Variant
SUPPLEMENT

Dialogical Aesthetics:
A Critical Framework For Littoral Art

Grant Kester

Introduction:
Socially Engaged Practice Forum

There is pressure through the public funding system for the arts in the UK to create at least the allusion of engaging a broader demographic of the population. The reasoning for this is explained away as public funding shifts to an indirect yet local and media promoted form of taxation through the Lottery, so Government wishes to see—as much for its own PR as continuing Lottery sales—a publicly visible correlation between where the income is generated and on what it is being spent—'good causes'. This can be seen to be having not dissimilar conservative repercussions on what receives public funding as happened with the National Endowment for the Arts in the U.S.

One outcome has been the supporting of art that adheres to promoting and cultivating 'Social Inclusion'. This has placed the emphasis on artistic engagement as educational, or pedagogic, in a way that attests to inclusion within society as an integrated whole. At least superficially, this is espousing a shift in the terms of engagement between artists and what were traditionally regarded as audiences, to a more therapeutic or correctional interaction with an underscored group of people.

However, expectations and shifts in artistic practice are not a 'given' with legislative changes to government funding priorities, but performative. If a shift is to occur at the point of social engagement then it does not 'happen' coercively or in isolation but as a direct effect of an informed choice shift in formations of artistic practice in partnership with the people with which they work.

Within socially engaged approaches to arts practices there are widely differing dispositions, from what can be seen to be broadly in line with the Government's agenda—uni-directional activity of cultivating what are effectively better 'citizens'/ consumers where 'collaboration' is largely symbolic—to attempts at anaquality of engagement, where art is seen as "a medium for discussion with social reality", as artist Jay Koh puts it.

One description of the latter has been 'Littoral' practice. "Littoral—adj. of or on the shore. —n. a region lying along the shore." From its description it can be taken to express a point of complimentary meeting, an inbetween space.

The UK Government's take and emphasis on 'self-help' programmes has generated much scepticism with regard to socially engaged art practices. While there may have been many managerial conferences, effectively bolstering the position the Government is adopting, there has been little to no indepth and critical discussion.

One conference that was established to address issues of socially engaged practice was *Critical Sites: Issues in Critical Art Practice and Pedagogy* held in the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, September '98, organised by Critical Access and Littoral in Ireland. At the conference Grant Kester, assistant professor of contemporary art history and theory at Arizona State University, delivered a paper: *Socially Engaged Practice—Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art*.

To raise and debate some of the related issues Variant is hosting an on-line forum on Socially Engaged Practice, commencing with the launch of this issue. Given his commitment and work done to date in these areas, to initiate this dialogue we asked Grant Kester to re-present his paper from the conference.

The Socially Engaged Art Practice on-line forum—held in collaboration with the Environmental Art Department of Glasgow School of Art—is at:

http//:sepf.listbot.com/

This includes an archive of all messages, available to all list members, you can subscribe (at no cost) to the list also from the above site.

Grant Kester's paper *Socially Engaged Practice—Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art* is also available as a downloadable PDF file at the Variant site:

www.ndirect.co.uk/~variant/

If you do not have access to e-mail but wish to respond to Grant Kester's paper, or any issues related to socially engaged practice, please post them to:

Variant, 1a Shamrock Street, Glasgow, G4 9JZ

The resulting exchanges will be subsequently documented at the Variant site and are intended to appear as a dedicated supplement within the ensuing issue, Variant #10 (Spring/Summer 2000).

Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art

Grant Kester

I. Defining Littoral Art

In this paper I'm going to outline a framework for the critical analysis of "Littoral" or engaged art practices. I start with two related caveats. First, my analysis is based primarily on work that I am familiar with in the US and the UK. Thus, it is very much a selective framework. And second, even within this geographically limited context it is focused on a single aspect of these works which I feel is of particular importance. Given the time and space limitations there will be a number of complex questions which I will be unable to elaborate sufficiently and others which I will be forced to bypass altogether. I begin with the assumption that Littoral projects make very different demands on the practitioner than do typical gallery or museum-based art works and that they challenge on many levels the normative assumptions of conventional art works. By the same token I would contend that Littoralist art requires the development of a new critical framework and a new aesthetic paradigm. There are aspects of Littoralist practice that simply can't be grasped as relevant (or in some cases identified at all) by conventional art critical methodologies.

Mainstream art criticism is organized around two key elements. First, it is primarily concerned with the formal appearance of physical objects, which are understood to possess an immanent meaning. These meanings are then actualized as the object comes into contact with a viewer. The object here remains the primary carrier of aesthetic significance, whether in terms of a formal analysis or in terms of a speculative phenomenology that attempts to re-construct a postulated viewer's interactions with it. Second, the judgments produced through the critic's interaction with the physical object are authorized by the writer's individual, pleasure-based response. In *The Scandal of Pleasure* the American critic Wendy Steiner argues that the primary organizing principle of criticism should be "subjective preference" or what she terms the "I like" response.[1]

When contemporary critics confront Littoral projects they often lack the analytic tools necessary to understand the work on its own terms and instead simply project onto it a formal, pleasure-based methodology that is entirely inappropriate.[2] The results are not surprising: Littoral works are criticized for being "unaesthetic" or are attacked for needlessly suppressing "visual gratification". Because the critic is unable to gain any sensory stimulation or fails to find the material in the work personally engaging it is dismissed as "failed" art. This was the reaction of a number of U.S. critics to the most recent *Dokumenta* exhibition. Ken Johnson of *Art in America* coined the term "post-retinal" to describe much of the work in the show.[3] Although Johnson intended this term as a mild pejorative, I feel it is quite useful in capturing the ways in which many Littoral projects challenge the tendency of contemporary visual art to function primarily on the level of sensation. The reliance of contemporary criticism on the writer's personal response also has the effect of treating subjectivity as an unquestioned, *a priori* principle, rather than recognizing the extent to which the critic's "personal" taste is structured by forms of identification and power based on class, race, gender and sexuality. I would argue that the critic has a responsibility to interrogate their own individuality; to ask how their identity functions in relationship to other subjects and other social formations.

1. The Problem of Definition and Indeterminance

The concept of a Littoral criticism is important because it forces upon us the question of what Littoral "art" might be, which in turn requires that we differentiate Littoral art from other kinds of art (or other forms of cultural politics or activism for that matter). I know that for myself most of these differences have remained relatively intuitive or unconscious. The act of criticism requires that we make these intuitive judgments more concrete and subject them to some conceptual elaboration. The positive dimension of this activity is that it can deepen our understanding of what makes Littoralist art effective. The negative dimension is that it can lead to a hardening of categorical definitions and distinctions. This brings us to a central question. There is a long tradition of defining modernist art through its difference from dominant cultural forms. Thus, Clive Bell and Roger Fry defined avant-garde painting (and in particular, Postimpressionism) through its active suppression of representation, which they associated with the populist realism of Victorian genre painting; Greenberg, of course, contrasted authentic art with vulgar "kitsch". In the 1970s critic Michael Fried differentiated the truly avant-garde art of Anthony Caro and Frank Stella from the inauthentic "Literalist" art of Donald Judd or Robert Smithson, based on its resistance to "theater". That is, Caro's work was judged to be superior because it refused to incorporate formal cues that would acknowledge the presence of a viewer.

This resistance to fixity can be traced to the function of the aesthetic in early modern philosophy as a force that is intended to absorb antagonisms created elsewhere in society. Typically, as in the writings of Schiller, the aesthetic is conceived of as therapeutic; its job is to ameliorate the fragmenting effects of a market-driven society. This compensatory function needs to be understood within the context of liberalism. The aesthetic provides us with a unique power to comprehend and represent the totality of forces operating within society, and to envision more progressive or

humane alternatives, but this epistemological insight is always joined with the requirement that the artist must never attempt to realize these alternatives through direct action. The "poet", according to Schiller, possesses a sovereign right only in the limitless domain of the imagination. In a parallel manner, for Hegel, in *The Philosophy of Right*, the "aesthetic state" can comprehend the deleterious social effects of private property but it is prevented from intervening in the ostensibly "natural" operations of the market. The resulting social tensions (poverty, a growing gap between rich and poor, environmental destruction) will be relieved, rather, by the *expansion* of the market and by the colonization of what he terms "backwards" lands. These as yet unclaimed colonies are defined, like the aesthetic imagination itself, as potentially boundless and conceptually indeterminate. For Kant the destructive impact of social stratification will be healed by the unfettered circulation of commerce and knowledge (or "books and money"), leading to the gradual diffusion of a spirit of harmonious Enlightenment. The aesthetic can thus be understood as one of several related mechanisms that were developed within liberalism to simultaneously regulate the threat posed by systematic forms of critique and to compensate for the dysfunctional effects of the emergent capitalist system. It must remain highly elastic and unregulated, precisely because it is being called upon to absorb a potentially infinite range of divisive social effects.

Under the influence of late nineteenth-century critics such as Robert Vischer and Heinrich Wölfflin, this principle of indeterminateness was transferred from a general condition of aesthetic knowledge to a trait primarily associated with the experience of artworks. Specifically, the capacity of the modernist work to continually complicate or modify its own formal condition became an expression of its refusal of determinant boundaries. Critics like Bell, Fry, and Greenberg then endowed this idea of formal innovation with the specific motivation that modernist art must constantly transform itself to avoid co-optation by popular culture. This principle of indeterminateness remains with us today in the concept of the art work that refuses the economic exchange of the market or that resists translation into other forms of discourse or meaning (Adorno) or, for that matter, in the belief that art schools should be experimental and open-ended institutions.

In my remarks here I am, thus, working somewhat against the grain of a long tradition that says we must not attempt to limit or define art's potential meaning. In fact, I would argue that one of the strengths of Littoral practice lies in its capacity to transgress existing categories of knowledge. At the same time I want to stress the importance of understanding indeterminateness in specific social and historical contexts. Clearly we aren't talking about a generalized refusal of all ontological boundaries. The question is, how has indeterminacy functioned strategically over time? I would contend that, within the modernist tradition, it has been constructed through a dialogue that oscillates between the form of the work of art and its communicative function. And it is in this question of discursivity that I will locate the basis for my definition of Littoral art. It is necessary to consider the Littoralist work as a process as well as a physical product, and specifically as a process rooted in a discursively-mediated encounter in which the subject positions of artist and viewer or artist and subject are openly thematized and can potentially be challenged and transformed. I am particularly interested in a discursive aesthetic based on the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience—a relationship that allows the viewer to "speak back" to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the "work" itself.

2. Modern and Postmodern Anti-Discursivity

This approach is significant, I think, because it stands in opposition to a long tradition of anti-discursivity in modern art that associates communicability or discourse with fixity—the generalized belief that art must define itself as different from other forms of culture (popular culture, kitsch, Fried's theater) precisely by being difficult to understand, shocking or disruptive (except now, *contra* Schiller's return to "wholeness", a Lyotardian "ontological dislocation" becomes the therapeutic antidote to a centered Cartesian subjectivity). I would contend that the anti-discursive tendency in modern art hypostatizes discourse and communication as inherently oppressive. It can't conceive of a discursive form that is not contaminated by the problematic model of "communication" embodied in advertising and mass-media.[4]

Notably, this attitude runs across the historical and theoretical divide of modernism and postmodernism. Thus Lyotard writes with real disdain of art which is based on the assumption that the public "will recognize. . . will understand, what is signified."[5] And both Greenberg and Lyotard postulate avant-garde art practice as the antidote to kitsch. If kitsch traffics in reductive or simple concepts and sensations then avant-garde art will be difficult and complex; if kitsch's preferred mode is a viewer-friendly "realism" then avant-garde art will be abstract, "opaque" and "unpresentable". In each case the anti-discursive orientation of the avant-garde artwork, its inscrutability and resistance to interpretation, is juxtaposed to a cultural form that is perceived as easy or facile (advertising, kitsch, "theatrical" art, etc.). The condition of this degraded cultural form is then seen as entirely exhausting the possibilities of a populist art, thus forcing the artist to withdraw completely from the field of discursive engagement.

What I am calling an "anti-discursive" tradition in the modern avant-garde is defined by two seemingly opposed moments. The first, which I have described elsewhere as an "orthopedic" aesthetic, seeks to aggressively transform the viewer's consciousness (implicitly defined as flawed or dulled) through an overwhelming encounter with the work of art.[6] This perspective is more accurately thought of as counter-discursive in that it argues that the work of art has the ability to operate on the viewer through a unique, non-discursive, somatic power. Examples would include the "alienation" effect of the 1930's Russian and German avant-garde and Walter Benjamin's concept of a "shock" of critical awareness produced through the "dialectical" juxtaposition of images. Although ambivalently positioned relative to discursive forms of knowledge, these approaches provide an important framework for thinking through a communicative aesthetic model. The positive recognition that everyday language is always/already ideologically prepared to interrupt the formation of a critical consciousness, is combined with what I view as a negative dimension: the positioning of the viewer as a passive subject whose epistemological orientation to the world will be adjusted by the work of art. The extent to which the commitment to shock (what we might call the "naughty artist" paradigm) remains an almost unconscious reflex can be seen in the recent controversy over the English art students who claimed to use a grant to vacation at Costa del Sol while actually staying in Leeds. Like some kind of dated Baudrillardian scenario the various characters (the outraged press, the spluttering conservatives, and the clever art students) played their roles almost as though they were working from a script, and in a way they were.

The second view contends that the artist, and the work of art, must remain entirely unconcerned with the viewer. This is the basis of Michael Fried's distinction between authentic and "theatrical" art. Fried insists that the artwork is under no obligation whatsoever to acknowledge the viewer's presence—that is, to anticipate or play off of the viewer's physical response, movement, or expectations relative to a given piece.[7] In its extreme state this can take the form of the position that art is not a mode of communication at all. In a classic expression of this view, we find the painter Barnett Newman projecting an anti-discursive tendency into the very mists of time: "Man's first expression, like his first dream," Newman writes in 1947, "was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication. . . an address to the unknowable."[8] (Or to an ideal but currently unrealizable *Sensus Communis*.)

3. Modern Aesthetics and the Problem of Universality

Greenberg's citation of Kant in his "Modernist Painting" essay is widely taken as proof of the neo-Kantian lineage of formalist art criticism. I would argue that we can draw very different lessons about the meaning of art from early modern aesthetics. The concept of the aesthetic that emerged in the work of philosophers such as Kant, Schiller, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson was centered on the relationship between the individual (defined by sense-based or somatic knowledge) and the social. This relationship was constructed through concepts such as "taste" (which marks the fortuitous harmony between the autonomous individual and a more objective standard of judgment). This work was only nominally concerned with the form of the art object *per se*. A primary term of reference was the concept of a *sensus communis* or *Gemeinsinn*, a common sense or knowledge that marked a horizon of shared communicability. This opens out into a whole area of debate in contemporary theory between Habermas, Foucault and Lyotard, among others. Lyotard goes so far as to link the concept of discourse and communicability in art with what he ominously terms a "call to order" and the cultures of fascism and Stalinism. Habermas' claim that art might expand from "questions of taste" to the exploration of "living historical situations" is linked for Lyotard with a naive, nostalgic and politically reactionary yearning after "unity" and the misguided attempt to reconcile art and society into a mythic "organic whole".

Of course Lyotard's fears of a universalizing discourse are well-founded. One does not have to look very far in the current cultural landscape to find concrete examples, such as recent attacks on the teaching of Spanish in California public schools (Proposition 227) under the guise of a resurgent one-language Americanism that attempts to define American identity through the negation of the complex cultures that actually constitute that country today. Clearly, any model of discourse or cultural identity that is founded on the violent suppression of difference is oppressive. At the same time the vehemently anti-discursive tradition within the modernist avant-garde has led to another kind of negation—an indifference and in some cases an outright contempt towards the viewer. "The artist," as sculptor David Smith insisted in 1952, "deserves to be belligerent to the majority".[9] I would argue, however, that we don't have to choose between fascism and withdrawal into a mute, monadic isolation. Littoralist art is concerned precisely with exploring and negotiating the complexities of discursive inter-relationships, with trying to create a discourse which minimizes negation.

4. Implications for the Analysis of Art

I now want to outline three related components of a discursive or dialogical art practice.

1. Interdisciplinarity

First, Littoral art is interdisciplinary. It operates "between" discourses (art and activism, for example) and between institutions (the gallery and the community center or the housing block). This is

opposed to traditional art that operates within both the discursive presuppositions and the institutional sites of the "art world" and art audiences and that is, moreover, often even further defined by its identification with a specific art medium. Ian Hunter of Projects Environment uses the term "interface" practices which I understand in two ways—first, the interface between practitioners and other individuals or groups and second, the interface that is created in Littoral works across disciplinary routines or bodies of knowledge. (This relates to the argument that the formation of disciplinary knowledge is both an empowering and a limiting activity, and that breakthroughs occur in the disciplinary interstices, while consolidation occurs within the disciplines themselves.)

Along with this interdisciplinarity comes the need to learn as much as possible about the ways in which meaning is produced in and through these other contexts. This interdisciplinarity, the ability to draw on analytic resources from other areas such as critical theory, social history or environmental science, *and* the ability to work through alternative institutional sites, allows Littoral art to develop a systematic critique that can be actualized through specific political or social struggles. The Littoral artist, by "interfacing" with existing sites of political and cultural resistance can challenge the disabling political quietism of liberal aesthetics.

2. Multiple registers of meaning vs. formal immanence

In Littoral art the "meaning" of a given work is not centered in the physical locus of the object, or in the imaginative capacity of the single viewer. Rather, it is dispersed through multiple registers. These include a spatial-temporal register, in which the work "means" differently in different locations and times, as opposed to the immanence that is characteristic of modernist formalism. The work also produces multiple levels of information at a given time and space as it interacts with a myriad of other discursive systems (existing belief systems, ideologies, the psychological make up of particular viewers or participants, etc.). There is thus no single "work" to be judged in a Littoralist criticism. This is what differentiates Littoral criticism from conventional art criticism. The "work" is constituted as an ensemble of effects and forces, which operate in numerous registers of signification and discursive interaction.

3. Dialogical indeterminance vs. formal indeterminance

The recognition that Littoral works operate on multiple levels of meaning doesn't imply that meaning is entirely indeterminate, however. It can be clearly analyzed at specific points, and this capacity to ascertain meaning effects among particular viewers or co-participants is an important part of the process of dialogical "feedback" (e.g., Stephen Willats projects with housing estate residents). At the same time, this doesn't make the work entirely fixed. Rather, the principle of indeterminance that is registered in conventional art through formal innovation is expressed in Littoral art through the open-ended process of dialogical engagement, which produces new and unanticipated forms of collaborative knowledge. I'm not saying that Littoral art works can't be formally innovative, but that they don't depend on the principle of immanent formal differentiation as the primary engine for their development.

II. Current Political and Cultural Context

In the second half of this talk I want to use the concept of a dialogical aesthetic to outline some specific conditions for the analysis and criticism of Littoral art. As I've argued, one of the defining characteristics of Littoral art is its capacity for interaction with other areas of social practice. The "interface" includes more than just the "conversation" that takes place between practitioners and their co-participants. It also encompasses the broader discursive context within which a given Littoral project operates—for example, relevant public policies and debates, corporate ideologies, images and narratives promulgated by the mass media and numerous other sites which structure the political and cultural meaning that a specific work is capable of producing, and which are susceptible to being transformed by the work in turn. Two related tendencies in contemporary cultural politics are particularly salient. The first is the growing privatization of social life, linked with a corollary embrace of the individual as the primary locus of political and cultural authority. The second is the resistance to both theoretical and systematic forms of analysis. These tendencies, although differentially articulated, operate across a broad spectrum of cultural and political positions.

1. Individualism/ Privatization

In the U.S. we are witnessing the widespread privatization of those domains of social life which were based on the ideals (if not always the reality) of a shared commitment to a general public good and a willingness to sacrifice some portion of one's self-interest for the benefit of others. What might be termed the re-segregation of American life is occurring at numerous points: public education is being replaced by a system of selective "voucher" schools which often violate the separation of church and state; fortified "gated communities" are proliferating among the wealthy as a way to simultaneously express class privilege (and paranoia) and to opt out of shared municipal services;[10] with declining state and federal moneys "public" universities are becoming research fiefdoms for major corporations; under the Republican congress industry lobbyists are being invited to re-draft federal regulatory legislation intended to protect the public from their own companies; and forms of collectively-financed health care and social services are under attack by proposals to restrict benefits to those least likely to need them.

Everywhere we see a retreat into privatized enclaves along with a refusal to acknowledge the relationship between economic privilege and consumption patterns here and lack of resources and opportunity elsewhere. The withdrawal from a public commitment to these programs is justified by the claim that they are inherently flawed. But rather than recognizing the problems experienced by, for example, urban high schools, as a result of an interconnected set of social and economic forces (declining tax bases due to white flight, lack of job opportunities as a result of a deliberate program of industrial disinvestment leading to the proliferation of a drug-based economy, etc.) their problems are attributed entirely to the failure of the poor as individuals; their lack of moral fiber and personal initiative. The implication is clear: the only effective public policies are those that function to transform the (failed) individual; to provide them with a work ethic and a capacity for self-sacrifice.

2. Anti-Systematic

The second, and related, tendency I noted was an opposition to systematic forms of analysis. Conservatives in the U.S. have undertaken a concerted effort to discredit any form of political analysis that seek to explain poverty or criminality as the result of economic and social inequality. This has involved in turn the adoption of a triumphalist view of recent American history.[11] In this view the last few decades have seen the elimination of all forms of organized racism, classism or sexism in America such that women, the poor and working class, and people of color have no impediments whatsoever to competing in a fair and open way with economically privileged white men in what Dinesh D'Souza calls the "foot race" of modern life.[12] Having realized this liberal ideal through past political struggles over civil rights, society is now understood to be composed of free individuals whose success or failure is due solely to their personal efforts.[13] If, in this meritocractic utopia, white upper-class men still seem to dominate the most powerful positions in corporate and political life this certainly can't be attributed to the fact that society continues to systematically impede or limit the opportunities of women, the poor, or people of color. Rather, we must seek some internal cause, located in the individual rather than the social. Thus we have the pseudoscience of the *Bell Curve*, attributing a genetic inferiority to blacks, and conservative attacks on the immorality of the poor.[14] I suspect that there are rough corollaries for these views in the UK today as well.

In place of flawed public institutions we find conservatives championing private philanthropy in which members of the upper class choose to dispense some portion of their accumulated wealth as a reflection of their own humanity and moral excellence. Social programs are to be viewed as a form of *noblesse oblige*, rather than as a collective recognition of inequalities that operate elsewhere in the social order. The result is a neo-Victorian discourse that locates the causes of poverty in personal failure. In line with the roots of early reform in Evangelical Christianity, the act of dispensing charity is itself intended to facilitate the moral transcendence of the giver, to demonstrate their own capacity to reach across the boundaries of class and race privilege on the basis of some putatively universal spiritual essence which they are able to recognize and activate through their elevated capacity for empathetic identification.[15] There have been numerous books published during the last several years (e.g., Marvin Olasky's *The Tragedy of American Compassion*) in which conservatives argue that the real problem in the U.S. today is a lack of moral character among individuals, and that existing social problems can best be solved not by the state, but by the efforts of private individuals and organizations that develop programs focused on building the character of the poor.

3. Relationship to Art

In this brief outline I've discussed the conservative world view in terms of a resistance to systematic or holistic forms of analysis and a (fictive) construction of the subject as a radically autonomous individual whose desires must be either unimpeded (as a middle-class consumer) or rigorously policed (as a working-class producer). In general terms both the anti-systematic orientation and the rampant individualism of conservative thinking seek to detach a given subject, event or condition from its imbededness within a network of causal factors; to abstract the individual, as a product of social forces and discursive interrelationships into an entirely self-contained and generative entity.

Two interconnected tendencies in contemporary art critical discourse are of particular relevance here—the widespread interest in the role of visual pleasure in aesthetic experience and the consequent attack on theoretical or systematic analyses of art. These tendencies first emerged as a reaction to the perceived didacticism and theoretical excess of 1980's postmodernism. For critics in the U.S. such as Mark van Proyen and David Hickey "theory" marks a retreat from the unique somatic knowledge that is the special province of the artist.[16] Theory is abstract and distanced; art is immediate and experiential. The iron heel of mind-driven theory has attempted to quash the subtle but necessary truths of the body over which the artist has a proprietary authority. Here mind and body, dominative reason and a spiritually cultivated intuition are juxtaposed in classic binary fashion. The assertion of "beauty" and personal

The OTHER X / change is a project aiming to explore cultural diversity through critical contemporary interactive art practices. Bettina Buck, Roland Kerstein and Jay Koh were in Beijing in May/June 1999 and set up a temporary project space that functioned as a forum to facilitate dialogue and exchange with local artists.

http://www.geocities.com/~gintra/index.htm

Xu Tan
Interactive CD ROM *Made in China*, 1997/8

Li Yongbin
Visitor, digital print 99

pleasure as the only legitimate basis of an art experience and the reaction against "theory" (which is seen as contaminating the purity of that experience) coalesce around the troubled figure of the "individual". The artist (as an exemplary individual) becomes the final bunkered outpost of resistant subjectivity against a whole array of "objective" and abstract cognitive forces. The somatic or sensual experience that they register through their works is understood as having an inherently progressive political power, constituting a pre-social domain of personal autonomy and self-expression.

The "individual" marks an important point of congruence with the conservative views I've already outlined. The concept of the (bourgeois) individual constructed in conservative discourse bears a striking resemblance to conventional notions of the artist, virulently resisting any threat to the autonomy of personal expression or desire. This is not to say that any artistic position on individual autonomy is necessarily conservative. Further, it is clearly the case that the individual body and the right of expression mark an important domain of political struggle today. But the politics of the individual are not necessarily a given; they have to be established in and through specific contexts—a process that requires some form of analytic thinking.

The attack on theory in the arts is part of a more general reaction against analytic systems of thought that has been taken up across a range of cultural sites. The political implications of the anti-theory stance are particularly evident in recent debates in left journals such as *The Nation*. In a opinion column in May of 1998 *Nation* editor Eric Alterman castigated what he called the "radical/ academic" left (a.k.a. the "Foucaultian" left) for its focus on theory ("theory and identity are everything") at the expense of "real" politics.[17] Wallowing in its own elitism and irrelevance the "cultural left" blithely assumes that "the higher the level of its abstraction the more subversive it is." Where many contemporary critics bemoan the irrelevance of theory to the actuality of art-making, Alterman contends that contemporary left academics are out of touch with the average worker and incapable of "translating theory into praxis in the real world of U.S. politics." In each case the attack on "theory" is generated out of the claimed authenticity of "experience".

Although these debates, in art and in contemporary political discourse, are being staged on very different terrains they share some tendencies. First, they express a common desire to bypass what is seen as the extraneous, abstract, or irrelevant discourse of theory in order to regain contact with the "empirical" basis of a given discipline or activity. They urge us to move closer to the object of study or engagement, to collapse the distance (critical, physical, emotional) between object and interlocutor, at the same time that they express a demand to recover the "essence" of politics or art in response to the dangerous forces of conservative attack and anarchic inter-disciplinary transgression. This is a perspective that makes it increasingly difficult to recognize the inter-connections among and between these various cultural and political fields. It marks a retreat from the possibilities of a cultural politics and from the possibility of a shared discourse among activists, artists, critics, and others, and specifically, from the kinds of processes that lie at the heart of Littoral practice.

III. Littoral Practice—Dialogical Aesthetics

If, as I am suggesting, the evaluative framework for Littoral art is no longer centered on the physical object then what is the new locus of judgment? I would contend that it can be found in the condition and character of dialogical exchange itself. I would define this as a pragmatic form of criticism to the extent that it is concerned with the specific effects produced by these exchanges in a given context. At the same time, it retains a nominal teleological orientation in that it preserves some concept of an ideal discursive process that can act as a benchmark against which to evaluate actual projects. It is necessary to consider two conditions that are specific to the subject position of the contemporary "artist", and which bear directly on the artist's capacity for discursive engagement.

The first condition is ideological—the tendency of artists to identify themselves with a highly individualized concept of personal autonomy on the one hand, and with the capacity to transcend self through their mastery of a universal aesthetic knowledge on the other. The result is an often problematic mixture of traits: a failure to engage in critical self-reflection (due to the belief that one's individuality constitutes a redemptive, pre-ideological enclave) combined with the perceived authority to heedlessly transgress boundaries of class, race, and privilege, and to engage in discursive acts "on behalf of" any number of disenfranchised "others". The potential correspondence between this view and the concepts of privatized philanthropy that I outlined earlier is clear. The corollary to the philanthropic middle-class subject who is able to make contact with, and spiritually "improve", the racial or class Other is found in the long tradition of regarding the artist or intellectual as a trans-cultural agent. Thus we have St. Simon's "avant-garde", Coleridge's "Clerisy", and more recently, descriptions of the artist as a Shamanistic healer which engage in a problematic projection of archaic notions of "tribal" spirituality onto a society that is highly stratified, even if not especially within the arts. To the extent that Littoral projects involve this kind of cross-cultural or cross-class negotiation (and when they do it is almost always the case that the transgression is moving from a position of greater to lesser privilege), this will remain a persistent area of tension.

The second condition that poses a challenge to discursivity is institutional and logistical. It is what we might call the problem of itinerancy. Discourse, and the trust necessary for discursive interaction and identification, grow out of a sustained relationship in time and space, the co-participation in specific material conditions of existence. But the nature of contemporary art patronage and production mitigates against this kind of sustained commitment. Artists have to earn a living which may require regular re-location due to teaching or other jobs, foundation grants are often oriented around singular projects over a fixed time frame, and the art institutions that provide support for Littoral work are accustomed to inviting a practitioner in from "the outside" for a limited period of time. Many of the mechanisms of engaged arts patronage function to reinforce the view of a given "community" or constituency as an instrumentalized and fictively monolithic entity to be "serviced" by the visiting artist. The British artist Stephen Willats has negotiated the problem of itinerancy by returning to the same sites, often tower blocks, over a period of several years. Another solution is found in arts organizations that are located in, and build ongoing relationships with, specific neighborhoods, as in the East Bay Institute for Urban Arts in Oakland, California.

1. Discursive Determinism

Turning from the condition of the artist to the concept of discourse itself I would identity two areas of critical analysis. The first relates to the problem of discursive determinism—that is, the replacement of a vulgar Marxist concept of economic determinism by the equally reductive belief that "discourse" or dialogue in and of itself has the power to radically transform social relations. This is problematic for two reasons. First, because it overlooks the manifest differential in power rela-

The **Saját Szemmel/Inside out** project began in July 1997. Between then and February 1998, around 40 homeless people living in Budapest were given simple colour disposable cameras and invited to take photographs of whatever they felt to be important or interesting in their everyday experience, in the knowledge that their pictures would later be viewed publicly. The participants were approached on a fairly random basis in the city's metro stations and homeless shelters. Afterwards, we recorded an interview with each photographer about their pictures. *Dominic Hislop/Miklós Erhardt*
http://www.c3.hu/collection/homeless/

László Hudák
This bread-beating man shows that there are people in this life- because the bread itself, man is bread as well- so, there are people who still have value. You see he took this bread out, he beat it and he increased it's value. In the same way there are people who at some stage, will take us out of the bin (because we are in a bin, we are thrown out of society), and they're going to take us out and increase our value.

Péter Vásárhelyi
I am like a bin. However you don't have to move me out from a bin. There's a pair of glasses beside the bin. Now, if I see a bin and I see a pair of glasses then I am trying to solve something. To here or to here. The glasses symbolize the meaning, the bin...this is the lift, going down. There is a poster in front of me which is advertising glasses, I've got bad eyesight, there is a bin beside it. Now, if I think about whether to choose the bin or the glasses, so I should look optimistically to the future, to choose the bin? I have two possibilities: I would choose the glasses in this case.

Deszõ Pavicska
It was pretty tricky really, because first of all you had to ask everybody for permission but afterwards the person still had to look natural. Luckily they know me. I just said that they should do everything as normal and I'll photograph them in the meantime and that not that many people are going to see it, they shouldn't let it bother them. I'm sure that not that many people that we know are going to attend exhibitions.
I would have been able to take better ones. However it's possible that I would have got a few smacks for it. So, it was better to ask. With this one, I gave the guy a sandwich, went a bit away...and it came out really well with the Coke advertisement. I like this one the best, it's very accurate, it hit the nail on the head. The opportunity had to be taken. It was such a good chance that I had to take it. If I wanted to be really ideological, I'd say that it's symbolic, but in the end I just liked the picture.

tions that pre-conditions participation in discourse long before we get to the gallery, community center or meeting room. We can attempt to minimize the effect of power on discourse, to point to its effects, but we can't expect to eliminate it. Discursive determinism also overlooks the extent to which political change takes place through forms of "discourse" (such as violence or economic manipulation of the electoral system) that are far from open and ideal. This tendency treats discourse as an abstract and autonomous entity, but the essential mediating relationship between discourse and mechanisms of political or social change is left undeveloped. We might call this the "argue but obey" criticism of discourse, taken from Kant's famous citation of Frederick the Great, who had no problem with Prussia's intellectual class expressing any number of radical ideals in written form so long as they did nothing to directly challenge his political authority—"argue as much as you want, and about whatever you want, but obey" (in "What is Enlightenment?"). "Discourse" becomes aesthetic, in the sense that I have used the term previously, to the extent that it becomes detached from mechanisms of political change and instead takes on a compensatory or primarily symbolic role.

2. Empathy and Negation

The second axis of a discursive aesthetic revolves around the related concepts of "empathy" and "negation". The specific function of conventional aesthetic perception is to treat the perceived object as an ensemble of stimuli to be registered on the conscious mind of the artist. Everything that is outside of the perceiving subject thus becomes a kind of raw material to be processed by the senses and the mind in order to produce what we might call a "transcendence effect". This process allows the subject to reflectively perceive the operations of their own consciousness, and by extension to glimpse the potential cognitive ground of a universal basis of communication. The transcendence effect is most pronounced when the material being experienced is treated as a mere representation, thus insulating the meditative perceiver from any direct contact with the viewed object which might distract them from the process of self-reflection. This is typically expressed in the early to mid-twentieth century concept of a formalist, self-referential art practice.

The effect, then, is to negate the specific identity of those objects around you (and people can easily function as objects), and instead to treat them as instrumentalized material. In contrast, a dialogical aesthetic would locate meaning "outside" the self; in the exchange that takes place, via discourse, between two subjects. Moreover, the identities of these subjects are not entirely set, but rather, are formed and transformed through the process of dialogical exchange. In the traditional view I've just outlined aesthetic experience prepares the subject to participate in intersubjective exchange by giving them mastery over a universal discursive form. They function as an already fixed enunciative agent who merely makes use of discourse to express the *a priori* "content" of their internal being. In the model that I'm outlining the subject is literally produced in and through dialogical exchange.

One way in which the instrumentalizing tendency of traditional aesthetic experience has been negotiated is through the concept of empathy (e.g., Burke and Lessing). Empathy is a relationship to others that at least potentially allows us to experience the world not as a transcendent eyeball searching out aesthetic stimulation, but as a discursively integrated subject willing to sacrifice some sense of autonomy in order to imaginatively inhabit, learn from (and be transformed by) another subject's material condition and world view. Politically resistant communities are typically formed by people who share lived experience and interests in ways that a Littoral practitioner may not. Yet, the problems of universality notwithstanding, we must retain some concept of an intersubjective common ground that would allow for the possibility of shared discourse, and that would allow the practitioner to bridge the gap of difference between themselves and their co-participants.

At the same time, empathy is susceptible to a kind of ethical/ epistemological abuse in which the very act of empathetic identification is used to negate the specific identity of the other subject. It is simply not the case that "we" are all "the same"—we are differentially positioned relative to material, cultural, and economic interests. And, historically, it is precisely in crossing these kind of objective divisions that "empathy" is most often evoked. Empathy can become an excuse to deny our own privilege and the real differences between ourselves and others, and to subject them instead to an instrumentalizing aestheticization. It is notable that in philosophical terms empathy has been constructed as non-discursive relationship. In Lessing's Laocoön essay he defines empathy in part through the restrained silence of Laocoön himself, even as he is attacked by poisonous snakes. The empathized subject is not expected to answer back, only to bear the marks of their suffering and to thereby elicit our emotive identification. Moreover, empathy is the product of distance, which guarantees that we cannot be "existentially implicated in the tragic event".[18] Thus both Lessing and Burke associate empathy with pity and with a quasi-pleasurable aesthetic response. I'm reminded here of a friend who worked developing art-based therapy in an Alzheimer's care facility. After some time she grew to be rather unpopular with the regular caregivers who resented what they saw as her tendency to romanticize dementia as liberating the creative child within. There is of course a long history of artists tortured by the desire to "do good" or be useful. Van Gogh's transition from Evangelical minister to the miners of Belgium, where he even began to physically mimic their impoverished lifestyle, to painting solemn scenes of peasant culture is exemplary of the tendency to treat the other as a material to be converted by the well-intentioned artist, or as a "representational" resource.

To make this point somewhat clearer relative to Littoral practice I want to briefly re-visit a project that I discussed in some detail at the Salford Littoral conference in 1994. The project is called *Soul Shadows: Urban Warrior Myths* and was produced by an artist from New Orleans named Dawn Dedeaux in 1993. It began as part of an "art in the prisons" program in Louisiana and eventually mushroomed into a travelling multi-media installation with sculptural elements, multiple video monitors, fabricated rooms, large photo-based images, a sound track and so on. In this form it toured from New Orleans to a number of major cities including Baltimore and Los Angeles. The project was subject to some criticism, especially by African American writers, because it presented provocative images of one of Dedeaux's chief subjects, a convicted crack dealer and gang leader named Wayne Hardy, half dressed, holding a spear, a shield and in one case a target. Although there are many "voices" in the installation, in fact a cacophony of audio and video tapes ran constantly, the dominant narrative "voice" of the piece was that of Dedeaux herself, who planned and orchestrated the project with some minimal "collaboration" from Wayne Hardy regarding the staging of his life size portraits. Dedeaux sought to help white viewers "empathize" with the conditions faced by young black men, at the same time that she hoped the piece would act as a kind of moral prophylactic for young black men who came to see it, who would presumably mend their ways after witnessing the contrition expressed by a number of imprisoned figures.

Dedeaux, who is from a white, upper-class New

Orleans family, spoke of the project as a way to overcome her fear of young black men after being mugged in the French quarter. The young black men she worked with thus served as the vehicle for a kind of immersion therapy that allowed her to transcend her own painfully self-conscious whiteness. At the same time, Dedeaux's project positioned her subjects as ciphers of black criminality (they are always viewed in the context of prison and of discussions about their crimes) by failing to locate their relentlessly foregrounded "criminality" in the broader context of the current urban political economy. Images of young black men in prison circulate widely in U.S. culture and their interpretation is heavily influenced by a broad network of presuppositions largely dominated by conservative policy statements, books, op-ed pieces and so on. These images cannot simply be re-circulated in an art context without taking that *a priori* discursive network into consideration, and without taking the artist's own position vis-a-vis these images into account. I certainly don't hold Dedeaux accountable for conservative policies on race and crime, but they constituted one of the most significant discursive interfaces for this project and, assuming that she didn't find herself in agreement with them, she should have devised some representational strategy to resist the assimilation of her project to these views.

Since this project was widely covered several years ago there have been two interesting addenda. First, in 1996 one of Dedeaux's subjects, Paul Hardy, was arrested for the murder of a police witness and, in order to build its case against him the FBI raided Dedeaux's studio, seizing interviews and videotapes. These images, which Dedeaux had collected and catalogued in her studio, are not simply a representational resource, they are in a very real way linked to the lives of her subjects, with immediate and profound consequences. The second addendum is provided by Dedeaux herself, who presented a mocking "self-portrait" (*Self-Portrait, Rome*) in a 1997 issue of the journal *Art Papers* which featured her in smiling black-face make-up with the phrase "Do You Like Me Better Now?" written on the palm of her hand. It is probably safe to assume that this image was intended as a response to those critics (possibly including myself) who raised questions about the position she took up in the *Soul Shadows* project. She seems to be suggesting here that the only reason she was criticized was because she was white.

Of course Dedeaux's easy accommodation to conservative views about black crime and poverty is not simply a matter of her race. At the same time, if she was black herself it is unlikely that the experience of being mugged would have made her fearful of all black men, and led her to produce a piece that is so problematically related to questions of difference, access, and mastery. Dedeaux's whiteness is not simply a question of skin color but of her imaginative orientation to racial identity and Otherness itself. While her class and racial background and her resulting isolation relative to poor and working class black communities might predispose her to reinforce these views, it doesn't predetermine it. This image is made more problematic by the fact that it is, presumably, meant as an indirect citation of David Hammons' billboard "How You like me Now?" which was installed on the streets of Washington, D.C. as part of the Blues Aesthetic exhibition in 1989. The billboard featured Jackson in whiteface and was meant as a critique of those Democrats who feared that Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" would split the black vote. As the billboard was being installed several black passersby found the image of a white-faced Jackson, being erected by an all-white crew, insulting. They returned with sledge-hammers and destroyed the piece.

This project provides an instructive example of the ways in which a discursively-based Littoral practice differs from gallery-based strategies, which assume that the physical object "in and of itself" carries sufficient meaning. There was no attempt by the sponsoring institution at discursive interaction with the "public" on whom this billboard would be imposed. Part of the difficulty lies in the ambiguity of Hammons' piece. "How you like me now?" could be a way of saying that Jackson was an "Uncle Tom" who was willing to play white to gain Democratic support just as easily as it could be taken as a criticism of Democrats who feared Jackson's blackness. On the streets of a formerly black DC neighborhood which was undergoing gentrification (in part encouraged by the activities of white artists and arts institutions), the fact that it was perceived as a provocation is hardly surprising. This makes Dedeaux's citation of the work in her image all the more questionable. Dedeaux displays an almost instinctive affinity for conservative views on race. Here she transforms Hammons' image, which was intended as an indictment of the suppressed racism of the Democratic party, into a caustic lamentation on the effects of reverse racism, in which she portrays herself as the oppressed victim of mean-spirited critics who attacked her solely on the basis of her skin color.

3. Critical Pedagogy and the Politically Coherent Community

As I've suggested, the antinomy between empathy and negation can be at least partially resolved by recourse to a discursive aesthetic which conceives of the artist primarily as a collaborator in dialogue rather than an expressive agent. Here the artist's identity is tested and transformed by intersubjective experience, rather than being fortified against it. The "artist" occupies a socially constructed position of privileged subjectivity, reinforced by both institutional sponsorship and deeply imbedded cultural connotations. It is the achievement of Littoral practitioners to work to mitigate the effects of these associations as much as possible, and to open up and equalize the process of dialogical exchange. This process is most easily facilitated in those cases in which the artist collaborates with a politically coherent community, that is, with a community or collectivity that has, through its own internal processes, achieved some degree of coherence, and a sense of its own political interests, and is able to enter into a discursive collaboration on more equal footing. This is perhaps the most effective way in which to avoid the problems posed by the "salvage" paradigm in which the artist takes on the task of "improving" the implicitly flawed subject. My intention here is not to idealize "community" per se. As I have written elsewhere, any process of community formation is based on some degree of violence and negation (of those individual characteristics that are seen as extraneous to a given community's common values or ideals).[19] Further, it is by now something of a commonplace to define "community" as an ongoing process, rather than a fixed and closed entity. But my question here is less theoretical than strategic; what role does the artist, as a singularly privileged cultural figure, play relative *to* this process? It is precisely the belief that the artist can somehow "create" community through a superior aesthetic power or relate to a given social or cultural collective from a transcendent or aesthetically autonomous position, which I would want to question.

Although artists can clearly function as co-participants in the formation of specific communities, they are also limited by the historical moment in which they live, and the extent to which existing social and political circumstances favor or preclude this formation. An exemplary case in this regard would be Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson's work during the 1980s with the Docklands Community Poster Project, which they developed in direct consultation and collaboration with tenants action groups, local councils and so on. This work was produced during a period of widespread political mobilization in response to Thatcherite programs for economic "redevelopment" that posed a serious threat to poor and working class neighborhoods in East London. This period also coincided, fortuitously, with the development of extremely innovative forms of arts patronage through the Greater London Council. The fact that the larger battle against Docklands development failed is less relevant here than the fact that the structural conditions for an activist cultural practice existed at the time that made it possible for Dunn and Leeson to produce works through a process of ongoing collaborative dialogue with a wide range of community groups.

Unfortunately the last fifteen years have seen a drastic change in activist politics in the U.S. and England. We live in a period of diminishing expectations, in which left organizations have in many cases taken up an accomodationist relationship to conservative policies, and in which the imaginative reach of activist politics has been severely restricted. The system of public support for activist work has been seriously eroded in the U.S., and a growing number of artists interested in Littoralist practices have to rely on private foundation support, or alliances with private sector institutions. It is difficult, if not impossible, to survive as an artist working primarily through grassroots political organizations. Increasingly artists are forced to develop strategic relationships with ancillary institutions such as public schools, prisons, and economic redevelopment agencies. Obviously these institutions are far more ambivalently positioned relative to the collective interests of poor or working class communities. Specifically, they function by defining community members through regulatory categories such as "at risk youth", "drug addicts", or "the homeless" which implicate the artist in a highly problematic chain of associations about their culpability as political and cultural agents.

A typical example of this tendency is seen in Jim Hubbard's peripatetic *Shooting Back* project, which began in 1988 with ex-UPI photographer Hubbard working with homeless children in the Washington, D.C. area to "document their lived experience as a means of personal empowerment." The project has been transported into a variety of other sites, including, in 1994, the *Shooting Back From the Reservation* series produced with Native American children in the west and southwest. Hubbard's press release for this project begins with a series of shocking statistics regarding unemployment rates among Native Americans and ends with a reference to the high incidence of alcoholism and suicide among reservations populations. Lurking just beneath the surface of Hubbard's description is the assumption that Native Americans exist in a classic "culture of poverty" in which the most significant barrier to their advancement isn't the absence of jobs, substandard schools or poor housing, but their lack of self-esteem, evidenced by their recourse to suicide and alcoholism. Hubbard himself substantiates this view. When he asked why he teaches children how to use cameras when what they really need is shelter his response was: "Housing won't be enough. Self-esteem is a big issue, particularly with children. Mastering the camera and seeing their own images in print have boosted their confidence." The project's effects are consistently described in terms of its remedial effect on truant youth. Thus, according to a press release: "children who experienced problems in regular school classrooms. . . are showing improvement in school work habits" due to the *Shooting Back* program. Or alternately, "children have been motivated to be productive in other school activities" because the *Shooting Back* program "contributes to their sense of self-confidence and accomplishment." Instead of addressing the structural conditions of Native American poverty Hubbard will "empower" them with the "self-esteem" necessary to succeed in the work-place by allowing them to temporarily inhabit the privileged subjectivity of the artist docu-

menting the world around them.

It is necessary to bear in mind here the increasingly conflictive role played by the public school system in the U.S. as a training ground for service sector and low-level technology employers. In northern Idaho, where I lived for the last two years, plans are under way to eliminate world history, geography, reading and even computer class requirements from the high school curriculum so that students can have more "flexibility for career-oriented electives." According to curriculum director Hazel Bauman, "What we are hearing from business and industry is that the large majority of kids who do not get baccalaureate degrees need to come out of high school with a good basis in technical skills." A plan currently being developed by the Coeur d'Alene Chamber of Commerce involves having local public school teachers spend their summer vacations working as "interns" at local businesses, like fast food restaurants or mines, in order to help them understand what these businesses need in students. According to band teacher Kevin Cope, "We're getting our students ready to go out and work for these corporations. We need to know what to teach them."

The *Shooting Back* project takes for granted the fatalistic political horizons of current conservative rhetoric; the best that can be hoped is to give Native American children the "self esteem" needed to stay sober and get to MacDonalds on time in the morning. Clearly there is nothing wrong with teaching kids how to use a camera. But why can't these technical skills be joined with some form of pedagogy which would help to encourage the formation of a critical consciousness of their situation within the current political economy? One of the most important characteristics of the aesthetic lies in its power to critically comprehend a cultural or social totality, and to think beyond its limitations. There is no sense of this kind of vision in Hubbard's project—no sense that he is conscious of working in and through an ideological apparatus that is precisely intended to circumvent the formation of a collective political identity among young Native Americans. Hubbard's decision to work with children is justified on the basis that they represent the "future" of Native American culture, but children are also far less likely to challenge Hubbard's own presuppositions regarding their own poverty. Children are typically selected by artists such as Dedeaux and Hubbard because they present themselves as more malleable subjects, less resistant to the impress of the artists' transformative power. But this is hardly a relationship that is likely to encourage any significant discursive equity or exchange.

We see this same failure of self-reflection in the recent National Endowment for the Arts' "American Canvas" report which attempts to insulate the NEA from future conservative attack by aligning it with programs designed to improve the poor and working class. In some of the more unintentionally amusing passages in the report Richard Deasy, director of the "Goals 2000 Arts Education Partnership", evokes the image of a rigorous, hard-headed art that isn't afraid to roll up its shirt sleeves and get things done. Deasy calls for an art based on "mastery" and "substantive, disciplined study." This "muscular" art can provide America's disadvantaged with the "self-esteem" that they are so obviously lacking, and can help them build the "workplace skills needed to ensure their own employability and their ability to make solid economic contributions to their communities." Having jettisoned its sissified ways on the cultural Nordic Track this manly art will "suffuse" itself "throughout the civic structure," according to Olson, "finding a home in a variety of community service and economic development activities."

These calls for a socially-engaged art are combined with a palpable fear among many of the contributors of calling too much attention to the political implications of this stance. In this context, the un-self-consciousness with which a number of participants in the public "American Canvas Forums" spoke of establishing friendly "partnerships" with the criminal justice system, urban renewal and economic redevelopment agencies, Enterprise Zones, and proponents of "cultural tourism" was truly astounding. The compromised function of these various institutions, relative to the interests of the poor, the working class, and people of color has, one would think, been well established, yet they are here viewed as nothing more than politically neutral vehicles for a pragmatic and non-ideological form of cultural activism.

In addition to their widely advertised positive effects, projects such as Hubbard's have the effect of encouraging children to believe that self-motivation and determination are the necessary conditions for progress; that it is "up to them" to succeed through the personal spark of creativity that will be unleashed by the art-making experience. When Hubbard's students are unable to start careers as UPI photographers who will be at fault? The project doesn't give them a way to understand the contradictory nature of their own status as "underprivileged" subjects in the first place—the very status that the artist depends on, and takes for granted, in choosing to work with them. It does little to help them develop a political critique of their own condition as "at risk youth" which might lead them to ask why the reservation has to fight for the crumbs of philanthropy and depend on well-intentioned artists to favor them with their projects in the first place. There is, in short, little space left open in these projects for the kind of emancipatory political vision that is a central feature of Littoral practice.

This criticism brings us back to the questions of individualism and anti-systematic thought that I outlined earlier as part of the current political and cultural context. For me the "indeterminateness" of a discursive aesthetic is not simply the condition of open-ended dialog, it also refers to the ability to think beyond or outside of the existing, constrained horizons of neo-liberal discourse which takes global capitalism, economic inequality, an individualized moral economy, "sustainable" levels of environmental destruction and so on as given conditions. When compared to the political climate of the 1920's, or even the 1960's this represents a deplorably impoverished range of options—the "end of ideology" real politik of NAFTA and the IMF. The demise of the USSR and the Berlin Wall is widely taken as a justification to dismiss any form of systematic critique as inherently "Stalinist". Yet I would contend that this is precisely where the transgressive powers of Littoral practice, and of a dialogical aesthetic, are most needed today.

Notes

1 Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.7.

2 There are a few exceptions here, including writings by Carol Becker, Hal Foster, Suzi Gablik, Suzanne Lacy and Lucy Lippard, among others.

3 Ken Johnson, "A post-retinal documenta," *Art in America*, vol.85, no.10 (October 1997), pp.80-88.

4 Some of the ideas presented here are taken from a forthcoming book project, *Words that Hear: Discourse and Counter-Discourse in Modern Art.*

5 Jean-François Lyotard, "What is Postmodernism?," *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.76.

6 Grant Kester, "Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public" in *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, edited by Grant Kester (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998).

7 See "Art and Objecthood" in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp.148-172.

8 Barnett Newman, "The First Man was an Artist" (1947) reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, editors (Blackwell: London, 1992), p.568.

9 David Smith, "Aesthetics, the Artist and the Audience" (1952), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, p.578.

10 According to David Dillon, in the June 1994 issue of *Planning*, one-third of all new communities being built in Southern California, Phoenix, Florida and the suburbs of Washington, D.C. are "gated." Along with the gates come surveillance cameras, infrared sensors, guard dogs, private police patrols and even barbed wire. These communities frequently privatize many of the functions previously performed by a local or municipal governments, such as trash collection, the provision of utilities, and even education.

11 For a particularly egregious example of this see a recent op-ed. piece by James K. Glassman a "fellow" at the Conservative American Enterprise Institute. In "From War to Art" (*Washington Post*, January 6, 1998), Glassman makes a virtue out of low voter turn-outs and the media's failure to report on domestic policy (in favor of stories such as Princess Diana's death and the "little girl in Texas" who fell into a well), which he attributes to the fact that "lots of people are happy" and thus don't really care about government anymore. Although "poverty, ignorance and pathology" still exist (the latter perhaps being a reference to arguments about the depraved or criminalized poor), the majority of Americans are using their new-found happiness to "read, listen to music and look at pictures". He cites as evidence the presence of "enthusiastic crowds" at a recent Richard Diebenkorn exhibition at the Whitney, praising Diebenkorn's "beautiful, sane and rhythmic" paintings.

12 Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society*, (New York: Free Press, 1995).

13 The institutional expression of this ethos is found in the privileged legal status granted to private corporations in the U.S. as fictive "individuals", which was first established by railroad monopolies in an 1886 Supreme Court decision (Santa Clara County vs. Southern Pacific Railroad).

14 Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, (New York: Free Press, 1994).

15 On the relationship between this view and contemporary community-based art practices see Grant Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Art," *Afterimage* 22:6 (January 1995), pp.5-11.

16 See Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993).

17 Eric Alterman, "Making One and One Equal Two," *The Nation*, May 25, 1998, p.10.

18 David Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoön: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.165.

19 See the "Rhetorical Questions" essay cited above (note 5).