragility in the present—in managing to grasp why and how that-which-is might no longer be that-which-is. In this sense, any description must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fractures which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of concrete freedom, i.e., of possible transformation” (Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”).

I am trying to articulate here something of the difficulty of responding as an artist to an urgent and arguably exceptional moment in a way that says, yes this moment is exceptional but there are ways of reading this exceptionalism without simply basing it on the fact that “America was attacked.” If we do not attempt to read it in other ways, or situate our readings of it in a historical context, it seems to me impossible to challenge the destructive and repressive opportunism of those who do read it within the exclusive frame of a terrible, specific event. As for urgency, which several respondents have mentioned, the paradox for me has been to recognize it and try to respond to it at a particular moment in my practice in which I have begun to understand something about the span of time I want to develop work

across. In other words, it's urgent to take a long time to analyze, theorize, visualize, and produce work that addresses a moment the contours of which are shifting very rapidly.



Valerie Tevere: There is a difficulty coming into this conversation at this point with so many prior responses, the desire to respond to so much of what has been written, but for brevity, I'll focus on a couple of issues in relation to the question. I will begin with something brought up by Sharon – to paraphrase, specifically, her discussion of the institutional framework in which we work and the long-term limitations of it/them to projects/models of 'community building'. I agree with Sharon's summation, and also feel that it is important to look closely at those limitations and find the fissures of possibility – or as David mentioned 'lines of fragility' – to change them from within/out in order to carve spaces and possibilities for the type of discursivity that interests us. 'Lines of fragility' for me fits here, the way it sounds in relation to institutions and bureaucracy – they are not ironclad, the possible fractures and transformations that the term opens up. Like borders, physically and geographically set to limit and define movement, to keep some in while others out, I imagine the fissures or 'lines of fragility' as breaks in the concrete, the place of passage or 'dead air', where insertions may occur.

Throughout the discussion thus far, other frameworks have been articulated as stymieing or 'inflexible' to intellectual or cultural production – Ashley mentioned the political campaign. Right, it is limiting, it shouldn't be for the movement, but with the

movement, the co-aligning of different constituents 'according to common denominators and shared concerns'. I think of Chantal Mouffe here when she speaks of 'new democratic struggles', or Hardt/Negri's 'multitude' or even Negri's more foreboding 'swarm'. We can look to and learn from historical moments/movements, for example the Chilean coalitions and resistance to Pinochet, but we also can look beyond the specific moment of ridding 'evil' and find ways to continue the articulation and collaboration.

To the actual question – The articulation of my practice is consistently shifting, due to many factors, including the current political situation.



Ulrike Müller: The political situation makes me question earlier assumptions that I had concerning the potential politics of art. Changes that are taking place outside of my sphere of influence as citizen (let alone artist) collide with the desire to change the world that I have and share with many others out there.

When in Vienna I experience how the neoliberal destruction of social securities manifests itself in an overall bad mood and depression on an everyday level. On the other hand I encounter the situation in New York, where people seem to be used to all of that, deal with poverty and it seems radical to ask for free and public access to education and culture, healthcare for all the benefits of the welfare state. In this country the politics of fear and misinformation produces bodies that are manipulated

on an emotional level. Conservative and right wing politics go hand in hand with big media corporations to create emotions outside of bodies. The situation does not allow for a lot of optimism.

But then again I cling to the notion that the world, or what we perceive and live as our realities is constructed, and that leaves room for decisions and interactions, however minimal they may seem. This connects to art production: What is the one-on-one exchange in a conversation, what is possible between an artwork and the viewer, what transmissions take place between performers and audiences. And how does all of this involve us physically, that means more than one aspect of our identities, personalities, social positions. I am more interested in the body as a site of feelings and intellect than I used to be. And in something that I call the politics of „Here“ and „Now“ - it feels a bit clumsy and under-theorized on my part but it is what I hold on to at the moment. There are situations where I experience that a „imaginary community of freaks“ (Kathy Acker) or the „multitude“ (Negri/Hardt) is out there and bigger than expected. Art can provide gathering points, physical, intellectual, emotional. In moments of self-realization or self-submersion you can recognize or forget something about yourself when confronted with an artwork, or a performance.

Alex Villar: 'How' is for me the most significant part in the question posed by Andrea. I would like to defer the 'yes/no' possibilities anticipated in the first sentence and concentrate on the more open-ended horizon suggested by the second portion of the question. But in order to do so, I would need to suspend the condition created by the sequence of these two thoughts. And then I would ask how could one, without abandoning the desirable relationality between event (current situation) and different types of productive responses (understanding), reverse this reactive tendency? One could for instance resist the lure of orbiting around possible structural paradigm shifts and focus instead on the counter hegemonic opportunities of this ever-shifting ground. The question can be displaced from 'how I am affected by this situation' to 'how could I affect this situation.' It seems to me that action is the logical conclusion in the response sought by the question. But if we insist in starting at the event, in a way assigning ontological priority to it, we would be narrowing our possibilities. Let me restate the question at hand a little: How does this unique political moment in what is essentially an ongoing condition may inform my evolving practice about new possibilities for counter articulation? And here is one among many possibilities: In contrast with the virtualization of lived experience that, at least on the level of discourse, characterized the moment prior to the one we discuss, one may consider the current moment as marked by a reassertion of the physical realm—the series of measures designed to curtail civil liberties and bring under more strict control an ever more eroded democratic sphere is only the most obvious example of this. Now, in order to identify an opportunity in what no doubt is a very dark scenario, one needs to first deflect the impression that the current situation is simply a retrograde move, i.e. a return to the moment before the 'excesses' of the 1960s. But power rarely if ever moves backwards, instead it tends to leap forward, accentuating tendencies well underway in the core culture. If Agamben is right in his contention that the ultimate right over life that characterizes contemporary power stretches

back to the very originary moments of political thought, what we face is not simply a resurging hiccup but a logical development. And so it happens that in this new development of an age-old tendency, bodies do matter. After bodies were practically declared irrelevant in face of the omnipresence of virtualized capital, not only do their irritant irregularities still need to be normalized to secure smooth functioning of the networked infra-structure, their exceeding lives also need to be calibrated so that any surprises may be avoided, ascertaining a more constant curve in the rising profit margin. Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that shifting the expected performances of these bodies might produce 'undesirable' counter hegemonic re-significations. To recoup, the opportunity on the level of critical cultural representation lies in the re-articulation of sanctioned and qualified performances.



There have been some great insights thus far. I appreciate Ashley's summary of the current situation and agree with his assessment about the need to seek commonality in diversity. I see Sharon's proposition to invigorate resistant cultural discourse via intensive dialogue as a way of sorting out the inherent difficulties in Ashley's suggested route. I am glad that Maryam posited the 'transnational vs. U.S. centric' debate as a more pertinent focus of attention than the unnecessarily polarized and often destructive debate between art and activism. In a way, Kara complexifies this latter split when she reasserts the body and its performative

repositioning in face of ideas. Everyday life is replete with productive or even unproductive possibilities worth dwelling upon. I think Ulrike raised a very pertinent point for this discussion when she contrasted the political aspirations generally experienced in Vienna to those experienced in New York. The discontinuity between those experiences, in spite of the contiguity of their temporalities, speaks of the impossibility to universalize the current political situation to any totalizing degree. In other words, one needs to understand how local specificities relate to a global condition. And I subscribe to Valerie's setting in place of the 'current political situation' instance as one among many factors affecting one's practice. Finally I rejoice in David's paradox that basically proposes the urgency to expend a long time for reflection and elaboration in face of a rapidly shifting moment. It is indeed very helpful to know that the conditions of possibility for the present can be found in the not so distant past in the intersection between distinct but mutually reinforcing practices. This knowledge exposes the larger political implications of various current technologies of power and fractures the rhetorical stability of the established hegemony. The ground is indeed fertile and we can supplement the analytical framework by imagining ways of exploring the potentiality of this fracture.

CVs and weblinks:

Andrea Geyer lives and works in New York. Her work stresses the possibility of defining complex fluid identities in opposition to mechanisms which attempt to form and control static collective identities. Big cities are recognized as sites for projected images and fantasies, places of diverse political, ethnic, religious and social realities, integrating relations between human beings and their surroundings. Her work has been exhibited internationally, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Serpentine Gallery, Secession, Manifesta4, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Parlour Projects and White Columns. She is a 2000 participant of the Whitney Independent Study Program. In 2003 she received a NYFA fellowship as well as a IASPIS residency. She is currently a resident at the Woolworth building LMCC space program. Over the recent years she has been involved in various curatorial and organizational projects among them Nomads and Residents, New York.

www.davidreedstudio.com/andreageyer.html

Sharon Hayes an artist who employs conceptual and methodological approaches borrowed from practices such as theater, dance, anthropology and journalism. In her most recent work, she has been investigating the present political moment through a critical examination of various historic texts, including a speech from the 1968 democratical convention in Chicago and the transcripts from the audio tapes made by Patti Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army in the 1970s. Her work has been shown in gallery spaces and theatrical venues including the New Museum of Contemporary Art, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Andrew Kreps Gallery, Dance Theater Workshop, Performance Space 122, and the WOW Cafe in New York City.

Hayes was a 1999 MacDowell Colony Fellow. She also received a 1999 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship and a IASPIS residency in 2003.

Ashley Hunt is a Los Angeles based artist who works primarily in video and multi-media. His main project of the last five years has been the "Corrections Documentary Project", exploring the political economy and relations of U.S. prison expansion.

<http://ashleyhuntwork.net>

<http://correctionsproject.com>

<http://prisonmaps.com>

Maryam Jafri is a video artist based in New York and Copenhagen. Her work centers on performance, narrative and gender. Her work has been shown in numerous exhibitions and screenings both in the US and abroad.

Kara Lynch is a time-based artist stretching her limits into space. Her work criss-crosses media, but she will own performance as her discipline and point of departure. Recent works include: 'Black Russians' 2001 117min documentary video; 'Mi Companera' 2002 12min video; 'Xing Over' 2003 6hr performance/2.36min 3 channel audio piece; 'Invisible: episode 03 meet me in Okemah, Ok circa 1911' 2003 7day audio/video installation. En exilio in La Jolla California, she retains a post office box in Nueva York and a storage space in Western Massachusetts. She is a gemini monkey born in the momentous year of 1968.

Ulrike Müller lives and works in Vienna/Austria and in New York. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and in 2002/2003 was a participant in the Whitney Independent Study Program. As an artist she is interested in a critical feminist perspective on social, political and economic developments and their impact on everyday life.

Valerie Tevere - Driven by discursive practices, Tevere's work has looked to the public sphere as a condition and framework for inquiry and discourse. Recent projects permeate the urban environment as temporal public works and performances that rely upon structured yet spontaneous encounters with city inhabitants. Tevere's solo and collaborative projects have been exhibited internationally at venues throughout North and South America and Europe. She was a fellow of the Whitney Independent Study Program in 2000, a recipient of a Mellon Humanities fellowship at the CUNY Graduate Center 2002/03, and, as part of the radio collaborative neuroTransmitter, is currently in-residence at Eyebeam Atelier, NYC.

<http://www.neurotransmitter.fm>

David Thorne lives and works in Los Angeles. His recent work has addressed the conditions of so-called globalization; notions of justice shot through with revenge; and memory practices in a moment of excessive rememorations. Current projects include "The Speculative Archive" (with Julia Meltzer); the ongoing series of photo-

works, "Men in the News" (1991-present); and "Boom!" a collaboration with Oliver Ressler.

www.speculativearchive.org

Alex Villar lives and works in New York. His work draws from interdisciplinary theoretical sources and employs video, installation and photography. His individual and collaborative projects are part of a long-term investigation and articulation of potential spaces of dissent in the urban landscape that has often taken the form of an exploration of negative spaces in architecture. His work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Institute of International Visual Arts in London, Museu de Arte Moderna in Sao Paulo, Paco Imperial in Rio de Janeiro, Tommy Lund and Overgaden in Copenhagen, Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius, the Goteborg Konstmuseum in Sweden, Joanna Kamm in Berlin, Arsenal in Poland, Lichthaus in Bremen and Halle für Kunst in Luneburg, Exit Art, Stux Gallery, the Art Container and Dorsky Gallery in New York. He holds an MFA degree from Hunter College and is a 2000 graduate of the Whitney ISP. In 2003, he received a NYFA fellowship.

www.de-tour.org