



[Home](#) | [Seminars](#) | [Speakers' Profiles](#) | [Core Participants](#) | [Programme Structure](#) | [PDF List](#) | [Bibliography](#) | [About us](#)

Working in public seminar series: Art, Practice and Policy

Seminar 3: Quality and Imperfection

Wednesday 20 June 2007

The Oakland Projects: the issue of assessing quality



Suzanne Lacy

Suzanne Lacy One of the things Simon said last night that I found very interesting was - How do we imagine the world; and how do we imagine it differently?

In the processes I work in, it is the act of listening that, in fact, changes and challenges our pre-existing imaginations. Listening collectively shapes another imaginary through multiple experiences. This is one of the points that I want to make through the one project I am talking about today.

One of the questions that Simon's work raises for me is -What happens with that notion of multiple imaginaries? What happens to the notion of a multiple and fractured public when you move into ever proportionately larger works of art within ever proportionately larger public spheres?

The project that I am going to talk about this morning is one that we have not discussed. Simon and I agreed last night at about one o'clock that quality was not something that we naturally associated with as an idea, but imperfection was certainly something that we were quite comfortable with. I think that I could have applied this sort of thinking about quality and imperfection to any of these projects.

The notion of imperfection probably emerged about the middle of *Code 33*. *Imperfect Art: Working in Public* is the title of my book on this series. We had removed the glass from a giant window up above the entire parking structure and I was standing up there in the wind, looking down several floors at the Free Mumia protesters. They were just about to blow an entire three-years' worth of work, and I thought, 'Ha! That is really interesting, isn't it?' It was a sort of bemusement – a disinterested bemusement on the inevitability of imperfection in this work and its complexities.

I certainly would consider some of my works as perfect. What I mean by perfect is that aesthetic sense that it 'works'. Sometimes that happens. It is rare. More often it does not work. If I use my own criteria of this sort of inner-sense of aesthetic competency or completion or wholeness, then most of my work does not really measure up to my interior gauge of what aesthetic quality is. Perfection is not the right word. In fact, the aesthetic operates on many, many dimensions from the visual to the relational or negotiable to the political. In which one of those spheres, or in what way are we going to assess a work's excellence or quality?

No Blood, No Foul 1995-6

Simon and I also had another conversation late last night. This was around whether or not it was even important to make that assessment. I am certainly open to the fact that the work represented in the Oakland series is a product of a different mode of address from mainstream art. I started arguing for this kind of work in 1970. At that time the easy dismissal was, it was not art. It evolved from that to - it was not good art. I think throughout the history of this kind of work, its positionality with respect to the art world is somewhat tortured and therefore quite interesting.

The work I am going to show you this morning, called *No Blood, No Foul* 1995-6, is part of a series of three inter-connected works. Starting with *Roof is on Fire* 1993-4 (which is not one of the inter-connected works), the young people identified the subjects that were of deepest interest to them to pursue. The relationship of youth to the criminal justice system was one. To begin that, I leaned over at the screening of *No Blood, No Foul* to the police chief, Joe Samuels, who I had just met and said, 'Wouldn't it be interesting to do a piece like this with police officers?' And he said, 'That's an interesting idea.' Between that moment in 1995 and 2000 (which was the completion of *Code 33*), all the works leading up to that were a way of intervening in the police department culture to allow the *Code 33* piece to take place.

The project began with a workshop called *Youth, Cops and Videotape*. We did a six-session seminar series with 15 kids and ten police officers. We facilitated the conversation and encouraged them to challenge each other. We got to a point of familiarity. We also took this workshop to different sites of contestation in the City. For example we took the workshop to a lake where there had been a youth riot. The police had come down heavy-handedly. We sat on the banks of the lake and talked about property. Even the police acknowledged that they represented the property owners in the neighbourhood. It was a very wide-ranging discussion that ended on the top of the roof where we did *The Roof is on Fire* and later *Code 33*. Sitting on top of that roof, the police officers began to talk about their own experience with drugs when they were in high school and how they had skipped out of school. There was a kind of evolution of familiarity and comfort with that project. We videotaped it (leaving out, of course, the officers' drug experience) and the tape was used in police training for a period of time.

The second piece was the one that I am going to talk about – *No Blood, No Foul*. The third piece, *Code 33*, was what I was ultimately aiming for during the course of those five years.

No Blood, No Foul is a basketball game (fig1). I have talked more than once about the condition of youth in California. I will just briefly mention that because it is critical background for this piece. California is one of the most diverse states in the United States. It has now reached the 50% people-of-colour mark and that has caused a great deal of consternation and adjustment within the white population. Oakland happens to be a kind of epicentre of dialogue on race and race relations. It is a community that has a long history of inter-marriage, inter-relationships between Black, White, Latino-White and Black-Latino. It is a very rich environment and that is particular to the success of this work. The work would operate differently in a different context. Certainly, this work would operate very differently in Los Angeles with the LAPD and its particular history. In California, the increase in diversity, like many places in the world, has brought with it a widening of the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest people. In fact, one of the statistics that I found most interesting was that as youth of colour increased in the population of California, the poverty rate of youth increased in parallel.

In the '90s in Oakland, youth culture was becoming a conversation. Oakland, alongside Brooklyn, was one of the two or three major epicentres of youth culture in the United States. *No Blood, No Foul* was part of a process. By the time that I was developing this work, I was working with a group of artists and a group of young people as well as City Council people. One of them, Sheila Jordan, decided to initiate the development of a youth policy. At that time I had just come back from Vancouver. Seattle had instituted a youth policy. In a few places around the country, councils had begun at city-level to institute youth policies. These policies gave certain rights and acknowledgements to young people as citizens. They were framed differently in different places, but they often delivered a stream of funding and even a youth bureau or a mayor's youth council.

In creating the Bill that would go through City Council to generate our youth policy, we developed a process of community consultation. When I say 'we', I want to be very clear that is not exclusively an art project. This is a project concerned with sharing a vision with Oakland. There was myself as artist, Sheila Jordan as a City Council and a group of people - the Urban Strategies Council that had carried out a lot of assessment of the indicators of youth wellbeing in Oakland. We were operating together to develop a consultative process. Some of those youth leaders that I had worked with in *Roof is on Fire* became the youth leaders of the City Council process in this project.

The art performance of *No Blood, No Foul* would operate as an announcement of the youth policy to the public the night before they were going to vote on the policy in City Council. We made sure the mayor and all the City Council people were there as well as the news media and a very large audience. The audience consisted of the breadth of people that live in Oakland - Latino, White, Black and Asian in terms of the constituencies that were probably fairly representative of the town across social class, education levels and generations (fig 2). I think there were maybe 500 people in the audience.

How did we decide on a basketball game? It was a way of using social engagement in a form that police culture was familiar with. We did not invent this form. There is a practice in the United States of young people and police officers playing basketball together. The performance was a much more mediated version and directed towards much more specific political ends.

Simon's thinking stimulated me to think about the various kinds of addresses that went on within this piece and the people and the publics that were collected here. There were young people - children, as well as teenagers from 14 to 18 (fig 3, fig 4, fig 5). There were a lot of artists, art spectators, NGO organisers, activists, city politicians and police. There were the patrons of Club 1, the health club in which the performance was held. It was actually my own health club. The patrons were still working out around the edges of this performance. The performance took place during an open night. Then there were many family members.

The game was constructed with a set of rules that were pre-determined. These rules established in my mind, the event as performance. It distinguished it from midnight basketball games where cops went out and played with the kids (fig 6).

This health club is interesting because it is the health club right next to City Hall so a good number of the politicians attend. It is also unique in its integration. African-American, White, Latino and Asian people all exercise alongside each other and all share fairly similar left-leaning political sentiments. That is the nature of Oakland and the nature of the professional class within it. It had an open session of basketball and so included working class people. Basketball is a very important sport in Oakland. It is one that almost everybody - men and women - engage in. During lunchtime this very high professional-orientated health club had people that would come in and pay their \$5 off the street and play pick-up ball with each other. This was a very active centre for the significance of that sport in the city centre.

We moved out all the exercise bikes. We installed a ring of television monitors in the back of part of the audience (fig 7). We installed an asphalt paper with lots of chalk and then placed various kinds of stereotypical questions such as 'When was the last time you encountered a police officer?' and 'What do you think about youth?'. Around these we had statistics of youth and prison incarceration that punctuated the space. The performance was also on television monitors that recorded the game with cut-aways to factual things like 'Homicide is the leading cause of death for youth in Oakland'. In addition, every time there was a foul, the lights would dim for a minute, and all the television monitors would come on. Either a police officer, or a youth, would talk about an experience with a police officer or a youth, or experience as a youth. Sometimes you could not tell the police officers from the young people. They would talk about being jacked by police officers when they were young, and how they were themselves now police officers.

The foul would be read as a discursive historical element of the players. In addition, we had what is called a basketball-of-colour commentator. That was a professional who was called upon to 'background' the players such as 'Jason is a youth who lives in Nickerson Gardens' and so on. This was the kind of narrative about the people that were playing ball. Those were some of the framing devices. Others included young people who were moving through the audience interviewing the audience about the youth policy and their perspective on young people. They had a set of questions. There were telephones in the lobby so that, as you went to the lobby or you left, you picked up and directly registered your opinion into a hotline for City Council members. There were youth documenters taking photographs.

There was quite a bit of tension in the beginning between the young people who were not selected for their particular 'appreciation' of the police officers. The officers, by and large, had a little more experience with the youth than this particular group had 'in a pleasant way', with the police officers. At the end of the game, the house lights went down and everybody went into small group huddles - officers and kids. After the adrenalin of a really hard-played basketball game, they had a different form of conversation with each other. They had a set of questions that loosely framed the discussion.

Youth Development and the Oakland Projects

As I mentioned last night, youth development is an important criterion of all of this work. I would not have gone into the community *knowing* in advance. This is something about which the young people and activists educated me through the course of this work. Most of the politics of this work are collaboratively framed. They do not just start as 'I have a brilliant insight into this problem and I do my work'. What happens is - 'I have an observation. I become curious. I bring my background to the picture and simply begin as we would do in this room. We would start talking and then the talking circles get wider and you even get referred to people who fundamentally disagree with you'.

For example, *Pueblo* was a police watch group who, fundamentally, disagreed with working with the police. Their position was, I think, a valid one. Their position was that one of the important ways of working with young people is to educate them into how to stand up to police officers. They would even give the young people cards that they would whip out of the back of their pocket articulating that young person's rights in any confrontation. I think that is as valid an operating procedure as is mentorship.

This work operates, as I have said repeatedly, in the context of a very activist community. The work is not only done by artists. It is participated in and designed by people in all forms of community.

Youth development, in particularly our case, did not mean learning your rights as a kid. It meant deconstructing imagery - particularly imagery of yourself as it existed in the media. It meant acquiring skills of public presentation. We taught the young people public speaking. We took them in front of Community Councils, Neighbourhood Watch Groups. It consisted of learning how to talk to the media as you will see in one of these news clips. It also consisted of skills in photography, video and performance as public communicative skills. Leuckessia (you might recognise her from *Roof is on Fire* as that articulate young woman) now has had some more training in working with the media. That is our notion of youth development. There is another area - how you take care of young people and make sure they are supported through the process of the work - that is different from youth development although it has relationships to it in terms of mentoring. The production team was made up of police officers, basketball jocks, teenagers and City Council people. They actually planned the performance itself along with artists.

The interesting thing to me about the game was that at each quarter we changed the referees. The first quarter was adult referees. In the second quarter we had young people as referees. It was not particularly announced but it became apparent that these were now different people making the calls. The third quarter was the no-referee - and that is 'no-blood-no-foul', the street game. If you do not draw blood, then it is probably not a foul. It means that basically you are calling your own game and the call is represented by the blood. At this stage there were no referees - it was just a game. In the fourth quarter the audience became referees and the colour commentator. Every time there was a foul, the colour commentator would ask the audience to vote on whether it was a foul or not, and whose foul, and so on. By this time the audience was screaming their lungs about one side or the other.

What I am going to do is show you a highly mediated version of this piece that is through news media. It is about six minutes. It is a couple of news clips. Keep in mind that, of course, it is filtered through the conventions and stereotypes of the media which are one of the forms of address (as Simon put it) that we have to think about as very complex. I wanted you to be able to hear a few of the people even though it is media-speak and also see some of the things that I have pointed out in the background like the television monitors.





Suzanne Lacy I am not naïve enough to think that, obviously, this transforms the relationship between youth and police and I am also very aware of a lot of the complexities and difficulties of everything from ethnicity to class that intervene in the system. Kids are beaten up. They are not going to stop being beaten up by cops. One of the key reasons we had decided to do the project is because of the incarceration rate in California i.e. at least three quarters of the people incarcerated are people of colour. One out of four young men in Oakland between 18 and 25 have had contact with the juvenile or the adult criminal system.

Justin, the young man who said 'we want to show the police a better aspect?' had gone to a juvenile gaol because the police misidentified him from one of his buddies in a housing complex doing drugs. He refused to tell the police that he was not the person. He refused to rat on his friend. What would have happened to him if he had ratted is also very complex. The culture of alignment against police and seeing the police as the enemy, and the culture of being gangsters against the police, badmouthing the police, is basically the first point of intervention between that young person (usually a young man) and the incarceration rate in California.

We decided we would work on that moment of contact. *Pueblo* was also working on that moment of contact by teaching young people their rights. We got feedback from the officers that worked with us (there are many officers that did not) about how their experience transformed their attitude towards young people, specifically on the street. Oddly enough young people began to develop allies in the police department. We also had anecdotes. Since I am not a great believer in anecdote as defining a reality, I am not going to tell you a lot of those except to say that we made the political decision to operate at that point of intervention in the street as a result of the larger social factors.

That is all I am going to talk about in this piece. It gives us a background. The imperfections in this work are many. The complexities about its political positioning, the contradictions and points of conflict in the work are many. My being white working in a largely Latino/Black community (as I pointed out many times) is one of the biggest problems. I wanted to bring this project up today in connection with the notion of imperfection because, of all this series, this is the one work that people have had a hard time seeing as an artwork. They will accept other performances or installations but this work attracted the comment, 'Well, it is an interesting basketball game' or 'It is an interesting social or political event, but is it art?' So I thought that might serve as a background for our conversation.

Grant and Simon, do you want to join me?

The morning discussion in this series is an expanded thesis advisory session. I begin by asking some questions of my colleagues. Grant is my adviser, but we have invited Simon to give input. I admire his work and I think it is very important for me to chew on it in terms of how it relates to my work.

You will all have questions as well from your own practices. I know you will jump in very quickly.

'Just as there is no complete ideal work, there is no ideal generalised spectator'

Simon, you said in one of the essays, 'Just as there is no complete ideal work, there is no ideal generalised spectator', and I agree with you. Yet, last night we talking about this word 'interesting' and maybe how 'interesting' as a word itself might cover up value judgements.

You showed an artwork that was a series of symbolic acts, I would say, rather than 'applied' in the way that my own work is - though it too is also symbolic to some degree.

Why did you show this work? What qualities did you single out as worth your while? If you do not want to talk about that work, maybe we could talk more abstractly. Are there specific characteristics that validate our attention to some work over others? I am asking not only about a personal level (that would be all be well and good if we were all operating just personally). There is a professional situation that we also operate in as artists and so, the question is, how do we evaluate this work and thereby begin to create an aesthetic framework or an aesthetic idea or, is that even a relevant question any more? Is that just a generational question? Is that something that I grew up with but that may not be as pertinent?

Simon Sheikh Well, it can be answered in many ways. First of all, I chose that particular video because I think it talks about the lack of imagination that I am interested in.

When I use a theoretical framework, I try to use it as a kind of prism through which to look at work, or even at the world. It is a toolbox. It is a limited view, like seeing through a filter. Through that theoretical framework we can have a discussion that is more discursive around artworks rather than about taste or a judgement of taste.

Let us say we are in a particular context and we try to identify that context in a specific way. Then we ask - How does an artwork relate itself to the delimitations of its horizon or the horizon of a current political hegemony at any given point? What will that tell us of the work? How can we then use our understanding to work within? This was the idea behind showing the work yesterday.

There were other reasons as well, namely that the film depicted a landscape that was difficult to identify. I thought that it would be an interesting thing to show here, rather than something that was very easily identifiable to a specific cultural context. I think it is a deliberate artistic choice in the film to have that landscape, namely to say that capital exists as a kind of universalising factor in the world today and that it appears almost like nature and as an endless horizon. This is why it is important to say that the work has to be installed with its glass wall so that you actually have an endless horizon. Secondly, I think it the film has a lot of imperfection in it. Maybe I should explain a little bit about how it was made in case some people were wondering. It started with a number of interviews with people on the street and with friends. These were then put into sequence. Scripts were created and then given to a number of actors who are all artists and friends of the artist. We asked them if they could say the words. The actors would retell the scripts in their own words, live and not read from the scripts. That is how it was made. It was a kind of re-representation of this impossible idea of the *vox populi* - that there is a voice of the people.

There are some strange metaphors at play. On the one hand, you have the voice of the people, but on the other hand you have the silent majority. I do not know how you can hear the silent majority if it is silent. I always wondered about that. In summary, that was why I chose that piece.

Suzanne Lacy Can you tell us what is successful about the film? What would be your own criteria for aesthetically, politically, compelling artwork?

Simon Sheikh Yes, I think it is actually quite difficult. Maybe my second answer is a more theoretical answer. It has to do with the idea of dematerialisation. I would actually say that the discussion of whether this basketball game is a work of art or not, is completely irrelevant to me because those boundaries are so dissolved and *anything* can be a work of art. I think we just have to accept that as an historical situation. Some might bemoan that, but ...

Suzanne Lacy But is it a *good* work of art? Because I think that is only the same question in advance.



Simon Sheikh

Simon Sheikh If we do not have a concept of what something is as an object of study, then it is impossible to have a value system that is coherent in any way. I think that is why art criticism seems to be so random. Is it maybe also why art criticism is increasingly irrelevant - irrelevant, that is, for the market. It has been said that the role of the critic has very little influence on the market these days compared with the art consultant.

If we look at the dematerialisation of the art world, it has happened simultaneously to the supposed dematerialisation of labour, though it is arguable as to whether labour has been dematerialised. I would say 'immaterial' labour should be understood as the fact that no-one is working in factories any longer. Labour should rather be understood as the way in which we all work in a global factory of knowledge production and production of goods.

One of the major theorists of this, the Italian, Paolo Virno, has a very interesting discussion of this in his book, *The Grammar of the Multitude* that came out in 2004 where he talks about the problem of remuneration for this kind of work. He says that now work is language-based, primarily, how do you judge it? He suggests that it has to do with aptitude - skills of a political kind. How can you actually advance through language?

We can look at this problem very simply. We remunerate traditional kinds of work such as that of the farmer for turning nothing into something. We can set a price or value on that. Then we have the industrial worker who transforms something into something else. We can remunerate that, as Marx shows, through the hours of work put into the object. The problem is, first of all, art has never been remunerated according to the hours of work that was put into the object. Secondly, there is dematerialisation and what constitutes work. So how do we actually judge quality?

Virno uses two examples. How do we judge who is a good priest? How do we judge who is a good journalist? We can say exactly the same thing about artists today (the kind of post-conceptual artists). With the good priest, it is impossible to measure how many converts he has. As for the journalist we cannot measure how many people changed their minds, how many people felt informed about the writings of this journalist. What we *can* measure is how this person advances. The good priest is the one who becomes a bishop and the good journalist is the one who becomes an editor or who gets h/her own column in a newspaper. Exactly the same thing happens with artists.

Reading that made me realise that this is why the CVs are in every goddamn catalogue and they are as important as the imagery. Why are they there? I have actually wondered about that for a long time. Now I realise why. It is because you can see - Oh, this person showed at Documenta. This person was in Venice. This person is in this collection, so h/she is a good artist. You have to put your CV on every grant application so that the assessors can say, 'This person had that show, so - here's the grant.'

It is the same system of remuneration as outlined by Virno.



Grant Kester

Suzanne Lacy Do you want to jump in, Grant - at any point, please.

The issue of quality in socially engaged practice

Grant Kester The quality issue is interesting. Questions of quality and evaluative criteria seem to come up regularly with socially engaged art, but very rarely in discussions of mainstream art practice.

I'm always somewhat surprised when critics of socially-engaged practices attack them for failing to foreground "artistic" or "aesthetic" meaning, but make absolutely no effort to define what either of these terms mean. What they generally mean, I suspect, is that activist work is too proximate to other areas of cultural or political practice; that it doesn't maintain a sufficient degree of ironic detachment or ambiguity relative to a given life world. Critical distanciation may or may not be intrinsically artistic, but it's hard to have a conversation about it. It's become so naturalized as the only proper role for art to play that it's not even visible as a distinct aesthetic paradigm. I would argue that there is more than one way to produce critical insight, and that the conventional avant-garde technique of an artist-administered ontic disruption is only one of them.

This paradigm emerged in part through the growing academicization of art education during the 1980s, and the consequent demand in universities for a codifiable "theoretical" component in the development of graduate school curricula. It represents the confluence of neo-conceptual art practice and post-structuralist theory during this period when you see a lot of theoretical material, drawn primarily for poststructuralist sources, beginning to be taught in art schools, not just in North America and Europe but in Latin America as well. It lends itself in particular to what I identify as a textual paradigm of art practice, based on a principle of repetition. The artist constructs an object, an event, or a performance that is then "set in place" (*Gestellen*, as Heidegger would say) before the viewer, who is summoned to the scene. The work of art essentially replicates an idea, image or insight devised by the artist. Typically the textual work is intended to derange or destabilise conventional forms of meaning or signification. After several decades, of course, this approach has become almost entirely naturalized, or maybe ritualized is a better way to describe it. That's why so much contemporary art practice comes off as a kind of potted cultural studies in which the artist selects a particular social, cultural or representational system, identifies the (often self-evident) ideological compromises and complicities committed by it's various participants, and then boldly "intervenes" by pointing out these gaps and aporia, confident that he or she has radically subverted, destabilized, or otherwise transformed the consciousness of all involved.

I would argue that any number of art practices that we might identify among artists in this room also have the effect of dislocating, destabilising or challenging conventional forms of identification or meaning, but they do not do so via the same 'textual' approach, or by maintaining the same sort of custodial relationship to the viewer. They proceed through a different set of procedures and, because of that, this work isn't legible to critics trained in the canon of poststructuralist art theory.

Rather than proceeding from the ethical/epistemological opposition that structures most textual criticism (i.e. coherence is bad, fragmentation is good, stability is bad, disruption is good, etc.) I find it more useful to view a given project situationally, in the context of a continuum of ideological, institutional and discursive forces, from the micro to the macro level. A lot of the work I'm researching currently is involved with the corrosive impact of neo-liberalism on local economies or on the operations of NGOs in the so-called developing world, and the ways in which artists and art collectives are working strategically to challenge the neoliberal paradigm.

Context is crucial here. Suzanne mentioned (I think appropriately enough) that this project *No Blood No Fear* could

Context is crucial here. Suzanne mentioned (I think, appropriately enough) that this project, *NO GOOD NO / OUT*, could happen in Oakland because Oakland already has a politicised activist community that is concerned with racial issues. It would not work so well in many other places. Park Fiction's work in the Hafenstrasse, for example, would never have come into existence if it was not in a community that had essentially barricaded itself against the German police two decades before. So, the complex negotiation of accommodation and co-optation could not have existed otherwise than in that setting, against the ground of the violent resistance that occurred in the Hafenstrasse in the 1980s.

Suzanne Lacy Let me jump in to the first part of your argument. It is true that this form of discourse is forced upon this kind of work. It is also true that some of us have taken it on as opposed to having it forced on us. As a result, I think of three things. What, perhaps, distinguishes this as art from political activism, is precisely this questioning - 'Is it art? Is it not art? Is it good art? Is it not good art?' Those are stupid framings for what is essentially an enquiry into the nature of what you are doing. I think that is the legacy of a certain kind of avant garde thinking.

I would never have been an artist if I had not gone to Cal Arts. When I went to Cal Arts, I was introduced precisely into this kind of enquiry as the underpinning of this sort of work. The Oakland projects, for me, are a culmination of that enquiry. I do not know what the results are, but I know I am ready to sum it up.

There are two other issues that are part of this question of the aesthetic or the evaluative criteria.

One has to do with the close linkage between a lot of this work - theatre and performance art. I am critiqued as much in theatre as I am in fine art. Theatre seems to have a comfort level with the intentional act, the act that is not on stage in a way that I think the visual does not. It is interesting to see the moment when some of us in LA and around the world began to call ourselves performance artists. I was one of the first group. We weren't sculptors who did performance. We were performance artists. It is interesting to see the trajectories that kind of work took from the very theatrical, people like Spalding Gray to the large-scale theatrical works of Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson. They were all part of this early performative art group.

That is one issue - how do you bring that aesthetic of temporality or even a discussion of it into the visual art world? I think the other issue that has just recently occurred to me is the relationship between the visual display of whatever you have done that exists very deeply in a particular community and the taking of this into a gallery. I have taken this work to various galleries at various times, but what happens to the work? Where is the work? Is there a fundamental problem with the visualisation of the people that you work with that is somehow linked to visual art (whether it is good visual art or not)? I think that is not just that, 'Gee, too bad ... We have to deal with this issue. Nobody else does.'

There are some very particular issues of aesthetic that are quite interesting in this type of work.

Simon Sheikh I think the gallery space has certain conventions of representation that one has to work with. It does not mean that you cannot circumvent them, but you have to work with them. I am not sure that documentation is the right way of representing, or presenting, this work. Perhaps there are other ways to do it.

Then, of course, I think I will have to give again an economic answer to how your area of work becomes part of the visual art world. It does so now not exactly as an object, but as a commodity. If you can commodify your piece, then it is not a problem. A lot of '90s relational aesthetics art was exactly about this. How can you commodify these practices? I would go as far to say, it was all about that.

Suzanne Lacy I am not sure it was! I am actually not sure it was the commoditisation of *these* practices. I think these practices came from another source, and that there has been a commoditisation of the *look* of these practices.

Simon Sheikh Well, yes. It amounts to the same, I would say.

Suzanne Lacy It amounts to the same in the art world.

Simon Sheikh Yes. That is what I mean. If you were to commodify it, it does not really matter if it took place in Oakland in that gym ...

Suzanne Lacy Right ...

Simon Sheikh ... that does not matter. But if you can present that performance in a commodifiable form in a gallery, then that kind of work is fine and people will take it at face value. Art critics will not, then, investigate what actually happened at all. That is unimportant. So, you know, you can just cook some fancy food for people or whatever in a gallery space and - pff - you can sell the work to an audience.

Suzanne Lacy Ok, but I raised this in Glasgow -Why would we call ourselves artists? If we did not, then we could just go about doing what we do, and not have to deal with the institution if the notion of commodification was abhorrent. It is not so much that it is abhorrent, but that it raises some very tricky ethical issues.

Simon Sheikh A lot of people left art in the '70s and said, 'Ok, I am simply evacuating that position and doing other kinds of work' - a lot of it for political reasons.

Interestingly enough, the way art history is then being re-written is that a lot of those artists are now reclaiming that work as art by saying, 'Oh, I know, I was working with Relief Help for Africa, but that was an art project that I did between '73 and '79.' This is very odd.

Suzanne Lacy That is interesting - I did not know that.

Simon Sheikh Yes! Certainly in Scandinavia - there is one art historian who is writing a whole book on that period. It is going to be a revisionist history because he is basically going to show that there is a connection between people who left the art world and their activism. The book reinstates the work as art and is the foundation for some other clearly commodifiable art groups that existed in the late 1990s. There is a direct continuum from those kinds of social practices into relational aesthetics.

I find it very troubling, but I find it also very troubling that the people are very happy to be inspired by that kind of history.

Controlling the conditions for art

Jay Koh At the moment I am working in a cross-community project in Dublin - a three-year project dealing with the emerging Chinese community and the Irish community. I have a background working in different structures, like the military government in Burma or communist government in China or in Belarus or, at the moment now, in Ireland. It is from this background that I give the feedback to your question in this session about quality. First I have to ask Simon -Who are the artists that you showed in the horizon piece?

Simon Sheikh It is Katya Sander, a Danish artist .

Jay Koh I worked with her for three days examining the different positions and properties of dialogical practice. She used a very similar piece of work like this to present her dialogical position. Horizon was not the position that she took up as a piece of work. It is very clear that the person answering the question in the piece are actors prepared by her - that is her whole projection.

You use a lot of words like 'communication' and 'imagination'. I find these very central to the position of the artist who becomes both popular and very privileged.

In public space I think we have to destabilise this position of artist as the person who creates an idea. The work that Suzanne showed today is a very constructed work as in a laboratory or Art School. It is highly structured. But we are dealing with a public that is real. We have to control the conditions in which such a construction becomes possible, where the artist becomes merged with the public as a part of the public, as a kind of performance in everyday life that the artist goes into

(Addressing Suzanne) I am very aware that you have controversial critical processes as you have said. You initiate



Jay Koh

... something and different members of the community come and work with you and create this product.

But once the work of placing the project is done, it seemed essential that the entertainment becomes the main part of the piece because the game did not stop. The television became part of that entertainment behind the scenes. But I doubt that people really looked at the work. They understand the dignity of the project, its visibility. But I doubt that any boy was going to spend two minutes reading the screen and its contents, the information that you were trying to show. I have problems with that.

With this in mind, how do I look at the issue of quality? The easiest way for me to look at quality is to look at the artist's intention, how he works, what I would refer to the work's imagination and ideas. We need to look in a deep sense in terms of how the relationships work, as Grant says, at a micro level or process. You are working in a society where there is a high level of competency in terms of civil consciousness and vocality. What happens if you transpose the way you create this work to another society or culture where these skills and values are not practised, the thinnest society where people do not communicate? How to get them to communicate?

In Burmese society understanding of crime is totally different from in a democracy, where there is accountability or transparency. How does this relationship work when a work is being presented in this way? I am interested in this different level of examination.

Suzanne Lacy Well, I would just say, briefly, that I would not do a piece like this in Finland! I have done works in Finland and they were not like this.

Jay Koh Have you shown this work outside America?

Suzanne Lacy Yes, I showed it in Japan.

Jay Koh That is very interesting, because Japan does not have an open culture – so how does it work there? A lot of Western artists fail in their projects by trying to revamp the school system.

Suzanne Lacy When I showed it in Japan, it was in the form of documentation that was re-setup in the midst of a lot of other international works. I did not redo this in Japan. You could not have done so. The whole relationship between youth and police, and youth and adult authority, is very different. I took youth to Japan and they talked to other Japanese youth – but it was very superficial. It was an exhibition, not a two-year process of work.

I do not want to go too far in this direction responding because we can do that later. I want to make sure that people have a chance to talk. Is that ok, Jay?

Jay Koh Ok.

The profiling of artists and participants

Jan Cameron (Core Group) I am picking up from what Simon was saying that quality, currently, is about visibility – where art is seen. Thinking about the context in Scotland, I have been really aware that is very different from the States. You were looking at profiling for practices that are really marginalised here in terms of live art, performance art, and artists working in public.

My questions are really about profiling or engaging different publics with the project we just looked at. Firstly, about the hotline to the City Hall - When people were leaving, there was a hotline to the City Hall. I am interested in who was at the other end of that phone? What were those conversations? Were they used in any way beyond the event?

Secondly, in terms of the media coverage we looked at, there was very much a disappearance of the artist. We did not hear the word 'artist' or the notion of an art project being mentioned there. I just wondered whether that was a deliberate strategy? I am thinking about the core group and our final event in terms of the artist and citizenship, the profiling of the artist outwith conventional settings as having a value in current society. Was that a deliberate construct in terms of your communication with the media? How much did you profile art and artists there?

Suzanne Lacy I will respond quickly to the issue of the hotline as I am sensitive to the fact that I do not want this to become a back-and-forth. A series of questions were consolidated and given to the City Council people. It was a tape machine and yes, it was a conscious strategy to leave my name out of it as artist.

Should we do what we have done before which is take a whole bunch of questions and then we will address a selection?

Relinquishing Power

Adele Patrick (Core Group) I wanted to return to Simon's question from yesterday about how come certain new ideas or imaginations are represented. I also want to address Suzanne's remark that I hope we are not going to lose in this discussion - the notion of artists listening and the rigorous research and reflective process that goes on before a large-scale artwork in public is actually launched and constructs different publics in a way that you, Simon, were discussing yesterday.

I am really interested in the political potential of when artists choose to embark on an almost explicit engagement with communities in the making of the work in the first place. I am interested where they might choose to refuse a privileged position to create a collective mode of address in the construction of these different publics.

It seems to me, related to this question of imperfection, that there is both a critical and fiscal risk in relinquishing power in that process. It is explicitly saying, 'This is, first of all, a collective imagining and a collective construction of different publics'.

I am picking up that idea of plurality and what happens when you do decide to have different visions and bring them in. This does seem to me to involve risks. Could we talk more about the negotiation that an artist might make today in embarking on these large-scale projects? It seems to me that the issue is not only to listen, but to almost say, well this is actually a collaborative thing and there are plural voices and so on.

Metrics and Remuneration

Robert Livingston I was very struck by the equivalence between Simon's description of how we remunerate the priest and Grant's description of the paradigm of the mainstream conceptual artist. These comments link back to what you were saying about the CV. It seems to me that what happens in that part of the world is that the mainstream artist is similarly remunerated or rewarded within the system as an internal process. You cannot actually tell how many people have had their perceptions, their views of reality, changed; but what you can see is how critically that person has advanced through the judgement of their peers.

This is perhaps at the heart of the unease we are feeling about the kind of practice that Suzanne is describing. What a project like that opens up is the legitimacy for a whole range of publics to actually define whether they have, in fact, had their perceptions or their interactions changed. A project like Suzanne's opens up a multiplicity of dialogues and not just the single paradigmatic description of the art-world itself.

Against that, I would set what happens within funding. The Scottish Arts Council recently sent out (for information) the assessment form that all independent assessors are asked to complete when viewing a project of any kind. Across the top it said, 'You are reminded that your comments must be based on objective aesthetic criteria and not your own personal tastes.'

How do we set the need to embrace a multiplicity of views of the effectiveness of this work against the notion that there are in fact a set of objective aesthetic criteria by which funding decisions will be made in future?



Robert Livingston

The participant's perspective of involvement

Katy Maynard I am an artist and I was formally a youth worker as well. I was interested in the way that Suzanne described the process of involving the young people and the Youth Development Program. I wondered whether that included an investigation with the young people into the meaning of public art and of engaging with the process of creating an artwork. Did the young people really understand the nature of the artwork that they were contributing to? Were they really seen as part of the public? Were they actually co-producers? If so, how did that affect the quality of the work? How would that affect the control of the artist over the work and the authenticity of the work?

Sally Thomson (Core Group) I was actually going to ask a complicated question about funding and conflict of interest. Instead I am interested in your answer to Jean Cameron's question about authorship. Why was your name kept out of *No Blood, No Foul* as the author and the artist in that collaboration?



Eva Merz

Speaking Out

Eva Merz I think that this is more of a comment, than a question. You ask - Why do we call ourselves artists? I just have a comment to that. Since coming to work in Scotland four years ago from Scandinavia, I have worked with social issues. I have just finished a residency that is concerned with the regeneration of a community in Tillydrone, Aberdeen (see core participant: Monika Vykoukal).

I have learnt, in Britain, that people who are working as politicians or social workers in different organisations have difficulty in actually expressing their views. They can be very frustrated about lack of funding, a lack of support, in the case of social workers lack of understanding from politicians. They feel that they cannot speak about it in public. As soon as they are dependent on funding, they will say, 'You do not bite the hand that feeds you.' I have had a lot of experience of this because I have interviewed a number of people about this.

It is very difficult to get that through in public. I see my work, my art, as being a way of communicating and trying to start a debate in public among people who could not otherwise engage. I call myself an artist in the sense of the anarchist who can act as a catalyst in relation to problems that no one else can raise. As soon as you can say 'I am an artist and I am doing an art project', you can get some funding and in a sense do whatever you want. I think that freedom is really important. Apart from that it does not really matter to me whether you call it art or not.

Heather Delday I would like to ask the panel if they could possibly offer a metaphor to help frame the way we think about critical practice where art operates through relationships and possibly speaks more directly to 'structures of feeling', which is a lovely term, that Simon introduced.

Speaker I am an artist and also an arts development worker. I am really interested in what came first - the artwork or the project using the art to help community cohesion. Is it an artwork primarily to be shown around galleries, or was it the idea to open the eyes to council people and the police that art could be used for the benefit of the community? I really think that the art itself is a tool for community cohesion in this project and not an artwork in itself to be put into a gallery space.

Speaker I am quite uneasy about the comparison between the success within society of the artist and the artistic endeavour itself. It seems quite obvious to me that success within your peer group does not equate to good art and that, over a period of time - the artist may have deceased or may not have been widely accepted - but they produced stunning art. I am quite surprised to hear that comparison between success within a peer group and good art.

Imperfection and authorship

Simon Sheikh I think the political task is exactly the challenge in relation to social issues. I cannot give an optimistic answer to that.

I do not think that historical value in art is about the hope that the work gets picked up at some point. There is a system of museums and the economy that equates with quality and is about a judgment of taste. That is why the notion of quality is not so interesting to me. It is circumscribed in a certain system of value.

Imperfection is actually much more interesting. It has to do with the idea of collective experience that was mentioned at the beginning. That has to do with how the system of remuneration works and how history is written. It is always written about individuals. It is very difficult, for instance, to imagine a kind of collective organisation of artistic work because everyone, nowadays, has to have their own contracts and individually negotiate their fees and so on.

I do not know if it is possible any more to discuss collective organisation of artwork. There were experiments where some people said, 'Ok, we are running this institution'. These were mainly in theatre but it also happened at least in one art institution in the late '80s and early '90s, namely the Schedhalle in Zürich where everyone worked to equal pay. I do not know if that is possible today. I think a lot of artists would be very unhappy to do that. They would be happy to do community work, but they would still want to have their authorship somewhere. That leads into a very interesting question - When is it opportune to use the historic figure that the artist is anarchic and when is it opportune to draw it back from it?

Suzanne Lacy I will address two or three of the pragmatic questions about my practice.

Jay, we can return to the very complex one that you raised. I would say that I tend not to work in cultures that are not western. I work in cultures that I am familiar with. I am bound by language to an extent. If I work in another language it has to be through an interlocutor who is in fact really the collaborator in a very significant way, even the leader of the collaboration. I worked in Medellín, Columbia with Pilar Riaño, who is an anthropologist. I am pretty clear about my limitations in relation to a United States based culture. My practice ranges from the intimate with two people to the very large.

Interestingly enough, there is a very different response to this work from Asian-specific people, even living in Oakland. The young people do not have the same form of performative discourse that, for example, the African-American culture has.

There are all sorts of complexities in this practice that I am sensitive to, but I am certainly not aware of all the cultural differences in the world. It means that I am humble about my ability to negotiate those differences.

The use of my name and/or my figure as an artist is one that I have always use very strategically. Christo is an artist who heroically carries his name throughout the process. That is the fallback position. If you deconstruct documentaries and look at the way the media operates, the mass media looks for the personality that drives the event. I tend to be absent, particularly in mass media. I have a hell of a time working with television and media producers who make documentaries on my work because I am always saying, 'Can't you find another voice to tell the story? Can't we think about this in a different way other than Suzanne narrating the event?'

Now that is complicated. You have to be careful about a representation in which you are the hidden convener of the whole. The works I make tend to be fairly large and happen over a long period of time. I develop pretty intense relationships within these works. I tend to be open about 'Suzanne the artist as the image and the construct'. When I make images, I do represent both my own cultural perspective, and also a set of desires and I am very clear about that. I will say 'I do not like that image; I am sorry'. I had a big fight with women in prison once where we undertook within the project to have a conversation about where a particular image would come from, based on whose experience, how the image might be arrived at collaboratively. We really did shape the image together but it was not a simple process.

The last question I want to speak to is youth as co-producers of the work. There is a whole range of work that is art as pedagogy for youth. Many colleagues work with youth. These are different positions within a spectrum of working within a social situation. We all go through that social situation, some more intensely than others. In America this work is highly influenced by race, class and issues of how you go through youth, work with youth and how they are seen as youth. As a teacher, I would do the kind of artwork that is me and the young people doing what the young people precisely and exactly want to do. When I enter the arena as an artist, it is a much more negotiative process. As I have said before, there is no way I can persuade 300 young people to do something in Oakland that I want them to do that they do not want to do. I have no hold over them. They do not even particularly respect the white woman who walks in through the door. They do not respect the professor and they do not respect the artist particularly. You have to earn their respect through a complex

process of negotiation about my desires to make an image as artist and their desires to make an image as young people. They bring a whole other set of desires for self-presentation to the situation. These are usually not what I would consider my particular, specific and rather small desire in the situation – which is to make art. I do not think, in the scheme of things, that making art is the answer to the world's problems. I do hold on to that as something that gives me a very deep pleasure and structures my practice. However, I am a very political person. Whether I was a doctor or a lawyer or an Indian Chief (as they used to say when I was growing up), I would be working politically. As an artist, I am simply working politically.

Working across cultures



Reiko Goto-Collins

Reiko Goto The comment about language issues – I think to show your work in a different culture is very important because our human imagination is primitive. We have to keep trying to extend our imagination. If we only work in one culture and the understanding of why we live in that culture, we think we know everything. Our discussion is then based on that limitation. Our imagination cannot go beyond it.

In my country, the Prime Minister has said that black people are lazy. When things like that happen amongst Japanese people, we cannot solve the problem. It is just that the person was rude. We need outsiders to come in and talk about it. We need good artists, good curators and good educators. They start to unpack what we look at as a work of art and *then* these issues start to make sense. But our imagination – we cannot start imagining if we do not live in Oakland, California.

Simon Sheikh Unfortunately, it is not just a question of knowledge, you know. We have now a newly elected president of France who called black people animals.

Suzanne Lacy Really?

Simon Sheikh Yes. It does not have to do with distance. You can be very close to the problem. He is, by the way, the son of an immigrant! These language games can be used in very different ways.

Jay Koh It is not just whether the artist can control whether you want to work on something. It is about what you produce (like that grand book that has been read in a different space and now there is a taboo translation in Chinese, in Taiwan). You have no real control as an artist over the reception of the work. Nonetheless the reception or acceptance of what you create depends on what you have projected and the way you have prepared for it.

So I am an artist because it gives me the highest level of freedom, greater than a sociologist, an anthropologist, or a lawyer. When I became an artist, I made use of the perception in a community of art as chaotic, as defying definition. I use that as a reverse strategy in order to be accepted by adopting different positions - that of a politician, for example.

Suzanne Lacy That is what Eva was saying, yes.

Roxana Meechan I think what you are saying is very interesting, but it makes it even more complex when you are an artist working also for the local authority, when you are effectively working for local politics. There is a perception of artists who are working in the community that they might be there because you were not successful as an artist, so you have become an arts worker. This project has been a great project for me because I see myself now as an artist who works in a dialogical practice. I have rediscovered the origin of why I wanted to be working in this sphere – so thank you for this.

Emotions and Democracy

Anita Haywood It seems to me that Simon's articulation of history and economics as underpinning art discourse now needs to account for the emotional as a structure, particularly when you mentioned agonism.

Grant Kester The agonistic argument is developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. It is the idea that democracies have to be premised around an irresolvable kernel of difference because otherwise they will ride roughshod over all singularity and difference. Agonistic dissent is productive of good democracy.

Anita Haywood I just feel that this is becoming the contemporary structure, now.

Simon Sheikh This is actually what I worked on in the latest curatorial project I did. It exactly concerns the connection between our emotions, our subjectivity and capital. I think that we are in such a dominant phase of capital that we cannot distinguish our emotions from commodity.

You see it in language. You see economic language when you talk about emotions. You say, 'Well, I cannot invest in this relationship any more' and so on. Economic metaphors are part of our structure of feeling, so in that sense yes. I do not know if that is what is what you meant.

Suzanne Lacy I think that is, yes.

Sustainability

Roxanne Permar I am interested in the relationship after a project is finished. Suzanne, you talked about the intensity of some of the relationships that you formed. I am interested both in how we sustain relationships and how considering sustainability then impacts on the processes and kinds of achievements that happen within the context of the project?

Suzanne Lacy Let me just say that I am really reluctant, in one sense to talk about relationships. Privately, I do, of course, talk about the relationships I have with the people in Oakland. There is a lot of racism in this (your) culture but I do not know if you are aware enough of it to know that there is this stereotypical thing that white people do in America. That is to say 'my best friend is black'.

I would say at least 50% of the people I worked with were black and at all levels: artists, kids, politicians, and so on. One of the problems with talking about my relationships with people is because it is such a rich community. It becomes problematic for me to use my complex and ongoing relationships with the people in Oakland as any kind of justification for the work. I would rather say that in the process of making of work that is complex and meaningful, ongoing relationships are formed by a lot of people on a lot of levels and they do continue by virtue of the fact that many of those people live in the same community. I still have a home in that community so I am there quite a bit.

I am curious about whether or not this issue of relationships is in any way part of the evaluative criteria of the work. To go back to what Robert said, it certainly gives us an opportunity to look more closely at the multi-vocal criticism that exists within the work. If I can talk to 50 people whom I worked with, who still have very rich and full perceptions of this work however they want to frame it, then that adds to our knowledge base. Whether that is a criterion of the work or not is a loaded issue when you are doing cross-racial work, particularly.

Chris Fremantle Can I pick up on that thought of Roxanne's? It troubles me when the artist develops a project in a community and then goes away. Roxanne triggered an experience I had in the past.

I worked in a hospital for a while. I have worked in a museum. I have worked in various places and I have a set of relationships with people because I have worked with them. When I move, almost all of those relationships fall away. Even if you were best buddies and would go out for drinks and all of that, you move on. Actually, fundamentally, those relationships are about work and only a few of them become personal. Is that actually fair, or do we have an expectation because we think it is engaged practice and we are doing all these 'good' things for the world and all of that, that it should be more than that?

Suzanne Lacy We are looking for it *not* to be paternalistic and seeking evidence to that effect.

Jay Koh This kind of questioning around relationships after the work is completed has been conceptualised in the terminology of concrete intervention. Concrete intervention determines that something should be sustained after the artist leaves. If the project falls apart after the artist leaves, then it is a failure.



Anita Haywood





Chris Fremantle

For me, the relationship is already an issue that is considered at a pre-research phase. I direct my research onto the question of ownership at this early stage. If this ownership does not happen early on, then the project is stopped. It comes down to how I would direct my work.

Educating the Artist

Anne Douglas I want to pick up on an issue that Ed Carroll raised in Seminar 2. How do artists learn in this very complex landscape of practice? Allan Kaprow, I think, said that in art-like art, you could accept the art work and there was no need for feedback, but in life-like art, you had to construct, not just the experience, but an understanding of what that experience meant in context i.e. you had to construct feedback loops within the practice itself with participants and with the art world.

It seems to me there are implications for not being able to easily replicate these practices. One of the ways that artists traditionally have learned is through copying – and copying in a very literal sense of copying the visual element in order to get inside the understanding of the practice. Where are we now with that learning process, now that we have this very complex landscape of issues that we cannot easily replicate? When we replicate, we have to judge very carefully how to tell the story, what issues to raise.

How do we learn in this field of practice?

Simon Sheikh Working as an educator with artists, I do not distinguish between different forms of practice. The discussion we will always have is, why they choose to work with a certain format, or what I would call a mode of address, what is indicated in that choice, historically and in the present. I believe that the intention of an artwork is not always clear in the work, and especially when you are working within education. As a consequence the discussion becomes, 'What is the intention and what is the function of the particular work?' I think that is an evaluation that all artists do continuously. Some artists do not have to carry out this kind of evaluation if their intention is to have fun doing what they are doing in their studio and there are galleries that like what they do and people want to buy their work. That is totally valid and I do not mean to be critical about it.

There are other things where I would question the ethics and that is when you work with people and you turn them into images that are, for instance, paternalistic – which is happening in a lot in relational aesthetics. I have huge ethical problems with that.

In terms of my prism, Walter Benjamin said that the work with the correct political tendency also has to be formally the most innovative. I still think that it is a good strategy not to separate between form and content, that you actually say that the form defines the content and vice versa but that is a huge discussion. A lot of artists think that you can make that separation. They say, 'I know I work with a commodity, but the commodity is very critical of the work at large' and maybe it is. I mean, a book is a commodity, but there are still good things in it – so.

Grant Kester I think it is a good point. It has to do with the paradigm shift that is represented by the movement away from object-based art practice. We tend to see a more heuristic approach to site, an attempt to engage with the continuity of forces that operate in a particular location as creatively as possible and to toggle back and forth between an immersion in that site, and the capacity to stand sufficiently far outside to grasp the totality of forces operating within it. This standing back is not an expression of some naïve outsiderism ('I cannot afford to intervene in this space, because once I do, I risk too many compromises'). At the same time it avoids the equally naïve model of the Gramscian, "organic intellectual," who can speak with absolute authority from the belly of the beast. It is that toggling, back and forth that I find most productive.

Suzanne Lacy Ok. Thank you very much.

[<back to Seminar 3 Oakland Dialogue menu](#)

