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Sites of Criticism A Symposium

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*Organized and moderated by Joshua Decter, and co-moderated by Andrea Fraser.
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SITES OF CRITICISM

Practices: The Problem of Divisions of Cultural Labor

Panel Two
March 10, 1992, The Drawing Center, New York.

JOSHUA DECTER: During last week's panel, "Critical Forums: The Organization of Oppositionality," a discussion ensued regarding language. Specifically, the question of how different types of critical, theoretical, or ordinary/basic language function within various cultural contexts, and how this issue related to fundamental difficulties in communication between distinct or divergent constituencies within the contemporary cultural arena. In a sense, this goes back to the problem of creating an effective critical forum, and the related question of different audiences and audience receptions. If the language of public rhetoric is meant to communicate not only ideas and concepts, but also possible strategies and agendas, it is not so easy to cut across boundaries of cultural, ethnic, racial, educational, or ideological differences. And, in a sense, this symposium — tonight's and last week's panels — are designed to organize such diverse voices and positions into at least a temporary framework of productive discussion, debate, even polemics. And so by extension, we should expect, if not encourage, the wide range of rhetorical strategies of language which will naturally emerge in these types of public forums. The real issue to be addressed is the complex relationship between speaker, audience and context, and whether or not we tend to exclude or alienate the participation of other cultural constituencies even as we attempt to embrace different language articulations in this type of institutional context: a site of privileged, if not prescribed,

culture. Or, do the pressures of specialization in our culture lead us, as Edward Said has pointed out, to become experts, caught within self-serving academies— essentially disconnected from other larger social, political issues and concerns. Or, do we resolve this dilemma by organizing ourselves into separate, distinct groups and contingents which may indeed represent local community interests— but may also lead to pernicious forms of fragmentation and division.

Tonight's panel will attempt to address some of these concerns and others, as we focus upon questions regarding the erosion of traditional — i.e., modernist culture's prescribed segregations and divisions — between art making, criticism, and newly emergent forms of cultural production. Clearly, the development of conceptual and politically oriented practices of the late 1960s, as well as the emergence of cultural activism (as both practice and action) in the same historical period, influenced these types of discussions, and have been instrumental in the emergence of discussions on issues and notions of multiculturalism, for instance. It might be argued that tonight's panelists, as well as my co-moderator Andrea Fraser, consider themselves to be "cultural producers" or "cultural laborers," who may use their levels of "expertise" or "specialization" to break down the symbolic authority or mastery with such categories, so as to open up lines of communication between divergent positions, ideologies, etc.— and, furthermore, to resist or pose interferences against attempts to standardize language and communication. Finally, before Andrea makes her

statement, I would like to read from Edward Said's book, "The World, The Text and the Critic," in which he defines his notion of criticism:

"To use one word consistently along with criticism, not as a modification but as an emphatic, it would be oppositional. If criticism is reducible neither to a doctrine nor to a political position on a particular issue, and if it is to be in the world and self-aware simultaneously, then its identity is its difference from other cultural activities and from systems of thought or of method. In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself, and if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma. Ironic is not bad word to use along with oppositional, for in the main, and here I shall be explicit, criticism must think of itself as life enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse. It's social goals are non-coercive knowledge produced in the interest of human freedom. If we agree with Raymond Williams that, however dominant a social system may be, the very meaning of its domination involves a limitation or selection of the activities it covers, so that by definition it cannot exhaust all social experience and therefore always potentially contain space for alternative acts and alternative intentions, which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project. Then criticism belongs in that potential space inside civil society, acting on behalf of those alternative acts and

alternative intentions, whose advancement is a fundamental human and intellectual obligation."

ANDREA FRASER: As we have ten people up here, my statement is going to be very brief. One of the most important trajectories of critiques of the division of cultural labor in the 1980s, and particularly of that between theory or criticism and practice, took as its starting point Foucault's assertion that "theory does not express, translate, or serve to apply practice. It is practice." It is practice only to the extent that "the intellectual's role is no longer to place himself somewhat ahead and to the side in order to express the stifled truth of collectivity. Rather, it is to struggle against the forms of power that transforms him into an object and instrument in this sphere of knowledge, truth, consciousness, and discourse." While the idea that theory was or could be practiced was put into use in the breaking down of the opposition between art criticism and art production, its importance lies less with the diversification of activity within the art world, than with the developments of conceptual and critical practice. The opposition that Foucault describes is not that between theory and practice, or criticism and practice, but between activity that reproduces institutional structures or relations of power, and activity that attempts to work against them— or to transform them. Foucault locates these relations of power in other places— in the divisions of labor. But the divisions of labor that he is referring to here are less those that separate different areas of production, such as art objects from art criticism, and social divisions that separate off cultural

and intellectual activity, as a specialized field.

Critiques of divisions of labor in the art world were in some sense the rethinking of art making and art criticism, as critical or social practice—the organizing principles of which would be particular points of engagement that can cut across institutional definitions of professional activity. I'd just like to conclude by saying that what is at stake in these critiques of these divisions of labor concerns not just the breaking down of boundaries within the cultural field, but also a struggle against boundaries of specialization: social divisions of labor between producers and consumers (or nonproducers of culture, as their defined by art institutions) and between producers and non-producers or objects of discourse, as it's defined within academic institutions.

JD: The following comprises the series of questions originally posed to the panelists, and to which they are responding this evening; this will be followed by their statements. In terms of the thematic focus of this panel, we would like to examine how the disciplinary segregation of the functions of art production and art criticism has been traditionally utilized to preserve patterns of cultural specialization which may now require serious re-evaluation. We are interested in addressing whether such conceptual and practical distinctions are still legitimate, or whether they merely serve to reinforce the institutional frame of high culture for the sake of particular marketplace interests. Specifically, we want to reconsider how certain types of art production

construct and enable modes of critical engagement—for example, the critique of art history, the de-struction of aesthetic ideologies, the analysis of socio-political conditions, the de-coding of ethnic and gender identities, etc. In other words, to re-evaluate those strategies which may go far beyond the current disciplinary boundaries of art criticism. So, if art can operate as a form of cultural criticism, shouldn't this task also be available for art critical discourse? Furthermore, does the existence of "activist practice" open up the possibility of an activist art criticism, or do activist practices already subsume the category of "art criticism" within a hybrid, multiple language? Finally, we will want to address the implications of artists who also produce bodies of theoretical-critical writing, and explore the nature of the relationship between these two corollary activities. Is it tenable to consider art production and art critical writing as fundamentally interchangeable instruments of cultural, political, aesthetic and ideological analysis? Proceeding in alphabetical order, Gregg Bordowitz will begin.

GREGG BORDOWITZ: It's always important for me to start at these discussions by telling you two things: I'm gay and HIV positive. I'm telling you this for two reasons. First, these facts about myself have informed all my work for the last five years; and, secondly, I'm committed to the enfranchisement of all people who refuse to be identified as the subjects of compulsory heterosexuality, as well as those living with HIV.

Given these commitments and others that I will

address in this short presentation, for me the issues of division of cultural labor within the art world has little urgency at this point in time. I associate this problematic with the thinking that defined the work of artists in the late sixties and throughout the seventies. People who immediately come to mind are Joseph Kosuth (*Art after Philosophy*) or Martha Rosler (*The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*); or Dan Graham, and his writing on rock and roll and architecture, as well as his videos such as "Rock My Religion." These are just a few names and projects that come to mind. There are many more. It seems to me that a critique of specialization, and arguments for multi-disciplinary practices, have already been well articulated in theory and practice.

One of the most urgent issues of our time is the sharp division between various identities, and how these divisions are manifest within the institutions we work in. I'm most interested in practices and strategies that address the representational issues concerning difference. For the past twenty years, art institutions have been embattled sites where members of disenfranchised groups — women, people of color, lesbians and gays — have fought hard for inclusion and legitimacy. The universal presumptions made by institutions that all viewers are straight, white, male and moneyed have been challenged, but not completely overcome. In general, we know that conditions of existence in this country are so degraded that various disenfranchised groups are fighting from entrenched positions, doing two jobs at once. Struggling to take care of their own,

while at the same time, struggling to overcome the forces that caused such suffering. Additionally, these communities are attempting to do such things without the necessary resources to succeed. It's even worse than that— we know this. The variously identified groups that comprise the disenfranchised are profoundly alienated from each other. At this moment, we all face a representational crisis. We are unable to envision common cause in ways sufficiently compelling to motivate masses to move and change some of the social ills and inequities that can be changed. I have in mind the issues of health care, choice, and poverty.

In the field of grass-roots politics, the long held assumption that only coalitions among the variously disenfranchised will bring about genuine social change has a renewed intensity within the Pro-Choice movement, the AIDS movement, and the nascent health care movement. Representational work that pictures the chains of associations necessary for various disenfranchised groups to identify their interests in these struggles, and find common cause is the most important work going on at the moment. Picturing coalitions is both necessary and a difficult task to perform. It's not a matter of representing utopian visions of communal living. It's not the *Starship Enterprise*, it's not *Benetton ads*, it's not *Beverly Hills 90210*, it's not the multiculturalism of large institutions like the military, multinational corporations, and major universities and some museums. I have in mind the work of Isaac Julian, Yvonne Rainer, Adrian Piper, Stuart Hall; there are many names that come to mind, but these are the first four. There

are many collaborations and collectives: Gran Fury, Fierce Pussy, Gang, Guerrilla Girls, Paper Tiger, Not Channel Zero, Sankofa. The group Testing the Limits has recently produced "Voices from the Front," a work showing the development of AIDS activism over the past three years and exploring its relationship to other progressive struggles. It's premiering at Film Forum, March 18-24. There are many works I could name. It is sufficient for the moment to say that there is a large and growing number of practitioners working in a number of fields concerned with the problematics of coalition politics. This is a very specific kind of work, and it has a number of necessary components. Any work interested in the formation of progressive coalitions must have an agenda. More than that, an agenda must have a defined and attainable goal. Another necessary component is that work should articulate its motivating interests. An agenda is defined when all groups committed to its accomplishment place their own interests at stake. A truly democratic agenda is the cumulative results of a discussion concerning relations between various interests. Thus, works that articulate the needs and experiences of specific groups, such as lesbians and gay men, women, African-Americans, Latins, Asians, poor people, etc. contribute a great deal towards the classification of intention necessary for coalition building.

Subjectivity is a socially relevant, historically specific formation, and its analysis can be compelling and enabling. Relations of different groups need to be pictured as dynamic and sometimes competitive. In theo-

ry, it is too often assumed that all oppressed peoples are beholden to each other because each can identify with the oppression of the other. Well, it ain't necessarily so. Established institutions and groups often fight and stab each other in the back, for the ridiculously small resources apportioned for social spending. Any work interested in bringing people together must admit this and acknowledge it within the frame of representation. Alliances are necessary provisional articulations, bound up in complex, constantly shifting processes of representation and becoming. Social formations change rapidly with history, and thus representational strategies have to change to.

So how does this relate to questions regarding divisions of labor? This line of inquiry can't focus on the relations of practice among people working solely in the field of art. Rather, we must pursue ways of aligning art world practices with grass-roots cultural practices. To some extent, this is already being done by a number of art world institutions; but all too often, it's a matter of granting activist practices the legitimacy of high art, which I think is an uninteresting and useless credential for counter-hegemonic work. What can be done? Activist practices in the art world can picture ways for increasing numbers of people to become involved with grass-roots efforts.

The problems with divisions of cultural labor stem from issues concerning the distribution of resources. Recently, over the last few years, there have been many questions about art funding. Should the State

fund art? What kind of art should the State fund or not fund? What kind of system should regulate State funding for the arts? These are poorly stated and unimportant questions. The most important question we face today in the U.S. is: what are the priorities of government spending, and where is the peace dividend? Art finding cannot be discussed in a vacuum. There is no money forthcoming for a broad range of social services: health care, housing, and cultural work. They all deserve funding. We must fight for all of these things together.

I understand "practice" to be an ensemble of activities unified by the goals of the practitioner. These goals are defined by her or his interests and are motivated by her or his direct experiences. The ensemble of activities constituting a practice can and, I argue, must transgress the boundaries of established divisions of cultural labor between the art world and the rest of society. Art is no longer, and perhaps never was, a categorically autonomous entity. At this point in time, it's questionable to discuss divisions of labor without recognizing that the category "art" is deeply troubled and increasingly irrelevant to discussions of cultural work.

This summer in July, the Democratic Convention will happen at Madison Square Garden. The problem that a large number of grass roots activists are grappling with at the moment is how to get large numbers of p~people demonstrating outside the Convention for a legitimate agenda on health care. This issue has become popular among the Democrats. Each one of

them has a completely insufficient proposal. In progressive circles, a Marxist analysis, a feminist analysis, identity politics, and civil rights agendas are all in agreement that this country must have a national health care system. So, the representational problematic a number of culture-makers face is how to picture a coalition that will make a large collectively organized demonstration possible, and how to articulate options for future alliances around specific goals. In some ways, this problematic is not new. Yet, in many ways, it is unknown history in the making. The specificities of our historical moment renew this problematic with fresh intensity and compelling urgency. I think we must picture forgotten options, render ignored possibilities, represent ourselves and our interests as part of a larger, broadly defined social formation because all of our actions bear the weight of social significance. We can only choose to whether or not recognize this fact.

JD: Thank you, Gregg. Coco Fusco?

COCO FUSCO: My opinions about the division of cultural labor — which, in short, I believe to be highly arbitrary — are no doubt greatly influenced by the fact that I never received formal training as an art critic or as an artist. Not having been prejudiced by classical training and never having felt compelled to focus on one area or genre of cultural production, I have sought to overturn "common sense" divisions of labor. My education, methodology and interests have always been interdisciplinary, and I tend to be highly skeptical of any attempt to force myself or any one/thing else into a single cate-

gory, whether it be ethnic, sexual, or professional. It makes much more sense to me to conceive of my work — across disciplines and areas — in terms of strategy; that is, that I begin with a set of issues or a set of ideas, and then choose the best method to articulate and analyze them. The result might be a piece of criticism, a public lecture, a fake advertisement, a film festival or a performance.

The context in which these activities take place, however, definitely affects my choice of strategy and how that work is interpreted. Speaking more specifically about writing about art and culture, it is undeniable that there has been an extraordinary backlash against “multicultural” arts criticism by people of color in the last year. The Political Correctness debate has had a disproportionately extreme effect on those who are not identified with the dominant culture. The arguments used against our “tendentious” points of view are familiarly reductive and ethnocentric. It is alleged that we are not sufficiently educated to determine quality, that we are too passionate about our “causes” to be taken seriously as arbiters of aesthetic value, and that our politics subjugate the importance of ideas in favor of partisan maneuvering and collective ego-boosting. Our attempts at promoting cultural ideas are very much under attack as threatening to “American” values. Implicit in these evaluations are theories of the division of cultural labor, or more specifically, a clear mandate to separate people of color from the production of knowledge, about themselves, or any one else.

Ironically, the very multicultural policies that have demanded “diversity” of mainstream cultural institutions have played a role in this process. In the mid and late eighties, I argued that despite the apparent good intentions of multiculturalism, its emergence at the apex of a national economic crisis and its function as a benevolent gloss on establishment paranoia about shrinking white elites should act as a constant reminder that its ultimate goal was to legitimate, incorporate, absorb and commodify different kinds of ethnic cultural practices, and not to cede power to ethnic groups. In other words, the old division of cultural labor has remained, for the most part, intact. While multiculturalism has helped several artists of color to survive economically, and to attain a certain degree of respect, it has also contributed to the erosion of most ethnically-specific art organizations in this country. I will offer one example: ten years ago, there were over one hundred Chicano arts organizations in the U.S. Now there are ten. At the same time, several blockbuster Hispanic art exhibitions have toured major museums. When it comes to ethnic minorities in this country, we are still operating on the principle of the talented tenth: you take the cream of the crop and let the rest struggle without leadership until they fall.

My choice of strategies then is directly affected by the backlash and these institutional power struggles between small and large organizations. At this particular moment, I find that it is more effective to make art that deals with race and culture than to write criticism about these issues. The battle over the division of cul-

tural labor regarding who can speak about multiculturalism as a critic still rages. I recently attended the College Art Association Conference and noted that although panels such as this one present an illusory and utopian model of equality and heterogeneity, the colonial model is still in place in most parts of the country. Most of the people of color who attended the conference were artists, while most of the critics who were talking about multiculturalism were white. Colonialism continues to operate within the art world and within other social institutions in this country.

So what specific choices do I make when working as a critic or as an artist? I see my current critical work as a kind of social intellectual reform. I go to great lengths to contextualize artwork that may be best understood as dealing with non-traditional forms or aesthetics from other cultures. I place a tremendous emphasis on the problem of interpretation - because, all too often, we tend to censor difference or depreciate the value of works we perceive as culturally different.

I will give an example of how my work as an artist deals with social and political issues. I just returned from working on a project in the University of California-Irvine with Guillermo Gomez-Pena. We lived in a cage for three days as undiscovered aborigines who had allegedly arrived in Orange County demanding that they be discovered for the Quincentenary — a satirical take on what was once a common practice of exhibiting human beings from Africa, Asia and Latin America in zoos, parks, museums, circuses and freak shows.

For ten days before we entered the cage, however, we spent several hours a day with students, faculty members and others, discussing institutional racism and the manipulation of different populations in Orange County. We tried to engage in a dialogue that would make the metaphor of the cage resonate in that particular context, and also brought much of what was discussed into the actual piece. Given that Orange County is the home of the John Birch society, the land of the Klu Klux Klan and many monied Republicans, there was a great deal to talk about. We learned how campus police treat faculty and students of color on campus — they often pull guns on them for no reason after 6pm. We spent time talking about how the brutal treatment of undocumented Mexicans throughout the county, and how that treatment expressed unconscious fears about what these people represent. All this information was put back into the piece.

JD: Thank you, Coco. Félix González-Torres?

FÉLIX GONZÁLEZ-TORRES: Just a simple thing before I start reading my paper. The definition of Félix González-Torres as an artist should also include the fact that I watch TV. Every time I have to write a paper or prepare some type of presentation, and if I am running low on motivation or inspiration — if you want to call it that — I usually force myself to look into the dictionary for the meaning of a word or words. As a customary exercise, that usually leads me into something. This seemingly banal act is always for me, an act of

resistance: I read the meaning of the word, the different ways in which the word can be used, and the words that precede or come after the particular word I am looking for. This dictionary exercise became, in itself, closely related to the themes or theme we are attempting to address here tonight, which is again, I'll repeat: "Practices: The Problem of Divisions of Cultural Labor."

This book of definitions, of rules, of "simple" meanings seems always to reveal a general consensus: a social relation in which, by accident, we seem to be living in. The dictionary, an apolitical book that has no agenda, a transparent book, a book whose only innocent function is to serve as a reference, as a source of plain and precise information, a book unrelated to other literary books, unrelated to our oppression, unrelated to power. Right?

This division, this distance, like the division of labor, like the division between public and private, like the division between feminism and women's lower wages, between the AIDS crisis and the American Medical Association, between the Savings and Loan bail-out and the NEA debate. It is a division that is in place to serve a very specific purpose, which is, among other things— to confuse. To diffuse any formulation of meaning, any connections, and perhaps, action. And I mean only perhaps. But wait. What is the meaning of the word "dictionary" in the dictionary itself? Well, according to the Meriam Webster dictionary of 1974, which is the one I own, it is as follows: "Dictionary— a reference book containing words, usually alphabetically

arranged, with information about their forms, pronunciation, functions, etymologies, meanings, and syntactical and idiomatic uses." But according to whom, I may ask? And when and why? And who was the editor or editors? Were they male or female? Who was the editorial consultant, and that is the history of this dictionary? Were dictionaries always a part of our lives? Is the dictionary another act of God? Who made the first dictionary and why— why was it needed? Perhaps to define national language— a nation? To create a rule to which a new expression could be compared to— or it just simply happened? One day we woke up and, voila... there it was, the dictionary.

In culture, everything happens when it is needed, however we might want to define that need, even with the objects and ideas that are already there— these are only foregrounded until society feels it is the right time. Then it becomes. The division of labor, like the official separation between public service and private life, is a social contract to which we agree. Or, to put it in a way in which I will feel more satisfied, it is a division in which we are forced to believe in order to reproduce the rules of production, and ultimately, in order to reproduce those forms of production and consumption— to keep the narrative going. And yes, soon I will have to quote Louis Althusser.

But now, let's go back to the innocent dictionary: full of good old values— and let's find the correct information about the word "practice," which concerns us tonight. "Practice: to perform or work at repeatedly, so as to

become proficient; to carry out; to apply; to do or perform customarily; to be professionally engaged in the exercise of a profession; a professional business." And let's leave it like that for now.

For a moment, let's re-address the main question we are trying to discuss in this panel tonight. A question posed by the editors of *Acme Journal*. Anyway, this is the question: "You (the panelist) might want to consider how certain types of art production construct and enable certain modes of critical engagement. For instance, the critique of normative art history, the construction of aesthetic ideologies, the analysis of socio-political ideologies, the de- or re-coding of representations of gender or ethnic identities, etc. which may indeed go far beyond the current disciplinary boundaries of art criticism. So if art can operate as a form of 'cultural criticism,' should this task also be available for art critical discourse? Furthermore, does the re-emergence of 'activist art' practice open up the possibility of an activist art criticism." And that is the end of the question.

Anyway, this question is very crucial in the way in which it solicits some specific types of answer— not just any answer. I would like to then take this opportunity to reformulate the question: the meaning of some words, and therefore the answers or answer. A few ideological traps need to be diffused first. And first, let's define "ideology." Let's use a text as political as any dictionary, let's use a text by Louis Althusser. His definition of ideology is as follows: "Ideology is a representation

of the imaginary relationship of the individual to the real conditions of existence." I'd also like to express my surprise about the fact that activist art is emerging, by the way. Art has always been activist. It just depends whose activities it was in service of. Either those who want to go back to the good old times of the monolithic straight white, male classical voice; or, those of us who are interested in a little more— I should say, color and texture. I truly hope this question was not solely referring to activist art, to the kind that is interested in inclusion rather than exclusion. A type of art that has a preoccupation with giving different voices a chance to be heard and valued; a type of art that is concerned with trying to make this place a better context for the larger group. I guess that art can also be called activist. But let's be careful with the naming, and who is doing it, where and when. Let's not make it so easy for the opposition to define and dissect us so quickly, so easy, so black and white, so Hollywood: bad guys versus good guys. By no means we should leave out of this definition of activist art that very artistic production, whose use and definition has the most successful ideological effect because it is represented to us as the norm, the rule, Art with a big A: art only interested in art, the inert dictionary of art, the normative explanation of good art. This very artistic production is in active service of another agenda that may not be our political agenda, but it is definitely an agenda. Let me give you an example that I hope will help us clear this smog, and redefining and renaming that which is presented to us in a distorted manner, we might be able to see the underlying mechanism by which we are usu-

ally taken for a ride.

On September 26, 1989 — and I should re-contextualize this situation, since occurred before the NEA debate, and when the Soviet Union was still a very useful enemy — I received a letter from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. I had a fellowship grant from them in 1989, and the letter informed me and the other grantees about the interest that the State Department was having in art. I'm just going to read some highlights from the this letter: "If your art is accepted, you will have the option to lend or donate your art in association with the State Department. This opportunity may not be of interest to you, but I did want to bring the possibility to your attention. Sincerely, Executive Vice-President, etc."

And then, this is the fact sheet— I didn't make this up, it came in the mail from the State Department, it's not, you know, a simulacrum. It says, "Fact Sheet: Art and Embassy Programs, US Department of State: Art is a powerful form of international currency. It promotes understanding of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. George Bernard Shaw once said, 'Next to torture, art is the greatest persuader.'" And, I repeat, this is a letter from the State Department. They meant it. By the way, I didn't know that the State Department was now more interested in art than in torture. The fact sheet continues: "...art is an advocate around the globe through the Art and Embassy Programs," and then the letter goes on to explain the procedures. It states: "Selection process: art collections or many

exhibitions are selected based on a particular theme or to highlight a particular style, subject or time period. Each work of art must meet the following criteria: A) art must be original, created by an American artist; B) art must be of recognized quality to represent American culture; C) art must be compatible with culture or concepts valued in the host country; and, D) art should complement the architecture and interior design of Embassy buildings."

So just in case you still don't get it, they also included a series from an article in *Art News*, which explained what their program was, and the article also included a picture— in case we were still a little bit confused. The caption of the picture read: "A painting by Franz Kline is one of the several American works embellishing a room in Spaso House, the U.S. Ambassador's residence in Moscow. Other types of paintings that were used from various museums, corporations, and private collections are by such luminaries as Milton Avery, Frank Stella, and Ellsworth Kelly." It's amazing that Helen Frankenthaler wasn't added here. Obviously, this type of art is being used for a very active purpose which can be translated as "activist art" for a conservative right wing Republican agenda. But anyway, back to our haunting question of the night.

As some of you might know, art criticism was the first funding category to be eliminated from the National Endowment for the Arts a few years ago. It was not an accident, believe me. The type of art criticism that did not agree with the stomach of the Right Wing cultural

guardians was the kind of art criticism that might, let's say, re-contextualize the art object within a socio-political cause and effect. A kind of art criticism that suddenly stopped talking about the inspiration produced by the "walk in the woods," because it understood that it was just impossible at that point in history— that we do not live in isolation, not even the studio artist. This new type of art criticism, now active in another direction, broke the ideological mirror in which we reflected ourselves and the art object, devoid of any connection to history, to events, to issues and institutions that intercept and effect our thinking and our lives— even our most intimate moments.

Let's also remark here that this new art criticism was mostly by women, and by a few brave boys, that this time around managed to include gender and sexual preferences among some of the interests behind certain productions and receptions of art. Before, I guess, these issues were omitted by mistakes in the printing process, no doubt! And it is precisely because a certain number of artists are dealing with issues that were always thought to be better off un-mentioned, because, after all, in the service of the divisions of labor, artists are supposed to do something very specific— maybe to produce a work that could complement an Embassy decor. The State is totally out of control: any artist is a threat right now. Any artist's conviction: a direct attack on the frightened American family. Thank God we still have some "defending fathers" to unravel the truth for us— for all of us. Just look at your TV, and check out the political ads— all we need to know is there. By tak-

ing over issues of housing, health care, queer rights, women's rights, the environment, the government cover-ups (and many more unfamiliar acts), we artists, critics and art historians do in fact re-arrange the divisions of cultural labor. The State also practices control, not only through the repressive methods of the State Apparatus — such as the army, the police, the jails (by the way, we in the U.S. have one of the largest incarcerated populations of the industrialized world) — but it also exercises control through the Ideological State Apparatuses— such as the churches, the family, the media, and — in the most recent incarnation — through the NEA debate. Yet the NEA debate is not actually a debate, but rhetorical posturing about freedom of information, and the first amendment or so-called free speech— which was never free, you had to pay for it. It was about white, male, straight speech— or classical values. Let's not forget who wrote the Constitution that is "protecting" our rights. As wonderful as it may sound, this Constitution was not written by single Black mothers, or factory workers on a three-day work schedule somewhere in Chicago. No, it was written by free white men with properties and titles— what I call, "the Other."

So if you ever get invited, or get invited again, to pretend that there is a debate about freedom, just remember a few things if you are a cultural producer. First, don't act "artistic." Screw the divisions of labor really good, and don't talk about how important it is for your "creative self" to smear shit all over your body as a metaphor for the long time you had to wait for the sub-

way to arrive. No, instead tell the audience — the American family — that perhaps we should be addressing ourselves to the more than \$500 million dollars with which the government is subsidizing the Savings and Loan orgies of the 1980s (for every dollar spent on social programs, we now spend six dollars for the S&L bailout, so this is no longer the Welfare State, but rather the S&L bailout state). Screw up the division of labor real good, and recite — at the drop of a hat — numbers and statistics about the increase in infant mortality, the new cases of tuberculosis, the de-funding of supplemental food programs for pregnant women, infants and children, the WIC programs, by the supposedly pro-family, pro-environment, pro-education administration.

Yes, really screw up the divisions of labor and your role— the divisions and rules of how you should look, and how you should act; or, the things you should know if you're an artist. Don't give them what they are expecting from you. Re-frame the terms of the argument. Make connections. Establish priorities and perhaps in this way, we might be able to put forward our own agenda— if we trust ourselves. Maybe in this way, our voice of opposition will be a more complex voice— less easy to dissect and categorize. A voice not only of a more diverse contestation, but also infiltration. An infiltration that upsets the expected narrative, and ultimately a voice that includes all of us, for all of us— from this room, to any other rooms. A voice that truly attempts liberation through meaning and re-naming, and re-ordering according to our own needs.

JD: Thank you, Félix. Renée Green?

RENÉE GREEN: I just wanted to preface my statement by saying that I focused on the letter that was sent to me, so it's a little more rigid than it might ordinarily be.

As I read my letter from Josh, describing the thematic focus of the "Practices" panel, I noticed my blood pressure rising: my breathing became quicker, more shallow, and bells went off in my head. My body seemed to be experiencing flight or fight symptoms: sensations common to those I'd felt in the audience of previous panels at times when I'd wanted to pose a question, yet wasn't able to do so before the subjects shifted or the panel concluded. This visceral reaction was not simply the result of being asked a question such as, "Is it tenable to consider art production and art critical/theoretical writing as fundamentally interchangeable instruments of cultural, political, aesthetic and ideological analysis?" To which, upon first reading, I emphatically marked, "NO," in the margin. But rather, I was responding even more to the chance to examine how, as was stated in the letter, "the disciplinary segregation of the functions of art production and art criticism have been traditionally utilized to preserve structures of cultural specialization, which may now require reevaluation,"; or, to paraphrase this in the way I understood the statement: that the separation of art production and art criticism have been viewed as exclusive categories, implied in the maintenance of that division is a power struggle between the right to represent— this right traditionally going to the art critic, rather than

the art producer, or “cultural producer,” and how now (as well as in the past) both categories are up for questioning. This sentence made me flash back to my own struggles with academic divisions, when, as an undergraduate, I attempted to cross back and forth between being an art producer and creating a theoretical framework from which to examine my position in relation to historical and contemporary art debates.

I recently found an old notebook, which was begun in 1980. In it I charted the development of an undergraduate thesis, which was written in an attempt to piece together my thoughts about myself as a budding artist in relation to the artistic canon, as well as to examine my relationship to past and present debates in art concerning “Black artists”— a still contested designation. One which I wanted to deconstruct, with the help of Edward Said, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault. The topic was, “Discourse on Afro-American Art.” I remember wavering between African-American and Afro-American, and somehow settling on Afro-American, as it was still in common usage. In the thesis, I never accepted the implication that there is any unified form of a so-called Afro-American art, but instead attempted a textual analysis of criticisms, which were written by both Black and White critics from the 1920s and the 1960s. At the time, my own frustration to express my opinions was great. One art history professor told me that artists could never represent themselves because they never really knew what they were doing, and needed an art historian to interpret the work. It seemed as if artists had what appeared to be equivalent to a biologi-

cal problem, which would keep them permanently deficient of this mysterious lucidity— which art historians somehow miraculously possessed.

Luckily, these notions were thrown into question for me by reading the texts of artists like Robert Smithson and Adrian Piper, who made writing about the processes of art production a part of their practices. These examples gave me the impetus to make my own attempt. I want for a moment to read some excerpts from this notebook, to give some clues as to what my concerns were then: concerns which propelled me into the position of a speaking and writing artist, or cultural producer. As I recently read this notebook, I was surprised to find that my recent concerns are quite similar, and I was also saddened and irritated to find that some annoying patterns which I observed then continue to repeat themselves.

October 26, 1980— In the bibliography of the Alain Locke book (this book is actually called *The New Negro*, and Locke was a New Negro cultural critic from the 1920s), his categories exclude Black visual artists. He has, the Negro in literature, Negro drama, Negro music, Negro folklore, Negro-American, and African and Negro race problems. This topic is so oppressive I feel its heaviness when I walk through stacks of books on the Negro question: race relations, etc. Am I doing this to purge myself of any further obsessions in this area of Black artists’ positions? I feel compelled to do this thesis. It is a very compulsive thing. I’m definitely not being pressured to do it, but I need to straighten

some things out for myself.

November 3, 1980— Is the artist allowed to speak or must his or her words speak for themselves, which leaves open the possibility of all sorts of conjecture. How is this problem, interpretation, common to artists in general— different or more complex for Black artists? Why is it possible to sense in the criticisms of Black artists tones of cultural domination by both Black, and for different reasons, White critics. This is a very tangled situation.

November 7, 1980— Letters to faculty explaining the feasibility of my project. Listing artists and critics. Preliminary outline. Ask the art department what my standing is, and tell them to contact Honors College. Arrange appointment with Professor Lowe and discuss how to approach my reasons for not having taken math or science at Wesleyan. Work on that over the weekend.

December 26, 1980— Writing: why do I feel it necessary to express my thoughts in a verbal medium as well as in a visual one. I no longer want to think of myself as being divided into a part which has to write, and a part that has to use visual symbols, yet the need to write raises questions of doubt for one who thinks of oneself as a visual artist. — I'll skip ahead — Is this attitude which regards visual art as less important than a verbal form a kind of brainwashing? Is this attitude present in writings on Black artists? I already know that it is, but I have to specifically pin down this attitude. —

I'll skip ahead — In reading about art created by Blacks, I tried to let myself go, suspend my tendency to pounce on the author. So far, I have not read anything that has allowed me to remain in the suspended state for very long. Later— I am changing as I write this thesis. I cannot be as removed from it as I was in writing previous papers or in handling works of visual representation. My brother said, "Renée, maybe someday you will be in one of these books, 'Renée Green, Black Artist'." I don't know about that. I want the books to change. Things are so much more complicated than the categorizations which are given. Unfortunately, these categorizations and representations seem to stick. I keep finding an impulse to say, "Not True." Am I saying there is an ultimate truth? Do I instead believe there is an individual truth? What do I mean?

January 15, 1981— Irreverence is important.

January 27, 1981— This day has been thoroughly upsetting. Presently, I am rewriting a letter to the Honors College defending its questioning of my claim of "general education" at Wesleyan. I am so sick of the bureaucratic maze I've been going through today; instead of organizing my information, I keep trying to state or defend my qualifications to write the thesis. Then, the bloody art department has to decide if I am in "good standing" (ha, ha), and my tutor has to comment on my progress.

Undated Entry— I finally found an article by Elsa Honig Fine. The article, I suppose, is a microcosm of her

book, *Afro-American Artists Search For Identity*, it's rough. I think I'll just make a xerox of it, and go to bed. This is depressing. I'm just so overwhelmed by the statements that are being made. What is overwhelming? I guess the fact that these statements seem to glide so smoothly and matter of factly from an actual person onto the page. Fine informs me in an article on art that the "Black militant no longer feels inadequate because of his peculiar speech patterns, hair texture or body structure." I think the major issues were laid down in the twenties. Questions Fine asked: Why is there not a Black visual art tradition comparable to a Black musical tradition? And what is the role of the Black visual artist? Where do his traditions lie— with the American culture, or with his African heritage? And what should be the unique contribution of the Black artist? Should he express his inner emotions in his art, or does his responsibility rest with his people? She views things in such — excuse the pun — black and white terms, simplistically. She and Alain Locke are asking the same questions. The question emerges: what power do they have to ask these questions? Later— I found a 1970 April issue of *Time* magazine, a special Black Issue .

Undated Entry (near the completion of the thesis)— Irony of my reference to Western cultural discourse— what did it achieve? The realization that it is difficult to be a cultural commentator or critic at the same time— but that it appears necessary at least for me. Yes. I know I am adding to the already crowded arena of representations, but this study was an effort to untan-

gle some previously stated representations in order to analyze the authority they exert.

So my impetus for writing came about through what I then, and still, perceive of as a critical lack. One which has been bemoaned by countless artists from varying backgrounds. As I said before, Piper and Smithson, to name just two, demonstrated that it was possible to participate in a discourse about art, and that it was actually possible to elucidate the connections between other aspects of life and what had been presented to me at first as an isolated practice. Of course, this desire, even in the Sixties and Seventies, wasn't a new one for artists who attempted to locate an intersection between life and art. So then it isn't now possible to see this wish as a new development. But rather, as a continuation of practices, which are always being acted out in some form, but which periodically receive attention in the media and marketplace. The forms and names change, although the underlying impulses remain similar. For example, in the Seventies there was talk of crossing the boundaries between art and life with performance art; and today, Cornel West speaks of the "new cultural politics of difference," and the "New World bricoleurs who will bring these politics into practice."

I'd like to conclude by noting and questioning the supposition that (this is from the letter) "certain types of art production construct and enable modes of critical engagement which may go beyond the current discipli-

nary boundaries for art and art criticism." I think that art can serve a heuristic purpose: it can spark people to think. But I don't think it is interchangeable with a political and theoretical program, which would first come into existence through verbal language and writing—writing which may be informed by practice. But I think the two can function together. As I've just recounted, I've asked myself why I'm compelled to write my thoughts if they could be completely conveyed by my art production. What about film or video, or work combining text and images, or narrative and images. Is it possible for these two to be interchanged with critical or theoretical writing? Still, my answer is no. I just want to explain this. I'm alluding to some of the questions that have been asked here, and I'm actually more fluid than my "no" might suggest. Different purposes can be served by both critical and artistic practices. That is not to say that these purposes never cross, and can possibly function together. But if art production had to wield the entire weight of a theoretical treatise, what would be the point of that production? It's my opinion that there is a mysterious interaction that can occur between visual, oral and spatial stimuli and text that can't be completely equated with theory. Of course, it can be argued that some theoretical writings aspire to be art. So the debate can go back and forth, and becomes a matter of personal stakes and predilections.

JD: Thank you, Renée. Peter Halley?

PETER HALLEY: I've decided to take the boring point of view, so hold on. It is essential to examine the phenom-

enon of cultural specialization from an historical perspective. It is a system that began in the 18th century as a result of changes in consciousness triggered by industrialism. Its first ideological proponent was Hegel. It is a system that continues to dominate almost all aspects of intellectual life and its bureaucratic organization. It is a system that also clearly leads to a self-referential point of view in all areas of intellectual endeavor, and it is accompanied inevitably by the phenomenon we call Formalism. That art criticism can become cultural criticism is indeed an important goal, but most critical writing today continues to focus on individual forms of practice (the novel, art, pop music, etc.) and to focus on the particular history and syntactical manipulations that have taken place within those practices, as its subject.

However, it seems to me that creative activity is primarily fueled by the desire to solve or explore, in the imaginary realm, sociopolitical questions in a real world. Self-referential criticism ignores the situation. But even among socially aware critics, there is still a tendency to treat individually and in isolation, different forms of culture. This is especially true for cultural forms that are addressed to different socio-economic groups: high and low culture, as it is sometimes called. Thus, few writers attempt to glean common cultural trends in pop music and art, for example, or in commercial television and contemporary poetry.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that today we undoubtedly live in a culture that produces

more and more fragmentary and diverse sub-cultures. The reconciliation of the meanings of what is going on in these fragmentary groups, taken as a whole, seems to me a primary problem of cultural criticism. Thus the primary goal of cultural criticism would not simply be to relate criticism to real events in society, but rather to bring together into dialogue the various compartmentalized cultural practices occurring in our society at any given time, and in so doing, to achieve a kind of unified field theory of the culture. The only book that I've ever read that successfully takes on this problem is *Bomb Culture*, by an English writer, Jim Nutall, published in 1969. Nutall, in my view, successfully explains how the political movements in the Fifties and Sixties, as well as Beat poetry, various youth movements, avantgarde art, and pop music, were all the result of changes in ethical perceptions brought about by the threat of imminent nuclear war.

In addition, I firmly believe that today, creative practices has become a unique locus of cultural commentary and critique. Fueled by subjective attitudes, rather than norms of academic sociological analysis, the artist (so-called) is uniquely positioned to find chinks in the ever-more perfect fictions of our society. In addition, it is of utmost importance for artists to seize the role of interpreters of their own production— through criticism, through curating and editing, etc. Our culture continues to assign the artist such marginalized roles as clown, martyr, infantile narcissist, etc. Such roles effectively keep creative practice out of serious consideration. To my mind, it is only by the assertion that the

artist is a conscious and directed force — aware of the historical and social issues that have propelled him or her to act — that the artist can try to escape this marginalized and neutralized condition.

Thus, because of the extreme bureaucratic compartmentalization of most intellectual practice in the universities, and the simultaneous complete subjugation of the creative practices to demographics in the marketplace, scenes like art, performance, poetry etc. become the only locus of cultural criticism in our society. Thus, art criticism rather than becoming a debased form of academic practice, has often functioned as a flexible, unclassified arena for cultural critique.

In my own practice as an artist and writer, I have recently had to face an interesting issue. In his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau talks about tactics and strategy. Tactics belong to the disenfranchised, who can mount guerrilla attacks on the positions of the dominant culture. To speak tactically is to speak in terms of a language borrowed from a dominant culture, and transformed by means of play: by puns, secret meanings, and transformations of the dominant syntax. Strategy belongs to those with a "position," or "terrain," to defend. Most of my writing was done from the point of view of a person without a "position" in the cultural establishment. Since, in the last few years, I have, for better or worse, acquired a position or terrain, I have found it more difficult to write. My views over the last few years have not

changed dramatically, but the defense of a position or my position, does not seem to me a very interesting motivation for writing criticism. Instead, yielding the floor to those involved in tactics and the entire realm of play, recordings and sleights of hand that go with tactics, seems to me a much more positive alternative.

JD: Thank you Peter. Silvia Kolbowski?

SILVIA KOLBOWSKI: I am speaking here as an artist who writes critical texts, and as a critic who makes art; more specifically when I am culturally identified as an artist, I am someone who also writes texts, and when I am identified as a writer, I am someone who also makes art. The categorical resistance implied by the surplus of these linguistic divisions is what we are here to talk about tonight. These titles are not purely self-designated, they are of course categories established through a myriad of institutional discourses— linguistic, legal, and representational categories that we are not able to travel between freely. In a manner of speaking, to do so requires the use of institutional passports. Passports in the plural, because each institution issues its own. And it often appears that the holding of more than one passport at a time is not permitted. If rights are issued institutionally, it follows that these categories cannot be considered our freely interchangeable instruments. This is not to say that one could not issue oneself a passport, either by linguistic decree - e.g., "now I am a critic, now I am an artist" - or through the forging of a replica - that is, I take on the institu-

tional trappings of one or the other category. But by definition, then, at a given time we would practice as impostors within the one or the other institutional arena (and sometimes as impostors within both). An impostor, according to the dictionary definition, is "someone who passes himself off as someone other than he is." According to this definition, we are, of course, all impostors, since our identities - sexual, national, or otherwise - are never stable or originary.

The role of imposter, it seems to me, is not an altogether unreasonable or undesirable one for either the artist or writer of critical work. The role of impostor resists a meta-critical position, since one is always "in role," never outside a discourse. Yet it allows for the "playing out" of a critical distance from within any category, and in relation to those categories contingent on the one inhabited. By definition, the impostor always recognizes boundaries — such recognition is a matter of survival — but does not necessarily respect them.

The assumption of free trade between categories as a critical practice, on the other hand, I find more dubious. Dubious because along with the notion that borders can be willfully eradicated often comes an evasion of the significance of the institutional codes which persist even as they permute. When a so-called art world figure exults in "mixing critical, curatorial and marketplace activities," you can be sure that the institutionalized hierarchy may be masked, but it is not disturbed. Institutional accommodation is the operating principle. And when the artist takes up the codes of the critic,

the journalist, the curator, or the political activist, the institutional dimension of enunciation — the question of subjectivity and point of view, little enough addressed by criticism, art history, curatorial practice, and even activism — often remains unexamined. While it is undeniable that the institutional voice of positivism affected by journalism or political discourses can be engaged by artists to interesting ends, we have to be wary of too Machiavellian an approach, especially since the instrumentality of art remains in question. And if the instrumentality of art remains in question, it follows that a critical attention to the letter — and not just an adherence to the spirit of the discourse — is called for.

While the field of aesthetic practices and their companion institutions is overrun with those who would enforce the boundaries between, in order to naturalize the purportedly inherent rights and functions of each, it seems important not to underestimate the significance of differences between categories, differences within the field. If we maintain that meaning is produced through difference, and not through inherency, we need to exercise distinctions in order to gain an engaged voice for aesthetic practice, and not reinforce the popular notion of aesthetic practice as a field outside of the real world which has to be bolstered through the prosthetic devices of institutional discourses which are deemed to be more real, more social, more public. It is important that the specificity of artistic practice be developed, not with the Greenbergian aims of accord- ing it a medium-specific and metaphysical status, but in

order to accrue for it a strategic significance, a non-hierarchical status within the realms of social discourses. There is a difference between producing work in the manner of an institutional discourse — distinct from a conventionally aesthetic one, in which case critique is often readable by virtue of the differences — and subsuming one aesthetic practice into another whose readability is culturally paramount, which only serves to enfeeble aesthetic practice.

Redefining the parameters of art or of another field is in a sense a hallmark of critical intervention. But redefinition is not a quantifiable activity. Just as rewriting language produces changes which are discernable as such, but not quantifiable. Thus, if I presume to say that an impostor is “someone who passes herself off as someone other than she is,” a willed difference is noted. But I still travel with the false passport of the impostor when I shuttle between enunciation and the dictionary. All change is contingent on such presumptuousness, but the critical impact of such a statement is dependent on the readability of the institutional referent. It is the presumptuous work on the specificity of institutional referents which critical aesthetic practices cannot afford to lose to the free market play of codes. For as we certainly know by now, nothing is free in a “free market.”

JD: Thank you, Silvia. Calvin Reid?

CALVIN REID: Whatever barriers may have existed

between making art and writing about it for publication, have all but fallen by the wayside. I can't really claim to know the reason for this and my only inkling would be that, like most artificial divisions, it was bound to be ignored. Certainly the development of an artist is marked by a series of passive and active analytic encounters that include everything from studio critiques in school to the informal exchanges that take place wherever two or more artists are gathered together. Given the inclination then, the leap from informal communication to organizing these exchanges for the printed page is a natural progression. Perhaps it's this culture's emphasis on specialization and credentials that demands that one must do one or the other. Whatever the reason, in the present climate of engaged social and cultural critiques, the urge to write for publication is probably inevitable.

As work examining and challenging our putative intellectual and cultural verities proliferates, so too does the need for discourse to frame the issues these works embrace, particularly in the face of more traditional critiques that seek to dismiss or simply ignore works that embrace social themes. Writing, for myself, is another way of engaging many of the same themes that animate my own work. The writing addresses these themes in another manner, a manner much valued on the contemporary scene, not only for its ability to illuminate the work but for its ability to assign a particular kind of value to the art experience in question. In the specific instances of the aesthetic dialogues surrounding the representation of ethnicity, gender and sexuali-

ty, writing can obviously be an enabling, empowering skill that brings the writer as well as the art and the values it investigates into closer proximity to the various institutionalized spheres of power and influence that make up the New York art scene. The support and interest of this distinct variety of contemporary work draws attention and, one would hope, support to the embattled "marginalized" institutions (The Studio Museum in Harlem, the Alternative Museum, and others like them) that have sprung up over the years to provide critical support to the art of self-definition and socio-cultural analysis. This effort to address the institutionalized spheres of international aesthetic validation are one aspect, but a necessarily significant aspect, of the effort to force the institutions that collect, exhibit and comment on the arts to reflect the full range of American opinion and production. And as we address or critique our communities through art and commentary, we also seek to redefine the national conception of what is to be considered significant American art against the continually shifting backdrop of this country's complex history of intricate and interdependent social groupings.

However, as "activist" artists/critics organize around the most pressing issues of cultural definition for their respective groupings, the potential for this vision to degenerate into a regressive, isolationist cultural segmentation must be addressed. Does the need to investigate, say, the construction of identity in a racist society, or the wrenching effects of international dispersal characteristic of the immigrant experience blind the

socially engaged critic/artist to the subtle and not-so-subtle connections between both communities? Does this effort in group-focused introspection override any claims to general patterns of creative significance—my attempt at a reconceptualization of the notion of “quality”—or can these cultural self-examinations form the foundation for a more accurate delineation of how art affects us and how, in turn, we, as artists, are then moved to produce art? The initial question then, can be rephrased. For instance, does the traditional obsession with absolute cultural hierarchies, as defined by western cultural authority, make us more perceptive as critics and more profound as artists? Does the mainstream/fringe, center/peripheral model handed down to us serve to explain the intensive social scrutiny of recent art, or does it simply provide a convenient rationale for the dismissal of art production that falls outside its framework? For myself these questions suggest the importance of a healthy sense of wonder at the ability of artists to destabilize the ideological conventions that spring up in response to artistic patterns.

My own development as an artist has evolved from a vision of art production as an evocation of a black socio/political and quasi-spiritual efflorescence with roots that reach back to Africa and branches that touch the Carribean and South America, to a conceptualization that incorporates the traditions of formal analysis, psychological tension and the absurdist inventions associated with mainstream 20th century art movements. My initial sense of aesthetic criticality was forged amidst the debates surrounding the Black Arts

Movement of the 1960s. As a student at Howard University in the 1970s, I was first introduced to the aesthetics of identity as the school's faculty and students sought to define a black sensibility; to distill some irreducible, uniquely African-American index of consciousness that would constitute and validate the work of truly “black” artists. I've come to see the flaws inherent in an ideology that seeks to reduce the creative consciousness to a checklist of putative racial/cultural traits and a narrow catalog of self-perpetuating symbolism. Yet clearly the investigation into the nature of African-American reality, both material, historical and spiritual, has produced an abiding interest in the broad effect of social patterns on art production and, in particular, a reverse view of cultural importance that informs both my art and my writing to this day.

I was subsequently introduced to the stark academicism of formalist criticism and the philosophical defense mode of art discourse during my graduate school tenure at Virginia Commonwealth University and began to realize how both perspectives — Howard's dismissal of both the contemporary New York and European scene as comically decadent and irrelevant to black people, and VCU's mainstream ignorance of the metaphysical power and rich experience inherent in the broad spectrum of North American cultural production — failed to embrace the complexity of making art in contemporary North America. Yet if we fail to address the importance of our personal cultural spheres in relation to the vivid backdrop of a diverse

network of American social groupings, we lose the precious opportunity to fully understand the extraordinarily hybrid nature of North American cultural life and forfeit the chance to redefine its most significant aspects. If we don't recognize how the vivid African-American mythology captured in the works of Carrie Mae Weems intersect with the feminist re-representations in the work of Mary Kelly, or, in another distinct representation, how Y. David Chung's metaphorical Korean-American imagery reproduces themes germane to artists as diverse as David Hammons, David Wojnarowicz or James Luna, then the promise of multiculturalism, the reality and power of the acknowledgement of difference, may become a hollow exercise in cultural Balkanization.

My experiences as an artist and as a writer have to some degree produced a kind of cross pollination, with my interests in social patterns, representation and cultural self-examination, fertilizing my efforts in the two disciplines. As an artist I exploit both a sense of meaning and history while often indulging myself with humor, arbitrary juxtaposition and some degree of utter superficiality. My work is both intensely directed and can shift wildly in whatever direction my interests or moods may take it. My writing more often tries to annotate these same qualities in the works of others, with I hope, clarity and lucidity. The two activities, making art and writing, are most often complementary, but the writing has a particularly functional objective. It serves to reveal, to explain, to argue and to disseminate information on the nature of the art experience or object

examined. It is a record of my own engagement with a piece work and marks the process of making that work meaningful to myself and perhaps to others.

JD: Thank you, Calvin. Mary Anne Staniszewski?

MARY ANNE STANISZEWSKI: I am going to speak about the free speech issue. However, I will begin with a little different background on the subject.

Twenty years ago, the unlikely team of Congressman George Bush and Senator Edward Kennedy co-authored the "National Family Planning Program," Title X of the Public Health Services Act. Title X was created to provide contraceptive counseling and care to low-income women. For twenty years, some 4 to 5 million women were treated in these clinics annually, and the rates of maternal deaths, unintended pregnancies, abortion, and abandoned children in the US plummeted.

In 1980, when Ronald Reagan was elected President, he began an attack on Title X— the full implications have yet come to pass. Admitting in his first year of office that he did not have the votes to dismantle the Family Planning Program, his administration finally, in 1980, resorted to changing the language of Title X, adding stipulations that censored doctors, counselors in subsidized clinics from discussing abortion as a contraceptive option even if the client asks, or if the client's life would be endangered by having a child. The Reagan language stated that the counselor must speak

to the patient in terms of her “unborn child” and that she “must be referred to pre-natal care.” Title X became known as the Gag Rule.

A number of subsidized clinics and doctors who supervise these funds took the Reagan administration to court, arguing that the original intent of this Congressional Act had been destroyed and that, on a much more all-encompassing level, these revisions were a violation of the First Amendment right of free speech.

In 1991, the Supreme Court, dominated now by Reagan-Bush appointees, found Reagan’s revisions to be constitutional. The House immediately retaliated with legislation reinstating the right of doctors and counselors in federally-funded clinics to discuss abortion with their parents. President Bush vetoed this legislation (which was so similar to what he had introduced some twenty years before). Although the House voted 276 to 156 to override Bush’s veto, this was twelve votes short of the two-thirds majority needed, and the President’s veto was sustained.

Now, you are probably asking yourselves: why is she talking about contraception on this panel about sites of art criticism?

As many of you already know, the Supreme Court decision on Title X, now known as *Rust v. Sullivan*, is the clearest and most dramatic legal precedent in the U.S. for restrictions on government funded speech. The

Rust decision has the potential to be one of the most powerful instruments of the conservative backlash against human rights in the United States— and this is especially the case in relation to expanded definitions of speech— such as art, cultural criticism, and New Museum or Drawing Center panels. The *Rust* decision parallels the federal restrictions imposed on the art world, such as the anti-obscenity oath that was required of NEA grant recipients in 1990, the obscenity clause in the current NEA authorization, and the rescinding of NEA grants, such as the one used for *Performance Journal #3*— which published a project that dealt with the Gag Rule by the artist-activist collective, GANG. As it has been reported in *The Village Voice* this week, the Bush administration has already tried to deploy the restrictions of *Rust* against the NEA.

The *Rust* decision is also one of the clearest illustrations of the inter-connectedness of seemingly different arenas of modern life, and the effects the “Reagan Revolution” has had on the deep structures of U.S. society. Understanding the implications of *Rust* can lay the groundwork for a discussion of an expanded notion of cultural sites for critical work. On the most obvious level, explicitly political issues like the Gag Rule have always been subjects for the arts community; and, not surprisingly, the problem of Title X has been the subject of artists images, activist videos, demonstrations, art magazine articles and, both last week and now, a topic of these panel discussions. But the reason I want to talk about this particular issue, beyond my passionate concern for the Gag Rule and its implications, is

that the case demonstrates the surprising ways that institutions like Planned Parenthood, The New Museum and The Drawing Center are ideologically bound. In other words, the case of Title X makes visible what are often the more obscure forces that govern such seemingly unrelated institutions.

The art world's current interest in dealing with culture, as an expanded field to work in and respond to, and the visibility of strategies such as activist installations, graphics, videos, publications, and demonstrations are, on the other hand, being received by both the mainstream and the alternative institutions as if these concerns and practices were something new. Indeed, the premise of this panel is to discuss the validity of "traditional" aesthetic specialization, divisions of art production and art writing, and the legitimacy of cultural criticism. But throughout the history of modern art, and this is particularly the case for the past one hundred years, individuals involved with modern culture have consistently worked within a fluid field of activity in terms of issues, strategies, and division of labor. Anyone familiar with the spectrum of activities associated with the Dadaists, the Surrealists, the Bauhaus, De Stijl, the Soviet projects, the Futurists, the Situationists, the Independent Group, the Nouveau Realists, Pop, Minimal and Conceptual art knows that the categories of art production and theory have always existed within a diversified terrain of books, magazines, street graphics, manifestos, theater pieces, street theater, advertisement, unique objects, multiples and exhibition installations that were pro-

duced by artists, performers, writers, intellectuals, designers, teachers, and architects who worked individually and collaboratively within and far beyond the walls of fine art institutions.

There is an amnesia within U.S. art institutions about what modern culture has been and can be. Since my time here is limited, I will give one example that demonstrates this collective amnesia within the U.S.— the Los Angeles Peace Tower of 1966. Produced by the Los Angeles Artist Protest Committee as a statement against the Vietnam War, a fifty-eight floor tower and one hundred foot billboard studded with four hundred panels sent by artists from around the world were constructed on an empty lot on the crest of a hill where the Sunset Strip intersects La Cienega Boulevard. The project was organized by Irving Petlin, the tower was designed by Mark di Suvero, the panels were created by unknown and famous artists such as Elaine de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt and James Rosenquist. At the opening ceremony, Susan Sontag read a telegram sent "in solidarity" from a contingent of French artists and intellectuals which included Simone de Beauvoir, Andre Breton, Andre Masson, and Jean-Paul Sartre. For three months, the Tower functioned as a magnet for the local community. The lot became a forum for sheriffs, Hell's Angels, artists, teenagers from the Watts district, military personnel, and passers-by, to publically act out their differences and to address federal policy. According to some accounts, there were days when as many as one thousand people gathered. These events were picked up by the international press and, for sev-

eral weeks, were regularly covered by the local television stations. The Peace Tower was one of the earliest and most visible demonstrations against U.S. involvement in Vietnam and was a successful aesthetic creation thanks to the hundreds of contributions from the international art and intellectual communities. But, I have yet to find a trace of The Peace Tower in any of the histories of art and culture of the last 30 years.*

Finally, my point is that, institutionally and individually, we need to recover and acknowledge our history and the vast diversity of modern culture, which will augment our power to create, write, and speak.

(*Since speaking on this panel, I have come across one exception to this amnesia. Mike Davis, in his *City of Quartz* (1990) lists the “Artists’ Peace Tower” as one of a number of examples documenting “the politically galvanized artists and writers” in Los Angeles during the mid-1960s.)

JD: Thank you, Mary Anne. Do the panelists have some issues that they would like to address now?

SK: Mary Anne, have you given some thought as to why this institutional amnesia occurs, beyond what you’ve pointed out?

MAS: Yes. If you trace it out institutionally, this type of work doesn’t fit into, for lack of a better term, the liberal-humanist notion of art— that it’s made by an individ-

ual creator, that it fits into the marketplace, that it seems to be value-free. It’s almost a cliché to talk about this liberal-humanist art object, but the category is steadfast. I see it in the institution I teach at, R.I.S.D., which is supposed to be an avant-garde art school. But it’s quite rigid there; students cannot take courses outside of their concentration— for example, if you’re in sculpture, you cannot take a course in painting. There is a related type of rigidity in institutions such as The Whitney Museum and The Museum of Modern Art.

SK: That’s what I’m trying to question when I make the point about the instrumentality of art as not being quantifiable. Isn’t that a perfect example: you have a situation where so-called alternative practices don’t seem to affect the persistence of institutional divisions, boundaries and canons?

MAS: If we accept those institutional boundaries, we’re reproducing, I feel, the dominant terrain rather than changing it, transforming it— really working with it in the way that I think the art community has traditionally tried to do, whether it has succeeded or failed. And actually, historically, I believe it’s only in the past twenty years that this amnesia has really taken hold so tenaciously, at least in the United States.

GB: I agree with Silvia when she says that the instrumentality of art is not quantifiable. What’s interesting to me is the burden placed on art in relationship to the institution, and to other jobs it may perform. For exam-

ple, I think the function of a lot of work may be not to either erase the boundaries that are concrete within institutions, but rather take on a different goal— a goal of organizing the community outside the institutions in question. I'm thinking about this specifically because the line of thinking that led me to this point was based upon the inheritance of institutional critiques in art school. And at a certain point around the mid-eighties, I ran out of questions for gallery walls. Now, I'm not advocating this for everybody, but I made a decision to base my work in a completely different sphere— in community-based organizations. I made the decision to work at G.M.H.C at that time. I didn't totally abandon my interest in art world-oriented institutional critique, because being here on this panel represents a part of that project of talking about institutions, criticizing them, and actively participating in reshaping them. But, the focus of my work clearly shifted towards outside spheres that were not as rigidly established, that didn't have institutional legitimacy. So, for example, when I worked with ACT-UP in 1987, the purpose was to challenge the government, but what it has actually accomplished over the past three years is an incredible organization of people to pursue different kinds of practices and activities. So when you're talking about instrumentality, I think we have to talk about what the purpose the goal of the art is.

SK: I don't question the value of the kind of work that you're discussing. I think my question is more about the way in which so-called alternative art — and the kinds of aesthetic practices that are easily readable by

a mass culture as subsumable into another category, in this case activism — doesn't seem to have any impact on the institutions that then go on to shape a certain kind of consensus about "valuable" aesthetic practices. What is shocking to me is that the demagogic argument which asserts that people should get what they want according to "consensus," overlooks the fact that this consensus is clearly produced by the very institutions that we don't want to give very much credence to. So, for me, the conundrum is about what happens when one turns away from institutions or doesn't give them credence because we want to devalue the particular ways in which they canonize, and the particular things they canonize.

JD: It seems to me that Gregg was talking about, in a sense, creating some type of coalition between the work that goes on within the sanctioned art institutions and the organizational activity that occurs in specifically non-art groups. My concern is why more of this type of activity doesn't seem to happen, which is partly related to Mary Anne's contention that there is a general amnesia about historical precedents.

MAS: If one has a sense of the specifics of the history of the last one hundred years, all of the recent activist-oriented graphics production has a precursor in the work of John Heartfield. There are many artists of the 20th century who engaged in various types of simultaneous art production— exhibition installations, political propaganda, fine-art painting, etc. For example, Herbert Bayer and Frederick Kiesler. There is a tradi-

tion of work that goes beyond “traditional” institutional boundaries, but I don’t view this as a transgression of institutional boundaries. These are artists who were working as artists, but they were working with an expanded notion of what that practice might be.

GB: I just want to say that I agree. I think amnesia in some way places the burden of responsibility on us, in terms of asking the question: why have we forgotten? There’s a dominant system in place that constantly reaffirms and then erases these emergent residual tendencies. It’s not so much that there is a periodic forgetting, but that we’re confronting a historical problem, a structural problem.

SK: I don’t think it’s a question of fault, clearly. But on the other hand, I think, that if we’re talking about developing critical practices which are interventionist in nature, then it isn’t a question of fault, but it is to some extent the labor that we undertake.

CF: For some people intervention means not necessarily ignoring those larger institutions, but to direct energies to another arena, precisely because those institutions have never had any kind of validity or significance to them. And I don’t think that the fact that institutions are going to go on establishing what a dominant culture thinks is valuable negates the value of those other activities which are very important for other communities that have never felt included.

SK: When I say institution, I don’t necessarily mean

museums or galleries. So, I’m not really calling for critical artists to return to museums or galleries. What I’m saying is that when one does so-called activist work, when one works in sites outside of the physical space of these institutions, that the power of those sanctioned institutions persists even outside of the boundaries of their walls— this kind of institutional power and signification needs to be addressed no matter what site one works in.

PH: Some people on the panel have addressed — very articulately, and with a great sense of immediacy — the issues and problems coming to us from national government. I’m kind of a confirmed anti-statist, anti-nationalist, and I find it very difficult to subscribe to an identity as an American; and, furthermore, we’ve lived in a place in which the federal government has been a repressive force at least since the 1950s. I wonder if a more radical solution isn’t called for; rather than calling for a reform of the federal government — which I feel may in fact be impossible, considering the extreme right-wing nature of a great deal of the United States — perhaps a kind of decentralization, anti-statism, or anti-nationalism isn’t one possible solution to some of these legal and governmental issues?

GB: Well, there are a number of things I want to take on. First of all, it sounds good in theory: anti-statist, decentralization, etc. But I think that you are devaluing the validity of grass-roots politics. I’m also just a little confused, frankly. You have a passport, right? If you have an American passport, you’re an American. The

point is that this issue is not merely a matter of choice; you can't willfully say that "I am not an American." That's one point. I'm also saying that while it's true that we will never totally overcome the government, or the way things are, history demonstrates that enormous things have changed. Enormous amounts of people have caused change in this country through recent revolutions, assaults on the powers-that-be. You know, two years ago there was no needle exchange policy because of city government; but this April there will be a clean needle exchange policy because a group of people took it to court, challenged it and won. I think these things show that collective actions cause changes in our immediate lives, and so to reinforce a notion of totality in some way defeats the goals of those efforts and movements.

PH: Well, just to take it one step further, the needle exchange issue that you are addressing is in fact a city issue, where the progressive change came from the city government. I'm much more comfortable with the idea of the city-state as a political unit that can be acted upon.

FGT: Well, I agree with Gregg Bordowitz. You have to start somewhere. Lately, I've been very nervous about the term revolution. I mean, I've been waiting for the revolution for a very long time, and I don't know how much longer I can wait for the Utopian final state. But in the meantime, I'd rather believe in grass-roots movements and actions. But I also wanted to say that I'm also skeptical of people who make connections with

grass roots groups because of some type of guilt.

CF: Although I very much appreciate the power of grass-roots efforts, I'm very afraid of the idea of completely erasing one's relationship to the nation-state. It seems like a kind of escapism in a time when we are so connected to different cities, different states and different countries. To pretend that we can have a government that only exists at a local level is like absenting oneself from the larger political order that we all operate in— whether we like it or not. So I just can't see regionalism as a solution. I also fear it because it historically has been a strategy of the Right — to send things back to the states — and so I think we have to be very careful about accepting and then using this mid-nineteenth century utopian idea.

QFA: Coco Fusco said that she would recite the particulars of a backlash— not that I don't believe you, but I would just like to hear them.

CF: Well, there are a lot of different levels at which to begin addressing this kind of issue, but I've been involved for the past year or so in working on counter-quincentenary activities, and I've been following the ups and downs of the "Who loves and who hates Columbus?" show that seems to get on every *Newsweek* and *Time* cover and national news show about once every two weeks. The arguments of this sort of patrician, enlightened, so-called liberal approach is that the multiculturalists have gotten out of hand— that we're too polemical, that we don't really

have a significant contribution to make regarding the understanding of art history, that we just want to stroke ourselves and make ourselves feel better about being victimized for a long time. I also see the repercussions of this kind of argument in responses to positions that critics of color — who consider themselves activists on the progressive side — take from institutions that don't want to hear them any more, from publications or editors that don't want to hear them any more, or from hate-mail writers who don't want them around any more. I also think that within the academy, this is very much in operation and very, very powerful. There's a tremendous amount of resentment from tenured faculty — from all over the country — about having to change their curriculum, about having to change their understanding, about having to invite different kinds of people to come and speak, about having to feel that their knowledge of civilization is partial. I find this type of resistance emerging in a number of different directions and in a number of different ways: for example, being called "too extremist to be taken seriously," when my position really hasn't changed in five years. There is also something I'd call "compassion fatigue," where people basically say: "I've had enough of you guys telling me that I don't know enough about this, or that I have to go and do my homework." I also see it in the way that certain artists get set up to succeed, and are then systematically destroyed in the press, over and over again. This has happened here, it's happened in England, it's even happened to Isaac Julien and several of his works— it is something that saddens me deeply. Yesterday, on the

airplane I was reading a lot of junk magazines and there was an article about strategies for the future— how we're going to survive the recession. The person who wrote the article considered himself a moderate, but began his agenda with the dismantling of affirmative action, because it annoys whites. I said to myself, "Well, I guess segregation annoyed blacks." This problem also manifests itself in the kind of spontaneous generation of overnight experts in Native American Art, African American Art, Latino, Chicano, and Asian American Art in cultural institutions all over the country. It's quite frightening, actually, because the power is still vested in those institutions to move people around, get them shows; and the people who are functioning as intermediaries very often claim to be trying to help, but at the same time I think they are also attempting very fiercely to hold on to the power that they have.

GB: I had a question for Coco Fusco. How do we deal with the proliferation of various things that are called "multicultural" or "multiculturalist?" I thought you might have some thoughts on that. I'm aware that there are multicultural programs in the army, in multinational corporations, and I myself actually went through one of the programs designed for companies businesses. What is extrapolated from those multiculturalism meetings is a notion of disenfranchisement, a notion of oppression, and so it's all about tolerance, about a sort of cultural relativism.

CF: Well, there's a kind of streamlined version, or a more "progressive" version that sounds rather menac-

ing. What some of us are really being called in to do is the social work for mainstream arts organizations, and I'm not exactly against doing that, but I often wonder whether or not white artists are also asked to do the same. In other words, you come in with a project and you have to sort of create an audience for yourself, create an outreach program for the education department, generate all of the press material because nobody else in the institution has really bothered to do their homework. And there's a way in which you become a part of this corporate mechanism, and you legitimate that institution by carrying out all of these things. And at the same time, I'm doing this at the expense of giving those energies over to a small organization that is really struggling to survive— and so I constantly have to be adjudicating between the value of speaking from the center, and worrying about whether or not, at the same time, by doing that, I'm also damaging the possibilities of smaller institutions. So the only way I can seem to produce a balance is to find ways to make individuals and organizations understand the needs and desires of a specific community.

JD: Thank you for coming tonight.