

WORKING IN PUBLIC SEMINAR SERIES: ART, PRACTICE AND POLICY

SEMINAR 1: AESTHETICS AND ETHICS OF WORKING IN PUBLIC

GRANT AND SUZANNE – MORNING SESSION

The Context of Oakland - political, social and cultural

Suzanne Lacy: This morning I'm going to show you a 12 minute video that has just shorts of three Oakland projects.

They began in 1991 and ended in 2001 and there were many more projects than three. These are three of the largest. The one (I think significant one but missing this morning) is one with pregnant teenagers *Expectations* 1997.

This work began with an enquiry. Chris Johnson and I began to work in a high-school class and over time we evolved an analysis with teachers, educators and the youth themselves. As we grew into the work, we began to understand what we had intuited - that youth occupied a very contested place at that moment in the emerging culture of 1990, '91, '92, particularly in California where the numbers of youth were increasing. What was called, at that point, the ethnic minority has now become the ethnic majority in California.

There was a population shift taking place and now, as always in California, a tug of war between very conservative forces and very liberal forces in the same state. Youth operated politically as an image around which policy was made by various forms of manipulation of that image. African-American men, in particular young men, became an image of fear on television and in the media. This image resulted in quite a few policies and laws drafted during the '90s. These developments coincided with a continued erosion of both public school systems at entry level and at the higher education level.

At the same time, California saw a boom in prison growth in rural areas. There was also a growing resistance around criminal justice issues. Between the eighties and the nineties was also a shift in public money from other kinds of social welfare into the criminal justice system. Nationally, police departments were asked to respond to issues like community policing. On a local level some departments initiated youth centres. Police were, in some locales, expected to pick up truants and take them back to school, to take kids out of violent or abusive homes and so on. Some police felt that they were being funded to become social workers.

At the same time as the rise in public spending on criminal justice and public fear of crime, there was also a development we have called youth culture. This included music, clothing styles, forms of speech, and in some cases political activity. It was quite obvious in urban centres like Oakland where teenagers who were highly talented and very verbal, were involved in developing the beginnings of rap and other, newer music. Of course, corporations were climbing on the opportunity to exploit popular culture - in the early nineties you saw McDonalds beginning to use rap in their commercials.

This was the kind of environment that we operated in at the beginning, an environment of both fear of youth and youth activism.

The Artists' Analysis – A texture of relationships

Our analysis grew through reading, of course, but it also grew through talking with the young people. We listened very carefully to them and to their teachers about their experiences. We listened to teachers telling us they didn't know what to do when a kid came to their house and they knew he had just been thrown out of his home. What was a teacher *supposed* to do in that situation?

We were also fortunate to have a very activist community in Oakland, one filled with diversity and cross-cultural communication. In the public school systems the population was half African-American, almost a quarter Latino and a quarter Asian American, with a few others who were mostly white. Private schools were growing and there the statistics were reversed: 95 % white. Schools in Oakland are a battlefield; not just for the kids but for politicians, school board members, angry parents and activists. Funding, or lack of funding, for the public schools was always a topic of conversation. In tough urban areas, the school environment involved locked toilets, kids running around the halls, teachers with bullhorns, and so on.

We were challenged by working with young people. Were we exploiting youth? Were we taking a proactive stance with respect to youth development? It is difficult to work with any particular group, but especially young people, without looking hard at the many ways they need support. Every project became much more extensive and much more cumbersome because of the need to develop support systems within the work, including youth education, training, and development systems.

Fortunately, at that time and in parallel with our work there were many adults taking an interest in young people. Community members, teachers, politicians were asking - What is going wrong with the culture that cannot support its youth, that cannot educate them and that is afraid of them? A lot of people, often white people, were afraid of being killed in this tough urban environment. The irony was that it was not the white people who were being killed. It was young African-American men. Those men had families, mothers, sisters, fathers who took an active interest in changing things for youth. Nevertheless, white people (upper and middle class people) were extremely frightened of those images of young African-American teenagers in hoodies hanging out on street corners in downtown Oakland. They looked like the young men they saw on television at night being arrested for shooting someone.

Oakland was a symbol for a racially diverse, somewhat ominous, high crime city. Our projects took place within these contradictory systems.

We looked at the institutions that served youth. In each project we worked with our own youth advisory group. This group was created for the particular project. We had not set out to do a series of ten years' worth of performances. In the beginning we thought we were doing just one project, but out of each project grew others. Throughout the process of developing the project, these youth groups advised us on the current and subsequent performances. In addition to the performances, which you will see, there were workshops (as Grant alluded to last night).

There were a complicated series of personal relationships. If a kid in his first job got caught with lifting money out of the till, we would go to court with him. If a young woman who was pregnant had a bladder infection, we would take her to the hospital.

Other than the scary young male teenager, another potent symbol in public culture was the image of the female pregnant African-American teenager. Although in California, I believe teen pregnancy rates are higher in the Latino population, it was the Black teenager that carried the weight of the stigma of 'welfare mom'. The young women would tell us that when they rode on the bus, for instance, strangers thought they could touch and talk about their bellies, often negatively: 'Oh, there is one of them' This was at the same time that welfare was being dismantled, both in California and later, nationally.

So, young pregnant African-American teenage girls became a symbol for the cause of pretty much everything else going on in California including prison growth, incarceration rates, mental health problems and so on. This is not just hypothesis on my part. This is demonstrated in politicians' speeches. The correlation between those issues became causative.

The 'We' was a complicated coming together

Let me just say one thing about the 'we' that I keep referring to in this group. 'We' was a complicated coming-together – diverging and coming together again – of probably a 100 to 150 people that were core people. They consisted of artists, politicians, teachers, police people, health professionals and college students and youth. Some youth actually grew up to become part of the core planning team of artists. It was a complicated net. One person would work with you on one project, then leave and come back again later. When I say 'we', I mean collectively a kind of a difficult-to-identify, but very known-to-each other group of people. We still run into each other. Although I don't live there any more it is not uncommon to run into, say, Shawn or Rishone or Ogubala, and its like "Ohmigosh, Ogubala, did you just graduate from college, already?" or "Look, there's Alberta who was such a rascally teenager screaming at cops, and is now a youth worker!" Of course, many of the artists also stay in contact. A lot of us have friendship networks that have continued over time.

It is a very complicated 'we', but it is always a 'we.' never an 'I'.

Representation or Appropriation?

I think Adele raised a very important issue last night, and we will return to it again and again –that is appropriation and experience, and who has a right to speak for whom. The teenagers in Oakland are quite independent. Often from 10 to 13 years old they are travelling around the city on buses by themselves. In a politicised environment with mature teenagers there is no way that a middle-aged, white woman could convince 220 mostly African-American and Latino teenagers to come anywhere in Oakland. I did not try to do that. The work was always done by youth, sometimes working with adults. In this case 40 teenagers were involved with ten teachers from eight different high schools.

The 150 teenagers that came to be in *Code 33* were recruited by Unique Holland, one of the young women who was 15 when she first began to work on the projects. She recruited these teenagers with her team of youth who were all paid to be organizers. She is now in college. I would have absolute no credibility in that environment.

When we created a workshop for youth and police, we worked with the kids who had been referred by truancy officers. We contracted Unique and Greg Hodge to lead the group. Hodge was a youth worker, lawyer and school board member during this time. Again, can you imagine how I would have any credibility leading a group of largely African-American and Latino teenagers and police officers?

That gives you some background for looking at this video. It does not reveal the complexity of this work. It is very important for you to hear the voices of people engaged with the work. I found years ago that when I represented it through slides, audiences were confused. They really only thought about what they were seeing from one context - the one they were in. This was a largely white audience of artists and students, with a white presenter talking about the people of colour. Those lectures set up a representational framework that people found hard to understand, particularly since the art school experience is fairly segregated. Art school students do not really experience deep community-level collaboration. That is part of what Grant means about the complexity of this work being hard to access.

Code 33

[Video clip: *Code 33*]

Suzanne Lacy: The performance of *Code 33* took place on two floors. At the top of the garage there was the youth/police dialogue involving between 150 youth and 100 officers. On the next floor there were small group discussions of 30-35 groups. After this was over on the next floor down there were 80 people from eight different communities having a conversation with each other about what they had just witnessed and how it linked to their own community. Those are the comments that you heard as a voice over towards the end of the tape.

Speaker: How long did those youth-police conversations go on for?

Suzanne Lacy: One hour.

Speaker: But also, how many weeks, or months, or whatever.

Suzanne Lacy: There were two separate processes in *Code 33*. Both took place over different time periods. One was a workshop that was meant to be a prototype of a police training activity. It was a televised programme, three hours a week for five weeks, and it was very closely moderated. The second was the performance itself. For that there were two preparatory conversations: in private before the performance with the participating groups and one final conversation that was the public performance.

In each project, workshop and performance, there was a ratio of 2:3; police to young people. That was our strategy. We involved more youth because adult voices are more dominant. Their greater numbers in a group gave them a kind of equality in the situation.

At the performance itself, at least inside the building, there were about a thousand people that had already got in before the *Free Mumia* protests started. At this point the police closed the building. There were probably another thousand people (or so I was told) on the street who could not get in. Grant witnessed half of what happened. He was one of those who couldn't get into the performance. I witnessed the other half from up above on the top of the building.

The performative conversations, held in public, had less resolution than the private conversations. They were shorter in duration. They didn't have the length of time it would take for participants to develop more intimacy with each other. Those performative conversations had a different intent. They were not a prototype training program. They had to do with a repositioning of the relationship between youth and police, to demonstrate that

the police department took this issue seriously, that cops could learn to talk differently to kids. These were meant to be an incursion into public sensibility, a media reframing, more than an experience of personal transformation for the performers, although of course some relationships did get a bit easier. Some cops did get a bit more relaxed around youth afterward.

Speaker: What happened after the videos and the performances happened? Did the young people take it on themselves to organise themselves in doing any further work?

Suzanne Lacy: I think there is a misconception, or perhaps it is the failure to communicate the scope of this work. There was not a single “group” of young people. There are multiple youth, youth groups, organizations, mentors, adult activists, politicians, artists, who interacted in different ways over ten years. Some young people went into other organizations, and some went to jail. Some did not get pregnant again, and some did. Some went to college and some became activists or youth development workers. I guess what I’m responding to is the notion in your question that there was “the young people” of this project. This is not ten kids who went through a performance and then went on to do something else. It is a much broader kind of activity.

I can give you several pieces of anecdotal information about several different students. I know personally of three students, of over 1,000 we worked with, who became youth workers. One became an abortion counsellor, one a beauty parlour owner, one a veterinarian, and so on. As for specific projects each project led to others, advised and recommended by some of the youth themselves. After *Code 33*, a group of students who attended Fremont High came back to us and said, ‘We want to do the same thing with our teachers’. We then worked with them for a period of about three months to do just that.

Monica Vykoukal: And the police did the whole training as part of their normal work life? It was not something they had to do in addition?

Suzanne Lacy: The police participated on paid time. That was an interesting point of negotiation with the City. What would they pay the police to do - to participate in a workshop with youth? Did they see that as an important part of their community policing and police training? That was the argument we made.

Roxanna Meechan: And the youth, were they paid at all?

Suzanne Lacy: Yes, the youth leaders, co-ordinators, youth planning team, were paid but not the performers in the large events. There was not enough money for that.

Andrew MacLean: You said it happened in about 1999. It seems to have had quite an effect on the participants. Has anything taken its place to see that it continues?

Suzanne Lacy: Again, this project is not singular. In Oakland there are dozens of development organisations, school-based projects, political organizations, and so on for young people. A huge youth-run media centre has developed – not out of this project, but at the end of our series of projects. Our work was some of the most visible. It had a very specific function in the public sphere. Other work was, for instance, deeper, or broader in scope, or more educational, or longer or shorter lived, and so on and so on.

This project was meant for us as artists to work alongside activists and politicians. Sheila Jordan, the City Council person that started the youth policy is now the Superintendent of Schools for Alameda County. She is still a good friend. She still develops youth

development programs. The youth policy is still in place. The *Kids First* grants are still in place. At California College of the Arts, the college I was working at, we started a centre for teaching college students and developing community programs. One of my former college students has a well established youth arts program that she started from the ground up. It is a creative town. There is a lot going on.

Grant and I want to talk about these issues of aesthetic and ethics.

Do you want to say something as an introduction?

Aesthetics: An historical framing

Grant Kester: Well, I'll begin with a short framing discussion about aesthetics and ethics. Anne, Suzanne and I had a conversation yesterday about aesthetics and the fact that the term aesthetics often seems alien to practitioners. There is an historical reason for that, I think.

I want to focus on aesthetics because of the tendency to collapse the aesthetic into questions of form and visibility. Usually, when somebody refers to 'aesthetics' in discussing a work of art they ask 'what does it look like?' or 'what shape is it?' or 'how does it appear visually?'. That has relatively little to do with the early modern history of aesthetics, which began about 200 years ago. It is a term that was originally used to define a mode of social interaction set apart from other forms of political discourse.

Aesthetic interaction in the early philosophical tradition is concerned with experiences that have the potential to unite people in some way, outside of conventional forms of absolutist secular or religious power. This is where we encounter the concept of *Gemeinsinn* or common sense, *sensus communis* in Latin. The aesthetic really begins as a way to talk about a social exchange, a way of being together, that is rooted in the individual, rather than collapsed into external forms of religious or earthly authority. It just happens that this quasi-anthropological idea of something that brings us together in the aesthetic is worked through in ways that have to do with bodily experience. Aesthetics is from *aisthesis* in the Greek, which means 'bodily experience'. It doesn't really have much to do with art *per se* initially. It is only in the 19th century that 'art' gets attached to that concept.

Reclaiming a broader understanding of aesthetics

What I try to do in my work is to reclaim something of that broader understanding. Certain orders of experience enable us to perceive the world outside of a self interested, acquisitive, possessive model of knowing. They allow us to access the underlying operations of human cognition. When we cease looking at the world as a thing to be possessed and to be turned to our needs, we reflectively become aware of the fact that *that* way of knowing the world is something that we must all share.

This brings us a sense of the possibility of a kind of community that is not externally imposed, but is felt at the individual level. It makes reference to the possibility of a larger sense of being together.

I would contend that the aesthetic is an essentially ethical discourse. It does not make much sense to me to divide the aesthetic and the ethical. They have always been co-extensive. We can see vestiges of this history in the notion that art constitutes a universal language. Kandinsky and the Blue Rider, Pollock, any number of avant garde groups imagined that their work operated at some trans-historical level of human experience that

was universally accessible to people. This comes from an early modern notion of aesthetic knowledge as a new form of being together. That association with collectivity gradually goes underground in the modern period.

Suzanne Lacy: How does it get linked so strongly, now, in the arts with visual, aural, kinaesthetic experience. For example, how is theatre explained?

Grant Kester: Yes, I'll try and condense that a little bit. What happens is that these philosophical ideas are eventually taken up in the work of Hegel. It is really Hegel who first begins to take the idea of an aesthetic experience that would have previously been associated with the experience of the natural world and apply it specifically to objects of human production, and works of art in particular. This in turn spawns the modern tradition of art theory in the mid - to late 19th century. In that context it becomes the form of the work that is the carrier of its universality, rather than the cognitive operations of the mind and its relationship to difference.

There are a variety of reasons for that. One of them is the fact that European art history and theory is being written in the context of a flood of cultural artefacts arriving from other colonized countries or from archaeological excavations. 19th century Europeans are really puzzling over what to do with all of these artefacts from Africa, India and elsewhere. They knew little or nothing of the history or the cultural or religious traditions that gave these objects their initial meaning so instead they concentrated on visual appearance. This decision to focus on the *form*, not the *context* of the work, is one of the founding gestures of modern art history.

In fact, in this tradition the *less* we know of an object's ritual and utilitarian context and the *more* we can detach it from its rootedness in the specific and the quotidian, the more easily we can use it as a kind of leverage point to achieve aesthetic transcendence. This strategic relocation of the nodal point of universality to the object's appearance leads to the 20th century traditions of formalism.

Suzanne Lacy: That notion of art theory that, say, Miwon Kwon might put forward, it seems to me, continues to privilege certain notions of aesthetics that are not concerned with retrieving this original meaning of aesthetics. Why haven't other people tried to retrieve this broader notion of aesthetics?

Grant Kester: Oh! I don't know. [laughter]

Suzanne Lacy: Well, speculate!

Art as text

Grant Kester: Well, ok, I'm going to have to find an answer to that. Maybe I can answer it indirectly. I think that what happened is that the discourse of formalism, which fell out of favour in the 1970s, was resuscitated by the rise of post-structuralist theory in the art world. In particular, there was the tendency of post-structuralist literary theory to define the work of art as a kind of text that is subject to a decoding operation, a certain hermeneutic interaction. The people that begin to be read in the world of art and art theory in 1980s, Roland Barthes, Derrida and so on, almost all came from a background in poetics and literary theory.

That naturalises the idea that the work of art is a formal device that operates through certain notions of play and textual indeterminacy. It also perpetuates the idea that the work carries its meaning with it, at the level of its form. There is a longer discussion to be had about why this occurs, but I think the effect of it is to *retool* formalism into what I term a “textual” paradigm of art practice.

Greenberg’s locus of resistance within formalism was the opacity of the form of the work, which functioned as a critique of the transparency of representational art. That shifts into the work of art as a critique of signification instead of representation. We already see that beginning in the 1980s with certain post-modern art practices that claim to interrupt or destabilize the signifying process in some way. This approach works fine if you’re dealing with literary poetics and indeterminacy in a text, but I think it had the effect of making it very difficult to attend to certain kinds of practices that do not involve a fixed object or a sculpture or installation that is created ahead of time and then placed before the viewer for decoding or interpretation. Textual hermeneutics works with object-based production, but with process-based work the concept of ‘text’ itself has to be re-thought.

Suzanne Lacy: There is a text, but it is not revealed text. Text could be what takes place in the community, in an ongoing way through conversation, and engagement, but it’s not available.

Grant Kester: Yes, and at that point you have lost the significance of text in the post-structuralist tradition –as a thing subjected to deconstruction and as such it has to be ...

Suzanne Lacy: ... available

Grant Kester: ... exist in a way that it can be read; not that it has unitary meaning, but that it has a certain fixity in space.

Suzanne Lacy: The interesting thing is, it has to have a fixity with respect to who is doing the looking. There is still no single perspective doing the looking here in the Oakland projects. The looking is decentred so that the text is read through multiple people, not through a single person. I think that’s one of the problems of this kind of work when we look deeply at what are the results. Where does it all come together so that we can look at it in a critical way?

Art/Life as Experience

Let me say something about the evolution of aesthetics in my practice. I did not come from an art theoretical perspective. I was trained first in science. I learned about art first through an emerging activism within feminism. Then at Cal Arts, I was subject to an avant garde discourse with people like Alan Kaprow, Alison Knowles and Dick Higgins, encountering the Fluxus and Happenings traditions. All of my art history education was basically European and US-based avant garde and performance throughout the 20th century. I was already versed in feminism and in race activism and community organising when I came into art.

The interesting encounter for me was with Kaprow and the kind of art-life dialectic that he was framing. At that point in time his ideas were influencing a group of younger performance artists in Los Angeles including Paul McCarthy, Chris Burden, Barbara Smith, Nancy Buchanan and a range of people who considered themselves, for the first time, performance artists only. In other words, we weren’t gallery artists in any way, shape or form. We were experimenting with performance.

Kaprow was exploring art/life from an individual relational experience. For example, he was exploring what was going to happen in your mind, my mind, and in Grant's mind, if I sit here for 30 minutes with my hand casually placed on his shoulder. That's the theatre Kaprow was interested in, the theatre of experience.

It wasn't hard to take this on as an activist and a feminist. I was concerned, as well, with who had access to art and who made art. In a way it was part of a hidden discourse on class, as well as a more overt discourse on gender. Who got to be the artist? Who was taken seriously as an artist? Was it only those white guys in the museums, or did somebody else get to make art? Lucy Lippard explored this in her book *Pink Glass Swan* (1995). So we were exploring both the identity of the artist and his or her role, along with the reception points of the art.

You can trace some of this as well in the thinking of Alan Kaprow. Kaprow was an American, a pragmatist inspired by John Dewey and also a Buddhist. This complex person was the American version of Joseph Beuys. His thinking, like yours Grant, was very open; very inquiring; not so much 'It is not...'. He was less interested in critical distinctions and more interested in what there was to be found out. He was interested in working on the edge of where it could be art and it could be life, and of asking what made it either. I have always seen myself as working with that same edge.

There were a lot of folks in Southern California, like Helen and Newton Harrison, Eleanor and David Antin, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula and so on in San Diego, who participated in a shared discourse. At that point in time experimental, relational ideas about art weren't particularly contested as they seem to be today. I think it was because, in one sense, most of us were pretty far outside the confines of power. Nobody needed to contest it. It was a sort of an idiosyncratic set of ideas. It was also a very experimental time.

Feminism

So, as feminists we were concerned with relationships, first and foremost. We launched many collaborative practices. As feminists, concerned with political issues that happened to women regardless of their culture, it was natural for us to reach out to different communities. We began to site works in public in ways that seemed intuitive in the beginning. We made aesthetic decisions that were also intuitive. Even within my own practice, I would say, 'Ah! Making it safe! Sorry, that became community practice. *Three weeks in May* (1997), interesting; that one made it into art.' But I don't think we ever managed to articulate what those aesthetics consisted of; maybe the painters did, but not performance artists. We did talk a lot about ethics and politics though.

Somehow there was a set of intuitive ideas about aesthetics. I don't think they have been articulated yet, and certainly not with respect to the history of theory as it impacts public art, until you (Grant) have been trying to parse this territory.

Grant Kester: Yes, it is striking, if you talk to practitioners, how often the "art" question comes up. For most of the practitioners I talk to there seems to be an internal compass that is not always overtly articulated, but which leads them to *feel* that this is an art practice. It is a belief that is very strongly held, but it is not ...

Suzanne Lacy: ... articulated.

Grant Kester: Yes, and it is not something that practitioners feel obliged to provide programme notes for. But at the very core of their practice is an intuition, a valuable intuition, I think, that their work remains artistic in some ways.

Suzanne Lacy: I think it is also, in a sense, connected to one's educational context and pedigree. In other words, had I continued in community organising, psychology and social psychology, I might have done similar things but would not have addressed the kinds of concerns I did when I went to Cal Arts and discovered that (art) methodology.

Art practice and adjacent disciplines

Grant Kester: I also like to go to the disciplines that are proximate to art practice and look at the practitioners in those disciplines whose work verges on the same territory.

I did a talk before I came here at the Woodbury Institute, which is an architectural school in San Diego where a colleague of mine named Teddy Cruz used to teach. I was talking to the architects and designers about their relationship to artists, coming at their work from overlapping points of participatory production and so on.

To give you an example of this - Teddy Cruz is an architect who has spent a lot of time studying vernacular traditions of housing and design in Tijuana in the border region. There is relatively little zoning enforcement in Tijuana, which is just across the border from San Diego. There are all kinds of really remarkable developments: houses with space for the grandparents upstairs, and a store on the front level and patio at the back. These are very improvisational approaches to living and working space.

Tijuana is a huge, growing city and, at any rate, these building practices are really interesting. Then you cross the border into San Diego, and everything is based on conventional, gridded, land use planning – you can only have residences here and businesses there – that sort of thing. Teddy took a lot of the lessons from Tijuana construction and then set up these pilot projects in working class neighbourhoods in San Diego. The projects often violate zoning ordinances, but accommodate themselves to the way people actually live and work. They are so effective that the city has been forced to acknowledge and accept them.

To me it is a really good example of one of these boundary practices. When I talked to Teddy about this, I told him 'You're in this really interesting zone where it starts to feel like an art practice'. The architects look at Teddy and tell him, "It's not architecture." Where is the generative author? You're just borrowing ideas. I think there's something to be said for the messiness of those in-between zones.

The Aesthetics of the Oakland projects as a visual and cultural discourse

Suzanne Lacy: So, let's talk about aesthetics in the Oakland Projects and then go on to ethics because there may be a difference in where you locate the aesthetics and where I do.

Grant Kester: Yes, I think that is probably true, maybe not a difference, but just a difference of emphasis. I was trying to sketch this out when the video was up there. One of the effects of the transformation of the aesthetic into a discourse on the visual, specifically, or the retinal is that it unfolds into a set of debates about manipulation and the image as

manipulative. This is where the whole discourse on kitsch comes from: the fear of propaganda and advertising. The fear of images goes back to Plato and the cavern of the senses. So there's a long tradition that assumes that images are going to lead us astray in some way.

A lot of the discourse that comes out of the transformation of the aesthetic into a discourse of the visual is based on this anxiety. It is partly the fear that art will be contaminated or co-opted by other cultural forms. It is a fear of the image being instrumentalized in some way and needing to defend itself from that manipulation. The other side of that dynamic is the belief that it is precisely by remaining in the domain of the image or semblance that the work of art can stave off its assimilation by these other forces.

What that means in art, and I think I alluded to this yesterday, is a narrowing of the bandwidth of aesthetic experience that cuts out whole registers of somatic, bodily, physical knowledge. Suzanne, you described this as the kinaesthetic or it could be described as the haptic. This knowledge embraces all kinds of other orders of bodily experience, or discursive experience for that matter, that simply cannot be understood as purely visual and yet were absolutely essential to the experience of 'works of art' in the past.

Let me look at 'Code 33' just to give you a sense of my thought process. I've heard Unique Holland talk about the process of 'Code 33' and the meetings that led up to it. I often found myself as interested in those conversations, which laid the groundwork for the project, as I was in the conversations that constitute the image of the project. Those laborious, difficult, messy, maybe even un-visual exchanges, to me, are central to the aesthetics of the piece. That doesn't mean that the staged conversations are not also essential, but they are of a different order aesthetically for me.

I mentioned this tendency with the work of Superflex. There are things I really like about Superflex's collaborative work, but the fine-grained nature of those interactions are seldom enunciated as a part of the creative practice. That is one of the things I've been trying to work through in my current research. I believe there is a way to understand these interactions aesthetically, in the full meaning of aesthetics as a complex ethical, political and cultural discourse.

So, I was making a little tip-of-the-iceberg diagram. The tip of the iceberg is the day of the performance, and then there is this huge mass of extremely complex human relational interaction that goes on leading up to that.

Suzanne Lacy: In any given conversation there is often a visual component, particularly in this environment (Oakland). I remember Moira Roth witnessing one of our early planning sessions where we got a group of youth and police together. She remarked on the visual - a large cop stuffed in his uniform and the body language of the teenagers. It was fascinating to watch those kinds of plays over time.

It is important for me to talk about the formal, the visual as part of the whole process. The process takes place over a large geographic area around the topic. I will not address topics here. I will focus on the way the piece is constructed visually. It comes together at a point in time within a theatrical expression. The tableau of the theatrical expression is multi-vocal. That is very important. Once the audience is in the space, they are allowed to move rather freely and to have conversations on the side. There are ethical as well as formal aesthetic concerns about how people receive the information; how the audience is structured and moves through the space. There is a lot of attention to the visual. It may not be apparent

but there is actually a designer who designed the stage set with the red, white and black swathe of cars. There are other artists involved in various ways.

Then there is 'after'. Part of the aesthetics for me is located in whatever is presented as the performative part of the work. Another part lies in questions of representation after the event such as on the news media. When the newscaster says, 'It's hard to keep out of trouble, nowadays'. Kids, always pick up on that. They react 'Oh, look what they did to us' again.

There is also the more complicated issue of the representation of the work 'post-performance' into or with respect to the art world.

The area that you talked about, which I have always thought about in terms of coherence, authenticity of process, empathy, relationship – that territory which I don't have very good words for also has an aesthetic component. That seems to be what you are exploring in your theoretical writing.

Creating a different *habitus* for encountering authority

Grant Kester: It is, but I think your point is well taken about the *habitus* of the space in these exchanges. The performativity of the piece in terms of just the police is very complex – I don't know how it compares to Scotland, and maybe it is somewhat similar. In the US for poor and working class people, the police are often the primary point of contact that people have with any sort of public or state agency. These performative interactions, in which individuals come into contact with authority, have been decisive in Southern California. I think of this piece in connection to the '65 riots in Watts in South Central Los Angeles, which were started by a very simple police interaction with a black man. There was a guy named Marquette Frye who was in Watts, on Avalon Boulevard. He was pulled over by LAPD. They thought he was drunk. One thing led to the next, and it escalated into a violent arrest, before you know it you had the Watts riots.

The LAPD, at the time, was known as one of the most up-to-date police forces in the United States. As opposed to the New York City Police Department, which was massive, the LAPD was very small in proportion to the scale of LA. The way they made up for their small size was through very aggressive law enforcement, an exemplary mode of enforcement of the law that sends a message that you don't mess with the LAPD.

So, policing as a performance is really crucial to the racial and class history of the United States in the last 30 or 40 years. Intervening in that performance and creating a different *habitus*, or a different space or a tableau if you will, around those moments of interaction is really important. It points in two directions. In one direction it points out and presents a kind of alternative image for media consumption, essentially. Then, the other direction is –and this is where my emphasis would be – the effect of those interactions on the participants themselves, how consciousness is changed, remodelled, by sitting down together face to face.

What changed? Approaches to analysis

This is partly a research question about this kind of practice for myself. Suzanne, herself, has gone back and started to interview a number of the participants in these projects after the fact to find out what the effect of their involvement was, their participation, and to reflect back on it. That is going to be a really interesting document to take a look at, to see what was changed. How do people view their experience in this as a way to get at some of these

questions of empathetic transformation, identification across boundaries of difference and so on?

Suzanne Lacy: This discussion leads us on to ethics. I have always been rather sceptical as soon as one starts talking about results, or what changed. I think that there is a way in which early on we assumed too many things were indeed true. They were generally based on anecdotal evidence. We were always hearing artists talk about how that person cried, and they therefore knew that this impact was had. I further have always been rather sceptical about whether a change in perception actually happens. This is what I am most interested in. In the case of the political environment, I am interested in the way in which that experience may or may not have impacted either on the city structure or, in particular, the institution of policing.

We have too quickly conflated those kinds of results with the ethics of the work and the success of the work. The areas that I've been looking at are maybe sites of enquiry in this work. What are the places we can look at to have a conversation about ethics?

The first seems to me to lie within the analysis of the process. Analysis is highly suspect. Are you making a leftist analysis or a neo-liberal analysis or so on?

In your work you discuss complexity. You would, I think, say that, for example, the Oakland projects are perhaps a little more sophisticated analytically than Dawn Dedeaux's work (e.g. *Soul Shadows* 1993), where there is a whole genre of work which is meant to serve or do good. Dedeaux' work is a good case study, but there are many that can be exactly like that. She works in a prison without any sort of deconstruction of prison or the way in which prisons or criminal justice operates within the United States or with regard to race and gender.

So there is the area of analysis that is an aspect of ethical enquiry. How ethical, how connected, how comprehensive, how relevant, is that? One could adopt, for example, a notion of service and say that, if she (Dedeaux) serves in a Buddhist sensibility, analysis as a compassionate response to pain is enough.

You can site an ethical enquiry in the process and, within that, issues of collaboration come up such as the de-centring of authority.

There is also a sub-category – relationship. How do you relate to individuals – adult, teacher-type person; teenager, student-type person? Where and how are the authorities centred? There is class and race. Race is probably, in my mind, the biggest kind of ethical relational issue within this work and, certainly the one that I am most interested in and have been traditionally from the beginning of my work.

Another site of the enquiry would be the personal actions outside of the equation – but you could call it the intentions, you could call it commitment and you might measure it by relationships after the work.

Then finally, the three Rs. A site of the enquiry would be the public actions outside of this equation, which are representations, responses and results. By representations I mean, how does the work appear on television, how does it appear in an art museum and, if it does, how does it appear back in the community? How is it re-represented over time? Then results: Did police training change? Responses: Did something happen directly as a response?

The *Free Mumia* protesters in *Code 33*

The *Free Mumia* protesters came out as a response to the piece – *Code 33*. Mumia Abu Jamal was convicted in Philadelphia of killing a police officer. His case has been hugely significant. You could probably explain this much more articulately than I.

Grant Kester: It's a death-row case. It has got a lot of attention because the evidence that he was convicted on is somewhat sketchy.

Suzanne Lacy: Yes. He has become cause célèbre in the United States. Within the week of the performance of *Code 33*, he had had one of his last appeals overturned. There was going to be a protest. The protesters planned that the protest would coincide with the performance. They knew there would be a lot of media there. They also knew the position of some aspects of critical resistance to the prison movement. In the United States within the Criminal Justice Movement you should have nothing to do with police. The police are the more or less blind instruments of capitalist authority. They represent the protection of property. (By the way this is an issue that even the kids and the police explored with each other within *Code 33*. They discussed the notion of what property the police were protecting, why and what it meant to do so).

The *Free Mumia* protest arrived at the performance of *Code 33* – about a 100 people strong. It wasn't a huge group of people, but it was very vocal. It was comprised largely of college students, but instigated by one of the police watch groups in San Francisco, Van Johnson's work. Behind the scenes we began a negotiation because most of us were *Free Mumia* activists. Most of us had the same position with one significant difference. We didn't believe that you *should not* interact with police around the situation; that you ignored them and that you adopted a protest mentality. So it was simply a difference in strategy. We did understand that.

We launched into a behind-the-scenes negotiation between our project, the police and the *Free Mumia*. That is why the piece *Code 33* started a little late. There were discussions and decisions that were made. We offered a platform, multiple platforms. The police recommended that we didn't have Act One. This was going to be police going in one direction around the building and low riders in another. We made a decision not to go ahead because the fear was that low riders, who are *really* particular about their cars, might be in some way encroached upon by enthusiastic demonstrators. If somebody leant up against a low rider car, the guy is going to get out and beat you up. The police were worried that the group of Latino low riders and the group of mostly white college student protesters would create yet another kind of dynamic. The police did what police do and for those of you on the street, I think the event appeared probably very successful from a *Free Mumia* point of view. They got a lot of PR *and* they managed to show the police in their least benign representation.

The police cordoned off the building such that, not only you, Grant, having come from Arizona but, the Fire Chief, who was a good friend of mine, could not get up to the performance. The police thought they were protecting the performance, believe it or not. They were also incredibly nervous, as police officers will be, about a display of vulnerability in a public space. Some of the behind-the-scenes conversations were whether or not the police should be in uniform at the performance. That had huge implications for their civic role besides the theatrical implications. For the police to be wearing a gun or a uniform in the middle of a public event means he will, or she will, be called upon if anything happens.

The individual police officer has that consciousness. If you are not in uniform, what is your responsibility to protect the civic environment?

There were lots of behind-the-scenes negotiations that came to what happened that night.

Analysis as the coming together of different perceptions

Four areas that I want Grant to comment on, and maybe change, include the ethical sites of enquiry, the analysis, the process and relationships, the commitments or intentions of the group, and the representations and results.

Grant Kester: Yes, I hadn't thought to kind of break them out like that, myself. So that is interesting.

Suzanne Lacy: How would you? What are some of the points of the ethical conversation?

Grant Kester: Yes, we could look at the question of analysis to begin with.

When you say 'analysis', we might think of a given project as carrying a particular understanding of a context in a complex way. That understanding is the aggregation of the artist's knowledge of the political context, but also the understanding of the collaborators. There is probably not a single analysis, rather the analysis is produced through the fractured coming-together of a lot of different perceptions. So, maybe the analysis of some of the young people in the Oakland Projects – their version of police identity, their reading of the police as the embodiment of state power, will be different from some other people in the project.

That's why the Dawn Dedeaux project provides a good counterpoint, when it comes to the complexity of locating a work in situations that are so vexed and so politically over-determined, and the necessity of spending a good bit of time acquiring a deeply-textured knowledge of that life world. Her analysis was, in my view, fairly naïve about the political economy of incarceration, drug laws and enforcement in the United States. I suppose the lack of the complexity in her understanding of the situation is what allowed the project to be so easily appropriated to other ends, to be used by social agencies for ends that might be politically questionable, even to the artist herself if she had been able to work through them a little more deeply. That project ended up being a way to bludgeon young black kids in Baltimore into renouncing their incipient evil ways for fear of ending up like the bad criminals in the videos.

The way that ethics enters into that work is complicated. I don't know that there's an ethical and unethical analysis. Perhaps I would say that there is a political analysis that has ethical implications. I guess I can't easily identify the locus for the ethical differentiation there.

Suzanne Lacy: That's the process.

Grant Kester: Yes – the process.

Aesthetics, Ethics and Power

Suzanne Lacy: But the analysis - Could I do that piece (*Code 33*) if I didn't have much of a race consciousness?

Grant Kester: You could certainly do it – but it might be a piece that would be damaging to the people that you are ostensibly trying to help.

Suzanne Lacy: Help?

Grant Kester: But that would be my interpretation, yes!

Suzanne Lacy: Yes, but not mine and that's where we get into politics, though.

Grant Kester: Exactly, yes.

Suzanne Lacy: Ok. So then what about the notion of aesthetics as it relates to process? Do you want to expand on that a bit?

Grant Kester: Yes, maybe I can step back a bit to discuss where I see the ethical implications. I would argue that the aesthetic has an implicitly ethical dimension. It has precisely to do with how the individual and the social relate to each other; the one and the many; the group and the singular individual. This is the pathos of the early aesthetic, you know. European society is trying to deal with the breakdown of transcendent forms of political signification and power, so how do we organise democratic will formation? Are we going to descend into chaos, because there's no longer a king ruling over us? How are we going to organise ourselves and not revert to some Hobbesian nightmare? That is really where the aesthetic comes from.

For me it is always a question of negotiating the individual and the social and the relationship between individuals across boundaries of difference, between the singularity of one individual and another. It doesn't have to just be class and race – obviously even within a working class community or within a particular ethnic or racial group, there are profound differences and disagreements that have nothing to do with race, class or ethnicity. The question of ethics for me, always comes back to those negotiations: subject and object; individual and group; and how those are understood to act together. Obviously you don't want to claim that a project can magically dissolve all the differences. .

Suzanne Lacy: Kind of "Can't we all get along?" Martin Luther King.

Grant Kester: Yes. There's that danger of ignoring the important differences between singularities in these exchanges and papering over them in some sort of naïve multiculturalism. At the same time, I'm uncomfortable with the alternate option, which is typically offered. That is to simply insist that there is absolutely no ground for individual singularities to communicate with each other, to establish even a provisional consensus. Any consensual knowledge has already been contaminated or tainted by a kind of incipient totalitarianism. I find that a very problematic distinction and it is often made in contemporary theory. I really feel strongly that it is necessary to work out an alternative to a kind of naïve Habermasianism on the one hand and the equally, in my view, naïve Deleuzian fetish of singularity on the other.

Ethics as Negotiation

For me, ethics has to do with that negotiation and how it might ramify outwards to the way that that project transforms the life world around it, as well as inwards, to the way that it transforms the consciousness or the perceptions of the participants.

I'm thinking of Stephen Willats as a good example of this. I can remember asking him, 'You have done all these projects in housing estates. You've been returning to these places for 15 years or more. Why do you keep going back? Are these projects meant to change people's lives? Are you hoping to catalyze some sort of political transformation?' But he's not really interested in that kind of translation into a discrete, utilitarian result. He didn't think a project had failed because he didn't organise a rent strike among the tenants in this council housing estate. I thought that was valuable. It does not mean a project *can't* do that, but he was comfortable with the fact that there was precisely *not* something that had to be immediately transformed into the currency of political effect, in that way.

Suzanne Lacy: Ok, so there is one other issue to be thinking about - What are the ethics of the re-representation of the work in public, into art?

I would like to instead just leave us with that to think about – because we can continue thinking about this through this series. Let's open it up to you to engage with you on issues that might have come up or positions you might be taking for yourself within this maze.

Question and Answer

The perspective of community development

Damian Killeen (Core Group): My history is all in social action, social development of one kind or another. I responded to the structure that you have put around the issue of ethics. The discussion you were having is the same kind of discussion that I have heard many times over for many years within the community development, community action field. Reflective people and effective workers in that field will always be asking these kinds of questions about their practice.

One word that you didn't use, which might have been implied in what you were saying but would definitely be overt in that discussion, was the issue of power. This would be pretty soon on the table as being at the centre of what is being explored. I just make that observation.

On the aesthetic side, I was wondering whether, in my own work in the past, I have had aesthetic concerns. I was very interested in that description of what aesthetic meant because, given that description, yes, I absolutely do have aesthetic concerns - on all sorts of occasions where I am bringing people together where there is a purpose. The word I've written down here that you have used is 'transformational'. It could mean transformation of perception or feeling or relationship or it could mean something more concrete, a change in direction of action. Many people in community development, community education fields and so on will be concerned to create an environment in which people coming into a room or a space, experience some kind of difference from the normal which frees them up to engage with each other in different kinds of ways.

I was intrigued, right at the very beginning, by Suzanne's business of rearranging the chairs. I recognised that happening and I had a wicked thought - Was that an artistic act because it was performed by an artist? It certainly looked like the same kind of thing that I would often do...

Suzanne Lacy: It was the same kind of thing that you would often do.

Damian Killeen: [laughs] That's perfect. So, but I'm really just responding to what I've heard. I think that there are many people working who would not begin to describe their

work as art. They wouldn't be looking for any kind of validation from the art world as to what they are doing. They would have a different related set of arguments, justifications (perhaps, is the word) for being concerned with the aesthetic in the way you described it – the bodily experience of people in space. They would certainly share this ethical agenda.

So, I am, at the beginning of this exercise, wondering where's the art? Or What kind of area is the art-life interchange? To me, the difference – one difference, rather, is the aspect of performance. I can think that towards the end of many projects that I am involved in, there will be some form of presentation of the project. Depending on the nature of the project, it may be very formalised in a conventional sense, or it may be something which people have put a lot of creative thinking into. How can we communicate with people differently about this? So there is an element of performance, but it isn't the intent that there will be performance at the end of it.

Representation of the different constituencies

Jan-Bert van den Berg (Core Group) I suppose I'm interested in this conversation that we're having about ethics and aesthetics in relation to an arts tradition when a lot of the work we're talking about is created with a whole range of constituent groups. Therefore it is slightly contradictory to then have a discussion around ethics and aesthetics only with one representative of those constituencies here.

Representation of the artist- as author, catalyst, negotiator or medium?

Kerstin Mey (Core Group): I think my observation was in a similar direction. I would like to summarise it as question. What precisely is the role of the artist in these processes? Is it as facilitator, a catalyst, a medium, a negotiator? How is that role being communicated in the dissemination and the representation of the project afterwards? It is in a way disseminated through a named artist – through a kind of signature artist practice, when in practice it has been a collaborative participatory project. What are the issues that arise out of that?

What does it mean for the artist to reflect and evaluate on a project?

Venda Pollock (Core Group): I'm interested how you, Suzanne, go back now and reflect on your process with the individuals involved. From my point of view, I 'evaluate' - it is a word I don't like, but it is the easiest word. When I go back to art projects after they have happened and talk to the participants, it is in itself is a very loaded process. I am coming from a certain academic tradition or a position.

With one project I came in afterwards, they heard that I was from a university and that cast the participant in a certain mindset. The language you use has to be adapted so that the participants can feel that they can contribute to the dialogue.

In another project I'm looking at now, I am trying a different tack by being involved in the beginning. That has implicated me in the process, but it opens up a lot more avenues for exploration - trying different ways to get people to talk on a level they'll understand, using verbal or visual techniques.

So I'm quite interested in how you feel what your role is in going back to talk to them. Are you going back as an artist reflecting on your practice? Are you seen as an artist continuing a kind of dialogue that was established? Is the research in itself part of that kind

of practice – that ten-year long trajectory? How does that fit in with the way you are thinking now?

Aims and Expectations of participants

Kate Foster (Core Group): My question is about aiming for results. When do you articulate your aims, if ever during the project? I've read or I've just heard that you simply aimed to deal with media literacy, not to touch the bigger problems. Then I think I heard later that you aimed for the result of improved training of police.

If your artworks, if your projects, do you have aims, what are the expectations of the participants when they join the artworks?

Artists and State funding

Judith Stewart: I'm particularly interested in the way that Suzanne's practice has come from a socialist, feminist, activist-base that has shaped this way of working.

I am interested in the way that this area of work has been so effectively absorbed by the state in this country to the extent that there is an industry that has built up around it. There are a lot of artists who have gone into this way of working because it brings them an income. A lot of artists have found that where they have started off with ambitions for aesthetic and ethical aims, their work has been adopted and changed into something else. In working on certain projects like this, are we actually just working on behalf of the State to make good citizens who do as they are told?

I would also like to throw in a question to Grant about relational aesthetics, which is a big thing in the UK as well. I wondered how your version of aesthetics fits with that?

Knowledge of the creative process and its reception in public space

Monika Vykoukal (Core Group): You were talking before about assessing the work or what the work is constituted of. These are both process of developing it and all the social things that actually happened even without taking in the spectators. Suzanne then touched upon the issue of us discussing its presentation in an art gallery. In a sense, the media is an interesting gap or difference between the performance and the theatrical side of the work, its huge choreography and how people relate to each other within the piece. I'm particularly interested in that aspect of Suzanne's work right now.

Also how do you actually assess the visible process, as an artwork? I presume you know because you are always assessing the representation of that.

Group dynamics and the role of the artist

Roxana Meechan (Core Group): I'm very interested in group dynamics and the artist perhaps setting out some structures, boundaries, for a particular group. Obviously, it is nice when, suddenly, the group takes over and somebody else becomes 'the artist'. Is the role of 'artist' something that is interchangeable between individuals?

First contact with authority: the British picture

Ruth Barker (Core group): I just wanted to pick up on something that Grant said that actually really changed the way that I personally understood the Oakland projects. You said

that the police are the primary point of contact with the State for the community, for the residents.

I'm from a slightly scummy kind of working class big housing estate in the north of England. The police are certainly not the major or primary point of contact. The police don't ever go there! It's actually really hard to get the police to come out. The primary point of contact is the 'dole' – the Social Security. You have to go every two weeks and sign on and you get your dole money. They don't even call your name. They call you a 'Job Seeker'. I think there is a really important shift – in the kind of power relationships that that embodies i.e. that difference that occurs where the police or the social benefits system are the primary point of contact.

Ways of art living in the world

Janice Parker (Core Group) I'm just thinking about how I know Suzanne's project and how it lives in the world. I'm wondering how and why different kinds of authorship or ownership come about. Does the work live in the world in different ways and different contexts? Do the police have a version of it? Does it live in the world in other ways? Does it exist otherwise?

Suzanne Lacy's Response:

Power

Suzanne Lacy: The issue of power is ongoing. It is as an ethical issue, one of the primary ethical issues. It is bound up with analysis. It is also involved in the process. I personally incorporated it into the work.

In the long trajectories of these pieces we focused in our discussion on *Code 33*. This is interesting because it was the first place that the many, many conflicts inherent in the work came into the actual subject of the performance. They were only referred to in the other pieces because youth had a much more prominent voice. It also had something to do with the *Free Mumia* people showing up and how the whole thing operating as an arena of conflict.

I think it is important to constantly challenge that including the power of one's authority as the 'artist'.

Academic Bias

The second thing is just a brief aside on the notion of academic bias. I think there is only bias in this work. There is no way to have an objective reality. Anything I do with respect to recounting is biased and subject to a lot of decisions that I actually have to make. For example - Am I going to put the *Free Mumia* protest into my film, or am I not? Chris (Johnson) who in that piece, by the way, was called the 'Oreo' by the kids – they found him very inaccessible although, probably to you, he was highly accessible. Chris is the African-American self-educated, colleague of mine who started this whole process. I'm very clear about the way he and I represented a different kind of positioning vis-à-vis race and class and so on, which was opposite from the way the kids understood it.

In the case of me interviewing people, I am not going to people who particularly see me as an academic. They are my friends. I am only interviewing the 20 or 30 people that carried through, over time, in various ways the division of the project.

Similar things are done in a lot of my projects – including a psychologist who looked at the language structure of kids in the groups and developed a masters thesis on it and so on.

Aims and expectations of the work and its participants

The aims, like the analysis, are developed in the process. That is, I have an intuition, then I get together with Chris, and he says, ‘You know, I have the same intuition – Let’s go find out what those kids are like’. Then we get a kid involved, and the kid says, ‘hey, you better...’ – Unique Holland was very good in this way.

In *Roof is on Fire* we met every week with a team of 40 kids. They felt that they were the leaders. Out of that 40, there were ten who met and decided the questions. At the rehearsal, the adults took over. I turned into a militant general in the middle of a performance – ‘Be there, do that ..’. The kids came up to us afterwards and said, ‘Wait a minute. This is not cool. You need to include us all the way.’ We explained to them that it was difficult to do so when you are representing the vision, the voice and the experience in the work and when you don’t have art experience. There was a complex negotiation that went on around that point between the rehearsal and the performance. I’m not saying that either side had a complete autonomy, but it was a negotiation. It explains to you how the aims of the work and the expectations of the people entering the work are a much more open field than one might see from looking at the end result.

So, it’s more like this. I say to Chris ‘I don’t know those kids. Do you?’ He responds, ‘I’m black. I’m from the poor neighbourhood, but I don’t know them either, but I do know Amelia.’ I ask ‘What should we do?’ He responds ‘Well, let’s go and teach in the local high school.’ Six months later the kids have told us what they think. The teachers have told us as well. We all sit down and say, ‘Well, maybe we should do something about this.’ And then a local journalist shows up and says, ‘I’m going to do a video of this. I’m so excited.’ And you say, ‘Hah! That’s interesting. Let’s expand it to eight other schools.’ So we go to the school district and say – ‘Why don’t you pay for eight teachers from eight different high schools to come once a month and talk to us not just about media literacy but about all kinds of aspects of the kinds of things that are eventually constructed into the analysis of the work?’

So the teachers and the people like Herb Kohl, Tod Gitlin and Troy Duster and Jeanette Getler (who was a television producer), came and talked to the teachers. The teachers then created a curriculum. They talked to the students and then, out of that, 40 kids came together. We said, ‘Hey guys! We have this idea. Let’s put all of you up on a roof talking about the issues that are important to you. Let’s give you direct access to television cameras though we will mediate’ Of course there are layers of mediation. Then one of the kids says, ‘We don’t have cars’. This then gets to the question of why is it art and not art – we launch into a complicated negotiation about whether they should sit in cars or in the park and what that means. It takes a month to have that conversation with the kids who are finally saying, ‘Would you adults stop fighting! Let’s sit in cars. She likes cars, let’s go sit in cars.’ Then there is a complicated discussion about whether or not the cars should be used cars or new cars. We try used cars. The kids say, ‘No. Those are dirty. They smell. We want really great vehicles.’

Cars are basically a framing device – a mini stage to allow multiple private conversations to occur in a public setting. They are also the means to prevent the circulating adults in the team from impinging on the youth conversations. We literally had to drag people’s heads

out of windows to keep them from saying, 'God dammit, you said blah, blah.' They didn't like listening to the kids. The kids' subtitle for the project was 'shut-up and listen'.

Everything, from the title to the use of cars, to what you wear, was part of the negotiation. The police were greatly involved in the conversation about whether or not they should be in uniforms. I considered this part of a visual arts conversation, because a lot of it was visual. It was how the visual represents meaning - to media, to the audience and to the people participating. The cops had a lot of discussion about how their role, with uniform or without uniform, had meaning. The discussion included the colour blue, the guns, the holsters, a lot of discussions about that kind of paraphernalia, the vests, the way they're tucked into the clothes. The kids had discussions about what they would wear. So these projects are the tip of the iceberg, as Grant said.

In the next seminar we will discuss the issues of display and subsequent representation.

Grant Kester's response

Possible tensions in the success of this practice: the UK and the US

Grant Kester: I'll talk a little bit about the nature of this practice in the UK in general.

I assume that this is connected to the success of things like New Labour and also, probably, discourses around the cultural industries and cultural capital, Richard Florida's work and a whole matrix of things that present culture as a new economic engine that will rescue languishing post-industrial economies from anachronism, etc etc.

Most of the projects that I'm looking at right now are not being produced in countries that are spending any money on art.

Certainly in the US, there is almost no money spent on contemporary visual art by the government, to speak of, certainly not community-based or activist art. So I still have to wrap my mind around the idea that you've actually got a government that will spend money on contemporary art of this kind. It would be interesting to understand more clearly the nature of the compromises involved in this.

This is something I hope to learn about, while I'm here and subsequently – what some of those tensions are. I can imagine that they flow along the trajectory of having work reduced to a kind of social provision. Now, to me the problem with that is the extent to which it functions as an alibi for the failure of the State to actually perform its necessary role vis-à-vis its regulatory or judicatory relationship to the market system. You find art being coerced into functioning as a prop for the privatisation process. That's where it starts to raise relevant political issues.

I would imagine that's the point of conflict for a lot of practitioners as well. So part of this has to do with the trajectory of neo-liberalism. Your comment about the police versus being on the dole – again, it illuminates the significant differences between practice in the UK versus the US, where we don't have welfare to speak of, any more. There's Aid to Families with dependent children (AFDC), but it has been cut to the bone. There is some money for food stamp programs, but the idea that people in the working class would actually go somewhere and get a cheque is hard to visualize because we've already been through this

– you know, going back to Reagan. Clinton’s dismantling of AFDC was really the final death knell for a lot of forms of social provision.

Suzanne Lacy: They’re working on social security, now.

Grant Kester: Yes, there are arguments to privatize social security and so on. Bush has eliminated the last vestigial expression of government as having any sort of controlling relationship to the private sector. I really hope that that is not going to be the case in the UK and EU. There was a hard-fought battle over the last century to create things like the eight-hour workday and workplace regulations and even the dole itself. If you look at the history of poverty policy in the UK going back to the Poor Laws and the Reformation of the Poor Laws in 1830s and 1840s, it is a fascinating history of struggle to win these concessions and to force the state to take on a regulatory relationship to the market system. It really saddens me to imagine that the UK will go the same the way the US went in this regard.

Forms of patronage: A critical view and a case for optimism

There will be no buffer between the individual and the private sector and so, when we talk about issues of patronage (to bring us back to the practice side), I think, ‘Ok, well we have got the compromises and contradictions of state support’ and then I think ‘What are the other systems of patronage?’ There are foundations, NGOs, universities, state agencies, welfare agencies. There are cultural tourism agencies and then there’s the art market: collectors, the Saatchis, whomever it might be. My feeling is that obviously, each of those systems of patronage carries along its own set of compromises that the artist faces. When you are working for a social agency the compromises are different from the ones you face having your work bought up by Charles Saatchi or in having your work supported by a research university or a Kunsthalle or a Biennial. They’re all going to entail compromises in some way or the other, but there will also be enabling potentials in each of those sites as well.

So part of me wants to be slightly more optimistic than people that actually live in this situation would be about the fact that there is money available. In a way it reminds me of the situation in the US in the late 1960s around the Office of Economic Opportunity. Community Action Programs were put in place, primarily as a way for the Democratic Party to peel off African-American voters from the Republican Party and to enfranchise what had become African-American working class neighbourhoods in cities. The Democratic Party, under Johnson, made a very concerted effort to found inner-city programmes, to cultivate votes, to enfranchise poor and working class populations. They proceeded through a principle that they called ‘maximum feasible participation’ which meant that the money should not go to the political machines that run city government, but directly to the grassroots level. This is where a lot of African-American politicians like Marion Berry and Julian Bond began their careers, in CAP- funded programmes of the 1960s.

What happened is that some of that money was used to organise tenants to go on rent strikes against public housing managers or to organize to support their interests in other ways. This is a really productive moment at which the role of the state in relationship to the private sector is on on the agenda and openly negotiated and debated. The unfortunate thing in our circumstances (in the US) is that we can’t even have that conversation any more. We can’t have a conversation about the role of the State in any meaningful way because the notion that the state’s primary role is simply to support and buttress the market is so well entrenched. One encouraging aspect of the situation here is that the state will, at

least, acknowledge that it has an obligation of some sort. It opens up the possibility of creating some pressure on the political system.