

The Metropolitan Complex

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"...soft subversions and
imperceptible revolutions
will eventually change the
face of the world, making
it happier. Let's face it,
it's long overdue."

Roundtable Discussion

Participants: Vaari Claffey, Louise Walsh, Declan Long, Susan Kelly, Willie McKeown, Grant Watson, and Sarah Pierce.

On Wednesday 28 April, Monday 10 May and Tuesday 18 May 2004, the following conversations took place in Grant Watson's office at Project, Dublin. Sarah Pierce invited the participants to have an informal discussion over 3 meetings about practice, activism, art, and politics. There was no audience present.

DAY 1 - Wednesday 28 April

Sarah Pierce The purpose of these sessions is to allow a conversation to develop that might complicate how we talk about and understand art and political action and the terms that art, politics and representation operate within. Perhaps we can start with Martha Rosler's upcoming show at Project and see where that leads us.

Grant Watson When I invited Martha to do something at Project I always had in mind a public discussion about art and activism as a part of it. When we talked about this in relation to the *Monumental Garage Sale*, Martha's concern was that the work was less of an activist piece and more of a work that functioned on a philosophical and metaphorical level. It is not activist in the sense that it does not identify a particular cause and then organise around it.

Louise Walsh What was it she called it?

Grant Watson I don't want to put words into her mouth. I think it is not an activist piece, but it's a political piece, or a piece with political implications.

Declan Long Did she use the word political?

Grant Watson She did. Philosophical and political.

Sarah Pierce In her statement¹ about the piece she discusses her role within the space.

Grant Watson She created a persona around the woman who's making the sale, the trader, which includes autobiographical material which is dubious.

Louise Walsh I remember it struck me there was a range of shoes that were different sizes, so it couldn't have been one person's gear, even though there was a persona put up there.

Grant Watson There is an idea of a portrait being developed.

Louise Walsh But it subverts itself a bit. It is kind of fragmented, or overlapping. There's the sense that she's putting forward a portrait, but when you go through it and look at it as a portrait it doesn't wash.

Grant Watson The original piece included slides of a family group, who patently weren't the family group of the woman who was the trader. The two didn't add up. That original slide show will be incorporated into the piece here.

Susan Kelly So it's a historical piece in a way.

Grant Watson Yes, it's been reconstructed on a number of occasions. One of the other political implications would be to do with commerce, and use value and exchange value. It is quite a Marxist piece in that sense.

Susan Kelly It has to do with personal investments in the commodity and how the personal gets folded into the thing you bought for a few quid somewhere.

Grant Watson In the sale they come up again for question, these commodities which are personalised are back on the market and the viewer is active in re-defining them once more.

Susan Kelly It's not necessarily about showing that either. I remember she said that you put this piece on and then people come in and actually they just shop! When Hans Ulrich Obrist did the show *Take Me I'm Yours*, there was a whole mountain of clothes in the gallery and you'd get so excited because there was great stuff. You start to trap yourself in this moment of "what can I get," and then you step back and say "whoa, hang on..." It's very much about dragging you into that space where you are out looking for a bargain.

Declan Long Was Martha Rosler's piece made for a specific time, are these pieces dated objects?

Grant Watson It's mixed. We will do a call for people to donate stuff.

Declan Long So there's that connection, there will be objects relating to this point in history.

Grant Watson It will function exactly like a garage sale. Stuff will be collected, sold in the gallery and the money will go to charity. There will be bits and pieces from the other sales.

Declan Long But there are things about the piece as she writes about it in her statement which are historically specific.

Grant Watson She wrote that text the first time the piece was reconstructed in 1977. The initial work had this character who was a single mother, kind of a hippie who was very specifically of that time and place. However, I talked with the artist about a commodity culture that exists here now, and how that has become such a visible aspect of Dublin.

Vaari Claffey Is it about a distinction that she makes then, between political and activist?

Grant Watson This is one of those conversations that you have on the hoof. Who knows how confirmed that distinction is?

Sarah Pierce How is it for us? What are our terms for activist art?

Declan Long That's really important. There's a tendency around some manifestations of political art for us to take the word of the artist and faithfully go along with whatever political agenda they say they are committed to.

Louise Walsh What isn't political though?

Declan Long Certainly. But I am talking about work which constructs itself as self-consciously political: "I am an artist addressing this issue and you must read it on those terms." We've been talking about whether this piece is an activist piece or a political piece and it's valid to not necessarily go with what Martha says about it, and to see what we make of it.

Sarah Pierce Annie Fletcher told me about an artist in Holland who passed out a census to a housing community in order to do what he imagined would be a piece about the plight of immigrants. He put the census under people's doors and when he went to collect it the next day he discovered everyone had packed their bags, literally moving out of their homes overnight. It was a disaster.

Grant Watson The issue is what is the effect of the piece? What impact does it have?

Susan Kelly Instead of asking what is an activist piece, it might help to talk about practice. There are a lot of projections onto what activism might be. It's better to talk about different kinds of practice, what affects they have, what they mobilise, what spaces they open. Then maybe you get a more fluid register of activity.

Grant Watson Certain so-called activist pieces are quite inactive.

Declan Long That idea goes to the heart of the discussion. To what extent are these things inert politically?

Susan Kelly Do we think activism and art are the same now as when Martha Rosler did this in the 70s? I would say she has a very specific notion of what it is to be an activist, based on her history.

Declan Long From her statement that seems evident. It's rooted in a cultural moment at the end of the 60s and the early 70s. She's using that moment as part of a representational mode by creating a fictional character who is effectively a hippie. The question is to what extent this work will have different effects today? One line in her statement drew my attention: "the work highlighted the dubious proposition that one is what one appears to own." Although there is a counter-cultural sentiment that this line refers to, it seems vividly contemporary to us now in terms of particular political movements assembling as we speak, and who are about to gather in Dublin I suppose. She says it's a dubious proposition, she doesn't say it's wrong. One obvious comparison is Michael Landy's piece *Breakdown* where he sat in the middle of C&A on Oxford Street and destroyed every single one of his possessions.

Willie McKeown Martha Rosler's piece taps into an emerging 60s and 70s reality of subliminally controlled freedom and the idea that we go shopping because we feel it's about the freedom of choices, but it's actually to do with being controlled. We think we go to Tesco or Marks & Spencers to buy something, but in actual fact we have already been bought. Vance Packard wrote in the 50s and 60s about "The Hidden Persuaders," "The Waste Makers," "The Status Seekers"—governments working with ad men and image makers. They realised that if you could manipulate people to focus on consuming then they were less politically aware and easier to control.

Susan Kelly The consumer index keeps the economy rolling.

Willie McKeown The bigger picture is that it numbs people to what's happening to them politically.

Susan Kelly But it mobilises them as well. "Fight terrorism, go out and shop." It's a patriotic act. It's not actually a tune out.

Sarah Pierce Thomas Frank wrote about this in *The Conquest of Cool*—it's American to own a pair of Levi's, it's cool, it's individual.

Willie McKeown By buying Levi's you are losing or displacing your own personality into the personality of the image of what you are buying. It appears to be about individualism and freedom but it's the opposite— it's symbolization; it's about loss of individualism, loss of the journey towards the true self. Coolness is very much a position of isolation. It's when people start to collaborate and start to understand and love each other that we become empowered. So by going out and shopping it's keeping us all separate. Television does the same thing— it's visual consuming with the real purpose of keeping us all separate from each other. Millions of us in our little boxes being communicated to but not communicating.

Sarah Pierce It's important to consider what happens when art is associated with commercialism, pleasure, pastime, where you go for diversion, or entertainment. Much of what artists do in claiming an activist practice is to locate their work outside of these spheres and to align with more socially "useful" practices.

Grant Watson Even those strategies you are talking about, they can also inhabit a space of entertainment and enjoyment quite easily.

Sarah Pierce Sure. There are art practices that create a tension between what is easily consumed and what might rub against that a bit.

Louise Walsh I was struck by the separate nature of how Martha Rosler's garage sale was advertised— in the artworld as an artwork and in other areas as a garage sale. Does that set up one set of people to be the fodder for another set, or is she trying to get people to converge?

Susan Kelly Martha Rosler would be interesting to talk to about that because she has done that in different ways as a strategy it seems.

Grant Watson We haven't talked yet about how it will be promoted in this instance, but I imagine it would be done in the same way. I don't think that necessarily segregates communities.

Louise Walsh It seems very segregating though.

Grant Watson It holds that space open to mean different things. It is actually a garage sale and it is actually art.

Declan Long So then why isn't the wording the same in the press release as in the general advertisement? Is it just a matter of the institutional frame gallery press release versus newspaper, that allows it to become one thing or another?

Susan Kelly She did this piece in the New Museum in New York and just advertised it as a garage sale. It was on a street front with loads of shops where the New Museum is on lower Broadway. If that sphere was kept open here you might actually find a cross sector of people in Temple Bar who can only afford second hand clothes that includes artists as well.

Declan Long It could attract a bunch of young skint artists.

Susan Kelly The Obrist exhibition at Serpentine was full of artists.

Grant Watson Obviously it's about keeping it alive on different levels so that it can simultaneously be different things for different people.

Declan Long It can take contradictory positions.

Sarah Pierce Otherwise, it is somewhat suspect when work depends upon a particular community to come in and activate the issue at hand, and another community to activate the art...

Declan Long Possibly the aspiration should be to undo or break down any hierarchies that come with the gallery space when it is used in an activist process.

Willie McKeown I feel that Martha Rosler's piece is very genuine as an art event which is open ended, rather than a certain type of manipulated inclusion, which seems to me to be more about personal gratification and power.

Grant Watson Ideally in this situation there wouldn't be a hierarchy of art audience, garage sale audience. You'd have people standing next to each other, one thinking it was one thing and one

thinking it's the other, or both thinking it's the same...

Sarah Pierce Maybe it would be productive to identify moments when art serves communities other than a typical art-going audience, whatever that is.

Susan Kelly We have to get specific about exactly what the call is, how it is authored around maybe personal gratification, for instance, how heavily authored it is, how it is described, where it circulates? Those mechanics of how projects move in and out and out and in again, are interesting and the specificity of how that operates is the efficacy of the piece— how you actually negotiate that relationship so that it remains critical.

Willie McKeown Right, and this piece doesn't try to control the response. It doesn't try to manipulate in any kind of a politically correct way. It's genuinely open and inclusive in the sense that it doesn't predict "who."

Sarah Pierce She is presupposing certain things though about how commodities work, how communities work, how people get together.

Grant Watson Which allows the piece to work on a more metaphorical and poetic level perhaps.

Declan Long She's interested in representation and a form of drama and persona, all those things which some artists self-consciously resist in an attempt to kind of exist beyond representation. Rosler certainly mentions and plays on both the idea of the entrepreneur and someone struggling to bring home the bacon. That ambiguity is interesting.

Louise Walsh It does stick in my craw a bit that one set of advertisements go into one area and another set of advertisements go into another. If you are going to send stuff out there, send it out to everyone. If you are going to call it an art event, call it an art event right through or call it both things, but call it both things in both directions.

Declan Long Do you think certain people are being had by this kind of fictional nature?

Louise Walsh There is that sense of the wool being pulled over your eyes. If I am somehow fragile when I go into a gallery because I don't get it, I don't understand it, and all these people are going on and on, and I just don't get it, then there's that sense of an inside joke.

Declan Long Nicolas Bourriaud had an idea when he spoke at MAVIS² a few weeks ago that perhaps inclusive or interactive work has a sadism to it. Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith suggested this related in some ways to this horror that people have of audience participation. If you were to tell people that they are taking part in an artwork, they would be terrified or embarrassed.

Susan Kelly But maybe in 1977 she struggled for this to be considered art. There's some sort of negotiation there that doesn't ring true now. Getting back to the practice, once the syntax of our conversation changed to artists making a piece where the art is social material, it reverted to exploitation, like the artist who exploits wood to make sculpture. Not that you change the syntax in order to describe the project— you have to talk about power and politics and representation— but if the community can't be the material...

Grant Watson There is this artist called Ella Gibbs who has an interactive practice. At the beginning all her work

was only about artists, it wasn't ever about engaging with wider communities. It was just her and her group of friends who would meet and do things. One way of dealing with this issue is to decide we are just going to do it amongst ourselves.

Vaari Claffey This brings us back to why Martha Rosler advertised in those different ways. Why not just the same way to both communities if they are the same audience? Why was it important that the art community knew that it was an art event— why not simply invite them to a garage sale?

Sarah Pierce It would be interesting to find out more about how advertising for art events performed in the context of San Francisco/San Diego, hippie culture, student culture, etc. in the 70s. Maybe we are reading that it was dualistic, but really there are overlaps between communities who go to garage sales and communities who go to art events.

Grant Watson It's as you say historical. It is about collapsing certain boundaries and certain moments in art practice.

Sarah Pierce Back to practices and the terms we use to describe them, is the artist here the person administrating the garage sale, the person serving Thai soup, the person organising a needle exchange as in the case of Ultra-red?

Grant Watson There is an issue of necessity. I am sure that needle exchange happened at a moment when Dont³ thought it so important that it overrode other issues like being an artist. There are parallels with the Indian group called Sahmat who started doing work around communal conflict. Certain critical moments produce that kind of practice. That can also be a good way to question the value of these practices, are they needed, are they crucial?

Willie McKeown I think the whole idea of an event staged in 1977 has a completely different meaning to it to now. The problem is an event then was a bit like using "untitled" for a painting, it was kind of open and liberating and pure. Because it has been corrupted and used lazily, now we are kind of cautious of it or suspicious of it.

Susan Kelly There was a serious critique of the commodity in the artworld going on at that time. Of course that critique has been co-opted by all kinds of people. Grant, how would you think about this sort of practice now as anti-commodity? Even in terms of an installation aesthetic, it's a very familiar one now.

Louise Walsh Culturally there's a whole load of non-applications that come up around this piece by the very title of it. The garage sale— we know it from TV programmes from the States. Here we'd have a jumble sale and it would be in a church hall.

Grant Watson Obviously that adjustment would be the same in the States, where garage sales don't happen in galleries.

Louise Walsh The notion though that one family puts out things on a stall outside their house and it's all their stuff, isn't necessarily transferable to here.

Sarah Pierce Is this piece an artefact in that it stays somewhat stable, or does it change according to the context? Or does each reconstruction allow the two to mingle?

Declan Long More and more it becomes a kind of historical artefact.

Susan Kelly But that's exactly what's going on with her right now. To claim it as only a re-activation would be kind of inaccurate because of all these untranslatable. What Martha Rosler is

doing more and more is historicizing herself through these exhibitions. She's not quite saying "here is the relic," and I like that, and I am also for her historicizing her work a bit.

Grant Watson It's interesting to see a historical piece re-activated. 30 years old, you can see it again, it works differently...

Susan Kelly But how is it different, how is it re-presented? What's the line?

Sarah Pierce On a certain level we think we know or understand these projects from 30 years ago. So I am interested in the prospect of opening that up and blurring the lines between the historical piece and the activated, new piece.

Grant Watson I am too. We could have shown an early collage piece or photographs, but I asked her for this work because for various reasons it relates to other contemporary works that have happened here in the gallery. For me there are many ways it will function as an art piece, as a historical art piece, as a theatrical piece. I also think people will understand the dynamic of going to the sale and buying stuff cheap.

Susan Kelly When she is here for the seminar, do you see that conversation as part of a re-activation? If so then how could these issues be made current and critical right now in Dublin?

Sarah Pierce It might go back to her role in the piece— playing the artist and what that might mean to the person coming into the sale, the potential for the commodity to be a personal memento or an artefact from a Martha Rosler exhibition... How was the original sale set up?

Grant Watson It was quite psychoanalytic. Nicer items were in the front and they were lit, and items at the back were maybe pornographic and more embarrassing and low lit.

Louise Walsh Wasn't there a sign somewhere as well?

Susan Kelly "A garage sale is a metaphor for the mind."

Louise Walsh The tradition of a garage sale as a family's detritus being reactivated into the public realm of commodities, is a very American tradition. I don't think that's going to translate— it's not part of our consciousness here. Jumble sales come from a whole community of people. It's a chance to clear out your clutter, it's a chance to pass stuff on to generate money for a community. People make things, there would be cake sales. It's an anonymous donation. The work here is hanging on that sense of one person's stuff. I am not criticising it, I am just bringing it out for discussion.

Declan Long This is closer to the car boot sale.

Grant Watson Do you have car boot sales here?

Vaari Claffey Yeah, we do.

Louise Walsh They are very recent and they are very particular to having a car and being in a particular area.

Declan Long People recognise the garage sale as an American form. It's American culture.

Vaari Claffey That's precisely what becomes interesting— Grant and Martha Rosler's negotiations around all of this. They will have to decide between them what is or isn't translated.

Susan Kelly I took part in the re-enactment of the *Semiotics of the Kitchen* in the Whitechapel. There were about 30 of us— I got to shake a potato masher!

We were all women interested in feminism. 3rd generation perhaps. Similar issues came up in that she wanted to reactivate that piece but also wanted to retain a historicity to it. She changed some elements and left others. There were seven TV sets set up and it was a live performance, but it was done over and over again, so it became almost ritualistic, and like a TV studio. It wasn't neat or tightly held, in a good way. We felt we were part of Martha Rosler's history. It was great— 30 very excited women yielding instruments for a whole afternoon. It did reactivate something.

Sarah Pierce She used a younger generation, so it had movement, where there was 1 there are 20 then 50 then 100. A metaphor for the feminist movement passing along from one generation to the next. Which brings us around to the idea of how activist practices work.

Grant Watson It also functions in relation to what's happening here now, which is basically as a kind of talking point and a generator of discussion.

Susan Kelly There are a lot of things that generate discussion, but I think what's interesting about this is when you start to get sucked in a bit and you start looking for the bargain. This piece seems to be quite effective on that level. You catch yourself giving into that commodity desire.

Grant Watson This is one way I think it will translate. The gallery can have its rarefied moments but also it can be very informal and it can change and people can go in and forget it's a gallery and do stuff. My fantasy is that it will be a bit like that.

DAY 2 - Tuesday 18 May

Sarah Pierce In the last conversation a point arose around the art community versus...

Grant Watson the other community.

Sarah Pierce Yes. There was also a point about the historicized event and the re-enactment of Martha Rosler's garage sale here in Dublin.

Vaari Claffey We dealt with translating and updating and concluded that it is not necessary on a certain level. It's a continuation of Rosler's practice even as it is historicizing it.

Grant Watson It is a historical reconstruction. It's not a piece that necessarily has to completely translate into this context, into this culture. It can retain some of its character as an American artwork.

Vaari Claffey Willie mentioned the idea of an open-ended versus close-ended practice.

Declan Long Did we talk a little about authorship? To what extent does a political cause becomes the signature work of a particular artist? I suppose that just relates to particular ideas of what constitutes as participatory, so again those ideas of inclusiveness or openness.

Sarah Pierce The difference between doing work on or about a group of people and actually engaging them in a process.

Grant Watson And that perhaps Martha's piece works on lots of different layers and can be different things simultaneously to different communities.

Sarah Pierce Perhaps we should turn to the articles that Susan circulated. I think that this piece "Liar's Poker"⁴ by Brian Holmes is especially helpful in clarifying how certain types of artworks work, beginning with differences between

art projects that take place in the artworld and those situated outside.

Declan Long There is a piece I have here that I came across minutes before coming over here so I haven't read it completely, by Will Bradley. It's called "Has the world changed or have I changed? Art and Social Action." The opening section reminded me of something in "Liar's Poker." He writes, "in the early 70s [Alan] Kaprow famously suggested a series of performances that would progressively narrow the gap between art and life until finally the artist would be working in an every day job having no contact with the artworld and telling absolutely nobody, not even their family or lover if this was art. Bonnie Shirk was part of the same Californian scene. A successful artist showing in museums, one of her projects was the transformation of a piece of waste ground underneath the San Francisco freeway into a small working farm. What was started as a temporary artwork realised with local community groups, took on it's own existence and became the focus of her life for several years." I just raised that in terms of what Sarah mentioned there about the difference between people who are working in an activist way or an artworld way, which seems to be marked by some of the groups talked about in "Liar's Poker."

Sarah Pierce How do artists rely on the systems and exchanges that are particular to the artworld in order to do what we do?

Declan Long There is a tendency in this "Liar's Poker" piece, which is admittedly a polemic by nature, to set up these competing monolithic institution's with no sense of slippage.

Grant Watson There is a slight notion of purity. He talks about the game and working with the game, what you can get out of it. Then he distills it down to the groups who are outside of the art institutions as somehow the most viable in regard to this.

Susan Kelly He talks about *Documenta* in quite an interesting way. I don't think it's that straight forward a model of power really. There was a big debate about this on discordia.com afterwards where people felt like come on let's use all the platforms we've got. In this sort of game you have to figure out where your aces are and that changes all the time. All institutions aren't the same.

Grant Watson He makes a very cynical statement about *Documenta*.

Sarah Pierce Placing all these practices in the framework of a game of taps into the psychology of how we all work together. One way I think about the Metropolitan Complex is that everyone has a "complex"— institutions have similar complexes to artists— how to act, what to do, who's the audience, how to respond, will there be money? If you acknowledge that we all have issues, that there are shared neuroses belonging to any given locale, then you can actually begin to play with those complexes. Like his notion of who calls the bluff. I wonder if calling the bluff is sometimes a conservative position, it takes the least imagination.

Susan Kelly Apart from the obvious polemic, what's interesting is when he talks about Bordieu and the "illuio" and suggests that this might be up for grabs right now and there's potentially really big change happening in that realm. There's actually a possibility of not only arguing within the terms that we have got right now.

Declan Long Declan McGonagle presents a position that we are at a stage where the terms are changing, that we are moving away from what he refers to as signature culture, and that this is the first

time since the Renaissance when we might actually start to re-define the artist's role in relation to civil society.

Grant Watson The idea of a paradigm shift happening and art being a potential motivator of that does not have to necessarily fall into a dichotomy between institutions and artists. It's too reductive. I just wonder is Holmes producing this big enemy that isn't necessarily making the point he wants to make.

Susan Kelly The institution is a convenient antagonist, and that is his rhetorical style. He would probably admit that that's what he's up to. He's a skilled rhetorician that way.

Sarah Pierce When artists claim certain practices they are also claiming space. They are claiming representation, they are claiming an association.

Grant Watson It's interesting to just to stop for a moment and think about why you are doing something, what's my position in relation to these issues?

Susan Kelly Or to find some language to try and describe what's happening right now. I find the language of institutional critique isn't working. This sort of writing by Holmes, if you agree or don't agree with it, is starting to lay out some terms and some language to think about the position we are in right now.

Sarah Pierce It's a shift that institutional critique doesn't allow for— that perhaps certain power relationships are less fixed. There's a certain way, no matter how much institutional critique you do, that you are actually fetishising the very processes you attempt to interrogate. At a certain point you realise that some institutions are asking the same questions you are.

Grant Watson He writes that the artist has the ace, the artists have the golden nugget, everybody else wants that.

Sarah Pierce And that the public are the ones who are going to finally call the bluff.

Susan Kelly I think his concern here is very much with the new social movements. What he's doing here and what's going on in the republicart⁵ discourse as well, is really trying to think about the difference between politics based on representation, whether it's the proper name of the artist or representing a social group, and different models of constituent power that come more from the Hardt and Negri⁶ idea of how we think about force and organisation and the social. So to move out of representation isn't necessarily to move out of the artworld but it's to practice differently. When you look at constituent practices here, look at constituent power as opposed to negotiations of representation. Of course it moves in and out, but it's really trying to theorise practice in a different way that I find exciting because you are not always stuck in this kind of negotiation with the police. It's a way to think of power a bit differently. When he says "beyond representation" at the end, it's not about naively getting out of that. It's not about saying there's no such thing as homeless people or no such thing as immigrant communities. It's how to think of that power and those relations and communities differently in order to enable a different kind of radical politics.

Grant Watson That also touches on how art can be political and in what way it can be political? What he describes is very temporary and momentary, it can happen here and there and that's part of the game right? So it doesn't have to be that institutions are either good or bad. At moments they function effectively and other moments they don't.

Declan Long What do you think he means when he says: "cultural institutions both public and private try to mediate between the logic of profit and prestige and desire for alternative valuations."

Grant Watson On one hand you have the government who hands out money and you have a corporate world that wants to back art, but on the other hand you have the artists making some kind of radical statement and then the role of the institution becomes about negotiating those two things. About being a kind of passage between them.

Sarah Pierce Brian Hand made the point in the first paper⁷, that in Ireland private organisations are partially funded by the government in that places like the Office of Public Works are big buyers of artworks from private galleries, so fundamentally there's no such thing as a "private" institution.

Vaari Claffey Well there's the Taylor Gallery for example, they deal with a different breed of buyer. We also had a conversation back then about the idea that public money is somehow "clean" money.

Sarah Pierce You could expand the quote Declan pointed out to include artists, curators, and audiences "try to mediate and negotiate between the logic of profit and prestige and desire for alternative valuations." When the game is exposed, it has a tendency to paralyse— every gesture is problematic.

Susan Kelly The temptation is to cease playing the game, which is possibly the "anarchist" solution. That's not what he's advocating. He's talking about representative democracy which is reflected throughout the institution. This sort of article is also about sharpening up your wits to be able to see what's going on, what's getting named, so that you can negotiate it better.

Declan Long I can't help thinking that cultural institutions are trying less to mediate between the logic of profit and prestige than with the logic of survival.

Sarah Pierce Survival is linked to these negotiations. If an opening has 5 people it implies you didn't mediate well, when in fact that right there could be an alternative valuation!

Grant Watson I think Declan, that at the level of institution we work at you are not really given that moral question very often, "Do you take this huge amount of money from a dodgy corporation?" It's more about filling in the next Arts Council application.

Declan Long At the same time, either individual artists or the community will often tar you with the same brush no matter what level you function at.

Sarah Pierce Well, both artists and institutions need to ask, "who am I functioning for?"

Declan Long So coming back to the processes of mediation, that is effectively what we are doing all the time though on a smaller scale or less explicit level.

Susan Kelly Vaari you are an independent curator, Sarah you set up The Metropolitan Complex, so you are both on the level of your own practices making those decisions. Likewise, if you are attached to an institution set up as part of a re-generation scheme in Dublin, you made certain decisions when you applied for certain jobs.

Declan Long You try as much as possible to find ways to re-imagine the terms on which these discussions are taking place or to readdress ways that the public might

consider exhibitions or to encourage the work of artists that might challenge the space or the public/private opposition. But I suppose you are right, you have given up in some ways before you started. You have accepted something.

Susan Kelly Well, you've made a choice.

Sarah Pierce It goes back to this idea of audience, or community. We are that audience, we are that imagined community. We can start questioning the symptoms or systems that belong to the institution. We can make the terms specific.

Vaari Claffey In Dublin you don't often have the luxury of taking a very clear position on things.

Grant Watson I think the point about not being able to have a kind of purity is really interesting. Particularly here in that you are connected to people in a way that is much more immediate.

Vaari Claffey You have a different kind of responsibility to people. That responsibility is complicated by all the different personal engagements you have. We talked earlier about the kind of expectations that artists have in terms of what they want from an institution. If you shut down you are depriving people very close to you of something that seems to be all they want.

Sarah Pierce It's about shifting the dynamics. So that notions of power and the institution and the curator and the artist become less predictable. I do think that one way to get beyond representation is through these smaller moments of working together.

Vaari Claffey This is something we've talked about before, about where the work is and that sometimes the conversation around something is the work in a sense. I think there is a nervousness here about what constitutes your work, what is the thing you do, what is it that you can call your art.

Susan Kelly As soon as you refuse to tell anyone what you are up to, you become this amazing site for projection.

Vaari Claffey A lot of it is panic as well. What if something happens that I don't understand? What if things continue to happen that I don't understand?

Sarah Pierce Which again leads to representation and who believes they better "represent" one role or another, to the exclusion of other possibilities.

Declan Long Are we saying there's a tendency here in Dublin for greater anxiety about this?

Vaari Claffey No, I am just saying that there aren't so many places to go. You have to occupy a lot of different roles within your community.

Grant Watson In larger cities where you have many museums and institutions you can insulate yourself, you can take particular positions, which in reality are kind of unrealistic and impossible. But in Dublin you're confronted with the unreality of the position that perhaps you are trying to take.

Declan Long Do you see this as a positive thing?

Grant Watson I think it's a positive thing. For me it's definitely interesting running a space in such a way that I can't insulate myself. I have to be constantly running up against everybody in one way or another.

Declan Long Looking again at Brian Holmes here, he makes this comment that art today is one of the few fields "open to experimentation with the technologies, habits, and hierarchies of symbolic

exchange." It's a constant re-imagining of a position according to changing sets of circumstances, without getting locked into certain roles or categories.

Sarah Pierce To resist responding to those projections and making them clear for other people is a political decision. To know where the boundaries are but to not necessarily react to the impulse to clarify them.

Susan Kelly It definitely is an interesting political position; and it shows the constructedness of all positions. The viability of those positions is actually predicated on this really messy practice that we all have where you are always entangled with different allegiances and affinities.

Declan Long I don't think people have a sense of that constructedness.

Susan Kelly I feel very policed personally in those particular issues. If I speak academically I am not an artist. As if artists shouldn't be able to speak "academically" because to practise discourse is to be somehow soiled. These are very policed boundaries that can be hard to resist. It's interesting to see what exactly is invested in those designations.

Sarah Pierce What conditions make us identify with or privilege one representation over another?

Grant Watson I think those politics can be more transparent in Dublin. Everything connects to everything else. If you are going to be an academic you can be, but I remember last year you did this and you happened to be an artist then. Everything is much more interconnected, it's impossible to create those illusions.

Vaari Claffey It's harder to compartmentalise.

Susan Kelly There is a political impetus. If you think about the number of people who have re-worked Walter Benjamin's "Author as Producer" in the last five years, there have been at least 10 re-workings of it starting with Hal Foster's. Gerald Raunig⁸ has just written another take on it, which I find really interesting. This article always points to thinking about the difference between the content of what you are doing and the formal intervention that you are making. If you think about the formal intervention, you intervene in the form of the system or the series of institutions or the roles or the procedures of what you are involved in.

Grant Watson The potential here is for the mechanics to be more visible in a way.

Susan Kelly It can be incidental, or practical but also there is some sort of impetus to try and intervene at that level of the formal that I think is central.

Sarah Pierce In Dublin those formal systems aren't as fixed. There is a real history of artists intervening with distribution.

Grant Watson I think it's less than it could be, it's less systematic than say London. It's a much bigger city of course but I remember there being artist-organised shows in this place and that place. When I came here I didn't actually see that.

Vaari Claffey There was a long time when we were all lamenting the fact that there were so few institutions— everyone was anxious to professionalize. Then when the institutions came the artists' initiatives fell away a bit. It's ancient history now but Temple Bar was occupied by artists because the rents were low and then the EU money came in and the

area became gentrified and artists' initiatives turned into institutions. No other place took over because the price of property went up so much. There were no empty shops or empty spaces or houses. Everyone was much more guarded about their space. Things have changed in the recent past, in the last 5 years.

Susan Kelly But again, an artist having an exhibition in a shop front, how radical and interesting is that? Just to be a bit of a devil's advocate. What we are talking about is a different definition of a practice here. To take it to another level, is there an "it" to be distributed? There is a group in Toronto called Instant Coffee and they have this trailer and they go to all the protests, but the trailer is just another site for having exhibitions. It's a mobile gallery space. It's not that radical. They still believe in a liberal definition of Art, capital A.

Declan Long Art stays there as a fairly concrete category. I wonder at what point can that shift?

Susan Kelly When those practices are messy, because you are curating and making and writing...

Declan Long In critical theory, in the shift made from work to text, there is this idea of the work becoming less valid because it has this sense of closure. So the word text is given much more currency because it allows this openness.

Grant Watson It's about clarity and appropriateness isn't it? The gallery has its place within the whole ecology of different ways of showing art. I don't think it's about saying the gallery is now redundant. We have to be clear about the language that we're using, not to just use language as it suits us. There has to be a balance between the reality on the ground and what you are doing.

Susan Kelly Right. Stop saying "I have dispensed with the art frame," because you are being a liar.

Declan Long Like with Thomas Hirschhorn, how can anyone be sure of the success when it's dominated by his proper name?

Grant Watson I thought it was a good piece at *Documenta*, but when I read the statement that Hirschhorn⁹ made, I thought this is really disingenuous.

Susan Kelly There is a Swedish group called Ladonia who have been going for quite a long time. It started off with a Joseph Beuys sculpture in Sweden. The government wanted to knock it down and so Ladonia claimed independent jurisdiction over the land, and said this is the Free State of Ladonia and you have no jurisdiction over it so you can't knock this sculpture down. It was an interesting way of protecting the autonomy of art by claiming an autonomous state. On the other hand, a couple of years ago they started to get all these visa applications through their website from people from Afghanistan and Pakistan and other places. They thought "Ah ha, it has worked! The confusion of art and life." It was so naïve somehow and awful. The immigrants' inability to "recognise" conceptual art amounted to a refusal of entry.

Grant Watson It's about being sensitised to the conditions on the ground.

Vaari Claffey Did Ladonia write back to anybody?

Susan Kelly They did, and they said "Oh dear, sorry you misunderstood, this is an art project." The key point is, how are we describing art here? It's the absolute bourgeois liberal definition of art.

Sarah Pierce Daniel Martinez did a piece at Cornell when I was there that

made all sorts of assumptions about the community he was entering. He made a piece out of black chipboard panels that cut through the arts quad. In Daniel's extremely revisionist account, the piece was vandalised and in response a group of 500 students formed a chain around it to protect it. That never happened, but it's a great fantasy. What did happen was that days before Hilary Clinton's visit to the university some women undergraduates wrote questions along the panels like, "Hilary what are you going to do about breast cancer?" They took ownership of the piece and made it politically active, and that is precisely what Daniel couldn't abide by.

Susan Kelly If your concern here is with public space, then the democratic inhabitation of a particular theme has to be part of that.

Grant Watson Going back to Martha Rosler, she uses the gallery because on some level she seems to want to control the conditions, but not the reception of the work. Again it is that kind of clarity that is important.

Declan Long I recall the way Gary Phelan managed some of the pieces that he showed in Dublin recently. In both instances you had to call Gary up and he took you to the place and he talked to you about it. The pieces were in off site venues so it was partly logistics.

Grant Watson The first piece that he made was a drawing in this old council flat. It was very complex and beautiful. The second piece was an installation of a video with some drawing in it. I was interested in how in the pieces related and Gary quickly told me that the second piece was conceived in 1992 and the first piece is the later piece. He was constructing his own history of his work that didn't relate to their sequence.

Declan Long Perhaps. I would throw it out there that possibilities might be generated from that end of the scale. Here's a way that an artist refuses to give up ownership by keeping a very tight rein over the work's reception. The dynamics of the distribution and the mediation are themselves unique.

Sarah Pierce It is a one-to-one encounter, yet the spaces functioned like galleries.

Declan Long That's something that Gary is very self conscious about. He did not feel that the piece in Buckingham street was about that community. He would be happy for that same piece to be in a Beverly Hills hotel room.

Susan Kelly We should be careful about not taking the notion of public space too literally. The public space in this might be you ringing Gary up and having a chat with him walking down the street.

Declan Long That's what I am wondering. Is that a part of it as much as anything else? That control is a kind of interaction. The video is 15 minutes of things swirling around, and you know Gary was waiting outside the door...

Vaari Claffey And you are conscious of trying formulate a clear response to the work while you are viewing it.

Grant Watson Then you go for a drink with Gary and he explains it really carefully to you. What's effective is that Gary gauged what he could control and the operation was successful.

Susan Kelly Although I haven't experienced the work, his approach seems interesting. It's not about a notion of a transparent public figure, it's more maybe a politics of friendship. You are obligated to stay and you listen to your friend and it's predicated on shutting your mouth when you do not agree.

Sarah Pierce Are we imagining that is part of the piece when as Declan says, it's a logistical decision on Gary's part?

Susan Kelly It would be mistaken to say it's about authorship only. That is the messiness we were talking about. He is claiming intention even if you don't buy it.

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Sarah Pierce We haven't quite figured out what it means to have a political practice.

Vaari Claffey Something that has come up time and time again in these conversations is how you read about given situations and grapple with trying to apply them to Dublin and the very particular situation that is here. When we talk about the market and what effect the market has it applies in a different way to Dublin. How politically motivated artists are and how that operates around an institution is entirely different here. A lot of the time it's the institution that is pushing that change and action, and often pushing artists. We have talked around art and activism in this particular place, in Dublin, at this particular time and what it is that might be interesting to think about.

Declan Long Among the things Vaari and I have been thinking about throughout this is a dislike for talking in terms of art and "something." Art and politics or art and activism or whatever the particular combination. We might think about the ways politics might define or emerge from particular kinds of practice. How these discussions might feed into other things that are going on, whether it's the exhibitions that might be forthcoming here at Project or Temple Bar Gallery, or the discussions around public art initiatives in Ballymun. This idea of separating art and politics becomes interesting to apply to each of these manifestations of practice and to note the underlying tendencies that disparate practices might share. Certain kinds of practice might be privileged when we talk about art and politics. Certain practices have the appearance of being radical. At times these putative, inclusive modes of practice are quite authoritarian compared with modes of practice which foreground their authoritarian character and are perhaps more radical in nature. We might overstate the extent to which the institution or particular discourse might determine responses or possibilities. Instead perhaps we can consider the unintended consequences or unplanned considerations that become possible in unlikely scenarios.

Grant Watson I would like to think about how you might have a sense of political responsibility or an awareness of political issues and how this might translate into an art practice in a way that isn't instrumentalized, uninteresting or sort of detrimental. It is a real question for me in relation to my work. I get irritated by the automatic assumptions that so often go with these discussions and the kind of practices that always get laid out every time art and politics are mentioned. Perhaps this needs to be challenged. In our conversations we have teased out the dynamics of different artworks but these have mostly focused on works that are self-consciously political. It might be interesting to move on to works which would not automatically be classified in this category. For me the *Monumental Garage Sale* is interesting because it manages to provoke ideas which engage with politics while at the same time maintaining a multiplicity of meanings.

Sarah Pierce We tend to expect political

art to be about scandal or spectacle—that is how we recognise the political in art. But sometimes in less overt moments unexpected territory can emerge. Willie McKeown's recent installation at Project is a good example. There were incredibly political moments that materialized in the space, articulated in formal ways.

Declan Long We are probably in agreement by what we mean by politics. We are talking about the ways in which society is organised and how certain social practices come about and are viewed. In that sense Willie's work does offer those very subtle shifts in existing established patterns of organisation and representation. For that reason it couldn't be anything other than political.

Grant Watson We should examine whether that is the case. For a start what do we mean by the political? I am not sure I know what is meant by that.

Declan Long Maybe my definition is simply too broad.

Grant Watson There is a case for carefully developing an understanding of a language that we feel more certain of. We can work on the idea Sarah expressed with Willie, but I don't know if that is the whole story. At the moment it's like an inkling that there is something there. An idea that is real, but I am not quite able to stand up and really confidentially claim.

Vaari Claffey At a conference in Tate Modern about art and politics Phil Collins said he is not a political artist. Seemingly there were all kinds of gasps from the audience.

Sarah Pierce It's interesting to think of Phil saying that—perhaps he senses that by claiming the work is political we might lose sight of what else is at the core, which involves a personal connection. People expect politics to be there, and so he downplays what might be construed as overtly political in order to convey what is actually personal and random and emotive.

Grant Watson Political art obviously has many different functions and one of them is to expose social and historical conditions and that is partly the category that Phil fits into. Another is a kind of activism and a third is a negation which is more individual.

Declan Long I find Phil's work interesting in an intimate autobiographical way, but in terms of it's politics it might be reductive to talk about the personal being political.

Sarah Pierce Phil's work introduces ideas of power and representation, but doesn't fixate on them. He gets over them and this is a political notion.

Grant Watson Above and beyond the development of the political world there is the question of what kind of art is effective when. When is it useful to be activist and when is it useful to be metaphorical? When is it useful to hibernate and withdraw from the political sphere?

Sarah Pierce I really question what art tells us about representation in this moment of globalisation. There are issues around who is mobile, who travels, who migrates, and some artists are privileged in that equation. There are passionate causes that are ignorant of the individual subjects involved. With Phil's work, I can sense his personal connection to people who are typically represented in the most general politicised terms.

Vaari Claffey A simple question though is why go there? Why go to those places? Why take that list for granted?

Grant Watson There are many types of extreme living and he has chosen ones where there is military conflict or the aftermath of a military conflict.

Louise Walsh Is he ambulance chasing?

Declan Long Is there an extent to which, if we don't think of Phil's work as political he becomes a kind of cultural tourist who then places his work in high profile galleries with a fairly exclusive audience who may then have certain kinds of stereotypes of certain parts of the world confirmed?

Sarah Pierce I don't think we can assume that effect.

Vaari Claffey Sarah, you have friends who took photographs of Iraqis and fly posted them in New York as an action, just simply to say we are putting faces on these people at this moment.

Sarah Pierce It began with Paul Chan who emailed Emilie Clark a series of portraits belonging to people he'd met in Baghdad. When she pasted them around her neighbourhood they could just as easily have been the face of someone living on the upper West side. Still she got arrested. As an artist she was involved in unregulated activity and the NYPD were automatically suspicious.

Louise Walsh I lived in Belfast in the mid to late 80s and there was a number of artists from all over the world who would arrive to make work about the troubles, who were invested in having been there, done that, and returned back home with work, with explicit images of conflict. There would have been a very serious intent to bring that war to people's attention. But it did get kind of funny, you know.

Grant Watson But why can't artists use the news and use what is current in a way that photo-journalists do? Phil is following their process of going to trouble spots.

Louise Walsh It's the cult of authenticity, (I am paraphrasing a student's piece I read this morning)—somehow that being physically there tends to ennoble your work.

Grant Watson The more varied places Phil goes to the more credibility it gains. It does then become a mimicking of a photo-journalist's journey.

Declan Long Phil has a great interest in pop culture which he connects to his representation of young people in these various places. So the Baghdad screen tests have a particular pop culture soundtrack, as does the dance piece at the Kerlin. There is something else going on there about how people's identities might be created or enabled or transformed through particular modes of representation.

Sarah Pierce When people start mouthing the words to Phil's favourite songs, or when they have no clue what the song is, it becomes a moment of interest in the work, and you wonder about how life really works in "sites of conflict." Phil is connecting without claiming that exchange as a "political moment." That is precisely the type of protest that I would like to see more often.

Grant Watson Phil is in a very privileged position in relation to where he can go. On the other hand this piece he just made at the Pump House, where he is taking photographs of refugees and delivering them to their families, is an acknowledgment of his ability to travel and their inability to travel.

Sarah Pierce Back to the piece at the Kerlin, I resist assuming that work has a certain type of audience.

Declan Long There is great potential for people to agree or disagree about what is going on there.

Louise Walsh Do you think?

Declan Long Yes. Would you go to a show at the Kerlin and approve of it and admire it without question?

Louise Walsh No.

Declan Long So there is the possibility there for anyone in the arts community to pose critical questions around the show.

Grant Watson The Kerlin gallery does not necessarily negate a potentially political reading of the work.

Louise Walsh I was just trying to imagine the range of people who go to the Kerlin gallery. It is quite a narrow group of people.

Declan Long My point originally had been that Phil could be showing somewhere that has a certain kind of an audience, but I don't want to be reductive about what that audience is. Or how that audience would read work in that space.

Louise Walsh Yes, the Kerlin would have a very visually literate contemporary artworld audience, but I wouldn't imagine that audience necessarily has a wide range of political or cultural viewpoints. I am just interested in where people put work and then what happens to it. The site of the Kerlin might tend to seal the work up a bit.

Vaari Claffey They are aiming to sell that work to a museum though. Then there would be an entirely different audience.

Grant Watson This leads to the idea of constituency. Do we want to make a claim that for work to be political it has to reach the broadest constituency or a constituency which historically would be called the proletariat and now might be called the general public or non-art audience? For work to be valid can it exist within small circles of people, who might have privileges?

Sarah Pierce How do we view institutions in relation to this conversation? The majority of work that I see is housed in some kind of institution. I go in and I read it in relation to my own education, my own interests, my own practice, and I look for its relation to a wider cultural context. How the work positions itself in that wider cultural situation, how it organises itself is often where I judge the work. For instance, in Malachi Farrell's recent show at Temple Bar Gallery I came to the decision that the spectacle ended up rendering that relationship somewhat one-dimensional.

Grant Watson That idea of artwork and what relationship it might have to the wider social context is interesting. How it negotiates that is the key. Is there something you can hone in on without generalising beyond? It becomes quite a useful tool. For me what is interesting and valuable and possible about artworks is their ability to challenge dominant forms. Dominant forms which become within society aggressive or militaristic or exploitative.

Sarah Pierce I am glad though that I can negotiate an individual's message amidst all of the corporate messages about the war coming at us from media networks, the news, the government, and I think art institutions can be real partners in that moment.

Grant Watson There is a possibility that an artwork can function differently than a TV set.

Sarah Pierce It's an individual

attention.

Grant Watson A speculative moment in which the white cube can be useful. There was a time when you could say commercial galleries, particularly in London, played an extremely important and radical role in helping to develop the concept of contemporary art in a city where that wasn't generally accepted by the bigger institutions or the establishment figures. That then grew into something that has become the new establishment.

Declan Long Could you think of an example of how that might be?

Grant Watson In the early 90s there were certain galleries which were based in people's houses, even in council flats that then went on to become established commercial galleries. They weren't making money, yet they were functioning at quite a high level in terms of the art they were showing. And they were providing an art scene which the establishment spaces weren't doing.

Sarah Pierce Again, perhaps the art exhibition is a limiting factor in terms of how certain political messages come to play.

Grant Watson For me it's more a question of trying things and seeing how they might work. It's not overly strategic, it's maybe more experimental.

Sarah Pierce People feel like they should recognise things right away.

Declan Long In the Sunday World I read a piece about the NSK performance that was in Temple Bar Gallery a couple of Saturday's ago, expressing hysterical outrage about sexually explicit acts.

Louise Walsh That is a lot to do with shock. There is very little that people will get hot up about now except stuff that is offensive. It's very hard to be radical in a positive way because we are desensitised. If you watch TV for a few hours you are so detached. There is so much out there screaming at you. It's very hard to make radical art and catch people's attention without sensationalism.

Sarah Pierce Which is why some gestures fall flat. How do we do recognise the more subtle moments?

Vaari Claffey It goes back to why sometimes the white cube is useful. It's a way of saying here is a moment.

Grant Watson The danger of that is obviously one of transcendence, transcending the social sphere in this space.

Sarah Pierce And do we teach art students according to big moments, rather than teaching how to use and recognise statements that might be a bit softer and complex?

Declan Long One way that dissipates in a literature department, where students do little more than read books for a few years, is that a student with the most radical point of view is marked by how well they can master a particular discourse. Something really controversial is refined so much that it disappears.

Grant Watson When a master narrative exists and then someone comes along and suggests another potential narrative there is a tension.

Vaari Claffey It goes back to what Sarah said about the individual voice- that you only occasionally get to hear it.

Declan Long I like these difficulties that come up when it isn't all clear cut.

Sale see *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. by Catherine de Zegher, MIT Press, 1999

2 MA in Visual Arts Practices, Dun Laoghaire.

3 Dont Rhine is a member of Ultra-red based in Los Angeles. www.ultrared.org

4 See Brian Holmes, "Liar's Poker, Representation of Politics/Politics of Representation" www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive.

5 See www.republicart.net

6 See *Empire*, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Harvard University Press, 2000

7 See The Metropolitan Complex, Paper No. 1, January 2003.

8 See Gerald Raunig www.republicart.net/manifesto

9 See Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument, Documenta 11*, Kassel, 2002, cur. Okwui Enwezor

Cover: Félix Guattari, "Entering the Post-Media Era," in *Soft Subversions*, Semiotext(e), 1996

The Metropolitan Complex is a project by Sarah Pierce. It organises a social practice around a range of activities such as exhibitions, talks, and publications. These structures often open up to the personal and the incidental.

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DOWNWIND



1 For the artist's statement about *Monumental Garage*