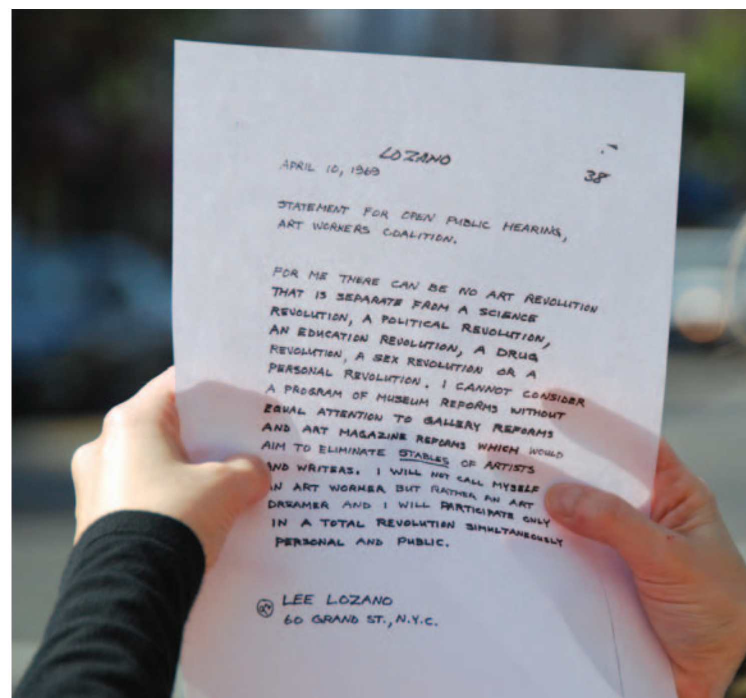
Sounding the Fury

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON ON KIRSTEN FORKERT AND MARK TRIBE


LOZANO
APRIL 10, 1969
38

STATEMENT FOR OPEN PUBLIC HEARING,
ART WORKERS COALITION.

FOR ME THERE CAN BE NO ART REVOLUTION
THAT IS SEPARATE FROM A SCIENCE
REVOLUTION, A POLITICAL REVOLUTION,
AN EDUCATION REVOLUTION, A DRUG
REVOLUTION, A SEX REVOLUTION OR A
PERSONAL REVOLUTION. I CANNOT CONSIDER
A PROGRAM OF MUSEUM REFORMS WITHOUT
EQUAL ATTENTION TO GALLERY REFORMS
AND ART MAGAZINE REFORMS WHICH WOULD
AIM TO ELIMINATE STABLES OF ARTISTS
AND WRITERS. I WILL NOT CALL MYSELF
AN ART WORKER BUT RATHER AN ART
DREAMER AND I WILL PARTICIPATE ONLY
IN A TOTAL REVOLUTION SIMULTANEOUSLY
PERSONAL AND PUBLIC.

LEE LOZANO
60 GRAND ST., N.Y.C.

Lee Lozano's statement from the Art Workers' Coalition 1969 open hearing, as a public speech reenactment organized by the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, outside Southern Exposure, San Francisco, May 18–19, 2007. Photo: Steve Rhodes.

"THE ART WORLD IS A POISON in the community of artists and must be removed by obliteration," asserted Carl Andre at a late-1960s meeting of the Art Workers' Coalition, calling for the demolition of a system that he deemed a source of "infinite corruption." His demands were sweeping: "No more 'shows'"; "No more 'scene'"; "No more big-money artists." An audio recording reveals that Andre's invective elicited loud applause, and indeed, amid the current orgy of commercialism, his anger retains its relevance, although his idealism seems outmoded. But as it turns out, the speech was not his own: It was penned by *Artforum*'s editor at the time, Philip Leider, as a parody of radical rhetoric; the artist appropriated the text, reading it word for word with full conviction. From satire to sincerity—it is hard to untangle Leider's ironic exaggeration or hyperbole from Andre's actual political passion, to get a handle on the exact pitch of this polemic.

This speech and the others presented that day form the basis of Canadian artist Kirsten Forkert's project *Art Workers' Coalition (Revisited)*, 2006–. To better grasp this work, one first needs to look back on some history. Founded in New York in 1969, the AWC brought artists and critics together to protest for artists' rights and forge alternatives to the individualistic nature of the rapidly exploding art industry; it was also involved in wider political issues such as demonstrating against the Vietnam War. Andre's presentation was given at one of the largest events in the AWC's brief life, an hours-long public "open hearing" held on April 10, 1969, at the School of Visual Arts in New York, attended by hundreds of artists, critics, and curators. The meeting's stated focus was to examine "the program of the art workers regarding museum reform, and to establish the program of an open art workers coalition." Almost seventy people delivered short talks on a range of topics: artists' solidarity, the commodification of art, and museums' connections to the military-industrial complex.

These manifestos—some handwritten, some typed out but bearing hasty additions or last-minute revisions—were collected into a volume that has since languished in relative obscurity, known mostly to scholars of the period and artists (such as Andrea Fraser) who have investigated modes of artistic labor. For her part, Forkert found the book in the library of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York while researching artists' collectives, and she was struck by how the texts oscillate between the hopelessly naive and the eerily pertinent, even forty years on. At a session of a conference on "Rethinking Marxism," held in 2006 at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Forkert passed out copies of these documents and asked conference participants to read the texts aloud, giving voice to the words of the AWC artists as they demanded mild reforms as well as profound transformations of the art system. Faith Ringgold denounced art institutions' racist exclusions; Anita Steckel excoriated the sexism of the art press. Some flirted with more revolutionary proposals—Frederick Castle called for the renunciation of private property. Dan Graham claimed, "The art world stinks; it is made of people who collectively dig the shit; now seems to be the time to get the collective shit out of the system." (Graham's suggested solution—dematerialized conceptual art—has proved no escape from the rapaciousness of the market, but the overall tenor of his dismay still rings true.) Possibly most radical of all was Lee Lozano's brief text, in which she refused to participate in an "art revolution that is separate from a science revolution, a political revolution, an education revolution, a drug revolution, a sex revolution or a personal revolution." Lozano rejected the label *art worker*, calling herself an *art dreamer*. She went on to announce a "total revolution simultaneously personal and public." The speech was given in conjunction with her *General Strike Piece*, begun that same year; Lozano made good on her word and soon dropped out of the art world altogether.

How do these proposals resonate today? *Art Workers' Coalition (Revisited)* unearths and vocalizes words from the past, in part to hear how (and if) such words might still carry force. Forkert is not interested in simply recirculating documents that have been somewhat lost in the shuffle of time, but in literally rehearsing such statements, to audibly try them out and test their tone anew. In conjunction with the Los Angeles–based *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, whose recent issue (edited by Cara Baldwin, Marc Herbst, and Christina Ulke) focuses on political speech, Forkert scanned many of the transcripts from the AWC open hearing for an online text and sound piece. She also recorded artists, writers, and critics reading the transcripts aloud. These audio files are posted on the journal's website alongside interviews in which the re-speakers discuss how the texts sound when spoken within a different temporal and political climate. (The journal has also held public readings of Lozano's manifesto.) Some retain their rousing urgency, but some overheated assertions come off as dated or, worse, borderline offensive, and Forkert's recordings at times reflect the

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From top: **Mark Tribe, *Port Huron Project 1: Until the Last Gun Is Silent*, 2006.** Performance view, Central Park, New York, September 16, 2006. Coretta Scott King (Gina Brown). Photo: Winona Barton Ballentine. **Coretta Scott King addressing a peace rally in Central Park, New York, April 27, 1968.** Photo: Corbis.

contemporary readers' skepticism. For instance, artist Jee-Eun Kim reads Iain Whitecross with measured sarcasm, in particular when Whitecross asserts that artists are "exploit[ed] and manipulate[d] . . . . Like women, like the black people." In her follow-up interview with Forkert, Kim discusses the tensions and contradictions that attend these racist and sexist metaphors. And Los Angeles artist David Burns, who reads Graham's words, notes their macho extremism and concludes, "I can't take it very seriously."

Forkert's work exists in an expanding field of re-enactment projects that return to the Vietnam War era—other artists include John Malpede, Lana Lin and H. Lan Thao Lam, Sharon Hayes, and media artist collective BLW. For these artists, archival texts such as interviews, propaganda films, and phone calls are scripts to be performed as much as they are historical documents. The contemporary upsurge in rearticulating this period might stem from the need, in the midst of grotesque distortions, half-truths, and revisionist histories, to set the record straight, or even, for a younger generation, to *hear* the record in the first place. This continues to be a critical task as this contested era is subject to constant rewriting.

In this regard, it is notable that for Forkert's audio archive, Carl Andre's text was read by New York– and Providence, Rhode Island–based Mark Tribe, another artist engaged in such work. In his ongoing *Port Huron Project*—named after the manifesto Tom Hayden drafted for a 1962 meeting of Students for a Democratic Society, which became a clarion call for the New Left—Tribe restages protest speeches from the 1960s and '70s, employing professional actors to perform the texts. The first reenactment was of Coretta Scott King's 1968 address to a rally in Central Park, three weeks after the death of her husband (*Port Huron Project 1: Until the Last Gun Is Silent*, 2006), which was followed by Howard Zinn's speech at a 1971 peace rally in Boston (*Port Huron Project 2: The Problem Is Civil Disobedience*, 2007), and Paul Potter's 1965 anti–Vietnam War speech (*Port Huron Project 3: We Must Name the System*, 2007). Creative Time is sponsoring three more speeches—first given by Bobby Seale, César Chávez, and Stokely Carmichael—later this year. Tribe, who teaches at Brown University and is the founder of the media-art website Rhizome, has also posted videos of these events online on multiple sites, to be watched by a more atomized—but potentially global—audience.

Tribe's reenactments take place at the sites of the original speeches, and the actors are cast and costumed to resemble the orators, maintaining a certain visual fidelity to the historical events. The impassioned texts are delivered with emotion—but the stirring cries for mass protest are made poignant, if not absurd, as they are spoken live before small gatherings rather than to the vast crowds that first witnessed them. For instance, Potter's speech refers to the twenty thousand people the activist was addressing in 1965; in the 2007 version, only a few dozen were present. The *Port Huron Project* obviates distinctions among art, theater, protest, and research, and the content of the speeches toggles between the dead-on and the dated. There are moments that seem almost uncanny, such as when speakers discuss a climate of repression and an administration justifying war with lies and false documents. Zinn denounces the "calm, smiling, murderous president"; this image surely suits the present. But there are also moments of strange disjuncture, most especially the speakers' calls to civil disobedience and their shared conviction about the efficacy of such actions. Scott King's announcement that "never in the history of this nation have the people been so forceful in reversing the policy of our government in regard to war" might have been true for Vietnam, but so far, it has limited applicability for Iraq.

In an interview with Ulke in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, Tribe explains that he started the *Port Huron Project* after seeing how politically uninvolved his students were. Tribe's work is tinged with nostalgia for a time when students and artists really thought they could change the world by putting their bodies on the street. But it also underscores that we have few current models of well-placed righteous anger, and that past structures of protest are perhaps insufficient today. "Nostalgia" is, of course, the bête noire of any scholarly or artistic return to the '60s and '70s, but there need not be a false binary between indulgent hero worship and outright dismissal. Forkert's participants largely steer clear of overwrought romantic longing, while Tribe's speakers, by turns mournful and enraged, indicate a melancholic recognition of an eroded culture of indignation.

An intractable war overseas, a galloping art market, and widespread disputes about what constitutes artistic labor and how it should be compensated: Sound familiar? If the Iraq war, record-breaking auction prices, and the ongoing Writers Guild of America strike offer up potential parallels between today and forty years ago, Forkert and Tribe also highlight how much has changed. For one thing, both comment on the decreasing primacy of massed bodies in public protest—it is difficult to picture hundreds of artists sitting through a four-hour open-mic meeting about museum reform today. Tribe's work pays homage to antiwar rallies and marches even as it acknowledges that today much protest takes the far quicker, less engaged form of Internet petitions. Fewer outlets exist in which to give voice to revolutionary hope and fervor, much less rage. More than just recovering the past, these re-speaking projects use archival speeches to ask questions about the current place of stridency and forceful dissent, and the possibilities of effective, galvanizing political discourse. ☐

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