

RESISTANCE AND PUBLIC ART:

CULTURAL ACTION IN A GLOBALIZED TERRAIN

MARTIN LUCAS

Two photographs of cultural production appearing in newspapers (and not in the “arts” section) during the summer of 2005, pictured stories about projects produced anonymously and collectively, and both projects spoke to big issues: the legacy of racism, the abuse of power, and the use of terror to control. One story was in print in the national news, on the Internet, and on television; the other appeared in the *New York Times*. The two projects the stories documented struck me as significant contributions to public art practice, not least because they were both done by “non-professionals” and both employed what could be called “a poverty of means.” It was the photos that seized my attention, for both of these projects presented themselves to the public sphere through images.

One of the projects was an identified artwork, a sculpture done by a group of East Harlem high school students, and shown at the Teachers College of

Columbia University in New York City. The work was a group sculpture based on the reaction of students to the seizure of their classmate, Adama Bah, and another teenage girl, Tashnubah Hayder, in New York by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Joint Task Force on Terrorism in March 2005.

According to an FBI document obtained by the press, the two high school girls presented “an imminent threat to the security of the United States based upon evidence that they plan to be suicide bombers.” The document cited no evidence thereof. The girls were placed in maximum-security detention on immigration charges. After seven weeks, Hayder was deported to Bangladesh, a country she had left as a kindergartener. Bah, from Guinea, was released under a gag order not to discuss the details of the case. Press reports suggest that the case against the two girls, who had co-taught classes in Islam for girls at New

York City mosques and are the first minors to be detained on terror charges in the U.S., might be related to Internet activity, including visits to fundamentalist Web sites or chat rooms. Nina Bernstein reported in the *New York Times*:

“We didn’t know if we would ever see her again,” said Kimberly Lane, who was then an art teacher at the school, the Heritage School in East Harlem, where many viewed Adama’s detention as unjust and incomprehensible. “This was a way for the students to use art to speak out at a time when a lot of people, including adults, were afraid to do anything.” The result towers over anything that most people would expect high school students to produce. At Columbia University’s Teachers College... the director of art education, Prof. Judith M. Burton, says it reminds her of [Auguste] Rodin’s “Burghers of Calais.”¹

The other project was featured nationally on television, and in papers across the country. The Georgia Association of Black Elected Officials, led by State Representative Tyrone Brooks, sponsored the reenactment of a post-World War II lynching at Moore’s Ford Bridge, about forty miles outside of Atlanta. The lynching in 1946 drew national attention because, of the four people murdered in broad daylight, one was a combat veteran and one was pregnant. A witness said they were killed by a large mob of some forty men. No one was ever convicted.

The images, by Ric Feld for the Associated Press (AP), of black volunteers in white masks using barbecue sauce for blood, are eerie and arresting. They appeared on Web sites and front pages across the country. I quote from the *New York Daily News*:

The New York Times

July 25, 2005



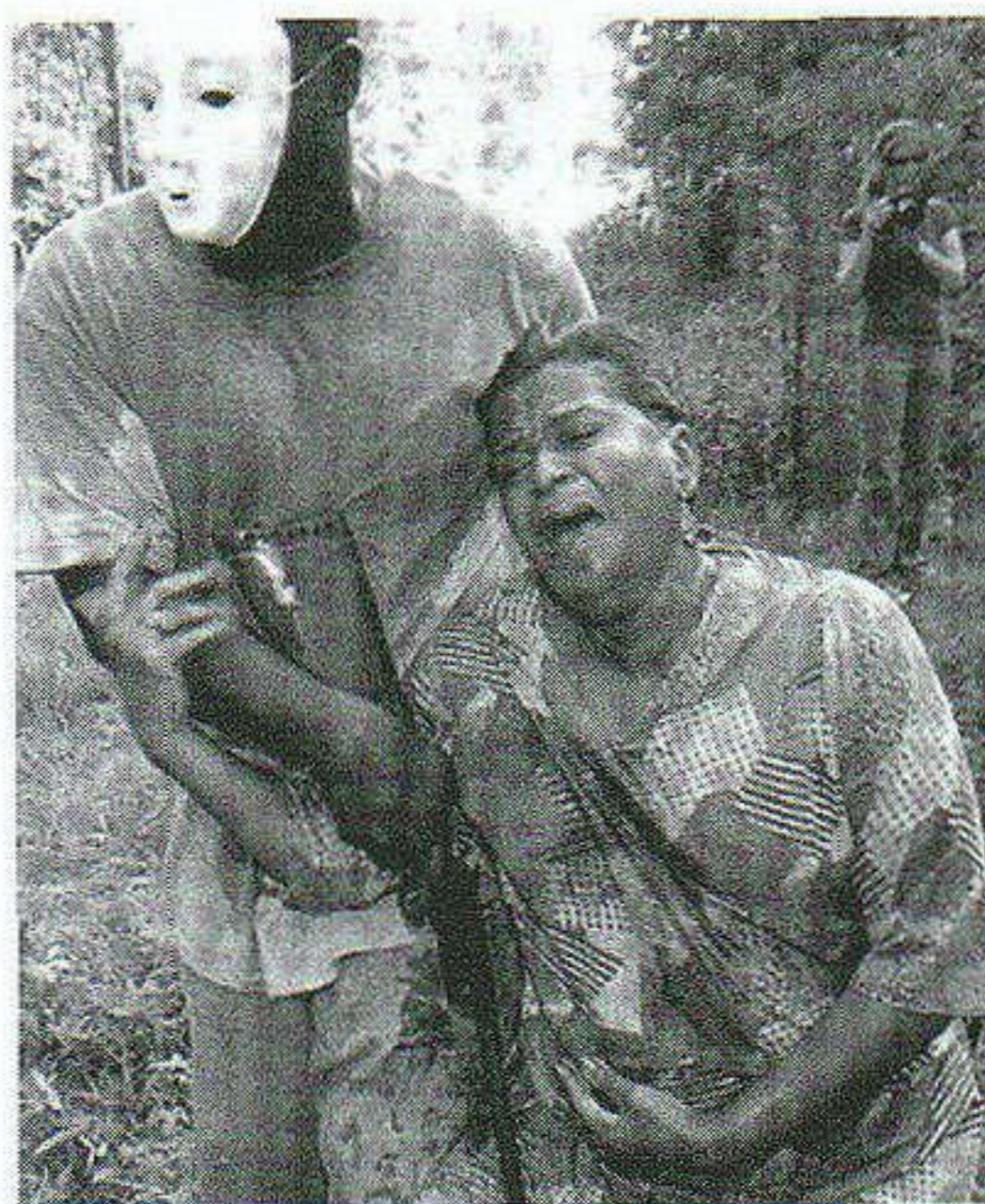
Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Adama Bah, 16, with the figures her classmates at the Heritage School made to protest her arrest.

Nobody was ever charged with the murders of Roger Malcolm; his pregnant common-law wife, Dorothy; Army veteran George Dorsey, and his wife, Mae Murray Dorsey... But the volunteers who played the parts of the victims got a stomach-churning taste of the horrors the four endured on July 25, 1946, in Monroe, Ga., during America's last mass lynching... "These were not professional actors," Brooks said. "These were just citizens who chose to walk in the shoes of the victims."²

Both of these projects transport art into the "public sphere." Both were made collectively and address charged topics of injustice in American society. Although both projects received mainstream media exposure, I want to suggest that the media coverage is not my sole criterion of their effectiveness. Ultimately, more interesting is what these projects suggest about a generalized understanding among the public of the nature of the cultural terrain of life in the early twenty-first century.

Before addressing this issue directly, I would like to ask about the significance of these projects as art. Given that both of the projects have a social flavor, it makes sense to examine them in terms of the avant-garde. Gregory Sholette, in a recent text, compared avant-garde goals of the 1920s with work by contemporary artists that tries to bring "art into life." He identified commonalities including the ambiguous status of the artists, the nontraditional venues for exhibition, and a pragmatic approach to materials.³ The intentions of the two pieces I am discussing differ, but they share the modesty, transparency, and anonymity Sholette describes as inherent in the legacy of the historic avant-garde. In addition, both speak to trauma, to a history of murder, to un-



Rosie Crowley portrays a pregnant Dorothy Malcolm during the reenactment of the 1946 lynching at Moore's Ford Bridge outside Monroe, Georgia, 2005; photograph by Ric Feld

just imprisonment, and to racial and religious persecution.

The Moore's Ford Bridge event takes a widely popular, but artistically insignificant, cultural practice—the "reenactment"—and brings it from the discursive field of the hobby into the realm of art and politics. This speaks to an avant-garde value—that of broadening or extending the field of cultural practice.

The other project by Bah's classmates can be seen to have value in a more traditional way—as representational sculpture, one of the most classical of western art forms. Although for many artists the comparison with a piece by Rodin would be the kiss of death, one can also say it speaks of an art situated in the human body, and in a struggle to create the citizen in the face of imperial might. The students, in other words, have reinvigorated a classical art practice. Both pieces could be said to turn around the traditional avant-garde goal: here are works that bring "life" into "art" as much as the reverse.

Significantly, neither story was reported in the art or culture segments of the media. The lynching reenactment was found in the main news section of mainstream print and television media; the other story in the metropolitan (New York City section) of the newspaper. People like the high school students and



Reenactment of the 1946 lynching at Moore's Ford Bridge outside Monroe, Georgia, 2005; photograph by Ric Feld

the locals who volunteered to reenact the lynching have goals outside the art world. A key question, and one I can only hope to begin to address in this essay, is why use such cultural approaches, rather than, say, some more straightforward kind of political action, like a petition or demonstration?

In the case of the Georgians, there was a specific hope that publicity would arouse enough interest to reopen a case closed for sixty years. But the pragmatism of the goal does not mean the work is mundane. The actual participation is one aspect that must be acknowledged, and my sense is that this was a profound experience for the makers. It is exactly in these depths that I would look for the beginnings of an answer.

For the participants in the reenactment, and for the high school students, I imagine what John Tagg called "the pain of silence turned into the exuberance of speech," which he goes on to note, using a geographical metaphor, "...opens a space in the fixed grid and, by this parting, brings the conditionality of the grid's regime into play."⁴ What is the "grid" that Tagg refers to, and what kind of altered cultural terrain does it suggest? This essay was developed from a conversation between myself and artist Peter Walsh in the context of a seminar entitled "Continental Drift," a broad discussion and mapping of emerging power blocs denoted by the European Union and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and their effects on individual subjectivity, conducted by Brian Holmes at the 16 Beaver space in Lower Manhattan.⁵ The driving notion of the event was that the new economics of globalization and the politics of neo-liberalism



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that accompany them demand the creation of new forms of subjectivity, hence the need to chart new “micro-cartographies” of resistance as well.

Many writers have marked the decline of the archetypal “public sphere” of enlightened discourse among equals, and its replacement by the “Society of the Spectacle.” With the idea of a public sphere irrevocably altered, this shift demands a new kind of cultural practice. The first problem is the hermetic quality of the spectacle and its version of events. Guy Debord stresses that this mythic or spectacular dialog is an *exclusive* dialog:

The oldest social specialization, the specialization of power, is at the root of the spectacle. The spectacle is thus a specialized activity which speaks of all the others. It is the diplomatic representation of hierarchic society to itself, where all other representation is banned.⁶

Do these pieces break into that closed circuit? And do they do so without becoming part of the spectacle themselves? Jean-Luc Godard was once asked if he made *cinéma vérité*. “No,” he replied, “I make *theatre vérité*.”⁷ This idea of a theatrical reality, or a theatrical intervention, that speaks in some way to a notion of the real opens up a way for understanding the role and impact of the two pieces, appearing as they did and standing out like beacons in between Caribbean hurricanes, melting polar icecaps, and a war in Iraq. In these cases, an understanding that social reality is a construct, subject to manipulation, has become a general understanding—something innate—and that understanding leads to new forms.

I am drawing here on the idea of a general consciousness that comes out at moments of crisis in class struggle. Jeremy Brecher, in his book *Strike!* (1972),⁸ suggested that the workers organizing the sit-down strikes in Detroit, Michigan, in

the 1930s understood something about the nature of industrial society and how to change it that their own leadership did not comprehend. Brecher’s analysis spoke to the crisis in assembly line industrial production of the 1970s, symbolized in songs like Johnny Paycheck’s 1977 hit “Take This Job and Shove It” or in films like Paul Schrader’s *Blue Collar* (1978). That crisis led to (among other things) a kind of passive resistance of dropping out. But the kind of consciousness that I suggest exists now is different. It is one that recognizes the theatrical nature of postmodern “reality” and chooses to respond on an aesthetic plane. In *Empire* (2001), Michal Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest this is the only territory worth struggling over: “... today all of labor power (be it material or immaterial, intellectual or manual) is engaged in struggles over the senses of language and against capital’s colonization of communicative sociality.”⁹

This is an ironic consciousness, but the decision to embrace it is a practical one. Both of these stories from the summer of 2005 emerged from specific realities. The lynching reenactment was planned and announced in the local community. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) promoted it. Local churches recruited participants. This was an act embedded in a long, ongoing history of struggle.

In New York City public schools, art programs are an endangered species. The fact that a group of public school students were able to participate in one at all meant special forces were at play. In fact, the art students were working on a commission, making a piece with the theme “Law and Justice” intended for display at Davis Polk & Wardwell, a leading corporate law firm that has supported Heritage School. The school was started by Burton in 1997 with art as a

core curricular value. Seemingly, Horace’s dictum about writing, or at least doing art, about what you know struck these students as valuable advice. The fact that the law firm chose not to show the piece is only another irony.

The rise of the spectacle goes hand-in-hand with the commoditization of information itself. Information now takes on the fetishistic quality of other commodities before it. In the moment of encounter the spectacle baffles; we know we are being asked to participate in a drama, a kind of political narrative, in fact, a myth; yet, the moment is reified, seems solid and eternal, undeniable in terms of argument. How does this work?

Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972) suggests that it does not really matter if you catch those who lie on behalf of power after the fact. As he notes, discussing an economic story in *France Soir*, “Myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression—it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations that may later belie it.”¹⁰ Once the moment is past, the perpetrators have moved on and barely need to defend themselves. Certainly, the U.S. administration has relied on this notion of myth-building heavily. In this strategy the current Bush administration is not so different from other power centers except in degree.

Information is the very stuff of power and the creation offers a chance to “manufacture” reality, a heady prospect, and for those in positions of power, not that hard to do. In fact, the mass media will do almost anything to cover up the holes in the façade of power. Only when the simulacrum has become truly pathetic will you get events covered, like the teleconference held by President George W. Bush with “The Troops” in October 2005. The ABC news banner was typical: “President Bush Telecon-

ference With U.S. Troops Was Choreographed to Match His Goals for Iraq War.”¹¹ The use of a “teleconference” format, rather than, say, a quick trip to the flight deck of an aircraft carrier, was supposed to speak to an ability of modern communications technology to shrink distance and to create a sense of hi-tech hominess. For once, the “credibility gap” was too large.

The story as told in the national press revealed that Allison Barber, deputy assistant defense secretary, coached the soldiers before Bush arrived, and that five of the ten “soldiers” were actually officers participating in what was described as a “publicity stunt” rather than a real conversation. An AP photo by J. Scott Applewhite showed Barber rehearsing the soldiers. Here it must be stressed how unusual it is for the mainstream press to offer a view behind the curtain. All presidential events are staged. The idea of Bush having a “real conversation” rather than a “photo op” does not enter into it. This minor debacle emphasizes the importance of even small efforts that stand out from the homogenized background (or pierce the screen that power projects).

We go back to what the two pieces we started with offer. These pieces intrude on the world of the spectacle, de-ossify the father tongue. These are cultural producers participating in the creation of a language where a notion of justice has meaning.

To contemplate how this is possible, I am interested in briefly sketching a connection back to the spacialization of capital and the resistance to its control. In *Empire* there is a discussion of the “despacialization” of empire, its creation of a featureless terrain of control: “The non-place is the site where the hybrid control functions of Empire are exercised. The terrain is completely open and completely closed.”¹²

This “space” is a metaphor, but a useful one in a time of globalization when distance is eliminated and regional variation is repatterned to emulate new homogeneities of consumerism, insecurity, and unequal distribution of wealth, in what Hardt and Negri call “striation,” which offers a terrain that demands new kinds of navigation. As Hardt and Negri go on

to say, “We suffer exploitation, alienation and command as enemies, but we do not know where to locate the production of oppression.”¹³

While the case of the two high school students is still under a court-ordered cloud, the principles in the reenactment story are more available. I called the Georgia State legislature, and spoke with Brooks about how he decided to hold the Moore’s Ford Bridge event. He told me that the reenactment was not his idea, but that of Charles Steele, national director of the SCLC. “It was the thirty-seventh anniversary of Martin Luther King’s death,” Brooks told me, “and we were standing on the bridge together. ‘What are we going to do?’ I asked him. And that is when he suggested the reenactment.” He went on to tell me that the event aroused more widespread interest than they had thought possible and has led to something they had been hoping for: the placement of an FBI agent in Walton County, Georgia, to investigate the possible reopening of the lynching case.

It seems that it is exactly here that these two projects, one made by high school students in Harlem with papier mâché and acrylic paint, the other by local activists in rural Georgia with Walmart masks and their old sheets, give us a guide—a small signpost on the way to locating that oppression. Just when the oil slick has covered every surface—when hegemonic oppression has offered itself in the guise of every notion from “democracy” to “equality” to, most significantly, “freedom”—along come small groups of people who want to talk about “justice” as though it were a real concept, as though there is a language that matters, as though the dictionary has not been pillaged and gutted. In this desire lies their value. In this “scorched earth” landscape a small signpost can stand out, and can matter. ☉

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NOTES

1. Nina Bernstein, “An Art Class’s Lesson in Politics,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2005. Bernstein also went on the plane with Hayder as she was deported to Dacca. See “Questions, Bitterness and Exile for Queens Girl in Terror Case,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2005.
2. Corky Siemaszko, “Horrorific Memory: Lynching Re-enacted In Hunt for Overdue Justice,” *New York Daily News*, July 26, 2005, 15.
3. Gregory Sholette, “Interventionism and the historical uncanny: Or, can there be revolutionary art without the revolution?” Gregory Sholette and Nato Thompson, *The Interventionists: Users Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 133. Sholette suggests that “...this experiment in utilitarian art goes hand-in-hand with an inattention to traditional notions of individual, artistic expression, it also reveals a distrust of overt aesthetic display in favor of an economy of form and an investment in transparency of expression.”
4. John Tagg, *Grounds of Dispute: Art History, Cultural Politics and the Discursive Field* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 20–21.
5. See www.16beavergroup.org/drift/.
6. Guy Debord, “Separation Perfected,” in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Fredy Perlman, trans. (Detroit: Black & Red, 1977), Section 28. Online at www.situationist.cjb.net/.
7. Jean Collet, Jean-Luc Godard: An Investigation Into His Films and Philosophy, Ciba Vaughn, trans. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1970), 65.
8. Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (New York: Straight Arrow Books, 1972).
9. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 404.
10. Roland Barthes, “Myth Today” in *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers, trans. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 130.
11. Deb Riechmann, Associated Press, October 13, 2005. Online at <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Iraq-Coverage/wireStory?id=1212159>.
12. Hardt and Negri, 319.
13. *Ibid.*, 211.

**“Superstition and bigotry,
have thrown many obstacles
in the path of truth”**

—Obadiah Dogberry

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