

EDITORIAL

CLAIMING SPACE

SUBVERSION BY INCURSION

Angela M. Bartholomew

In 1988, while Super Bowl XXII brought floods of tourists to San Diego, California, a controversial 'advertisement' temporarily drew attention away from the United States' most celebrated consumerist spectacle.¹ By purchasing advertising space on the sides of one hundred city buses for the span of a month, the artists Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, and David Avalos enabled an effective distribution method for their work. They thus launched a poster of their design that brought together photomontage and text in a manner typical of commercial advertisement. An image of the wrists of two brown-skinned men being handcuffed by an armed officer featured centrally, flanked by images of hands engaged in forms of labor that constitute the hospitality industry: cleaning dirty dishes and replacing hotel room towels. Making reference to the San Diego motto, 'America's Finest City', the poster boldly declared, "Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation" (fig. 1). With this bold approach, the poster was intended to generate discussion regarding the rampant exploitation of undocumented workers in San Diego—a city famous for its pleasant weather, pristine beaches, and proximity to the heavily-traversed southern border with Mexico.



↑ fig. 1 Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, David Avalos, *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation*, January 1988. Photo by: Elizabeth Sisco.

Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation was the first of several projects in which Sisco, Hock, and Avalos laid claim to spaces typically associated with commercial advertising. In 1989, for example, Sisco, Hock, and Avalos were joined by Deborah Small to erect a billboard that referenced a debate raging in the city about an acceptable tribute for the renowned civil rights activist, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Spurred by the overturning of the San Diego Council's decision to rename Market Street after Dr. King, and later the San Diego Port Commission's reversal of a resolution to name a new convention center after him, Small, Sisco, Hock, and Avalos designed a billboard that read:

¹ David Avalos referred to the work as "an advertisement for itself". As cited in: Robert L. Pincus, 'The Invisible Town Square: Artists' Collaborations and Media Dramas in America's Biggest Border Town', in: *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Nina Felshin (ed.), Seattle: Bay Press, 1994, p. 33.

“Welcome to America’s Finest a) city b) tourist plantation c) Convention Center” in the manner of a multiple-choice test. Alongside the text the billboard included a substantial portrait of Dr. King (fig. 2). Dominating the area with a billboard that would be seen by anyone passing through the downtown area, the artists succeeded in stirring up a debate about persistent racism in the city. When media attention followed, Small, Sisco, Hock, and Avalos deferred to their advisory board—comprised of three African American Community leaders—and distributed a press release that called the work “a critique of the commercialization of San Diego’s community identity”, and the convention center “the flagship of San Diego’s tourist fleet of controversy-free attractions.”²



↑ fig. 2 Deborah Small, Elizabeth Sisco, Louis Hock, David Avalos, *Martin Luther King, Welcome to America's Finest?*, April 1989. Photo by: Elizabeth Sisco.

While Small, Sisco, Hock, and Avalos could not have fully predicted the response their work would generate, when they took claim to this space of advertising, they did so with intentions regarding the circulation of their work, and the controversy it would spawn. Providing access to a viewing public whose numbers far exceeded those that would visit any institution of art, they were able to spread the work, and the discourse that it produced, across social strata. Media attention extended this reach. Local and national newspapers covered stories about the interventions, editorials debated the validity of the claims made by the work, and as the art critic Robert L. Pincus explains, “one hundred posters became thousands of reproductions”.³ This tendency

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Martin Luther King Billboard Project Press Release, 12 April 1989. The advisory board included: Cleo Malone, Ph.D., Robert Tambuzi, and Theodore J. Jones, MFCC.

of artists to consider the response their work will generate, and to factor this reception into the practice, reappears throughout much of the work discussed in both our volumes on subversion. It becomes apparent that it is not enough to simply perform a subversive act and walk away; one must consider who is being addressed, the specificities of the site, and the medium with which one is engaging, as well as the (almost certain) likelihood that the work will be recuperated to serve other voices.

In this issue of *Kunstlicht*, the second of two volumes to consider the potential of art to subvert power structures that limit artistic freedom and social participation, we look at practices that go beyond the barriers of institutional space. Working within museums it is not always possible to expose the agents and conditions that suppress dissident voices and shape our collective institutions. To lay bare the borders that maintain exclusion and capitalist domination, it may prove necessary for artists to create works that cross those boundaries, to storm the walls of convention and tact, and occupy spaces they were not invited to fill. The artists whose practices are discussed in this issue engage with subversion by taking works of art to their audience rather than waiting for them to arrive.

In the first article of the issue, Sally Mincher discusses strategies employed by Chicano artists of the 1960s and 1970s, who frequently took to public space to exhibit their work, with posters, murals, and performances. These artists often worked in groups and employed the forms and language of popular media and advertising to protest civil rights abuses. Mincher describes how their methods continue to be implemented by contemporary artists who use parody to challenge accepted historical narratives and occupy spaces of commerce to reveal its persistent appropriation by neo-colonial powers.

Maintaining focus on Southern California, Claudia Cano's performance as her alter ego, Rosa Hernandez, makes reference to pervasive stereotypes. Her practice employs public space as a site for 'uncanny encounters' to draw attention to the oppressive working conditions of Latin American immigrants. A cleaning woman of Mexican origin, Rosa Hernandez is frequently unseen, blending into the environment as a fixture of its maintenance. Her 'acts of cleanliness' resound with Latin American workers, and particularly women who fulfill domestic duties in the United States. In certain sites Rosa's cleaning draws more notice than others: during her atypically brief performance at the border wall, Rosa was confronted by six border patrol officers.⁴ As such, Rosa's performances also demonstrate the weight of the site where the act of cleaning takes place—each may open a particular debate.

Eliza Soroga also thwarts expectations by interjecting incongruous situations into spaces of the city which generally offer little time for contemplation. In her contribution to the issue, she describes two instances of her reoccurring performance project, *Reinventing Public Spaces*, one of which involves the quiet intrusion of an alternative rhythm into the middle of one of London's most traversed bridges; and another which amplified frustrations with the consumerist fashion industry by multiplying its target. Both make an argument for the agency of the street in engaging an audience, and the critical potential of bewilderment.

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Op. cit. (note 1).

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The artist has explained that one agent, in an attempt to convey empathy, even informed Rosa of the now-legal status of his mother, a cleaning woman herself.

Likewise considering the impact of site in determining the potential force of a work of art, Leonardo Dellanoce looks to a highly contentious medium: public sculpture. Comparing two archetypal works of sculpture that are sited in plazas of strategic importance to institutions of political power, Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) and Maurizio Cattelan's *L.O.V.E.* (2010), Dellanoce asks whether it is possible to subvert authority at its focal point, and whether the conditions for this subversion have been altered by the acceleration of neo-liberalism.

Complicating the distinction between public and private space, Andrew Wasserman gives an account of the sculptural installation of Themis Klotz, who used her yard to make a proclamation against nuclear war. Allowing her cluttered lawn to grow wild around her buried Pontiac Le Mans, Klotz incurred the wrath of her neighbors. Nonetheless, she held fast to what Wasserman argues was her "commitment to signaling the irrationality of the age." In the midst of the Cold War, Klotz thus revealed the stringent boundaries around art as free speech—particularly when that free speech may come to clash with real estate values.

Another artist that engages with the limits of constitutional freedoms is Robert Glas. Glas is concerned with the effects of legislative procedures and technologies on a state's citizens. In an interview with Rosa te Velde and Esmee Schoutens, he discusses his work with governmental institutions and refugees, in particular for his film *How to Motivate Someone to Leave Voluntarily* (2016). As an artist—and thus, in the eyes of government officials, a figure of little political agency—Glas has been able to secure access to view the practices of professionals working to 'reform' immigration. As such, he is able to create scenarios on film which are exceptionally accurate, thus offering a powerful glimpse into the reality of refugees facing deportation.

Blurring fact and fiction is fundamental to the practice of Romuald Hazoumè. Riccardo Ceniviva discusses Hazoumè's work, *Beninese Solidarity for Endangered Westerners*, a fictitious NGO in Benin that raises money for impoverished westerners. The work employs satire, imitating Western institutions and exposing the power imbalance that is perpetuated through charity. In a video that documents the performance, Hazoumè is shown soliciting donations from people in Benin. They are forced to make sense of a proposal that is at once fact and fiction; the solicitation is real, but the aim of the NGO is less certain.

Dick Verdult also plays loosely with reality. A prolific visual artist, Verdult has produced a body of work that pushes the boundaries. Among them is the boundary that distinguishes an artist from a musician. As his stage persona, Dick El Demasiado, Verdult is widely recognized for his accomplishments in the experimental (and entirely invented) musical genre of the Cumbias Lunáticas. While his exaggerated style and comical lyrics might suggest his performances are a form of musical parody, the fanfare he has generated is entirely real. Yet music is just one among a panoply of forms in which Verdult works. His graphic work appears in both issues on

subversion. In the current issue, Verdult presents his proposed (though unrealized) plan for the 2014 Forum Internacional de las Culturas in Barcelona—a plan which points to the contradiction between public spaces, and large scale international exhibitions, which are more often than not thinly veiled exercises in city marketing. In an article on Verdult's work, Jeroen van der Hulst provides context for his practice, and discusses the extent to which Verdult's practice defies classification. Working between art forms, amid high and low culture, and across multiple languages, Verdult has built an idiosyncratic, though remarkably perceptive body of work.

The potential of the Internet as a space for democratic speech, and hence subversive practice, is touched upon in an interview Steyn Bergs and I conducted with David Garcia, a pioneering voice in the theorization of tactical media. Comparing the vacant space of Amsterdam's unused buildings in the 1980s to unfilled television broadcasting time, Garcia explains that for a brief period in the mid 1980s, cable television in Amsterdam allowed for programming designed locally by individual producers. The Internet, as well, offered similarly utopian prospects as a new means to engage with the demystification of power structures through 'critical pedagogy'. Yet as current events have clearly shown, the Internet has also been used to mystify, to shroud, and to confuse. This, Garcia argues, is the work of subversion too, thus emphasizing the acute necessity of an ethics of subversion, in which disruption is not the aim but a bridge.

Taking this discussion one step further, Steyn Bergs considers the means by which artists might demystify the platform capitalism that governs the Internet. He looks to the practices of Julia Weist and Mongrel, who engage with the infrastructure that lies behind the Internet to use its praxes in their own work. In so doing, they suggest a direction artists may take to short-circuit the algorithms that frame online experience.

Two additional artists have also contributed to the issue: two poems by Arturo Desimone speak of totalitarian control, and (failed) resistance through idleness, nature, and art; and a selection of works by Gerald Van Der Kaap, made between 1988 and 2010, can be found throughout the issue in resonance with topics touched upon by the articles. Kaap creates instability by blurring the real and the virtual. Engaging in all stages of the production process, across a diverse span of media, his practice deals not only with the creation of images, still and moving, but also with interactivity, performance, distribution, and mediatization. Through forms of so-called high and low culture, he has invaded numerous realms of consumption: arts institutions, the private home through the waves of television transmission, underground dance clubs, above ground, government-funded projects, from billboards to digital projections.

The cover of our issue is borrowed from a still of Gerald Van Der Kaap's first full-length film, *Beyond Index* (2017). Rife with art historical references, *Beyond Index* follows a group of Chinese art students whose training comprises the precise imitation of classic paintings of the Western canon. This strict adherence to tradition shifts with the arrival of Yves—both a character, and a drug. Slowly intoxicated by Yves (Klein's) words, and the mind-altering color blue, the students undergo an awakening, and begin to consider an alternative, less polluted, reality.

At such a time as now, in which it is apparent that art is implicated in regimes of social control and the production of capital—when even “artistic critique has become an important element of capitalist productivity”, our companion issues have sought to question whether it is possible for art to subvert in the manner of Yves.⁵ Can art be called upon to undermine, or even destabilize, the regimes of neoliberal capitalism? Can it be called upon to awaken spectators from passivity? Within institutions, or beyond their walls, what can be concluded is that the work of subversion is never over. No matter how much foresight an artist may have, once an artwork is put into circulation, it is subject to transformations that can never be fully anticipated. The artist must be ever ready to reframe, replace, and recreate the work, to subvert time and again.

I would like to thank all of the artists and authors who have contributed to this issue. I would also like to say a special thank you to Pietertje van Splunter and all those working at Quartair, an artists’ initiative in The Hague. Quartair has been instrumental in planning an event that will be co-hosted by *Kunstlicht* and Platform BK to reflect on the contributions made by artists’ initiatives to subvert ideologies that inhibit many of art’s institutions. Artists’ initiatives like Quartair continue to set their own conditions while navigating a treacherous field for artistic production. They manage to make projects possible that would otherwise not be realized.

This double issue marks the end of my time as an editor of *Kunstlicht*. It’s been immensely rewarding to work together with talented authors, artists, and a devoted team of editors to put together issues on topics we deem important. There is enormous potential to change perspectives and shape policy with a publication, and you’ve shown me that in working as a team subversion is possible.

One last time, on behalf of the editorial board,

Angela M. Bartholomew

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Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces”, *Art&Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (2007), p. 1