

An interview between collaborators
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C: What was your favorite moment/action/happening of *The Tea Party* and why?

F: I truly don't have a favorite amongst our many activities. I think all the parts worked best as a whole, but if I had to choose, I guess I really liked going to the protests with the ACLU and the National Lawyer's Guild. I enjoyed using our project to contribute to an organized activity, something that we could fit into positively without being the main act. I also got a lot out of the energy of being there, because I felt excited about our contribution to the event. I don't get this feeling when I show up to a protest and hold a pre-fab sign, even though I might feel very strongly about the cause. It was similar to how I felt when Pink Bloque came to Pittsburgh and we learned dance moves together, and the workshop I did with Bread & Puppet. I'm really interested in creative resistance that is fun to do and fun for people to watch.

You didn't get to come with me for this one but my other favorite activity was going to Johnny Carrera's studio (Quercus Press in Waltham, MA). He greeted me at the door in full costume and in your absence it was like he became a surrogate or honorary *Tea Party* member. I liked the ambiguity in the meaning of my visit with him, in that it was very much art meeting everyday life.

C: When I think back about how you and I begin a project, it's difficult to characterize or analyze how it happens, but I'll try. It seems that we both use a combination of intuition (or in other words, a kind of a gut reaction to a circumstance or place- or even language) and then we explore that initial impulse with a more reasoned or intellectual inquiry into that idea. There seems to be a combination of those approaches: each of us responding and challenging an intuitive proposal with pragmatic questions of intent and purpose and expected outcome. Is that how you would characterize it? How would you compare this beginning stage of our collaborative works with the beginning stages in your work?

F: Although I never thought about it this way, it is a pretty accurate description, and similar to a process I use often in my solo work.

There is a delicate balance that is difficult to achieve, it lies between innovation and something that is purely about achieving a certain set of goals. Sometimes you have to let go with the intuitive process before cutting it off with the pragmatic questions. I think that if you cut it off prematurely, it's easy to edit out the wacky, weird stuff that comes out of playing with ideas and daring to do something illogical.

But I would also add that the myth of art production is that it is all intuitive and saturated in personal motivations, disregarding pragmatism or logic or questions of intent. Of course this is the romantic notion of the artists' muse, and a lot of art that follows this myth is pretty banal.

C: I don't think we've ever discussed why we are twins. Can you talk a little bit about why you choose to be a twin?

F: The use of identical costumes is not necessarily about becoming twins, but in creating a sense of uniformity. This also has to do with a desire for the piece to create a quality of legitimacy that is not available when people are dressed differently. By legitimacy, I mean a sense of organization and authority that comes when you dress in a way that is pre-meditated.

When two otherwise different people dress identically, it has obviously been pre-planned, or it has been required of them by some authority. This aura of authority is meant to transfer to the personalities wearing the identical clothing; it is supposed to drown out any sense of individuality and to unify them to be part of some kind of team effort. But when the outfits are weird or funny, like they were with both *Searching for the Fourth River* and *The Tea Party*, hopefully it enables the spectator to question the authority that requires such comical uniformity. Also, the fact that there are only two people works to our advantage because it further confuses the idea of group identity that is associated with uniforms. It leads people to question the very basis of the uniform: Was it just a coincidence? Are there really only two of these characters, or did they get separated from a larger group?

C: When we talk about the Tea Party project, some people seem confused by the direct political statements that we make because they are combined with silliness, humor and play. Why do you think this is? And why do you think it's important that we have both? Or do you? Do you think this may change in the future?

F: I play with political issues because I don't really know how to talk about politics any other way. The structure of it, the total enormity and our lack of power as individuals within institutions: these things are totally ridiculous to me. If I can't laugh about it, I feel paralyzed and hopeless. Of course I take it very seriously too. There are many people doing serious work around social change. I'm a willing participant and audience for traditional activism and documentary, or traditional means of disseminating information. But my contribution is dedicated to finding strategies to talk to people about issues that, in our culture, we try so desperately to drown out. So many people nowadays claim to get their news only from Jon Stewart. The daily barrage of silliness that spews from mainstream news is only detected when people don't agree with the representation of a certain issue, and this does not happen nearly enough. Whereas Jon Stewart is not hiding his use of fiction and humor. In our projects we are adding to this mix, but on a more grassroots level. So yes, I do think it's important to have both, in that it is a strategy to maintain accessibility to otherwise difficult subject matter and to expose the fiction inherent in any version of history and politics. Also, the confusion is extremely positive in my mind, because it provides a deconstructing force that I hope to encourage for any mediated experience.

C: With *The Tea Party*, I pulled back at the last minute, on one of our more potentially charged political actions. You were willing to risk arrest. Do you regret that *The Tea Party* didn't do that action as originally planned it (putting orange flags directly outside of T stops)?

F: I don't actively regret not doing this action the way we originally planned it, but I'm curious about what would have happened. With work in the public it is easy to second-guess ourselves, to try and predict how people and authorities will respond. But that is absolutely a requirement too; we have to prepare and take responsibility for whatever happens as a result. It is wiser to err on the side of caution, but there is value to risk-taking. Interventions into the public sphere are inherently riskier than work in the gallery, so we are already challenging ourselves on the most basic level, and I'm glad for that. You know what to expect from people when they enter a gallery, and you have a general idea of the kind of people who go to galleries. Anything can be transgressive outside the safety of arts institutions, especially now with the fascistic tendencies of the current U.S. government administration. In a recent lecture, Steve Kurtz talked about Critical Art Ensemble's history of confrontations with authority. He presented several projects that are precursors to the highly visible federal case CAE is a part of now. One of the first examples, which CAE also writes about in their book *Electronic Civil Disobedience*, involved an adult playing with toy cars in public. It seems absurd, but most every time, police or security would show up and ask them to leave. We need moments like this to stay aware of the nature of our culture. Artists can raise this awareness, if they are willing to take risks in their work. Throughout the talk, Steve highlighted the lack of freedoms that we have in our society, but ultimately he emphasized that it's never worth it to go to jail for art. I agree, but there are gestures that reveal these lack of freedoms, and for that, I am willing to take my chances.

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F: I just read something Meg (Meg Rotzel, Director of the Berwick Research Institute) wrote that called our endeavors a series of mini-projects. And I recall when you were talking about it at some point, you really emphasized the process aspect of the project.

I wonder what you think about issues of scale as related to this project: Is it possible for our work to create an impact on us, or on the audience, through a series of short-term actions? How do you feel about the way that the project developed in a series of smaller elements?

C: I do think it is possible for our work, or work of this kind, to create an impact on us and the audience, and I think *The Tea Party* did. Some of the evidence of this is that it captured the attention of a number of news media. Having our picture on the front page

of the *Christian Science Monitor* is evidence that one of our short-term actions both captured the public eye and in doing so, made an impact. Additionally, a friend of mine (who was not in Boston) was particularly excited about the buttons that we made out of parking tickets and distributed freely. These were intended to spark conversation about creative conversions for parking lots and even though my friend is pretty removed from the parking problems of Boston, this part of the piece struck her as particularly imaginative and inspiring.

The public tea party-picnic on the Esplanade that ended the project was a nice way to reconnect with an audience that had been aware of our presence and aware of our activities and intentions, even if they weren't witness to them. I think that is one thing I miss about a project based on smaller parts. I miss an audience. Without a consistent audience we are the only witnesses to the entire performance.

F: I have been reading a lot of writings by Mike Kelley, who began to write critically about his own work to represent it more accurately than he felt art critics could. I really believe in this idea of self-representation, but I'm also really interested in interventions into mass media as well. What are your thoughts about having control over how the work is defined, in the way that Kelley represents himself, and in giving up this control to be represented by others?

C: I'm really glad we are representing ourselves in this format: writing this interview rather than being interviewed (and in addition to Courtney's piece). I feel that perhaps both are necessary. For me it's important that the work, and in our case the documentation, speak for itself. In documentation, we are, of course, representing ourselves. We edit some things and emphasize others. I think it's important for the work to communicate with someone without the intermediary of the artist. But I agree with Kelley, *too often* artists defer to a critic or writer as if we are not *able* to speak about our own work.

F: With both of our projects we have had different experiences with media. We have been covered as a news story and as an arts feature. We have also created our own bits of media, in a way, with the pamphlets and tea bags that we hand out, and our website. How have your thoughts about the media as a means of "distributing" a performance art piece been informed by the experiences that we've had?

C: I am most interested in opportunities to be the feature story, and tell a story through a TV spot as we did with the *Fourth River*. In fact, I would also be interested in doing a project that was solely about media infiltration. But I also feel that the small features in a number of newspapers created a web of information about us, and the project was significantly larger in context because of them. I think this was particularly important in a city like Boston and I would definitely seek it out in other places.

F: After our first project, *Searching for the Fourth River*, we wrote about the idea of audience-participant, and the ways in which conflating spectatorship,

authorship, and participation can affect the way the content and meaning of a piece is generated. Do you think *The Tea Party* created effective audience-participant relationships? How would you update or expand upon the idea of audience-participant now, after the experience of *The Tea Party*?

C: I feel like the main difference between *Searching for the Fourth River* and *The Tea Party* was our relationship to audience and participants. *The Tea Party* was much more about promoting an ideology (less oil dependency, defiance of “homeland security”-type measures, limiting gentrification), than offering situations for co-creation as the *Fourth River* did. With the *The Tea Party*, we were lobbying, protesting, and situating our costumed selves in provocative locations.

As for the future, expanding or updating this idea: I would like to continue to work in this format of co-creation with the audience member. That is a big emphasis in my new project with the houseboat. But I also feel like I now have an understanding that the audience/participant relationship can never be non-hierarchical: the artist or initiator will always be more powerful in the creative process than the audience-participant. And I feel OK with that. I still think that work with an emphasis on gathering multiple perspectives/stories is some of the most interesting work.

F: I’ve been thinking a lot about documentation methods for public interventions and performances. I wonder what lessons you’ve learned about this from *The Tea Party*? Do you feel that it was made only for the people of Boston in the summer of 2004, or do you think it has a life for other audiences after this time?

C: I feel like *The Tea Party* should have a life beyond summer of 2004, for me to feel satisfied with the project. I do feel like the web is a great tool for communication and documentation. I love that we had a website as an on-going component of our Boston experience, but it was hard to work on both ours and update the Berwick’s at the same time. I would definitely use a website again. I think the web-based documentation is something that will get easier as we go along. And we will find strategies that work: something really simple yet clear and accessible. I love N55’s website for this reason.

Earlier, when I was speaking about not having a constant audience for a piece that is divided up into parts, I wondered how Lone Twin (British performance duo) deals with that. Their practice often doesn’t involve an audience for its entirety and they don’t have a documentary web site. But they do have staged performances in which they do a kind of re-enactment of their walks. They embellish it with stories and use choreographed movements to involve the art audience into performances that originally have only incidental audiences and audience-participants.

F: When I gave a presentation about our work recently, it was difficult for me to articulate the kind hype that had built up around the DNC’s visit to Boston, even though it was only a couple of weeks after the election in November. When I’m doing the work, it seems so important for it to be relevant to current events, in particular the way we addressed the issue of the baggage searches on the T.

This project was so particular to this moment in time; do you have any thoughts about how this kind of timeliness affects artwork? In particular I am curious what you think about the relationship between specificity of subject matter and accessibility to more diverse audiences (outside the time and place the piece was made)?

C: I think you bring up a really important point with this question. I feel like all artwork has meaning specific to the context in which it was made, but sometimes the meaning changes. I was just reading this book by Ivan Illich called, *H₂O and the Waters of Forgetfulness*. He talks about how late 19th century artists like Degas and Ingres began painting women in bathtubs. Before that women had not been painted in bathtubs. The domestication of sexuality and women's bodies was a significant shift which reflected on the Victorian views of femininity, women's' sexuality, and the iconography of water.

You know, when I look at the work of the Situationist International, that movement was so specific to what was happening in 1968 in France and in the world: student riots in Paris, the killing of Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy. The work of the Situationists has been tremendously influential on contemporary art, to people as diverse as Julie Mehretu and Jenny Holzer. But it wasn't until I began to look at their work in the context of the time period that I understood it fully.

I think our work, specific to the DNC and the local hype and paranoia during those two preceding months, also touched on some subjects that are translatable to a wider spectrum of time/space: freedom of speech, surveillance, oil dependency, gentrification.

F: There were aspects of the project that we worked on alone, and things we worked on together. Could you tell me how you felt about this distribution, especially as it relates to your period of working now (in which you are doing an ostensibly solo project). Do you think there is room to have an individual and collaborative practice at the same time? How will you structure your practice in the future?

C: I really liked having solo or sub-projects as part of our residency. I wish that the inflatable horse (my project) were more integrated into some action or performance as we had initially talked about. The website, as I said earlier, was integrated more and beneficial to the work as a whole. The Reagan video (one of your sub-projects) was helpful in that it was in the beginning and we got out into the public. I feel like it was a good exercise: a warm up. Perhaps for you, since you took the lead on that one, it had even more significance as part of your body of work. Overall, I think sub-projects are a beneficial way of working. I would like to develop it to the level where independent projects could be working toward the same collaborative effort and feed and influence each other.

You know, I would like to ask you to answer the first question that you asked me.

F: Which was that?

C: The question about making work that is comprised of a number of smaller scale projects.

F: I tend to do a lot of smaller scale projects. I think that I would probably want to continue with this kind of working process, it really keeps me interested and motivated. But I have been spending a lot of time now considering the value of the documentation and presentation mode, and I am becoming interested in the idea of creating stories after the fact, to embellish the “real” things that happened. Would it be interesting to discover a new platform for *The Tea Party* to transfer their energies? For example, Reverend Billy began with the Church of Stop Shopping. He now uses this character to preach about everything from Halliburton to Starbucks. Our *Tea Party* characters were like this: their interest in one issue naturally overlapped with other connected issues. I am interested in creating a project that can be very specific, but that is transferable with some tweaking as well. And yes, I am very interested in Lone Twin’s strategy for creating new lives for the same project. I think this is what we will have to do, if we are to build something substantial for ourselves to learn from without getting burned by trying to start from scratch every time. It could be anything really: the *Fourth River* investigators could tackle other urban legends, *The Tea Party* could begin its 2008 campaign now. I would like to continue working with you and I know that we will have other commitments vying for our time.