

I SEE IN THE SEA NOTHING EXCEPT
A DOVE _____ YES THE
I DON'T SEE A SHORE, I DON'T SEE
THE SEA

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"I've always gone away and been involved in other people's tragedies ... coming back to America was a refuge. But now the war had reached us ..."

- Photographer James Nachtwey on 9/11

How could the war reach us when it has been here all along?

I go to the camera to listen. Not for truth but to freeze light in time.

I see Robert whenever I cross the hazy bridge into downtown. There's space between us. The bridge is his home; I'm a passerby. One day he asks me where I got my headphones. He says he likes their white color. My desires are born from complicated constellations. Capital is swift, isolating.

I read about White Fragility. It scares and comforts me at the same time. Fractured by long days of driving from one classroom to

another; the car radio connects me to the war out there. But war's here too.

I stare at the water to forget debt. The tide is rising. Screen glow keeps me up at night. I program a sunset on my monitor. Candescent radiance makes my eyes tired. I post to prove I'm alive. Individualism is a problem, collectivity difficult. Together we try to stop a jail from being built. We dream to unlearn, undo.

My presence lights the match for development. A luxury building goes up in flames. All that's left are corkscrew staircases leading nowhere. Security bikes keep circling: waiting, watching. They say they're protecting me.

I close my eyes and try to see again.

Darren Wilson isn't indicted for killing Mike Brown. Red lights spiral through the freeways. I can't sleep. I keep thinking about colors. Black and white. White and black.

I open the curtain and see a white rabbit,
rummaging around on the ground. It's
beautiful in the shadows of the moonlight,
but I only see it because of the backdrop of
the night sky.

How do we rearrange our desires?

Heather M. O'Brien
February 2015, Los Angeles

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**Roundtable discussion
+ video screening with
Adam Golfer, Ashley Hunt,
Carlos Motta, Heather M.
O'Brien and Samira Yamin**

*Saturday, April 19, 2014,
3:30-5pm at The Camera
Club of New York*

An afternoon of video works/presentations, followed by roundtable dialogue with the four artists, event attendees and Heather M. O'Brien. An opening reception followed the discussion.

Heather M. O'Brien: Thank you for coming to the Camera Club on this lovely Saturday afternoon. It's a beautiful day here in New York. I'm excited to have everyone here for this screening and roundtable discussion. We're going to be seeing four different presentations today. It's a mixture of video works and images. I'll start with a short introduction, so if there are no questions, we'll begin.

[video/live voiceover screening of *The sea is walking in the streets*, 5 min]

The radio tells me my school is the next target for a shooting. I practice holding my head under the desk. I wake up in a dorm room and watch the second plane hit the tower. People are holding newspapers in the subway; they show a city that's underwater. Light beams down through a hole in the roof of the stadium. 2,500 men sit inside Orleans Parish Prison. Water rises to their chests. I finally see his eyes on the cover of a magazine. People peer beyond the fence, hoping to catch a glimpse of the ash. He tells us we will not fail. He tells us we are with him or we are with them.

I see the snow fall on her face, and I'm reminded of the ash. The desert feels cold at night, even inside the trailer. They watch the shadows shimmer from above. He tells us to get on board and do our business around the country – to go and enjoy a great American destination spot, like Disneyworld. I see a tent city at the base of the skyline. It's dusk and the light is soft. But I can't see the prisoners. There's a bottomless fountain but no people. There are no images of his body. I search but my eyes are tired. I search, but I don't want to see anymore. I search, but I'm completely numb. I must search.

The document tells us nothing. Let's begin there. Now, what is the site? Is it here or is it there? How do we tell this story? A conscious choice is made to tell it otherwise – to mull over media, memorial, technology and detention. That

which is unseen begins to leak, and slowly we begin to see: blue, white, foam, waves.

[video/live voiceover ends]

I'm hoping today can be not only a screening of various works, but also a point in which we can enter into a conversation together. A moment where we try to figure out what our questions are about what we're seeing. With that in mind, I would hope that as you're watching and hearing about the works, you think about what is at stake for you, and then at the end we can come together to chat. Does that sound good to everyone?

[head nods]

I should also say that I'm Heather M. O'Brien and I'm currently based in Los Angeles. In addition to being an artist, I'm an organizer and an educator. Most recently I've been working with Critical Resistance, an organization that seeks to abolish the prison industrial complex. The pens and paper you see on the ground are inspired from some of the things I've been learning through organizing, both in terms of listening and responding to political ideas amongst a group.

Let's begin with Carlos Motta's presentation.

Carlos: This is a piece from 2004. It's called, *Letter to My Father (standing by the fence)*, and it came about when I was a resident at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council artist residency, which was located diagonally across from the World Trade Center site. What became apparent being there at the time, at least for me, while engaging with it creatively, was a very recent history of seeing the site's transformation into a touristic destination. And that's still a very open wound. It's actually not a letter I wrote to my father. It's some things that I would have liked to tell my father, but the father became the figure for the nation state and its abuse. And the prints that on display here in the gallery are a part of this work as well.

[screening of *Letter to My Father (standing by the fence)*,

14 min, excerpts of sound from the video are as follows:

(Woman's voice): Let me talk about what I see. I see an ambulance parked in front of the site. I see red cones. I see a large fence. I see clusters of tourists in shorts, reading panels, describing the history of the World Trade Center.

(Woman's voice): Beyond this wall the Twin Towers once sorted to heaven. Since 1973 they were international centers of commerce. To stand in their shadows or to witness their imprint on the skyline was to marvel at the ingenuity and determination of the American spirit.

(President Bush's voice): My fellow Americans, for as long as our country stands, people will look to the resurrection of New York City and they will say, "Here buildings fell, here a Nation rose..."

(Narrator's voice): A fence separates; it divides territory. Affected by economic, social or political interests a land is made accessible to some while others contemplate their absence through it. A fence is a means of security, a signifier of power, a monument, a memorial. It indicates that history- no matter on which scale- has taken a turn. This particular fence indicates death, damage, political mismanagement, intolerance, and the most egregious consequence of capitalism: greed. It also justifies for some war and the continuation of a quest borne of pride.

(Narrator's voice): Today words have taken a different connotation. Freedom stands for struggle. Liberty stands for protection. Unity means division. Land means borders. Struggle denotes responsibility. Division denotes race and religion. Borders denote economic monopoly. Responsibility means what ever you want. Monopoly is power.

(Woman's voice): The pain of the situation for me comes from feeling like I as an American, as like a gluttonous, self satisfied, sheltered, you know, well fed, consumer, American; I am partly responsible for the anger...and I don't know, I don't see that on people's faces here as they visit it, I feel like that they are kind of ignorant to their own responsibility in the tragedy.

(Narrator's voice): The current World Trade Center site is a place of ideological and political confusion. The product of a historical chain, which dates back centuries. The fence is a malfunctioning universe, which is deemed as the natural course of history. I am looking through the window at a confrontation with humanity. This is what we are. We kill, we mourn, we are lost in the order of the world. Some fight back, others litigate for change, some agree, others pray, while we are all the prey of institutional manipulation. Humanity has turned against itself. And perhaps our ability to reason is to blame...]

[video ends]

[new people arrive]

Heather: Thanks Carlos. Please, if you just came in and you need a seat, we have some here in the front. Don't be shy. Next we have Ashley Hunt.

Ashley: It's great to be watching this piece after Carlos' piece. It was made six months after 9/11. I had finished my first feature documentary, called *Corrections*, which is about the politics of prison expansion in the U.S. It was made just after the U.S. prison population reached 2 million. It's continued to grow to 2.4 million today, and that's been the subject of a lot of my work since that time.

This was made when Third World News Reel, the distributor for *Corrections*, put out a call to filmmakers for works that would address how the responses to 9/11 that we were beginning to see at the time might affect particular communities of color — a concern that is a big part of their mission — because one can't talk about prisons without talking about their affects of communities of color in particular. I had a great deal of research that I'd been doing around these questions, and this was a piece that took that question up in a particular way. This is from 2002.

[screening of *Lockdowns Up*, 9 min, excerpts of sound from the video are as follows:

So it's in this context, where in this last quarter, a

post-9.11 conference call, the effect of 9.11 of course is of interest, what sort of effect is this going to have on the private prison industry? And clearly you have this CEO of the most prominent up and coming company of rubbing his hands together as he speaks, about oh my goodness, I can't explain exactly how this is going to play out but wow, here comes this big new market because the justice department is going to be targeting these people and locking up as many as possible is basically what he's salivating over the opportunities that might be made available to the private industry if the justice department goes to mass internment of people from the middle east.

But real audio has this feature where you can stop, go back, revealing what these people think, where they think they're headed, what they think their expansion strategy is. 'Cause like I said, this is the opportunity they have to convince the stock market that it should not only continue but expand the level of investment in their business.

The whole focus on sealing the borders and arresting and detaining and incarcerating more and more immigrants as they come across the border is going to be good for business and that's the bottom line.

You know, if Osama Bin Laden were ever apprehended and brought into this country the last place he's going to be put is in a CCA prison.

The federal prison system is the fastest growing prison system in the country, they're expanding at the rate that far outstrips the states these days.

You know, they're basically hyping their business...

Crime is up is good for us, recessions are good for us. The worse things are the better business is.

More business means more money, and immigrants and people of color are the commodity...]

[video ends]

[Note: *Lockdowns Up* was included in the screening

event but was not on view in the exhibition. Ashley Hunt's *Degrees of Visibility* was included in the exhibition and is a photography-based project that investigates the visual appearance of prison spaces, looking upon prisons as they are situated within different landscapes, among diverse forms of land use, and with varying degrees of visibility and concealment, asking what can be learned by looking. Each photograph is titled according to what cannot be seen: the number of prisoners held within its landscape; juxtaposing a visual knowledge with the quantitative knowledge that defines each institution statistically, as well as a database of these and other statistics obtained from the facilities, expanding upon what cannot be "known" by the eye alone.]

Heather: Thank you Ashley. Perhaps we should open both windows before starting the next screening. Just to get a little bit more air in here, as long as the sound isn't too loud out there. Can we open them higher? Thanks. Next we have Adam Golfer.

Adam: The work that is on display in the gallery right now is part 1 of a 3-part video piece entitled, *We'll Do the Rest*. We are going to screen parts 1 and 2. Between 2003 and 2006, an Air Force base in Las Vegas, NV was piloting unmanned aerial vehicles – commonly known as "drones" – in the skies above Afghanistan and Iraq. I became super interested in the dislocation of the pilot's experience as someone both experiencing the war through a screen and enacting large-scale violence through the push of a button. Many people are aware of drones and what is going on right now, but I thought that the way that the pilot was unpacking her dreams and her recollections of that experience was very interesting and not exactly what I expected. This piece is loosely based around the dreams and nightmare visions of the female pilot, Lynn, as she unpacks the dislocated memories of her experience.

[screening of *We'll Do the Rest* pt. 1 and 2, 10 min, excerpts of sound from the video are as follows:

You know, my first week, I remember us cheering. Everyone was like, "Yeah, high five! Yeah, we got that!" You

know? "Oh my god, this is so cool." You see the car on fire, and everyone was like, "Oh it's so cool! This is the real deal. I'm really part of the mission."

I remember being so excited. And everyone was excited. Like - this was - we were helping. We were part of the mission. We were stopping bad guys, you know? Even though we were across the world, and all of us wished we could be there. All of us wanted to be in Iraq. All of us wanted to be helping somehow.

Um...I don't remember any dreams except one. And that's like a really bad dream. Um - it's like a suicidal dream. And there's a black cloud that's just like, always there. And in Las Vegas there's like this really big mountain, Mount Charleston, and then there's like - there's another mountain and I would just look at the city all the time. And I would just like, be going up and down the streets. And being like, that's Craig Street, Craig Avenue, whatever, that's this that's that, you know. And it's like, watching people in a way. Watching stuff from overhead was something that was a calming thing for me. And it's weird, because like, I did stuff then and I didn't know why.

But every day - not everyday, that's exaggerating - but all the time I remember going to - and this is not a dream, this is real life - I would go to this cliff and I would just sit and look. And that would be the most calming thing for me. And looking back on it, it makes sense, because I never really looked at things from like, in it. I would see the top of a roof, I would see the top of a truck, I would see the side angle of a man walking. And being up high and looking at things, looking down at things was the most normal thing. And like, watching people, you know? And looking at the city. And knowing where things were in the city. Because it's like, that's what I'm familiar with. That's what I'm used to seeing. And that was just very calming for me. But like, that calming place became this - in my dreams and hallucinations - I don't really know. Like, a cloud that wanted me to just like, just go over the edge.]

[video ends]

Heather: Thank you, Adam. Next we have Samira Yamin.

Samira: I'm so overwhelmed with the presentations. I don't know if you all have the same feeling, but there are so many parallels. I feel like a little bit of the odd man out here, odd woman out, I mean, I am a woman.

When I talk about my work I'm somewhat lighthearted, because the content is so serious. I always joke about how the work is about Osama Bin Laden, and if you Google my name, pictures of Osama Bin Laden come up because it's my work. I was coming here on the plane with the TIME Magazine that's in the vitrine out in the gallery and thinking about the irony, joking about getting on a plane to New York with Osama Bin Laden in my handbag. As I'm sitting here watching these works, I realize how glad I am that Heather arranged today, because it pulled me back into a more serious way of thinking about my own work. I'm definitely having an experience.

I wanted to talk a little bit about the context of the work, which was shown last year at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. It's part of a larger series. The show was called *We Will Not Fail*, and the centerpiece of the work is in the vitrine that's on display here in the gallery.

[scrolls through images of *We Will Not Fail* and *Geometries* while speaking, 10 min]

The work was made in 2012 from the third issue of TIME Magazine after 9/11; the magazine was printed on October 1, 2001. The first issue post 9/11 had the Twin Towers on the cover, the second George Bush and ground zero (Together We Stand issue). The third one says 'Target Bin Laden' on the cover. Within three weeks, TIME Magazine was able to construct a narrative of how we were to interpret this event. From 2001 onwards, we have a mandate of We Will Not Fail.

And a secret, just between us, the work's not totally done. It's a huge undertaking. I'll explain a bit about how it's constructed. It's part of a larger series called *Geometries* that I started in 2009. I work with images related to wars, active wars, mostly Afghanistan now, Iraq as well.

I cut Islamic sacred geometries into war photography from the magazine. The geometries are representations of the universe as an infinite and objective place. They're representations of the 99 names of God in Islam, concepts of truth and justice.

Sacred geometries are ways of representing a seemingly chaotic world as a structured place, a place that has an underlying systematic order to it. I find that to be an interesting metaphor for the news magazine — working within a realm of narration, history and storytelling. TIME magazine, in this case specifically, taking a seemingly chaotic world, and a seemingly chaotic event, and trying to construct some sort of systematic narrative out of it.

The work on display here at the Camera Club is in a vitrine. It's modeled after the way the The Metropolitan Museum of Art displays illuminated manuscripts in their Islamic collection, which is an upward direction. You sit and meditate on something that you can't touch. But TIME Magazine is something one typically touches, flipping through its pages at the dentist's office, for example.

Heather mentioned to me this morning that we have two terms at stake in this show, we have art and we have war. Obviously my work depends a lot on awe and beauty, as a way to captivate and sustain a kind of looking that wouldn't otherwise occur with TIME Magazine.

In thinking about war and art and seeing the three previous presentations, the things that are going through my mind are a reversal of where objectivity and subjectivity live, and where representation and abstraction live. There are functions and collisions within a system of information or a system of art production. While one watches a video, lines can separate and become material again — there's a breakdown and remaking of audio and visual information.

Heather: Thank you, Samira. Could somebody hit the lights?



Video stills, *The sea is walking in the streets*, Heather M. O'Brien, 2014

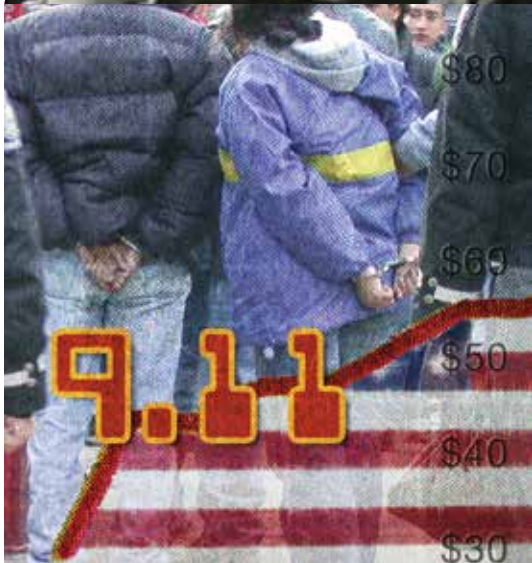




Video stills. *Letter to My Father* (standing by the fence). Carlos Motta, 2004

Video stills, *Lockdowns Up*, Ashley Hunt, 2002





Video stills, *Lockdowns Up*, Ashley Hunt, 2002



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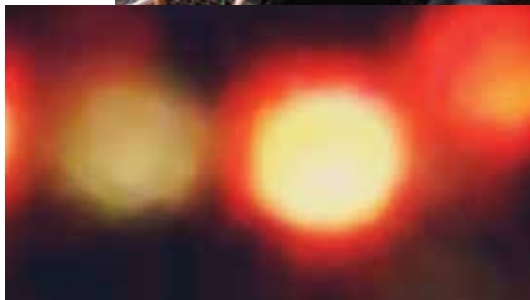
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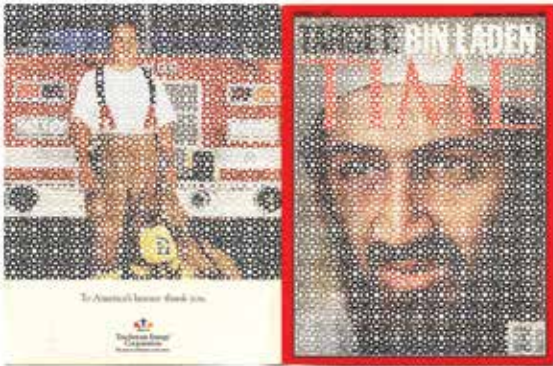
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The Empty Swimming Pool

Allen Frame

When Heather M. O'Brien asks us to arrange our chairs into a circle surrounding the gray paper she has used to cover the floor, I feel the familiarity of a 12-step meeting or my own classroom, a bid towards democratic participation and a fairer way of engaging in discussion.

The artists in the show have already made their remarks, and now it's our turn. Heather suggests "rules of engagement," all flexible, enjoining us to take responsibility for our participation, either to "step up" (those who are normally reticent) or "step back" (those who usually dominate discussions). She asks us to introduce ourselves around the circle, say what has brought us there and to ask a question that we might have about the terms "art" and "war" based on what we are seeing in the exhibition.

She invites us to use any of the numerous colored makers set down for our disposal, to draw, if we like, on the sea of gray paper at our feet. And I think, California has come to the Camera Club of New York. The fact that there are no takers is not surprising, reflecting the typical reluctance of New Yorkers to break the reserve of anonymity that we cling to in daily life. To be on the floor with the markers is to be on a stage, in a spotlight. Our collective aloofness casts Heather into an interesting position as a curator and moderator. She takes up her own suggestion and becomes the sole person using markers — an artist in process, sitting on the floor inside the small Camera Club studio with its lighting kits and tripods hanging on the walls around her. She feels somewhat like the child who has been given paper and crayons to occupy herself in a corner while the adults have a serious conversation. But in this case, the child is guiding the discussion, as she manages to chart and steer the discourse from this seemingly innocuous — and now performative — position. She is not standing and writing on a board like a facilitator. She is absorbed in her drawing, the taking of notes and writing of words. As her comments thread the discussion, she becomes, not just the moderator or group therapist trying to heal, but the artist making lines in different colors, creating texts as graphics, marking off

space as composition, physically acting out the behavior of an artist, while verbally expressing ambivalence about living the life of the artist in a society in which so much goes wrong and demands to be addressed, in which the life of an organizer would seem to be more meaningful.

First, there's one of the artists from the show who resists the round of introductions ("I think it would be nice not to have to participate if you don't want to."), then asking why his older work rather than his more recent work has been included. He creates two challenges right away: one to the format of the discussion, the other to the concept of the show. A little tension is always enlivening, especially when coming from an unexpected quarter. An accommodation is quickly made, and there are no introductions; we skip immediately to a question, although Heather reintroduces the round of introductions at the end, when those who are most engaged have lingered and those who are least, have left. Then we get to hear from those who have been silent, and discover again — it is always such a pleasure to discover it — that those who are quiet often have interesting things to say if you simply ask them.

As for the question about recent work versus old, it allows the curator an opportunity to comment on what may have seemed like overly broad or disparate choices in her curatorial edit. She makes us consider time and the continuum of 13 years since 9/11 — whether it seems long or short, whether we feel significant shifts or not, whether things are better or worse or just the same. And with 9/11 as the starting point, it is a chance to consider war as conflict that exists among us rather than beyond us, outside U.S. boundaries, and how evident or concealed those conflicts may be. We are asked to consider our relation to the fortresses that are built as prisons to cover up inequality and income disparity; we are asked to consider drones that are deployed remotely from within the U.S. by people who are pulling the trigger without being threatened themselves except through a high degree of post-traumatic stress in the aftermath. Some of the works in the exhibition are unmasking how well we have camouflaged systematic

acts of oppression; they question our complicity.

Because of the breadth of issues addressed in this very small show in a very small space, the chart Heather is making on the floor is a complex navigation. *I see in the sea nothing except the sea. I don't see a shore. I don't see a dove.* So many different things are referred to, including the role of the marketplace in art with a reminder that we must understand how the context is being created around the art we see, who is playing all the parts, and how the economic factors figure. In a personal vein, there is someone from Heather's class at CalArts who refers to the class they took together, *The Work of War in Times of Art*, and is deeply affected by the discussion.

Heather has included two mentors in the show — one her East Coast earlier mentor, the other her CalArts recent mentor; their behaviors and work are as different as night and day. The New Yorker comes and goes from the room restlessly, making statements of non-compliance, (“If you want me to participate in something, you can never tell me what to do”). The West Coast mentor makes statements that are unambiguous and forthright.

I am struck more by how the discussion is evolving than what is being said, given the breadth of the subject, and what is striking me the most is the curator's ambivalence about living the life of an artist. As a teacher, I recognize this as the state of mind of someone who has just finished a degree program; one is saturated, how is it possible to justify going on?

I think back to my own ambivalence when I was young in New York and first curating. The director of an important space approached me at the opening of my first show and asked me when I was going to come work for her. As an artist, I said, I was going to make my own work and not do any more curating. The task of organizing 15 artists on no budget in a space not set up for art had been sufficient, I thought. Little did I realize that a decade later, I would find the act of curating to be irresistible.

Someone makes the astute comment that “I think it’s really interesting that...you’re questioning whether or not you wanted to be an artist...I think that it’s a fundamental part of being an artist...every morning waking up and saying, ‘Do I want to be artist today?’ It’s just part of what we do, and it’s one of the more painful parts.”

I also look back at the time in my life when a catastrophe, the AIDS pandemic, was impacting me and everyone around me. I left my comfort zone to become an art activist, creating an epic public projection and touring with it for a number of years. In a sense, I was the opposite of Heather, learning to be an art activist, while she, already a political organizer, wants to figure out how to be an artist and whether she can reconcile the two functions into one practice.

I look at her on the floor, unselfconscious in her solitary demonstration of a kind of mark-making in the midst of our discussion and wonder how she can even question a mode of being that seems to come so naturally to her. I have a flashback to one of my favorite characters in movies, from one of my favorite films, Robert Altman’s *3 Women*, a film inspired by a dream. Janice Rule plays an older painter, who is seen creating a surrealistic mural in an empty swimming pool. She is a silent, brooding character who is knowing, intent and preoccupied. As the mysterious muse of the two confused and alienated young women trading identities in the film, Janice Rule has a mythic presence, translating what’s around her into a strange cosmos of unearthly figures and symbols. (The brilliant score by Gerald Busby intensifies the sense of displacement and other-worldliness.)

In the studio at the Camera Club, we are in Heather’s empty swimming pool, and she is noting our presence and positions in a careful calibration of lines and texts, a cosmos that is not unearthly but mysterious in a different way.

How are we at war?¹

Malene Dam

1 The question and title is borrowed from Ashley Hunt's essay *We's of War*, from the publication *Metta World Peace –The Work of War in Times of Art*, Spring 2012.

I am angry at you. I am angry at myself. I am angry at the idea that these are individual feelings. They are not. I am angry the rhetoric worked.

I am left in the middle. We have moved into normalcy. This is how we are at war.

I sit in a room surrounded by art, artists and colleagues.

You say you are nervous. You talk about your film, still in process, and screen a few of its chapters. Drones, the Californian desert, PTSD.

I now know the shorthand for posttraumatic stress disorder. Before the War on Terror, I didn't. Insisting on using the term "War on Terror," I remind myself of the beginning.

We don't currently use that term to talk about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The wars followed my coming of age. I was in Gymnasium and 20, organizing the only anti-war demonstrations in my hometown — a traditionally right-wing town in the middle of Jutland, Denmark.

This is 11 years ago now.

Denmark entered the Iraq war with a minimal majority. This was the first time ever that Denmark entered a war without the full support of parliament.

I feel a responsibility of being a citizen of a country that was a part of the coalition in the War on Terror.

We demonstrated. We demonstrated.

Can we draw a link between the War on Terror and how drones have become part of ongoing warfare? Part of U.S. military strategy?

You present your series, *We Will Not Fail*. You hand-cut TIME Magazine pages into Islamic geometric patterns.

TIME Magazine, Osama Bin Laden, 9/11. The narrative seemed so simple; it had a perfect dramatic curve to it, in those first weeks and months after 9/11. I am angry at how simple it seems. And at how nostalgic it becomes. And yet how quickly we can all recall that time period. At how we talk about the urgency we felt — of going to weekly anti-war demonstrations. It seems so long ago. It is not over. Remember drones, PTSD. Remember.

I read the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, in bed. He wants to hold on to a sense of humanity in the face of rockets and shells. He wants to drink his morning coffee and read the newspaper. He writes about the June 1967 war and the ongoing war in Lebanon. You pulled the title of the show from his book, *The Memory for Forgetfulness*. I bought the book to feel close to you. But I am far away. From you, the wars, and I think about the eleven years. How everything changed. I think about how at different moments within these eleven years, I have moved in and out of thinking about the War on Terror. From that first demonstration, to art making, curating and writing. For eleven years, I have been with you.

“Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”

The us-them rhetoric. I feel sick. I feel angry. I drink my morning coffee reminded that we are at war, differently. Geographically, mentally, temporally. The geography produced an us-them. Politics produced an us-them. Time produced normalcy. This makes me angry.

This summer, I returned to Denmark after having lived in the U.S. for four years. At their summer convention, one of the two major parties in Denmark launched their political program. The capital of Norway was facing a terror threat, and Oslo held its breath. This Danish political party felt this to be the perfect media moment to launch the immigration section of the program, dividing incoming immigrants into categories after regions. The map looked suspiciously

similar to a world map color-coded by dominant religious practice. “Muslims are not welcome, they’re unable to assimilate.” This was their selling point. This is what they thought would win the coming election. Bush’s us-them rhetoric. It had moved into normalcy.

I want to ask again, how are we at war?

You screen a video from 2005 titled *Letter to My Father (standing by the fence)*; it’s connected to your photographic work in the show.

“On September 11, 2001, terrorists crash two hijacked planes into the towers murdering 2792 people.”

“Here, buildings fell. Here, a nation rose.”

“The fence separates.”

Intercut between different voices you talk about your mother’s death.

“I see above all a huge hole in the ground.”

“Liberty stands for protection, unity means division.”

You talk about the strangeness of seeing your video again, so many years later. You ask why she included such an old work in the show.

How, and at what point, did your work move from current to past, from urgent to dated? I am moved by it. I am reminded that I am still angry. And I am still sad. Still. What is the time of the event? I wonder about ongoingness.

I never went to Ground Zero in those two years I lived in New York. My classmate wore a pen on her jacket. It read: 9/11: I will never forgive. We never had a conversation about it, never talked about 9/11, Bush, or the War on Terror.

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I sit in the studio room at the Camera Club. We begin, we speak, you leave. I wonder about your frustration. It is

different than mine. I always get frustrated about a lack of language; an inability to talk about how we are at war, what the War on Terror did and continues to do. I suspect your restlessness and impatience about our conversation is fueled by how you might feel we should be talking about our current political situation instead. My frustration, on the other hand, has to do with the fact that I feel unable to talk about how we moved into normalcy. How it all is connected, and how the rhetoric worked. I am able to say it worked, and yet I am not able to speak or have conversation about this fact. The language is unavailable. Foreclosed.

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Little by little, fundamental juridical rights were taken away in the name of terror and fear. The ongoingness of the War on Terror provided an opening for these laws to be the rule, and the not the exception.

Now we all know that our data is being recorded and analyzed. How people are affected differentiates along very political, geographical, classist and racist lines.

To name consequences doesn't begin to explain the constitution of this normalcy.

You screen a video from 2002 about how the responses to 9/11 within the U.S. prison industrial complex affect communities of color. This was at a time when the American prison population had just reached 2 million people. The expansion continues.

You ask us to look inside the prison, inside the notion of private prisons and government contracts, inside how an us-them rhetoric might affect the growing prison population. You look at the structures and the capital behind warfare. You draw links.

I sit with this uncanny feeling of time-lapse. I am deeply affected. We all do work to create language and to have

conversations. I look at you, on the floor drawing and making notes. I look to my right and see my brother. It's his first visit to the U.S. He has been a cohort and friend forever. We walked side by side at the anti-war demonstrations in our hometown, organizing together. We watch Democracy Now over Skype, me here, him there. This is the final round of a long conversation. I feel the nervousness in his voice as he begins to speak. He starts off saying that to him, all of these attempts at creating a language — visual, audible, affective — through art, attest to the importance of resistance, of thinking, of collectivity.

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I'm back in Denmark. Yesterday a new political party was announced, holding their first press conference. The National Party has the Danish flag embedded in their logo. The co-founder of this new political party, a young Danish man with Pakistani roots, stood in front of the logo, speaking to a Danish public about the importance of tolerance, solidarity and equality. Values that had met his parents when they immigrated to Denmark in the 70s. He says these values are now hard to find.

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I look for an opening where we can build and share a new language. And ask again, how are we at war?

Gratitude to Heather M. O'Brien for organizing the opportunity to share this space and have this conversation, and to everybody who participated.

**Roundtable discussion
facilitated by Amin Husain
and Heather M. O'Brien**

**Participants in the
conversation included:
Marina Berio, Bridget de
Gersigny, Zee de Gersigny,
Amin Husain, Heather
M. O'Brien, Gabriela
Salazar, Nicole Salazar,
Diego Sierralta and Felisia
Tandiono**

*Saturday, May 10, 2014,
2-5pm at The Camera Club
of New York*

How do we live? Who's telling the story? - MTL Collective

Through dialogue and note-taking, we will re-consider and re-contextualize four artworks included in the exhibition. Some of the questions we hope to unpack: What "here" (in the U.S.) makes war "there" (outside the U.S.) possible? How is the struggle "there" connected to "here"? How are the four artworks in the exhibition connected to contemporary struggles on the ground and the larger economic system? What are the contradictions? What is art after Occupy? How are we implicated? Can we separate art and the way we choose to live? How do we rearrange our desires? What do we want?

HEATHER M. O'BRIEN: [places down recording device]
How about right here?

NICOLE SALAZAR: Sure. In my own work, I often have to ask people if I can record them. I really don't like it when people ask if they can record me, but I know I have to say yes because I am so often asking people for the permission to record. You notice it, but then you forget it eventually.

H: Video is more invasive.

BRIDGET DE GERSIGNY: Yes. Because it faces you.

N: It has the eye that watches you.

H: Do you mind closing the door a bit? Thanks. Maybe we could go around, and say a little bit about ourselves, or what do you do in life?

GABRIELA SALAZAR: My name is Gabriela. I'm an artist. I teach art at a high school in New York.

N: I'm Nicole. I'm Gabriela's sister. I am a video journalist at Al Jazeera, previously with Democracy Now. And former artist.

B: Former artist?

[Laughter]

N: Yes. It's turned into years.

AMIN HUSAIN: I'm Amin, and I'm Palestinian. I was raised in Palestine. I studied and practiced law for about five years and then became an artist. I'm involved in a lot of stuff here in New York — Occupy, Strike Debt, Occupy Sandy, *Tidal Magazine*, and recently, G.U.L.F. and G.U.L.F. Labor. I'm also part of MTL Collective.

FELISIA TANDIONO: I'm Felisia. Similar to Nicole, I'm currently in a rejuvenating process of being an artist. I also collaborated with Heather as part of the Work Progress Collective.¹

B: I'm Bridget. I'm an artist; I'm from South Africa and have been here in New York for three years.

ZEE DE GERSIGNY: I'm Zee. I'm not an artist. I'm Bridget's partner, and I work in finance. We raise funds in the U.S. to invest in Africa.

H: I'm Heather. I'm an artist, organizer and educator based in Los Angeles. I teach photography at two community colleges. I'm an organizer with Critical Resistance (CR)², an organization that seeks to abolish the prison industrial complex. We lead abolition workshops and mobilize around legislation. LA recently passed a \$2 billion jail plan to build new jails throughout the county. We fight for community solutions instead of putting people cages. I am also the curator of the show we are sitting in. I'm very uncomfortable with the curator title.

[Laughter]

In putting together these artworks, a lot of different ideas came up for me, so I wanted to create a space where we could collectively unpack the ideas and issues. I also wanted to leave it open to the folks who are in the room today as to what would be most useful to talk about in time together.

N: It's something of an anomaly to have a show that is trying to have a real cross-disciplinary conversation between art and politics. The art world, as I know it more

1. workprogresscollective.org

2. criticalresistance.org

recently, seems to have diverged from political activism. So I appreciate the intentionality of this exhibition, trying to use both of those languages to see what they bring to the dialogue. I believe one has to engage in both of these things. Artists think about the real world, and people who care about politics are often creative people.

B: For me, everything is interrelated. I recently had a conversation with a friend who's a feminist-focused choreographer named J Dellecave. She workshopped a performance, *Angry Women REvisited*, a fifteen-person ensemble, multi-disciplinary performance re-exploring the 1990s classic feminist text. She mentioned she's seen a move in American art toward identity portraiture — a move from dealing with abstraction to dealing with identity. It made me think of art that we might call social practice. Information is such a key element of that practice, and how we deal with that information? Whether it's through abstraction, or whether it's through direct representation. There are different ways in which information and abstraction are working in this show — from blurring out direct representation or information [points to Carlos Motta's photographs from the *Public Domain* series], to accompanying photographs of prisons with direct locations [points to Ashley Hunt's photographs from the *Degrees of Visibility* series]. These different approaches seem to be in conversation with each other. So while we may not necessarily know everything that's inherent to the picture, or related to the text, you are pointed in a certain direction. I find Adam Golfer's video piece quite abstract in that way. This difference between abstraction and representation made me think about different artistic strategies we can use for political activism, and what it means when we use one versus the other.

I think about representation a lot being South African and in the LGBT community, since photography and video are used to represent underrepresented people in quite an overt way. "These are people; have a look."³ These are people who have love, or, this is a photo that shows that

gay people exist in Africa, for example. And the movement here in the U.S. seems to be one of working in tiers that are more fluid and interspersed, messy and unhinged from representation. That's what's interesting about the selection of works here, because it taps into those different ways of working. The works range from overtly representational to a far more abstract way of dealing with information or politics.

H: You said something that I've been questioning a lot in my practice: the use of art within political activism. Amin and I talked about this recently, and he posed the important question to me: "What is art doing?" Or, what's different between art and activism? For example, protesting the new jail proposal with colorful posters at the Board of Supervisors of downtown LA, versus making an artwork about a jail that is shown in gallery space. Is art perpetuating a problem, or is it changing something?

Z: If it's creating a conversation of any kind, then it's helping to change perceptions or create some kind of awareness. The two acts you mention are very different, but in a certain way they're both bringing awareness to the issue. Art can hopefully change perceptions and allow for different access points to information.

G: Points of access was actually exactly the phrase that was going through my mind. I was on Rikers Island on Thursday, doing a site visit for a public art piece that hopefully doesn't end up as tokenism. The Department of Corrections is paying for it as part of a building project, a new admissions facility. It's interesting that this proposed art is in a place that nobody can get to. You can't go on the island without clearance and without a certain amount of difficulty. The audiences for these experiences or sets of sensitive information exist in a mode of invisibility. Governments make it so we can't physically experience these prisons. So without text, without the information, they're just landscapes [points to Ashley Hunt's work]. Nothing stands out. You can see some clues, but you have to know what to look for; they do a really good job at

making these sites invisible to us. Even to go to the Board of Supervisors or City Hall, very few people approach those sorts of places without some kind of access point.

So that's really where the political in our lives starts to dovetail — in the government's best interest — into diversions. They've made it very easy for us to ignore a lot of things.

N: As an example of one way in which these structures bleed into regular life, I was visiting school in California a couple of years ago, and a lot of the same large firms who design jails and prisons design a lot of schools. They're institutions designed for surveillance and population control. We have so much investment in prisons, which creates an expertise in the market. It also means that we have that type of power replicated in other social spaces.

G: Yes, in fact, there's an architecture firm affiliated with this project that I'm working on at Rikers that only works on "justice" structures, Justice Architecture Business, or something like that.

F: It's an architecture firm?

G: It's an architecture firm that specializes in justice.⁴

B: It's actually called that?

G: It's "justice" something. I'm not quite 100 percent sure what the last part is.

B: Wow.

G: Definitely some wordplay going on.

[Someone walks in the room]

H: Hi, do you want to just quickly introduce yourself, and say something about yourself to the group?

MARINA BERIO: Sure. My name is Marina; I'm a photographer who draws. I make straight photos, drawings, and also photos that are not straight photos. I was the teacher of three of you, and so my thinking about the issues

4. RicciGreene Associates, riccigreene.com

represented in the show come not so much directly out of my own work — but from the dialogue between people at the International Center of Photography (ICP), where I teach and where I chair a program, and where the General Studies Program, which is mainly an art program that runs parallel to the Documentary Photography and Photojournalism Program. So how those two programs relate to each other or don't, is always on my mind – questioning the idea that there's some truth in objectivity and the artist's position.

I was just working on something this morning; I have some of my drawings appearing in a magazine in the fall. The drawings are about my husband and son play-fighting. I made the prints out of my own blood, so I'm not in the pictures, but you're looking at me when you look at the pictures, because you're looking at the material of my body ... that whole issue of the photographer being in the picture or not, or being sort of implied within the picture, even when she is not in it. I don't really believe in photographic objectivity. I feel that pictures are always taken from a position. Pictures are always embodied in some way or another.

F: That is an interesting point you brought about that architecture firm and the term justice. It made me think about architecture in like other countries, and how architecture relates to capitalism. I'm just thinking about where I'm from, in Indonesia ... the building conditions and services that are provided there are completely different than the U.S. The landscape of art is also different, which makes me think about diversity in forms of expression. In the U.S. landscape, there seems to be more diversity of expression in responding to what's been going on. It made me wonder, how much of that diversity of expression do we have in other countries? It also makes you think about where you grew up [leans over to Amin], in Palestine. How long were you there?

A: Eighteen years.

F: And also South Africa. And I guess in coming here to the Camera Club, what is it that we want to talk

about here today, is it the war, politics or access? I'm looking at the description of today's event, which has the following questions: What is art after Occupy? How are we implicated? Can we separate the way we choose to live? What is the meaning of that phrase exactly, "the way that we chose to live" – is it everyday life, or do we live in connection to works of our art making? Is it our daily conversations, for example, when we go to a deli and speak with someone who works there? In NYC, it's mostly immigrants who own and operate the delis. So what is the meaning of, "how we choose to live"?

A: That was my contribution to this event and some of the questions that I was interested in talking about. But there is a question that needs to be posed, and people need to think about, which is art after Occupy. That's a real, real question – because what's happened in the square in terms of art practices coming together is politics beyond politics, right? It's important to simultaneously question what do we mean by art, and what do we mean by art works, and not take for granted what those definitions are or how we understand them.

And in terms of life and living, one of the things I am most concerned about is to not think of the military or prison industrial complex as something that you're not involved in just because you're not a police officer. It's about thinking of space and our complicity in what's happening. So in that sense, we don't have a choice. Most of the time when we talk about these big issues, we also tend to simultaneously abstract them, and with the abstraction comes the relinquishment of responsibility. I know it's messy, and I'm not interested in the answers necessarily, but I'm interested in opening up that space to do a little undoing because that's the work right now. It's not so much about information, from my point of view. There's an abundance of information. That proposition of "if people had the right information, they would act differently," also needs to be questioned. I don't think that's true. Those are some of the things I was thinking about in terms of living, and that matter if we're talking about everyday life.

F: Yeah.

B: You said something about abstraction coming without responsibility?

A: I said that abstraction was the relinquishment of responsibility.

B: Maybe you could speak about that some more. So when we abstract something, perhaps we remove our responsibility from that thing, to a certain degree, and yet it becomes far more open to the multiplicity of ways of being because it's more abstracted. So that's interesting in parallel to what you're saying about not actually needing more information. How do you see that move towards abstraction happening?

A: People talk about how democracy is broken, how the system is broken. To me, the system is an abstraction. People consent and reproduce the system every day with their actions. Just that observation has a lot of responsibility in it, it gives a lot of weight to very mundane things in life, and the choices that we take to be in this room, or actually for someone to say, I don't want to be in this room, I want to be outside of this room having this conversation. What if, somehow, we are thinking of this room as ideology; what does that do to this conversation and my relationship to you? I'm trying to get at that because the prison industrial complex, capitalism, the man, the matrix — they're all systems. What I'm more interested in is where can each of us locate ourselves within a system — with a viewpoint, responsibility and power.

M: Maybe to give a more concrete example, I recently had an argument with someone at a bar about gentrification. There had been a newspaper article about that classic pattern everyone is familiar with now — when artists go into a neighborhood that's considered sort of blighted because they're looking for a studio space, or because they can't afford to go elsewhere, and then, they become the front wave of what ultimately becomes gentrification. The argument we had is about whether

there's an issue of personal responsibility within that — for the people who go to the neighborhood at the beginning: how the artist who made the choice to go to that neighborhood chooses to behave within that neighborhood.

My position is that, yes, this is a force that happens; you can talk about it on the societal level, as an abstraction, or in ways in which it can be quantified or summarized — something that make sense in an article in the *Times*. But this guy didn't see how he, as a person who lived in a particular neighborhood, had any sort of impact on that. My argument was that you do, because you go and live in a place, but you can also choose not to go live in that place, so it's an exercise in personal responsibility. And if you go to that place, there are people to talk to. Or you can subvert that way of talking that makes it seem as if once the white people arrive, that neighborhood is born, or that's when it begins. People use phrases such as “nobody lived there before.”

So the way we talk with people in the street has an impact. It may not be the impact that changes the whole issue, but, that granular and particulate version of a dynamic is the one that we all can take personal responsibility for and try to change too. That's how I'm hearing part of what you're saying.

A: Yeah.

M: Issues of space, and how people interact, on a one-to-one scale, also have these other impacts.

N: I agree with you, but then there is a point where abstraction is fundamental, which is to understand things from a macro and systemic perspective. The idea of personal responsibility is also something that exists in the culture of certain right-wing ideas, as in, the government shouldn't help you; everything is personal responsibility, screw food stamps, pull yourself up by your bootstraps. That idea is also supported by a system that very much benefits from increases in the gap of income equality and retrenchment in austerity politics. There is responsibility

of the artists here, of course individually, to see how they are participating or not, and/or making different decisions, but there also needs to be some room for abstraction to see the entire structural system. That point can be where creative thinking happens; how do you change the dynamics for the larger structural system wherein artists getting a cheap a studio space has negative consequences on another disenfranchised population. So some abstraction is necessary.

A: It's not an either-or, it's an and-and-and. My focus right now is on people actually finding the power to act — collectively, not individually. Individualism is a problem. When I say responsibility, I mean that you have a role to play, and so what is the role of the artist now? Now, the right, in this country or in general, has been better at taking language and using it. Are you going to give up on the word “freedom”? Are you going to distinguish between “freedom to” do stuff and “freedom from” say oppression in its various forms? To me, there is an issue of whether the language has been claimed, and therefore that's a space that needs to be contested.

But on the gentrification issue, Free University and *Tidal Magazine* just did a talk out in the park on May Day about gentrification. It was the largest attended, about 50 people. What gentrification brings up for me is notions of creative class — what Richard Florida writes about. As a side note, I hope everyone here doesn't like Florida or his theory.⁵

[Laughter]

But artists have been instrumentalized in the process, and it's important to reflect on that and understand the process, but it's not enough to base it in identity politics. There's a class war happening, a class struggle that's racialized. So these are abstractions that are useful and

5. Richard Florida is best known for his concept of the creative class and its implications for urban regeneration. This idea was expressed in Florida's books *The Rise of the Creative Class*, *Cities and the Creative Class* and *The Flight of the Creative Class*. For a critique of Florida read Martha Rosler's essay, *Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part II*, www.e-flux.com/journal/culture-class-art-creativity-urbanism-part-ii/

important to think about, but at the end of the day, people also need to act, and you have to locate a source of that power. It's not going to be one person against the system.

The other thing about gentrification is it's an accumulation by dispossession, a David Harvey concept that's being employed right now in the United States — capital going around and around and taking from places. It's related to the inequality that's happening, which is a class based warfare, and we have to approach it not so much as a person has choice to move into a neighborhood or not, because a lot of people don't have choice, but it's what do you do there. I want to just bring up Tom Finkelpearl's role, another problematic figure, and a curator who has now been employed by the mayor. He's pushing all artists to work with socially engaged practice. And to me, the question that this raises is not that socially engaged practice is bad — that's not the point. The point is that something is happening right now, and what people choose to engage with or what the system chooses to push artists towards is exactly the thing that they shouldn't be doing. It's a way that ultimately gentrifies: "Oh yeah, go to the neighborhood, do the socially engaged practice, feel good about yourself, gentrify."

[Someone walks in the room]

H: Hi, since you just walked in, do you mind just saying who you are and a sentence or two about yourself?

DIEGO SIERRALTA: I'm Diego. I went to school with Heather and Felicia at ICP four years ago. It was Marina's first year as the chair of the program. I'm from Venezuela. I stayed in New York after studying photography. I work mostly in photography, and lately I've found myself learning to draw and paint. I'm still getting into the conversation as far as what my take on it is. I rode my bike here, so I was battling traffic, rain and taxis together, and now I'm into a completely different mode of thinking.

[Laughter]

But I thought what you just said about the system being an abstraction was interesting. If you're in a society,

there's always going to be some kind of system. It's being employed for people to be able to interact. So perhaps the point of the conversation is, how do you conceive of the system, how to not necessarily eradicate all previous systems, but how to go forward with a way of not taking into account capitalism or resource management, but rather of information and the way the decisions are made collectively, as a new way of thinking of systems. That's what's in my mind; from the little I've gotten from the few minutes that I've been here. I don't have any answers. I mostly have questions.

F: Are we in a neutral platform, or do we have to pick a side? Because something in this scribble [points to notes from previous conversation on April 19] says, "what side of the fence are you on?" Is there a fence? Is it more favorable if we are on one side? Is this a safe place to talk about and express any thoughts, even though it may go against the grain of the rest of the people? Or as artists in our work, do we have to be neutral?

M: Don't be neutral.

B: How often are we complicit, as we are critical, of these things that we try to identify? We sit here and we say, "Gentrification is bad. The prison industrial complex is bad. Capitalism is bad." We label all of these huge systems and, by default, put ourselves on the so-called "right side of the things," but when you really break it down and think about it — how we got into the room, the food we eat — everything is somehow linked to these "bad" things. I always find that when we come into these more obstructive ways of having a conversation, it becomes easy to say, "This is bad, and I'll sit on the good side, and as an artist I can critique this." But what it comes down to is this space between the individual and the collective, which is something Amin pointed us to earlier. When it comes down to being opposed to the system, maybe you have your own mouth and words and actions, and so you're in it, always complicit somehow. Then it's what do you do with what you know, to a degree.

I would also like to make a point between a personal

agency and being in a space and engaging with community or not, or buying things from a certain place or not – movements as something that’s more collective. Amin said something about individualism being part of the problem, and it seems there is an ideology of individualism that’s a problem versus an ideology of collectivism. To me, those are two very different things: to have individual agency and make individual choices, versus moving as a massive collective.

I read something a while ago by Chantelle Mouffe, who was writing about agonistic pluralism. On some level she is saying, fine, everyone is saying democracy failed, maybe it has, maybe it hasn’t. But the point is, we lived with all of these different systems, and it’s not about necessarily overthrowing a system to find a better place of harmony. But instead, since we’ve come with so many contrasting systems, how do we find a place that’s not necessarily resolved in massive agreement to one idealized position – agreeing that maybe there are broader principles with how we want to live together, and maybe they actually don’t resolve, but because we want to live peacefully, then we can agree to have fundamental disagreements about what’s right and wrong in the world.

One of the examples she gives is this idea of a so-called Western way of people being individually focused, versus something that’s collectively focused, and that the fundamental basis of freedom and ideology in America is based on individualism, and so “it’s my right to have a voice” versus a more collective culture where the notion of individual right or freedom is not necessarily first and foremost. The collective voice is far more important than my individual voice.

This notion raises questions around how we go about making those decisions, where we fit into a collective and where we have an individual voice.

M: That word “pluralism” is really important, and maybe in some ways more useful than the word “diversity,” because it does imply that there are also plural collectivities you

can connect with, speak to, and be a part of — that no one label is going to do it for you. The word “diversity” started out implying that, but it’s become like a positive value that is desired in certain types of institutions, mostly to benefit the people who are not so diverse, to augment a wonderful educational or cultural experience. For those of us who identify as the person of color or queer or whatever it is, the word “diversity” becomes a flavor that is desired to boost quality of a group or a community. The word diversity starts to sound a little —

B: Trivial.

M: It’s not always used in an actual “hearing” way. It’s used as a value rather than a way to have a real dialogue. The concept of diversity can still be silencing people who might identify with groups like that. Whereas pluralism, for me, still sounds like a slightly more neutral term. I feel more comfortable with it, because it renders the dominant voice visible. It’s one of all of the voices. The word “diversity” makes whiteness invisible, or the dominant voice invisible; it’s the status quo. Of course, you may be critiquing it. But those people don’t have a chance to really necessarily participate in an empowered way, if they desire to, because they’re the bad guys. So I have a problem with the word diversity.

Z: It’s been institutionalized, even in our company; it’s a value system.

B: A strategy.

Z: Yeah, and we’re not the most progressive company in the world, and so the fact that we’re embracing it, well, that sort of says it all.

H: I’m wondering if we can just bring it back to the room we’re sitting in for a second. Because something I thought about when putting together this show was access and lack of access. One thing that came up for me, particularly related to the last event in conjunction with the show, is who’s missing from the room. Who is not here, and why are those folks not here. Of course that’s a pretty broad

statement, so feel free to challenge me on it. What is the artist doing with their work, how is that work bringing a plurality of voices to the table or shutting voices down?

And even in a space like The Camera Club of New York, a nonprofit that has a mission to assist emerging photographers, I wonder about the privilege that's happening in this space. The privilege of the artists who have access to time to make this work, about issues that they may or may not have themselves experienced. It's something that we, in Critical Resistance(CR), question a lot in working with prison abolition. How are we implicated in this system? Or why are these issues we are bringing up so urgent?

B: It feels like a huge question that's very obviously present here, but also in the conversation around art in general. The institutions of art have a homogeneous audience. Perhaps social practice art is trying to break that down in terms of the spaces where art is shown, Gabriela mentioned the project on Rikers Island. So the question becomes how to move outside of gallery spaces.

That's something I grapple with as an artist the most; I come from a background where I was working in advertising, where the conversation was always, "Oh you make this and this is your audience." So I am always thinking about who is engaging with my art, or where the work is distributed. Maybe you have these ideals of actually using your art to create a conversation, but then you think about where that conversation is happening. It's often not necessarily at the place that you really want to be having the conversation. All of us here, at some level, feel — and I don't want to speak for everyone, but we feel — like we have some level of cohesion in terms of a political agenda to a degree. We're not sitting here, jumping down each other's throats. Of course we don't know enough about each other, but it's not like we have fundamentally disparate, opposing views. So how do you get people in the room who have different politics? Or those who are deeply complicit in the system of things like the prison industrial complex. I agree

that it's not necessary that you have to be a police officer to be implicated, but there are also extreme levels of people working in government — for example, those folks who are actively providing policies where the \$2 billion jail expansion bill gets signed. Those people will probably not see this art, right? If you're making work that's about these broader things, but its not necessarily being exposed on that level, where does that leave the conversation?

D: Or those deeply complicit people could look at the work and just not necessarily see it the same way you would see it. They may just see some text and a frame, walk past it and go on with their life, which is frustrating. Part of it may be the structure of the information, or the idea of information being art. It's great when there is a conversation between people about the work, but then it's difficult when there are not diverse of points of view within the dialogue.

Art inside an institutionalized system is precisely what isolates it from other things. Can somebody that's oblivious to something, suddenly become aware of it, and then have a conversation with someone else in an entirely different space?

F: Sorry to interrupt, but I have to leave for work.

H: Thanks for joining us, Felicia.

M: In terms of despair about how the art world works and how it doesn't have the voice that we wish it had in a larger sort of context of society: one of the problems I see is conflating the art world with the capitalistic aspects of it. The values that are attributed to it, the auction houses, what gets reviewed, what gets seen in these big white box galleries, and all of that.

I find that, often, when people despair about the art world, they're mostly talking about that art world. And it's really important to realize that we make the art world. Heather having a circle of chairs is the art world, too, and even though I'm super fucking busy and tired, I decided to be here, even though I was late, I am here instead of going wherever else I was going to go, and that it's important to

remember that. I think the art world has a pretty diverse audience. It's important to remember that it's not the audience that gets written about in the paper or that has a lot of money to buy. The buyer of the work is not necessarily the only audience. The audience is whoever might happen to have a conversation about it or read about it, see it on the Internet or whatever. That's how I get less despairing, because otherwise it would be too fucking depressing.

[Laughter]

H: To speak to Diego's point about people who make the decisions not seeing the work. You really never know who ends up in seeing the work. There was an interesting thing that happened at the last roundtable event — a friend and his Jewish family came to the screening event we did in conjunction with this show. I went to breakfast with them the next day and ended up having an interesting conversation about Palestine and Israel. They had just come back from Israel, and they were asking me questions as if I was somehow an expert on this side of the Palestinians due to the choice of the works I curated into the show, my politics on the issue of borders, and some of the challenges I posed to them about Israel. It felt crazy to argue on the side of something that I feel so far away from here in the U.S. Yet of course here in the U.S. we are all-complicit in the situation due to the fact that our government funds the Israeli army. That breakfast conversation ended up being part of what I was hoping would happen with the show, in terms of having a plurality of positions see the work.

But going back to the idea of who is in the room, in CR we are always talking about getting more folks of color involved in the struggle for prison abolition, since those are the folks who are most impacted by the prison industrial complex. But at the same time, in terms of what I hear Bridget saying, it is also important to educate people who may be directly connected to funding or building the prison, or, to put it another way, educating the over-educated and the rich. As an example, CR recently held event at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, which

is in Beverly Hills, so the audience, was partly made up of white curators, architects and established artists. Providing those folks the information about what's happening in LA county is important because someone could possibly work for a company that is making a proposal to build a jail. So I would agree with you that we have to be in dialogue many different kinds of audiences.

M: For all its flaws, I still see the art world as one of the freer places in which to have conversations, to make work and do things. But the problem with the term “art world” is that it sounds like a closed unit, yet its borders are completely permeable with the rest of the universe. But we need constructs. A little bit like the abstractions we were talking about before. We need constructs to situate ourselves and understand certain things. When I talk with friends who do other things for a living, they're feeling more limited than we are because they are literally told what to say by whoever is employing them.

Z: So being a person who very much works as an agent in a system, I believe you can evoke change from within because you have a certain amount of influence. So while I agree that you have great liberties as an artist, when you are in the system, you have a different relationship to it and thus can have a different impact when fighting it. You can change something within its environment. And that speaks to our points about understanding the way we all fit into the system and in what way we are complicit. Many artists criticize large issues, but if you look at the MFA programs the artists come out of, those programs are a large part of the capitalist system — in the sense that people borrow huge amounts of money to get an education and then struggle to pay it off for the rest of their lives.

A: In regards to the MFA or looking at NYU, which has students graduating with one of the highest amount of debt in the nation — it's not simply debt as a financial instrument, but you're actually trading parts of your life in time. And students may not know that, but the radical professor, who is supposed to change the life of the person, is lecturing

them about change, and it's not even changing in the fucking classroom! And it's not changing because of what the status is. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri talk about going from a welfare state to a debtfare state, where right now a lot of people take on debt, thinking they're living that middle class, which was always a fiction, and actually they're not.

If you study people who've lost their homes in East New York, which is racialized as well, and then you talk about race, which tends to divide people, and say, well, it's a privilege that you take on debt. As a side note, I have a problem with talking about privilege in very loose ways. But what do we mean by "debt"? There's good debt, there's bad debt. There's a lot of debt in this society. There's municipal debt, which everyone is in right now. For example, take a situation where someone without a credit card gets caught by the police — what's that labor doing? We need to map it out. If you stay within the system, and you go with these narrow constructs, it will always limit our analysis of trying to understand the moment we're in. And the moment that we're in is similar to the past. It's a trajectory. If you want to connect what's happening to the art world or art movements, it's around the surrealists. You have to go there. But it's also a different landscape now — a majority of people live in urban cities, worldwide. A majority of people on this planet are under 30. There's some serious shit going on right now that's very radically different than in other periods of time.

The other thing I'll say about the art world, an example which happened to me here in New York — the collective I'm part of, MTL, was presenting at a Creative Time summit — what it was about? Inequality and social justice. Yet, Creative Time may have been in violation of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel.⁶ Nato Thompson, up until the moment that he went on stage, kept

6. <http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/egypt-media-collective-mosireen-boycotts-creative-time-summit-2012-over-israel>

<http://hyperallergic.com/131497/over-100-artists-and-intellectuals-call-for-withdrawal-from-creative-time-exhibition/>

saying we were going to flag this for folks in the room and have a conversation about BDS. When the time came he went on stage and pretended like nothing was happening. When he returned he told me, “That’s the best that I can do.” So, here’s Creative Time, which supposedly does “public art work.”

Art isn’t neutral right now, maybe it never is. It’s being employed almost instrumentally for a very particular reason. We all have to live and make these choices, negotiate spaces and make compromises. No one is judging each other here. It’s a very safe space. And outside, people should make the decisions they have based on their life circumstances and ability. My only ask is that we be honest about what we’re doing and why we are doing it.

I’ve taken money from Creative Time. I’ve done projects and commissions from them. But Creative Time, in addition to violating BDS, is huge part of the gentrification process right now in New York. They’re opening up the Kara Walker exhibition today in the Domino Sugar Factory. It’s a serious project. Now Creative Time has many fine people in the organization, including Nato Thompson who has a lot of cultural capital, but at the critical moments in this city where he could be using his cultural capital for good, he is not.

G: Is Nato the head of Creative Time?

A: I think Anne Pasternak is? But Nato’s up there. So it’s not so much about cultural capital as being “bad,” but rather, how are we employing it? If you’re the person that’s benefiting from this shit about 9/11, making art, putting it on the wall — what are you doing? And you can say, “You know what, I don’t give a shit. I just want to put pictures on the wall and sell them.” But be honest. Consider the current Whitney Biennial right now. The whole idea is that artists don’t talk about the moment they’re in.

I was recently in Detroit, talking to people about how to deal with race and class. Their whole conversation was — who’s in the room, who’s not in the room, who needs to be in the room? It’s really another way of talking about

difference, which is interesting and a good way to go. But it has traditionally divided the left in ways of working. It always crumbles around this basic focus of race and class. Why are these things so important right now? Because we can't produce anything better if we can't deal with that focus. Which brings us to the issue of struggle and change.

The struggle and the change aren't only on a structural level. There are three levels: systemic, group, and internal. Gayatri Spivak talks about the training in the practice of freedom. A system over time can rearrange a behavior, but in order to change that system, you have to be engaged in that practice for something to emerge. I find hope from struggling because it changes me in the process. And when we talk about complicity or awareness, it's another way of saying it's complicated, but the complexity shouldn't stop us from acting.

Ultimately, it's about rearranging desire. You can rely on laws all you want, you can write contracts, have million dollar deals, but it's the incentive and what people want, that, at the end of the day, makes things happen. Having something in a contract or realizing something intellectually is not what holds people to act in a particular way.

B: I've been reading these blogs around changing desires, which reminds me of pop culture, which is so much around desire and idealized ways of being. For example, the critique that bell hooks has given of Beyoncé,⁷ in very academic language around feminism, and then there is also a way in which Beyoncé is existing as a feminine power symbol in society, which is not presented with an academic language, but is operating on a very powerful level. What is it to change desire, or shape desire in a certain way? bell hooks's critique is about how Beyoncé's feminine body is still being used a symbol of black objectification, yet there is all this other stuff going where woman feel very empowered by her, which is just as valid.

This question of action-shaping desire is potent in a pop

7. *Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body* at Eugene Lang College. A video of panel discussion can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs

culture world because it's happening on a vast level, not just a cerebral level. It's important to remember that desire comes through a myriad of things, as you said, not always through information and logical conversation. It seems that every new post on Facebook I read is someone writing about the misconstruction of something that bell hooks was actually saying, and everyone is too scared to critique bell hooks, but also Beyoncé — she's a goddess too, so how do we deal with this?

[Laughter]

G: That makes me think both of this show and then with the notion of changing desire ... we were talking about audiences before. It made me wonder about the way I make work — mostly for myself. It's an audience of one. And not in a self-absorbed way, I hope; but I'm trying to work through problems and actually put those questions to myself. A show like this one makes me think, also, about when I teach, and the way in which I become the audience again through engaging with students. I am learning from what the students are getting and not getting. We recently were looking at Mierle Laderman Ukeles' work and the *Touch Sanitation* project;⁸ they were watching the sanitation workers be the audience, and I was watching my students be the audience of that audience.

H: Watching the watchers.

[Laughter]

G: Yeah. And to bring it back to what we can do, or what our implications are — in some ways that audience of pushing outward from outside ourselves, and this sounds sort of abstract, but being in this conversation and looking at this work around us makes me think about my work and what my work can do outward. There is a rippling of desire,

8. Performance Duration of *Touch Sanitation*: 11 months, at least 1 to 2 8-hour/per day work shifts, the artist shakes the hands of 8,500 sanitation workers. About the project, Ukeles' writes, "I'm not here to watch you, to study you, to analyze you, to judge you. I'm here to be with you: all the shifts, all the seasons, to walk out the whole City with you." I face each worker, shake hands, and say: "Thank you for keeping NYC alive."

of wanting to do, which is an interesting thing to desire — to sacrifice your time and self to something that doesn't have a monetary or physical return, but that does obviously have a return.

H: Do you feel like the work in this room is doing something?

G: In individual ways, yes, but also no. It's more that possibility of it doing something, for me. Because often, when it comes to art, we all are busy, and there's this lack of energy; I don't give the works as much full attention as they may need. I find myself walking by things a lot, too, but then you try to create space in which you can spend some time with something you realize you want to spend time with.

D: Heather was asking me yesterday what I thought of capitalism.

[Laughter]

H: You know, a casual, everyday convo.

D: You've asked me that several times before, and each time we've had that conversation, there's a different banter and a different answer. Because we're a part of it, and to a certain extent, we all think we have an idea of it, but we don't understand the entire thing. The answer I gave Heather yesterday is that I don't think capitalism per se is the problem. Capitalism is a way of managing resources, and coming from Venezuela, I realized the country did not have a historically capitalist system, but the people that are now in power perceived it as capitalist. Before Chavez, it was actually more like socialism. As a personal example, I was born in California because the Venezuelan government paid for my parents to study at UC Davis.

I don't separate what happens in the United States from what happens in Venezuela, as far as there are people that are struggling for power. And those people are basically willing to step over other people to get there; they also control media to create an impression that something else is happening. The problem is information, and the ways that

decisions are made on collective levels, which, in the end, comes from precisely from desire. In the sense of what you were saying about Beyoncé, it's quite interesting in that context. Right now we see what's going on in this room as maybe the spark of something. You'll see something, maybe you'll act, or you'll talk to someone about it — that's communication. Nowadays, there are different types of media. But I don't think there's much separation of ideas. A 22 year old is taking all of it in, and thinking do I want to be like Beyoncé? And in the same moment, they could be seeing information about the prison system in the U.S.

So, the term “desire” is a good one in the sense of “what do you strive for?” Or, what are you trying to get with your actions? Pop culture and art start to merge into one. I was recently talking to some people who are in their early 20s. One of them was using a professional DSLR. I realized in her mind there is no separation between using a professional camera, doing some drawings, and then watching music videos by Beyoncé online. Whereas I grew up in a time where having a professional digital camera to play with was one step ahead in terms of art-making. So a lot of boundaries are blurring, but the question remains: What do you strive for? Where are you trying to go? And how does media shape those desires? How are you part of the media? Because now, there is mainstream media, but you are also media. You can put it out there in social networks or not. You can say things with it, what you desire, and other people will identify with you or not.

A: It's also a temporality thing. There are temporalities in place. This is something, again, that Spivak mentioned. I spent some time with her recently.

B: Beyoncé?

[Laughter]

A: No, I'm talking about the theorist Gayatri Spivak again. It's the idea of there's thousands of years of ideology, and then there's “you're helping.” That's a quote.

B: “You're helping?”

A: Yeah. “You’re helping.” Like, you, doing your helping. That relates to Chantelle Mouffe in the sense of relating to one another across these divides around race, class, ethnicity, gender —

B: Generation?

A: Generational, yeah. As an example, Spivak has a school in West Bengal, which no one has ever photographed in; she doesn’t let anyone see it. She only goes for ten days at a time, never more, because she doesn’t want the students to rely on her or for her to influence the outcome. So in that sense, there’s the sub-altern person, which she defines as a person who lacks access to class mobility or, more broadly, social mobility. Her process is very powerful because she engages, but she doesn’t engage in a privileged, NGO-ish way. In this regard, she says that she tries to forget English in order to teach English.

So are there ways for us to relate across these divides in ways where we’re getting into a different type of epistemology? What I see currently are artists who are interested in “helping.” It’s unhelpful. You have to bring in Fred Moten who says, “Man, I’m not interested in your fucking helping. I’m interested in you waking up and realizing how you’re getting fucked, even though the way you’re getting fucked is more pleasant than the way I’m getting fucked.” I need that kind of a relationship and solidarity. We all do, and we need each other for that to happen. The most important thing about this exhibition is that it brought us together. The fact that we’re having this conversation. The fact that we’ve made new relationships. The way I understand capitalism, just as a working definition, is as a set of human relationships. Marx said that. So how can we have a different set of human relations that isn’t based on exploitation?

H: Do you think that when you’re talking about Fred Moten and the notion of “fuck helping,” ...could the term “solidarity” be used instead of helping? Grace Lee Boggs talks a lot about solidarity in her work; she’s been working within a community for many years that’s different from

her ethnicity and her upbringing. She talks about how she stands in solidarity with the black population of Detroit because of her work. I'm reading her book *Living for Change*, and I don't believe she has ever used the word help. I don't get the sense that she ever had a desire or intention to go into a situation and help someone. Whereas I personally feel I have been very conditioned to do charity, and I've had to undo a lot of that conditioning. I grew up in a very liberal town, Boulder, Colorado, where there was always a notion of "giving back" or "doing-good." But also the problematic of NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) were very real. The fake utopia surrounded by dystopia.

A: Yes. Words are the problem.

N: Helping is definitely different than solidarity. Grace Lee Boggs was married to Jimmy Boggs, a longtime civil rights leader, an African American who worked at a Chrysler plant for decades; she's lived her whole adult life in Detroit. She's beyond helping. She is part of that movement. So to Amin's point, I think there is something beyond just the language. Even though solidarity and helping can have some overlap, I think the way that we internalize the words, there is something beyond that, and Grace Lee Boggs is a great example of that. I went to a progressive private school, and there was an attitude that we're all going to go out into the world and lead NGOs and be helpful. There are these assumptions that you can "fix" things.

D: Or that you know better.

N: Right. A journalist friend of mine posted on Facebook the other day that people in the U.S. are so eager to say that our political system is broken; it really sucks, it's unfixable, but then our politicians are so happy to go out into the world and say, "Oh, but we can fix your country. We're going to rebuild it, and it's going to be fine."

There's this attitude that we're really good helpers, and it's a dangerous idea because if you don't start from that place of solidarity, which would say, I'm going to first understand and make myself a person equal to you, another

person. I have to understand before I can even think about what you need. Helping is very much an outsider's concept.

H: So that goes back to what Amin was saying about undoing, as well as what Gabriela was saying about unlearning. So in unlearning with your students, you're going through a process of actually unlearning what you're doing, or undoing the system. If we look to the work of Augusto Boal or Paulo Freire, who write about radical pedagogy, the knowledge of a people actually comes from within. It doesn't come from the top down all-knowing teacher, as we're taught here in the U.S. It actually comes from dialogue that happens amongst folks in a very non-hierarchical platform.

A: Yes, I've read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Freire. In our organizing we're always trying to think about how we're going to articulate something in a way that can reach a broad group of people, to subvert these categories that continue to divide us. I use the term failure because I am more interested in highlighting failure than success in order to do things better. But what about "pedagogy of the liberated"? How can we shift paradigms? A lot of it is space. Imagination. Artists are critical at this juncture because it has a lot to do with imagination. The imagining to do something. The imagining that something is possible. We are more appreciative of questions, and of the process of working through something. And I think that's really helpful.

The system is trying to neutralize us. Approximately two thirds of the people in Zuccotti Park were artists; there was an ability to communicate with one another. Now, the park had its problems largely because it was a class of people that got demoted, and they found themselves with other people that were on the bottom — that were always on the fucking bottom. So that privilege amongst that group was one of its major undoings in a way. Of course, I'm not focusing on the state repression when I say that.

So, how can we shift our thinking as well? Words are important because they're about ideology — they're the categories. We name stuff. Occupy was great until it became

a noun, but that's exactly what happens, and we need to know it. Once it became a noun, it became a possession, a brand.

Another thing people need to interrogate is community. Build community? What is that? Giorgio Agamben talks about community as whateverance. It just is. It's not the thing that you do. It's not the thing that you worked towards creating. It's the thing that is. The park was a great example, not in its goodness, but rather in its encounter. The park was useful in that the problems of society were made visible. The patriarchy. The racism and class system. At some point, the park became East and West.

What was different, though, is people were committed to sitting through 12 hours straight of mediation to talk things through. Points of conflict become points of construction. We're averse to conflict. We feel personally impacted. So in talking about space, art can do a lot. There is something about being vulnerable and something about being critical and both are important.

In terms of art, there are two spaces that we can use right now where there is possibility. Institutions like universities. You use those spaces and resources to do whatever you want. When I teach my students, I've radically changed their perspective on the world even though I don't teach them anything; I just facilitate the conversation that is happening. Spivak says, "It's not about problem solving, it's about becoming problem solvers."

The classroom is the space of coming together, and then collectively going out into the world. I teach a class called Race, Class and Ethnicity in the Media. Can you imagine what we uncover in 13 classes for 45 hours in a semester. Nothing really. Yet we touch on the politics of asking questions, of being critical, and not being afraid. Because people that care about race end up identifying it based on color, and then there's a moment of, "What do you need? Just tell me..."

The park was a big art piece, and I loved it for what it

was. *The Rolling Jubilee* was also great art piece. It could operate in multiple ways.

The reason Strike Debt failed, or the beginning of its undoing, was there was a group like this, and they came together and said we're going to do something for MLK day. We'll connect the movement that we want to launch, to militarism and poverty, and root it in an African American tradition, as MLK did at the end of his life. The majority of the group said, "No, we shouldn't do that." Why? "Because we should not take their day." We can do our gathering on any other day; it doesn't have to be on MLK day. Well, what's the problem with that? The assumed identity of the group was white, even though I was there, even though there were other people of color there. Why does stuff like that happen? Good people, good intentions, deep-seated racism and white supremacy. But we have to understand why that happens.

N: I'm curious about that, as it also highlights how MLK day has been appropriated by dominant culture. Be it your friendly, peaceful, revolutionary...MLK was very deeply engaged in anti-militarization work and fighting poverty, especially in the later part of his life before he was killed. The poor people's campaign was really how he was bringing these different parts together, and that's part of MLK's legacy that's really not acknowledged. Generally, when people think of MLK, they're not taught to think about those things. Economic justice is part of his legacy that's been largely overlooked because it's still not comfortable for people to talk about poverty, or to talk about poor people organizing.

H: That concept makes me think about the notion of fear. We're often afraid to talk about race and class because we've been conditioned not to. When I walk through Skid Row at night, I feel afraid. Why is that? Because of how I was raised; I was conditioned to fear black and brown men. There's also the element of being afraid to talk about that fear with friends or colleagues, in an effort to be "colorblind," which definitely doesn't get us anywhere. So,

in fact, the idea of “helping,” is often embedded with white guilt, which is deeply problematic.

Perhaps one way to engage in the conversation is taking part in dialogues like this, to collectively ask a critical question of the elephant in the room — is this work doing anything, or is it related to the struggle of oppression and racial and class inequality? It can be really difficult to do that. We’ve been so conditioned to have “proper” or “politically correct” ways in which we function within jobs, institutions, or even on the street. What I hear us talking about is the idea of criticality.

D: And back to the idea of the “system,” so to speak — the idea where there’s a system oppressing you. I wasn’t raised with any white guilt. The system is within you, so the only way to recognize that is to look within first. Because to a certain extent, that seeking of desires ends up creating this system — government and institutions come from that, they’re a result of a lot of people thinking a certain way.

H: I want to be conscious of time. It’s also getting warm in here.

G: I’m desperate to use the bathroom.

H: Desperate?

G: Desperate. I just thought I’d put that elephant out there.

[Laughter]

H: Let’s take a five-minute-break and then come back and just kind of regroup and finish up.

A: Sounds good.

N: I’m going to a party later. I think my opener is going to be, “What do you think about capitalism?”

[Laughter]

N: I can’t wait to ask that question.

D: Just kind of an all around good question. You can

pretty much answer it however you want. If I asked that to Heather right now, she'd just answer with a laugh, and that's a valid answer.

[BREAK]

H: That was a solid break. Air out the room, re-energize. Did anything come up in that break that folks want to add to the conversation?

D: Amin and I were talking about the phrase he brought up earlier, "training in the practice of freedom," and I wanted to hear a little bit more about that.

A: Yeah. I think what freedom means is an interesting thing; it means different things to each of us, right?

D: Yeah.

A: That's important. The practice to me is somehow living it, doing it. It clearly relates to government. So for me it's a practice of not relying on government to shape my relationships in any way. One of the things we wrote in *Tidal magazine* is the theory of the social contract in Western philosophy. It's already been rewritten. If we're citizens in this society, we've given up certain rights for the sake of security. The government, right now, is not accountable to the will of the people, so the contract is in fact off. And they put you in prison, more and more of us are in prison. You have 37,000 police officers with paramilitary training, NSA, protecting private property. You must remember the police came from slave patrols, so I'm also thinking about what property is in this country. It happens in Detroit — where the peoples' biggest concern, in the areas where the state has withdrawn, is their own security.

You have to put under erasure the "we," because the "we" is fucked up already. That's what we were trying to say. So how can the "we" be better? We have to learn how to live together and be free without that contract. That's off the table right now. It's literally through global capital that people are put in place, taken out. Capital manifests in the Supreme Court's latest decision after Citizen's United. It

struck down limits on giving money to political campaigns. Rich people and corporations can determine political outcomes with money. This has been affirmed. This judicial outcome is only a symptom of a larger problem. It's not a critique of democracy, but, what is democracy? Arundhati Roy talks about life after democracy. But in the specific sense of a representative democracy, that's a problem. In my meetings in the United Nations, they've done studies about the singular grievance people have expressed since the Arab Spring has been in democracy, or, a representative government. Across the board. So the one mechanism that's supposed to deal with all the other problems isn't working, and if you get rid of the government, then we'll kill each other. That's exactly what these abstractions have done to us. So you come to "need" government and a police force. That's what I'm engaged with and interested in. And that's we saw that in the park. We came and said, no police can enter. The park is great for alchemy, for figuring out society. It started off well, but then what happened? There was sexual harassment. There were claims of rape. Well, how do you deal with claims of rape? What do you do with a rapist or a murderer? To me those questions are about freedom.

H: I was in LA during Occupy and I saw a lot of violence, arrests and fences being put up around City Hall. My question is, what happens once the park disappears? What happens when government removes our ability to organize? I see it happening with the adjunct teacher unions. I see it happening within the work I do with Critical Resistance. I see it happening to my students. I had a conversation on my way here with someone from Ecuador. He told me he worked at Dunkin' Donuts for 30 years and got fired out of nowhere. I asked him if there was a union. His response was, "No, they just pay us enough money so we don't revolt." So there is a collapse of the unions between working class people.

Further, one question I've been grappling with recently is — how do we create safe spaces that can't be taken away? How do we take care of each other? How do we make each other feel safe? It's a basic human thing, but it's also become

increasingly difficult to talk about. How do we create safe spaces without cops when so often our spaces are being ripped apart through forces of capital, administration and power? Walls are being put up around our housing, jobs, and education.

D: I see the control happening with social media in Venezuela, perhaps in a different way than in the U.S. ... Internet and media channels are being shut down. Anything that is anti-government is being shut off. Unknown people behind the scenes are stopping transmission of certain messages and buying up the oppositional channels. It's capitalism and power. But it's not just from this point of history. We're simply able to observe it more in this point in history. Whereas, in the past, some people were able to completely silence other people.

N: I just saw something on my Instagram feed yesterday that could be an antidote to that. One of the secular revolutionary papers in Egypt that came out of the Arab Spring, in their office a sign says, "Tahrir is not a square." Which speaks exactly of this idea because they no longer occupy the physical space. The physical space was instrumental, but the experience of solidarity, the culture that they managed to create there for a brief period together — the lessons are there, the experience is there, and all that energy is still going to go somewhere. It's the human relationships and not the physical place that's going to carry that forward.

A: There's a relationship of space with time, so the park was about slowing down time, and that allowed for relationships and encounters. Because we're so alienated at this point, it's not enough to do reading groups like they used to do. We're divided in so many ways. Physical space is also a sign of power. And if you don't have spaces like public parks, you find something else. We went after Trinity Church, which is the third largest real estate company here in NYC. A couple of my friends went to jail for that action when we tried to occupy one of their vacant lots. We were unsuccessful because they did not allow us access and

the police prevented us from occupying it, which was a Lower Manhattan Cultural Council lent-kind of space. The church also insisted on prosecuting the people who tried to occupy the space, including a bishop. But what that did was change the conversation among the faith community. The conversation that we had is: charity is no longer enough. The idea of feeding a few mouths to wash your shit, it wasn't working. It's actually called Trinity Wall Street. The church. Does anyone remember why it's called Wall Street? African slaves built the walls for what was to be the first market for slaves in the United States⁹. Anyway, what ended up happening is the church and congregations got radicalized.

The way that we were able to do Occupy Sandy was through a network of faith folks we worked with during Occupy. We identified them because what we knew of the era of the civil rights movement here in the U.S., you need churches. These are the spaces that provide some sanctuary; it's not a public where the state can smash you. But it's also church which has its own problems of hierarchy and imperialism. But what we're doing right now is actually working out the details to open up a lot of churches in the city that would be commons for organizing that would be networked. The biggest challenge is how can we relate to one another in this space. The same problems with the park. How can you deal with that in these spaces? They're going to be called jubilee houses, jubilee house one, jubilee house two, three, etc. But simultaneously, they are spaces of resistance where everything is common — spaces of free education, cultural centers that are part of a political project that is not party politics.

B: But isn't religion biased?

A: No. We're developing the mythology right now because that's what you need, a mythology. There's one slogan that goes back to late 1400s, early 1500s, by Thomas Müntzer. This was during the Reformation when Müntzer came about. He led the peasant rebellion, where 8,000 people got killed. It was the biggest uprising before the French Revolution.

⁹ see Wiki on Wall Street

But the Müntzer slogan, one that Friedrich Engels refers to in his early writing, is “everything is common.” Once again, it’s part of the imagination, the way we thought about religion, what are these things that can resonate, that can cross over to open up space. And so Heather’s right that you don’t go back to the park. No one ever wanted to go back to the park.

You want to go in the spaces where people are at so you can do the project of struggle and construction, resistance and building, sustaining one another. Because money is a problem. Money is part of it. If you’re going to rearrange desire, who’s going to sustain you if not fund you?

These are the questions that we struggle with. Part of what I really am excited about in *Tidal Magazine*, is that we think about big issues. We work with thinkers, but we also have our own voices in there; we’re interested in the conversation, and how can we translate.

The first time I worked with Spivak, she told us that in order to write for Tidal in accessible language, I had to relearn how to write. Because she was writing for people in the street. That’s who we want. We want to have a conversation. Everyone has their brilliant theory about why things are fucked up, and they have their magic solution of how things can be better, and they usually never involve us, and what we do. That’s the long-term project.

H: It could be interesting to take a moment to close the conversation. It’s been a difficult but interesting conversation to have on Saturday afternoon. Perhaps we could go around and share if something was unexpected for you in the conversation, or something you learned, or something you want to learn more about, or something you had an issue or contradiction with, or something you’re going to spend some time thinking about? We covered a lot of different ideas, and we’re lucky to have had a smaller group so that we can unpack these things amongst different sets of brains that come from very different places and ideologies. Does anyone want to start?

Z: I'd just like to say thank you. I thought I'd come to the exhibition and be an observer of the work. I didn't realize what I was getting myself into!

[Laughter]

Z: But it was a really good, so thank you.

B: I'm working on a project right now around what it means to be queer in Bed-Stuy, and how that overlaps with the gentrification that's going on in the neighborhood. There are families that have lived in the area for a very long time, and the history of the Hassidic community that is very antagonistic towards a queer way of being. One of the things I've been trying to do is to find a way to have a proper conversation about ways to live together — differently but still together.

So what this conversation has brought up is there are ways to do things that are for myself, as opposed to having a real conversation, and challenging ideas of what community is. There's not a Bed-Stuy community. There are a lot of people who live in an area that we call Bed-Stuy, but they come with very different ways of how they want to live in the world. One of the things that I want to do is try and bring people together who don't necessarily talk — to have a conversation that is not happening at all.

There's a lot of underground anger in the area. I was interviewing people around what happened in Uganda with the passing of the "Kill the gay" law. Some people responded that we should move away from any idea that it's okay to be gay. And in that, I kept thinking that we're all living in this space together. So how do we create those spaces to have a proper conversation? It can be disingenuous as an artist to come in and say, "I'm going to curate this conversation," versus working with the existing structures and systems of communication. I'm also thinking about the jubilee centers that Amin is setting up as one possibility of space.

D: For me, the major thing was the conversation about desire. Because that's the common point of what makes us

human. I'm not sure I understand power, per se, but it may be one way to see power, and to understand how different people wield it differently or struggle within it. It comes down to desire. Desire is a word that can be used in different ways. You can see desire as a sexual thing, or as proving yourself to someone else, but it also draws people together. Desire starts like a chain reaction; I'm excited to think about that more.

H: I've been thinking about how much time and work I spent putting together this show that we're sitting in, and how the conversation I actually wanted to have with the work and the artists is happening today, and none of those artists are here, which is really interesting. So maybe there's a way in which I can use future opportunities like this one to do more of this. I was really frustrated at the last conversation we had in conjunction with the show because I wasn't feeling generosity in the room in thinking and talking through issues of class and race. I kept thinking: how can it be that artists are making work about these issues, but they don't want to talk about them? So I'm really grateful that all of you took the time to be here, and special thanks to Amin for doing some prep work on this with me. It's been really amazing to hear everyone's thoughts.

M: Amin, when you were talking about different levels of freedom or action, the one that resonates with me the most is the internal one, the stuff right up here [pointing to head]. And it strikes me that maybe, Heather, you don't need this space to have this conversation. We could have done it at any time and any place, but maybe being in this space here and now helps us feel it empowered to do it.

Similarly, I have a question of why am I not having this conversation with the friends that I'm seeing after or before this event. Maybe it has to do with a need for a certain type of context and deciding to put it into motion. It helps us all focus, and needing to have your voice amplified in a certain way, to a point where you feel comfortable actually letting it out into the space in front of you. Otherwise, it's up here [pointing to head]. Often when I'm in an institutional space

of work, I think about how much I'm allowed to say, or how I should just be doing my job...that idea of trying to free this part of it, because I'm not necessarily feeling free anywhere else. So I have to grab it, if I can remember to grab it!

[Laughter]

A: Training. Training.

H: Indoctrination.

G: Jumping off of both your comments, my brain is ping-ponging, I don't have a very clear thread of what I've gotten from the conversation yet, but the goals of that ping-ponging seem to be about what kind of role does this space have? So the art itself, the wall versus the picture, and how those things can be active or allow for a possibility. Coming here, I felt a lot of discomfort because I also thought I was going to be more of an observer. And yet having the work on the walls, and having the sense that we were all here for this purpose, didn't allow me to be passive with my discomfort. So whether or not we talked about the art itself, its role in that is important.

N: I'm looking a lot at the words on the floor, in particular at the word activism, and the word art, and I'm thinking in my life, and maybe in all of our lives, the tendency is to silo -- here's work, here's my activist activities, here's my art time, my hobbies, my family time. And it's serious work, eternal work, to bring intentionality and consciousness between those different silos. So this space and this conversation sort of merit that in some way because we're here surrounded by art, but we're not talking about art. That kind of sort of unexpected dialogue or thinking is something I'd like to do more of in the regular parts of my life. To introduce different sets of questions in the spaces where they usually don't exist.

G: I'm also thinking about articulation, and it being very difficult. Sometimes it's very risky to actually say something, but to say it through art can feel like a different route to possibility.

A: Something really important that I hear right now

is generosity, which I think Heather said. To me that's the anecdote to feeling unsafe. In the art world, people are so ruthless with each other. It's unbelievable. Yet they make work about 9/11. That's the separation that I don't understand. The way we treated each other today is actually not common in the art world. So I want to acknowledge that. I was in an unpanel somewhere in Dumbo —

B: Unpanel?

A: Yes. At this unpanel, there were people speaking over each other, trying to really get their time in, trying to prove their point, yet tearing each other down...So thanks to Heather and to all of us for creating this space, so we can actually just have conversation that isn't about tearing each other down.

D: The type of art that draws me in the most is where the person that makes it makes themselves vulnerable to being seen. You see their childhood perhaps, and you see the person. They basically open themselves up to all sorts of criticism, and that's what actually draws me in the most. Just as a little parenthesis.

[Laughter]

H: Well, I suggest we continue the parenthesis. I will email you all the transcribed conversation. Special thanks to everyone at The Camera Club of New York for hosting us and helping to make this show happen. Enjoy the rest of your sunshower afternoon.

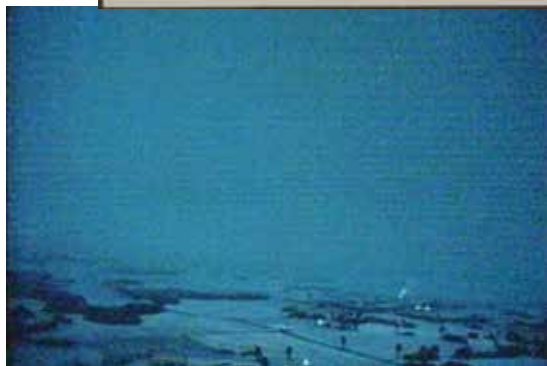
- 1- Willie Hart in an empty swimming pool, still from *3 Women*, a film by Robert Altman, 1977
- 2- *The Work of War in Times of Art*, a course at CalArts taught by Michelle Dizon, Spring 2011
- 3- *Metta World Peace* publication release at CalArts, 2012 - Video of *Come September* by Arundhati Roy, Photo by Jonathan Takahashi
- 4- *Releasing Carrier Pigeon from Tank*, David McLellan, 1918, Gelatin silver print
- 5- Harun Farocki, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, film still, 1988
- 6- Newspaper stand in NYC on April 18, 2014, photo by Heather M. O'Brien
- 7- World Trade Center Memorial site, April 19, 2014, photo by Heather M. O'Brien
- 8- *Angry Women REvisited*, J Dellecave, photo by Benjamin Lundberg
- 9- Heather M. O'Brien speaking as a member of Critical Resistance Los Angeles against a new women's jail, Board of Supervisors meeting in Los Angeles, July 2012, photo by Linette Park
- 10- LA No More Jails mobilization in front of Board of Supervisors Los Angeles, July 2012, photo by Heather M. O'Brien
- 11- Rise of the Dandelions mobilization at Mira Loma Detention Center, August 2014, photo by Heather M. O'Brien
- 12- Critical Resistance action at Antelope Valley Mall, protesting a new women's jail, March 2013, photo by Ashley Hunt
- 13- *Harvest Dome* art project crashes onto Rikers Island Detention Center, 2011
- 14- Angola Prison Hobbycraft Fair in Louisiana, 2011, photo by Heather M. O'Brien
- 15- *Jeff Koons wall text at Whitney Museum and NYC subway*, Diego Sierralta, ink on paper, 2014
- 16- *family matter 9*, 2008 - 2013, Marina Berio, gum bichromate print with blood
- 17- photo by Nevin Rao, Brooklyn, 2014
- 18- Gulf Labor, image courtesy of Human Rights Watch
- 19- Screenshot of CalArts' racial makeup, 2014
- 20- Kara Walker, Domino Sugar Factory, 2014
- 21- bell hooks critique of Beyoncé, *Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body*, Eugene Lang College, The New School, NYC, 2014
- 22- *Touch Sanitation*, Mierle Laderman Ukeles' performance, 1977-80
- 23- Claire Fontaine
- 24- *A Social Bailout Scenario* (detail). Work Progress Collective, 2010, Archival pigment on newsprint
- 25- *Is it time to strike at the moment. It is the moment to strike at time.* Raqs Media Collective, 2011, Stainless steel and LED strip lights
- 26- Gayatri Spivak speaks in New Delhi on the occasion of the opening of The Seagull School of Publishing, Calcutta
- 27- Fred Moten, A tintype portrait by Kari Orvik, made using the wet-plate collodion process, 2014
- 28- Grace Lee Boggs at home in Detroit, photo by Garrett MacLean
- 29- *Giorgio Agamben descubre el limbo*, Alfons Freire
- 30- *half awake and half asleep in the water*, Asako Narahashi, 2003



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- 0.89% American Indian/Alaskan
- 9.3% Asian
- 5.4% Black
- 42.9% Caucasian
- 0.6% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- 10.5% Latino
- 9.7% Two or more races
- 3.2% Other/unknown



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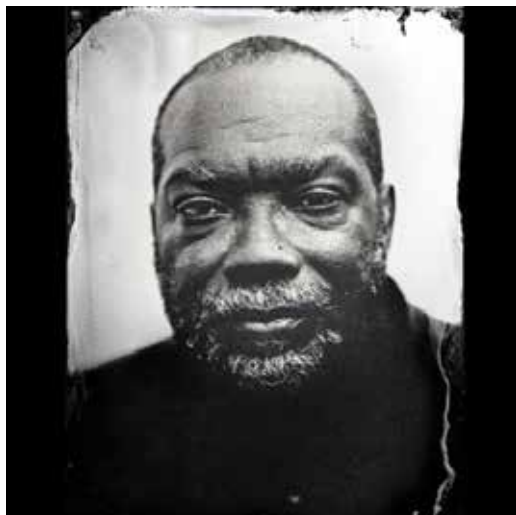


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Imagination and the Image*Nicole Salazar*

The human capacity to injure other people is very great precisely because our capacity to imagine other people is very small.

What if I could draw a bird that could change the world?

The everyday catch of war videography is not a scene of violence but of aftermath. The visual rhythm of a news feed — the scene after a bombing in a marketplace, for example — is some variation of long and medium shots and close ups: people walking near the site of the blast, a shoe left behind on the ground. The shots are steady, and the duration of each kept long; a visual contradiction to the chaos that came before. Sitting in dark edit bays scrubbing through daily feeds from news wires, I watched packages like this from Iraq regularly for years. These feeds are not iconic images, just methodically captured visual proof. A cameraperson (and possibly producer and local translator) far from American television sets snatched these images in the hours before some normalcy had been restored. But the pictures will barely register on the evening news. Some feeds will be cut into tighter pieces and others will replay on loops, while commentators and analysts talk politics. Some will not be shown at all when other stories take priority. The experience of an explosion is life-altering for those on the ground, but the regularity and familiarity of these events — each distinct but so familiar as it plays out on a screen — underscores an exasperating truth for a visual journalist: documentation has its use, but also its limits.

I was an art student in the early years of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. What felt like the remoteness of art to the urgency of war frustrated me, and in part because of this, my attention would shift from art to documentary and news. But the frustration has gone both ways over the years. TV news plays out within the constraints of established formats and pared down narratives; it depends on images. Events not captured by the camera are unlikely to get the same coverage as those that are. The result is that the documentation is absolutely critical as the starting

point for engagement. And so the burden to collect images rises with our comfort in disregarding them. With the degree of saturation of visual content that exists in other aspects of daily life, there are days when it seems like reality itself is what's trafficked in images — inured as we may be against believing in what we can't see. Even Jesus (proponent of faith) once admitted unto Thomas: seeing is believing. Had Caravaggio been a photojournalist in Biblical times and captured *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* in a photograph with the same dramatic lighting as his painting, it might have landed him on the front page of *The New York Times*.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag wrote at length about photographs, TV news and “those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists.” Her disdain for the dramatic image has merit. Sontag made me question my pursuit of photography in high school with *On Photography*. It was years before I could admit to myself that I could love her work while also holding her arguments at arms length. Her critique lives in the same world of the dramatic as the images she describes: full of adrenaline and boldness, tantalizing and seducing. No wonder it is impossible to deny photography's power. But her discussion of news images focuses on a particular editorial cull. Personally, it was the behind the scenes footage — the sights and sounds of people's shuffling feet, the persistence of the everyday amidst turmoil — that made the rupture of explosive events most real. The roiling drama of war coexists with a “new normal,” wherever it strikes. Exposing the normal is perhaps what makes war zones halfway around the world, and the people who live in them, most relatable. There is a good deal of exceptional visual journalism that works to properly contextualize and expose the human experiences in war.

In the early 2000s, I was introduced to the texts of Elaine Scarry, an interdisciplinary scholar who writes about aesthetics and constitutional theory through an exploration of the language of pain and injury. Her writing has since been something of a philosophical field guide for me for

navigating the possibilities and limits of representation in war both in art and journalism. At the center of her discourse is the problem of empathy — what she calls our “perceptual disability” when it comes to imaging others in their “full weight and solidity.” She writes in *The Body in Pain*:

When one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth... To have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt.

The 1961 Milgram experiments demonstrated that volunteers were likely to administer electric shocks to others, even if it caused obvious pain, if they were asked to do so by an authority figure. However, in a variation of the experiment, their obedience dropped if they were made to physically hold down the hand of the other onto the shock plate. Proximity mattered.

When Heather M. O’Brien approached me to participate in a discussion around last year’s exhibit at the CCNY, *I see in the sea nothing except the sea. I don’t see a shore. I don’t see a dove*, she presented it as an opportunity to reflect and exchange ideas on the question of war and representation across fields — not only in art but also in journalism and activism. It felt like familiar territory, and I was glad to have an opportunity to revisit these questions in the context of the exhibition. The range of the show is broad, as Heather set out to address not just wars abroad, but wars at home, and how different spheres of societal violence are connected — from the War on Drugs to the War on Terror. For those fortunate enough not to be caught up in these wars, it has always been an option to disengage. Each of the artists in *I see in the sea nothing except the sea* take on political and socially relevant themes. Interestingly, each artist’s work speaks directly

to the “perceptual disability” when it comes to imagining others, rather than depicting violence or war directly.

The works of the four artists — Adam Golfer, Ashley Hunt, Carlos Motta, and Samira Yamin — all draw on documentary and non-fiction elements to explore the limits of representation. They focus attention not on violence itself, but on the experience of viewership and mediation of information. Ashley Hunt’s images of prisons in *Degrees of Visibility* (2014) are titled with the number of people inside the prison walls, along with the gender of those people (i.e. 336 men). The message is straightforward: what you see is not just a building. The photographs ask us only to acknowledge that there is something beyond the walls, beyond the image, which we cannot see or fully comprehend. The titles also give us a sense of the violent gender responsive approach to the prison industrial complex in the U.S. Samira Yamin’s work *We Will Not Fail* (2012) uses the October 1, 2001 issue of TIME Magazine as medium. Yamin hand-cuts Islamic geometries into the pages of images of U.S. soldiers and Osama bin Laden, who appear in the magazine under the rubric of the War on Terror for the first time. The conversion of “news” to art object provides a critical distancing where the viewer can see the narratives aestheticized truths in themselves. Either side could be the “We” in “*We Will Not Fail.*” The glorification of the fight and of sacrifice are what make violence palatable and even pleasing to those who justify it.

The works of Adam Golfer and Carlos Motta both break down absolutes in *The Real*. Golfer’s video piece is a retelling of the dream of a female drone pilot, recounted by two different narrators. The identities of the people who appear in the video are ambiguous. Are they actors? Is it a scripted scene or slice of reality? Dreams and any retelling of reality are fractured memories recombined to make sense. Golfer’s video is a slice of the mental landscape as it could really be: pieces holding together by will — not a straightforward arc, not a single truth. A video work by Carlos Motta, *Letter to My Father (standing by the fence)* (2005), was screened at an event in conjunction with the

show on April 19. Motta's related photographs, *Public Domain* (2004) were on view as part of the exhibition. The video and images were shot in the physical vicinity of site of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. The two works use distinct visual languages to engage the viewer. *Letter to My Father (standing by the fence)* around the Ground Zero construction in a tapestry of voices, emotions and constantly changing footage. The work asks questions and draws connections between political and personal alienation — borders physical and experienced, truths contradictory and never self-contained. The photographs are of visitors to the WTC site. Taken from the 8th floor window of a nearby office tower, the grainy images have the look of surveillance footage — and captured in this way, the people in them have the appearance of suspects. A viewer may relate to the experience of the observed whose privacy has been breached in the name of safety; or to the one doing the observing — and the presumed sense of necessity for such measures. Or both. The two pieces by Motta permit us to imagine the artist (or ourselves) more fully: as the wielders of multiple truths within our own psyches and experiences.

I've long since abandoned the idea that only art or only journalism might be capable of bridging our imagination gap. There isn't a single language that can hold it all together. The perceptual divide isn't the sort of geography where you can construct a crossing and leave it there for others to follow. Instead, there is only the constant reimagining: the cycle of watching and rewatching ourselves, of seeing the new distancing we have created. On May 10th, a small group of us gathered at the CCNY gallery for a broad discussion facilitated by Heather and Amin Husain. There was no desired destination for our talk, only to share thoughts collectively and reflect on ideas that the show brought up for us. We spoke of solidarity and privilege. Within the visual domains of art and journalism, solidarity might be the equivalent of learning to see yourself reflected in the image — maybe you relate to those in the picture, maybe you submit to the distance, but recognize it as the journey towards seeing more fully. It was a small

group, and we sat in a circle so you could see not only the person speaking but also people listening to each other. I got the feeling that we had all had similar conversations before in other domains. But to share these ideas with each other in this space was the point in itself; we rejected passivity and insisted on engagement.

We can continuously change the image and be reminded of our role as viewer — our place as eternal outsiders. And if we can't fully see each other, perhaps we can see a glimpse of the other in ourselves — maybe that is the first step across perceptual divide and towards solidarity.

“The domain of the Strange, the Marvelous and the Fantastic, a domain scorned by people of certain inclinations. Here is the freed image, dazzling and beautiful, with a beauty that could not be more unexpected and overwhelming. Here are the poet, the painter, and the artist, presiding over the metamorphoses and the inversions of the world under the sign of hallucinations and madness.”

– Suzanne Césaire, *Tropique*

**#OCCUPYWALLST:
A Possible Story**

إنها لثورة حتى النصر

इंक्रिलाब ज़िन्दाबाद

MTL

Strike Art

Art as we know it is corrupt, exhausted and weak. We see works of postmodern masters sold to bankers for millions of dollars as signs of cultural capital and objects of financial investment. We see shimmering edifices of cultural wealth erected on the backs of hyper exploited labor — the pyramids and coliseums of the twenty-first century. We see museums, galleries and public art projects serving as the avant-garde of racialized gentrification and dispossession. We see ruthless competition between indebted cultural workers in pursuit of the hollow dream of appearing in Artforum. We see so-called “social practice,” the well-funded bureaucratization of alienated people’s desire for community. And we see theoretically savvy “discursive platforms” that speak of radical democracy, militant ecology, and even communization, while recoiling at the prospect of deploying their considerable resources, skills, and potentials for the purposes of building a movement. We no longer accept this.

When we speak of art after Occupy, we put ~~art~~ under erasure. We strike ~~art~~ to liberate art from itself. Not to end art, but to unleash its powers of direct action and radical imagination. ~~Art~~ does not dissolve into so-called real life. It revitalizes real life by making it surreal. Our surreal spirit is less that of Breton’s European vanguardism than Suzanne Cesaire’s freedom dream, informed as it is by the ongoing histories of slavery, imperialism and debt. ~~Art~~ defamiliarizes life, asking us how do we live? ~~Art~~ challenges us to respond to this question with direct action for which we, ourselves, are responsible rather than any pre-existing institution. We strike ~~art~~ as training in the practice of freedom.

When we strike ~~art~~, imagine a refugee camp collaged into the symbolic heart of finance capital. Imagine a self-organized commons installed at ground zero of empire. Imagine an empty minimalist plaza flooded with bodies and voices and cameras, blasting a collective cry to the world: we are sorry it took so long; we are awake now! So imagine a general strike in New York City. And imagine a never-

ending process of experimentation, learning and undoing, resisting and building in the unexplored terrain of an historic rupture.

Before Beginning

MTL is in Palestine. We are visiting friends and family and retracing memories of the first Palestinian uprising. We are traveling, listening, recording and translating. Land, life, liberation are on our mind. Then Mohammed Bouazizi ends his life through self-immolation. Tunisia breaks.

We return to New York. The city looks and feels different. Things are buzzing; we are watching closely. Soon Egypt breaks. We see revolutionary people-power from below. But it doesn't seem to apply to the United States, even though we know it is all connected in an expanded field of empire. We say to ourselves, "That is a revolution against decades of brutal military dictatorship backed by the U.S.; those are not the same conditions faced by those living in the heart of the empire itself." But then Greece breaks: Here is a nominal democracy, and yet people are rising up, taking to the streets and holding the squares. Then Spain: A Western nation with an advanced economy in the midst of elections. With the crisis, people are compelled to occupy — throwing into question the legitimacy of the entire political process: *basta ya! no nos representan.*

We start to feel something is possible in the United States. The Wisconsin capitol building is occupied, and the occupiers invoke Egypt; labor and community groups set up the Bloombergville camp in New York to protest urban austerity, making reference to the Spanish *Indignados*. Cracks are forming. The power of the powerless is beginning to show itself.

The Artist as Organizer

We are meeting regularly. In light of the global economic disaster, we know we have the chance to push things further in the United States. The crisis has produced an

opportunity. We are privileged to be in New York. We carry our cameras and our notebooks to document things, but we end up participating. The art we had imagined making for so long is starting to happen in real life. We do not have time to agonize about representation. We are making images, writing texts, having conversations and developing relationships out of necessity and urgency. Aesthetics, research, organizing; it is all coming together in the creation of a new public space in the heart of the empire. It embodies imagination with implications on the ground. #occupywallst.

At this time, occupy is a verb rather than a noun. People meet every Sunday at 5pm for hours to plan for the occupation on September 17. First at the Wall Street Bull sculpture a few blocks from the New York Stock Exchange on August 2. Then at the Potato Famine Memorial in the Financial District on August 9th. Then at the same time every week at Thompson Square Park in the East Village. A horizontal process is used in meetings. Facilitation allows for the maximum number of diverse voices to be heard. No one can speak on behalf of others. Organizations cannot participate as such, only as people speaking on behalf of themselves. The slogan "We are the 99%" is proposed to invite others to join. Everyone is interested in creating space, not deciding an agenda or specifying demands. Folks are in minimal but fundamental agreement on the need to reorganize social, political and economic life in a manner that is just and equitable.

Liberating Space

We occupy on September 17. A tweet goes out to gather at Chase Manhattan Plaza in front of the Jean Dubuffet sculpture. It's a few blocks from the stock exchange. We find the plaza barricaded, so we go to plan B: Zuccotti Park is wide open.

Our backs are on pizza boxes. Our bodies warm the concrete. You look up. The buildings cease to dominate the horizon as figures against a ground; instead, they frame

a threshold of freedom opening onto the sky. Di Suvero's "weird red thing" watches over us. We dumpster dive. If we have food, people will stay. The kitchen is born. When the police prohibit amplification devices, we institute the People's Mic: We repeat what people say so others can hear, and in the process we internalize each other's words.

General Assemblies are held daily. Rather than issue demands, we articulate principles of solidarity. We begin the process of mapping capitalism with our bodies. We take direct action to communicate injustice. The park is now everyone's open wound. We realize how much needs to be undone. We address racism, colonialism, patriarchy and other forms of oppression head on. At the epicenter of financial terrorism, we establish a community of care and healing — a people's refuge in the belly of the beast.

We are sparking imagination. Occupations are spreading. Momentum is building. But they evict us from Zuccotti Park. Attempts to occupy Duarte Square at 6th and Canal do not succeed. We are arrested and brutalized by the NYPD. A police state fears everything that does not follow its script. Our greatest threat is that we speak openly about inequality while establishing a self-organized community, a community grounded in the commons.

May Day comes and goes

Winter is hard. The camps are gone. Police repression has taken a toll. We realize we have to work differently to create conversations and actions in the absence of the park. We organize towards a future date and choose May Day — a day of global labor solidarity that has been suppressed in the United States. We come together: labor and student organizers, folks from Occupy Wall Street, undocumented workers centers, inspired academics, and insurrectionist friends. We have weekly planning meetings. We debate what constitutes a general strike? Who can make the call? Who can participate? What does strike mean for precarious, undocumented or non-unionized workers? What are the consequences of a call to strike that goes unheeded?

Finally, people agree on the following language:

OCCUPY WALL STREET STANDS IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE CALLS FOR A DAY WITHOUT THE 99%, A GENERAL STRIKE AND MORE!! ON MAY DAY, WHEREVER YOU ARE, WE ARE CALLING FOR: NO WORK, NO SCHOOL, NO HOUSEWORK, NO SHOPPING, NO BANKING. TAKE THE STREETS!!!!!!

After months of planning and preparation that yield thousands in the streets, a movement is not yet born. We realize unionized workers cannot break from the chains of their bosses and their leadership. So much has changed. Wages are stagnant, unions are busted, municipal austerity has set in; the exploitation of the worker increasingly overlaps with the experience of being in debt. We are all forced into servitude to Wall Street as we try to make ends meet. We articulate the indebted as a political subject.

Debt is a Time Machine

We focus on debt and touch a nerve. The new American dream is to get out of debt. Education debt, medical debt, credit card debt, mortgage debt, payday loans. We meet people where they are at, where global finance touches our lives in the most immediate ways. We gather and tell stories. The feeling of strength in weakness. The power of refusal — can't pay, won't pay. The smell of the bills going up in smoke as we testify together. The images become actions and back again. We perform our shared reality to break the silence, the shame, the isolation, and build community. We imagine debt as more than a set of "issues." We imagine debt as a placeholder for a dehumanizing system in its totality, debt as an amplifier of other oppressions, debt as a racist war machine, debt as a distillation of non-freedom. We imagine other debts and other bonds: to friends, family, community, rather than to the banks. Debts owed from immemorial histories of slavery and colonization. Debts that are both immeasurable and singular, debts that mark each of our lives and relations in different ways.

...and Other Racist Capitalist Bullshit

The identity of the debtor gains traction, but primarily among middle-class white people. We know that debt impacts poor communities of color the hardest: from subprime mortgages to payday loans to urban austerity. Debt intersects with racialized state violence on an everyday basis. All roads lead to Wall Street, but they pass through the precinct, the prison and the morgue. As we reimagine resistance to capitalism at an urban level, we think of those killed by the NYPD, private security forces and racist vigilantes around the country:

AMADOU DIALLO	MANUEL DIAZ
SHANTEL DAVIS	RAMARLEY GRAHAM
SEAN BELL	TRAYVON MARTIN
OSCAR GRANT	KIMANI GRAY

...and so it goes.

Climate Strike

Climate strikes back against Wall Street, and we all get flooded. The banks are under water. The ocean in the streets. The boardwalk is in ruins. We convert churches into hubs for mutual aid. In the void left by the State, we must make a calculation. Lives are lives. There is no hesitation. We step in, we take the risk. It is a crisis and an opportunity. We are reminded that our struggle against the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few is also a struggle for life — and that an obsession with growth and firing up a sputtering economy misses the larger ecological questions confronting the planet at large.

We offset the negligence of the city and the agencies just so everything won't fall further apart. A grey area between emergency relief and political resistance; can we pivot in that space? Can we align our responsibility to act with what we are working toward? How do we link climate to debt, to work, to sustainable living?

We go to Detroit with these questions.

It Does not Resemble a City

Detroit is a mythic wasteland of romantic ruins and vacant space. This post-industrial picturesque effaces those living and struggling in what used to be the city. Capital and the state have withdrawn from massive swathes of territory. Every square inch is a Wall Street crime scene. In both its devastation and possibility, Detroit is an outpost from our collective future. Long-term struggles on the ground throw everything into a new light: our own cities, our own work, our own lives. Racial, economic and environmental justice understood in a global context of empire, neoliberalism and climate disaster. People thinking of revolutionary time in decades and centuries, rather than in days and months. Non-monetary economies; community-based agriculture; work beyond jobs; education beyond school; culture beyond art; life beyond capitalism. In Detroit, we hear over and over: How do we live?

Beautiful Disruptions, Collective Gasps

MTL is called to participate in an ongoing solidarity initiative with South Asian migrant workers in Abu Dhabi. Workers are placed into debt-servitude as they pursue the so-called “Gulf dream.” Thousands arrive to Saadiyat “Happiness” island to build a complex of luxury cultural amenities for the global 1%. New York University, the Guggenheim, the Louvre have taken up residence there. This collusion of art and capitalist injustice offers us an opportunity. What does solidarity of the indebted look like across national borders and lines of class privilege?

In NYC, we choose to escalate and amplify the workers’ voices through direct action. We begin by mapping the transnational chain of debt involved in Saadiyat Island. The migrant worker, the student and the artist. They are all part of the chain of debt, woven together through student loans, precarity, indebted labor in the artworld and the debt

incurred by the migrant workers as “recruitment fees” to travel to Abu Dhabi. We visualize all this in a one page flyer “No Debt Is An Island,” assemble a crew of old and new friends to form the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) and within weeks unleash an unrelenting sequence of actions at the iconic flagship of the Guggenheim itself.

Our beautiful disruptions cause collective gasps. The museum is unprepared and taken off guard. Banners are dropped in the photogenic rotunda to chants “WHO IS BUILDING THE GUGGENHEIM ABU DHABI?” “1% GLOBAL MUSEUM” is projected onto the facade of the iconic edifice in the stealth of night. A fake website at globalguggenheim.org represents the Guggenheim as an ethical and sustainable museum is circulated to the press. We hit the museum again to make it rain thousands of fake-dollar bills from atop of the Guggenheim’s spiral. A Futurism exhibition at the museum is supplemented by plastering the pristine walls with modular machine-age icons displaying kinetic slogans directed at the trustees: G.U.L.F. JUSTICE NOW! INTRO THE FUTURE WITH DIGNITY! NO JUSTICE, NO ART!

The actions strings together over time a sense of how capitalism is located in concrete institutions, using a specific place as a physical platform, aesthetic theater and media force-multiplier. Boundaries between art, media and organizing continue to dissolve. We are applying the lessons of Occupy and adapting them to a specific struggle.

At Jubilee House

Acts of protest leverage the visibility of an art institution, but we know that no matter how big our protests get they will remain ephemeral. To both sustain resistance and move into the construction of alternatives — at home and in a global frame — we must build bases for community, mutual support and education at the level of the city in which we ourselves struggle to live. We return to the challenges of Zuccotti Park and the lessons of Sandy and Detroit — block by block, brick by brick.

We need space and find space it on offer from our friends in the radical faith community. Faith spaces are numerous throughout the city and largely underutilized. They have a readymade physical infrastructure and local community roots. We begin cultivating a network of spaces to build communities of resistance and experimenting with forms of organizing and noncapitalist economic systems capable of reproducing themselves.

We declare Jubilee House. In faith traditions around the world, Jubilee names the cancellation of debts, the redistribution of land and the liberation of slaves. One version of the story emphasizes the generosity of the rulers from on high. But another celebrates the power of the enslaved, the exploited, the indebted and the evicted to declare their own jubilee. Looking to militant struggles from the origins of capitalism itself, our motto is *Omnia Sunt Communia!* Everything is Common!

Jubilee House is always and forever being built, like a multi-dimensional dwelling with twists, turns and secret tunnels all over the globe — a new chapter in the story of the “mole” of communism celebrated by Marx. Imagine Jubilee Houses opening its halls of fellowship in an episcopal church in Brooklyn, a mosque in Bay Ridge, a burnt out shopping mall in Buffalo, a shuttered school in Detroit, a community center in Cleveland. This would be the work not only for our activists, organizers, and clergy, but for our poets, musicians and workers. Jubilee House will be our choice in the land of no-choice.

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Do you remember when they said it was the end of history?
 Do you remember when we couldn't imagine?
 Do you remember when a borderless world wasn't possible?
 Do you remember when the crack opened beneath our feet?
 The liberated territories are coming...

حتى النصر

حتى النصر



1. Image courtesy of MTL 2010, somewhere in occupied Palestine, documenting the roads and geographies leading to conversation.

1.2. Image courtesy of MTL 2010, in Bryant Park, Manhattan.

1.3. Image courtesy of MTL 2010, on Governors Island Ferry.



2. Image courtesy of MTL 2011, Newspaper Action, translating headlines of front pages of Arabic language newspapers in wide-circulation in occupied Palestine and other Arabic-speaking countries during the 'Arab Spring' and distributing in and around New York.



3. Image courtesy of MTL 2011, Zuccotti Park, New York, during the occupation of Wall Street.

4. Image courtesy of MTL 2012, a wall in Bushwick, Brooklyn.





5. Image courtesy of MTL 2012, somewhere in Far Rockaway, Brooklyn, after Hurricane Sandy had struck.

6. Image courtesy of MTL 2012, Far Rockaway Beach, Brooklyn, after Hurricane Sandy had struck.

7. Image courtesy of MTL 2012, #ClimateStrikeNYC.



8. Image courtesy of G.U.L.F. March 24, 2014, Illumination Action targeting the facade of the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

9. Image courtesy of G.U.L.F. March 29, 2014, Fake-Dollar Bills Action inside the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

Marina Berio is a visual artist who works with drawing and photography, images and materials. She has exhibited and published her work internationally, and has been awarded several grants and residencies. She earned her MFA at Bard College, and is Chair of the General Studies Program at the International Center of Photography. Trying to conceptualize the role of politics in her work and life trips her up, so she prefers to use words like ethics, neighborhood, community, and compassion to describe the ways in which she is thinking about her desires for change. marinaberio.net

Malene Dam is a curator and artist currently based in Copenhagen and a recent graduate from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College. She engages in an array of issues related to contemporary society, most recently with a strong focus on queer temporality, histories of feminism, education, and conflict. Her research-based practice addresses temporal and spatial notions of cultural collectivizations, inquiring how discourses situate themselves as knowledge. She holds a BFA from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, a MFA in Photography and Media from CalArts and a MA in Curatorial Studies from CCS Bard.

Nitasha Dhillon and Amin Husain are MTL, a collaboration that joins research, aesthetics and organizing in its practice. MTL's underlying interest is the experience of being human and the broader cultural and social arrangements that make up our lives. Nitasha Dhillon (b.1985, India) and Amin Husain (b.1975, Palestine/USA) attended the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York and the School of International Center of Photography. They were both deeply involved in Occupy Wall Street and continue to edit and publish Tidal, Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy, tidalmag.org, a strategic platform that weaves together the voices of on-the-ground organizers with those of longstanding

theorists to explore the possibilities created by the rupture of Occupy and its aftermath. Most recently, they helped found Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) and the Direct Action Front for Palestine (DAFP). mtlcollective.org

Allen Frame is represented by Gitterman Gallery in New York where he has had solo exhibitions in 2005, 2009, and 2013. His exhibition, "Dialogue with Bolaño," was presented at the Museum De Arte De Sonora in Hermosillo, Mexico, in 2014. His book *Detour*, a compilation of his photographs over a decade, was published by Kehrer Verlag Heidelberg in 2001. He teaches photography at Pratt Institute (MFA), the School of Visual Arts (BFA), and the International Center of Photography. He is an Executive Producer of Joshua Sanchez's feature film *Four*, released in 2013, and he serves as a board member of Baxter St at the Camera Club of New York. He graduated from Harvard University in 1974. allenframe.net

Bridget de Gersigny, is a South African multi-disciplinary visual artist based in Brooklyn, working primarily in video, installation, and sound. Having grown up under apartheid and experiencing the ripping shift from oppression to democracy in her teens, made her super aware of the space between impassioned belief and error. A place where fundamental ideologies collided. She creates interactive multimedia installations, bringing to consciousness aspects of those things, like looking at very long histories or different ways of relations of how things exist and shape our perceptions. Her work engages in the intersection of the queer community and other communities. Bridget is a 2013 ICP-Bard MFA graduate and holds a BA (Hons) degree from the University of Cape Town and an honors in Art from University of South Africa. She works for Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, an organization that directs resources to activists and artists working for systemic change. bridgetdegersigny.com

Zee de Gersigny is Bridget's partner.

Adam Golfer is a photography/video-based artist from Brooklyn, NY and an MFA candidate at Hunter College. Since graduating from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2007, he has worked as a freelance photographer, shooting assignments for TIME, FADER, The Wall Street Journal and Die Zeit. His most recent video work, *We'll Do the Rest*, is loosely based around the dream narrative of a female drone pilot, the murder of Tupac Shakur in 1996, and high school gang violence in Baton Rouge, LA. Through interviews, staged performances and found footage, the film deconstructs and reimagines a series of experiences and questions the subjective nature of memory. Adam is currently finishing a book of photographs that negotiates the deeply contested and fractured histories of Palestine through photographs, archival objects, and cultural artifacts and is in the early stages of a new film about individuals with multiple identities. adamgolfer.com

Ashley Hunt uses image, object, word and performance-based strategies to engage the ideas of social movements, modes of learning, and the relationships between our art worlds and the larger worlds in which they sit. His work is often concerned with questions of power and the ways that some people have more, others have less, and what can be done about that. Ashley's works include the performance, *Notes on the Emptying of a City*, a dismantled film that recounts his time in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina; *Communograph*, a multi-platform project with Project Row Houses in Houston; his ongoing collaboration with dance and performance artist, Taisha Paggett, which goes under the heading, *On Movement, Thought and Politics*; the collaborative video installation, *9 Scripts from a Nation at War*, produced for documenta 12 with Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes, Katya Sander and David Thorne. His

Corrections Documentary Project, a body of work addressing the aesthetics and politics of prison expansion in the U.S., includes nine video works, photography and mappings that span fifteen years of research, production and organizing. ashleyhuntwork.net

Carlos Motta is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work draws upon political history in an attempt to create counter narratives that recognize the inclusion of suppressed histories, communities, and identities. Motta is a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program (2006), was named a Guggenheim Foundation Fellow (2008), and received grants from Art Matters (2008), NYSCA (2010), Creative Capital Foundation and the Kindle Project (2012). He is part of the faculty at Parsons The New School of Design, The School of Visual Arts and is visiting faculty at Pratt Institute School of Art and Design in the spring 2014. carlosmotta.com

Heather M. O'Brien is a Los Angeles based artist, educator and organizer who works with photography, text, performance and printed publications. She questions how life is impacted by the current political landscape, where media and capital form a complex relationship between the national and the global. Her work considers a re-telling of the patriarchal History she was taught growing up, while investigating our shared visual moment — a fractured space where corporate interest too often penetrates the optical experience. She holds a BA from Loyola University New Orleans, an Advanced Certificate from the International Center of Photography in New York, and a MFA in Photography and Media from CalArts. She is a founder of the Work Progress Collective in New York, a member of Critical Resistance and School of Echoes in Los Angeles and a professor of photography at Citrus College and Moorpark College in Southern California. heathermobrien.com

Gabriela Salazar is an artist, curator and writer living and working in New York. Her sculpture and installations have been exhibited across the US, most recently at the Lighthouse Works, Fishers Island, NY (Fellowship in Public Art); La Bienal: Here is Where We Jump, El Museo del Barrio, NY; and Building Materials, Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT; and been mentioned in The New York Times, The New Yorker, and Hyperallergic, among others. She earned a BA from Yale University, an MFA from RISD, and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in 2011. Salazar's residencies include the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and currently, LMCC's Workspace Program. Since 2012, Salazar co-directs the slide projector gallery Carousel with designer Mary Choueiter. Through sculpture, drawing, writing, and site interventions, her projects investigate the relationship between human-made spaces and structures and the unpredictable or invisible forces (the shifting of land, the pressures of gravity, the passing and layering of time) that act upon them. Within the phenomenological response to the work is the friction between our assumptions about and ideals for the built environment, and its simultaneous, imperfect, transient, and intangible realities. gabrielasalazar.com

Nicole Salazar is a journalist and visual artist based in New York City, currently working as an Associate Producer & Videographer on Fault Lines, an award-winning documentary series produced and broadcast by Al Jazeera English and Al Jazeera America. Prior to joining Fault Lines, Salazar was Multimedia Producer the independent TV and Radio News Program Democracy Now!, working on the daily broadcast and documenting stories throughout the U.S. and internationally. Her work has as appeared on Common Dreams, Jadaliyya, the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting blog, Urban Omnibus and AJA online.

Diego Sierralta was born 1981 and raised in Maracaibo, Venezuela. He graduated from La Universidad del Zulia in 2004 with a degree in Graphic Design and moved to New York in 2008 where he completed the General Studies program at the School at The International Center of Photography. He lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. diegosieralta.com

Felisia Tandiono's work serves as participatory platform to explore cultural production, history, socio-cultural anthropology and perception — many evoke sensory experiences. Her ongoing project is a research on scent and olfaction. She maintains both individual and collective practices and has exhibited work at Columbia University, NY; Bronx River Art Center, NY; Museum of Arts and Design, NY; Dumbo Arts Festival, NY; Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, NY. She had participated in residencies with Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) and International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP). She lives and works in Brooklyn. catalogfelisia.com

Samira Yamin's practice explores systems of knowledge production through systematic interventions at various points in the life of the photographic image. Using repetitive, precisely articulated gestures, Yamin dissects, reorganizes, and often obliterates documentary images, resulting in a collision of representation and abstraction and the confusion of objectivity and subjectivity. Yamin has had exhibitions at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles and will be an artist-in-residence at the Rauschenberg Residency in the fall of 2014. Yamin received dual BAs in studio art and sociology from the University of California, Los Angeles, and an MFA from the University of California, Irvine. She lives and works in Los Angeles. samirayamin.com

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Through dialogue and reflection, an exhibition which took place at the Camera Club of New York in April 2014, *I see in the sea nothing except the sea. I don't see a shore. I don't see a dove.* is reconsidered.

The document tells us nothing. Let's begin there. Now, what is the site? Is it here or is it there? How do we tell this story? A conscious choice is made to tell it otherwise — to mull over media, memorial, technology, detention. That which is unseen begins to leak, and slowly we begin to see: blue, white, foam, waves.

The tide is rising. Can we separate art and the way we choose to live? How do we rearrange our desires?

