

Ours: Democracy in the Age of Branding - Checklist

On view: October 15, 2008 to February 1, 2009

Location: Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery

Sheila C. Johnson Design Center at Parsons The New School for Design
2 West 13th Street

Free admission

Opening reception: Wednesday, October 15, 2008 6:00–8:00 p.m.

Exhibition website: branding-democracy.org

Timed to coincide with the final stages of the American presidential elections, this international exhibition presents a range of works that reflect on some of the desires generated and satisfied by democracy—such as choice, participation, freedom of expression, a sense of belonging and the promise of individual success—and asks whether these values have become associated with the idea of democracy the way a consumer brand acquires value. Hosted by Parsons The New School for Design, the exhibition brings together practitioners in the hybrid field of art and design who use a variety of media, ranging from video to photography, from performance to sound, from sculptures to information mapping, to critically examine democracy as a site of branding.

In essence, the exhibition is a stage, conceived as a platform for debate, and consisting of four distinct structures that each feature analytical as well as generative elements. The first element of the show is a central platform designed by **Liam Gillick** that is the site of lectures, performances, charrettes (solution-driven workshops), and panels. A second layer consists of interpretative materials that both contextualize the exhibition and create ephemeral brands themselves—a gallery guide, supplemented by an audio guide with artists' statements, handouts, stickers, and a number of posters, all of which act as vehicles for a self-reflexive process. The third structure is made up of workshops inserted into existing classes at Parsons that, for the first time, are being held in the actual gallery space, on the platform. Modeled on design charrettes, which are effective and entertaining combinations of concept and mobilization, these workshops pose specific challenges and call for immediate practical solutions. The fourth structure includes public lectures and panels that further illuminate the subject.

The exhibition is presented in the Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery at the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center at Parsons, and is co-produced by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School and Parsons The New School for Design.

This program has been made possible, in part, by a generous grant from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. This event is presented as part of the Vera List Center's 2008–2009 program cycle on "Branding Democracy."

Please note, this listing is in alphabetical order and includes both gallery and online works.

Select pieces (identified here) feature additional audio information that can be accessed from any phone by dialing (718) 362-9597. “Guide-by-Cell” organized by Bartholomew Ryan.

Yael Bartana (Israel, 1970; lives in Israel and the Netherlands)

Disembodying the National Army Tune, 2001

Loudspeaker, metal pole, motor, movement sensor, and sound

Soundtrack: Keren Rosenbaum

Voice: Noa Frenkel

Production assistance: Yuval Kedem

12' x 12" x 12"

Courtesy Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam, and the artist

The reprise of an installation first exhibited in Israel in 2001, the piece is now positioned at the entrance to the Kellen Gallery. A loudspeaker on a 13-foot pole plays a recording of the Israeli national anthem in the voice of a person imitating a trumpet. Triggered by the viewers' movements, the loudspeaker climbs up and down the pole, simulating the raising and lowering of a flag and emphasizing a phallic subtext to patriotic displays. The work satirizes tropes of nationhood that are arrived at through pomp and ceremony.

See also performance on October 19.

Erick Beltrán (Mexico, 1974; lives in Barcelona, Spain)

Epistemic Merit Model, 2008

MDF table, wooden archive, wire, metal, rubber stamps, ink, sandwich boards, scanner, and paper

Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

New work, commissioned by Parsons for *Ours*

Guide-by-Cell

Dial (718) 362-9597 on your cell phone, followed by # 4

Erick Beltrán's design-oriented practice investigates the way language and meaning are formed through structures that are often arbitrary, though they may seem universal and inevitable. The artist concentrates on the visual and graphic formation of language, whether in the graphic designer's use of typography or in the many variations that alphabetical forms take across cultures.

For OURS, Beltrán has developed a “production site” stationed in the gallery. Users have access to an archive of 300 historic propaganda images that they can shuffle and combine at will: reproduced on old-fashioned rubber stamps, the images get printed

on paper, scanned, and uploaded to the exhibition's Web site. Each week a selection of the works is printed in large-poster format and mounted on high wires crossing the gallery windows. The posters, which evoke the photo collages of Dada and Constructivism, play with notions of artistic radicalism in relation to political ideology, and demonstrate one of the show's main themes: though participatory strategies often provide the appearance of democratic choice, this democracy is limited to the options outlined in the structure of the game. "Action" becomes "free play" within a narrow range of often compromising options.

Project assistance: Bartholomew Ryan

Paul Chan (China/Hong Kong, 1973; lives in New York)

Untitled Video on Lynne Stewart and Her Conviction, the Law and Poetry, 2006

Video, color with sound

17 minutes, 30 seconds

Courtesy the artist

Untitled ... is a video portrait of longtime defense lawyer and activist Lynne Stewart. In 2005, Stewart was convicted on charges that she provided support to terrorists by conspiring to smuggle messages out of prison from her client, Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman. Straightforward, documentary-style scenes feature Stewart discussing her prosecution and what she views as its implications for fundamental democratic rights. These talking-head sequences alternate with cross fading color fields that fill the screen when Stewart recites poetry, a strategy she often employed in court.

For Chan, Stewart's case demonstrates how the state takes dissidents who operate in the name of democracy, and redefines them as traitors who need to be silenced. Through its free circulation on the Internet, Chan's work aims to counter the state's mechanisms of exclusion and to reintroduce the "dissident" into the circuits of representation.

Joseph DeLappe (USA, 1963; lives in Reno, Nevada)

Dead-in-Iraq, 2006, ongoing

[http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/Gaming/Dead In Iraq/](http://www.unr.edu/art/delappe/Gaming/Dead_In_Iraq/)

This ongoing memorial takes the form of an intervention in "America's Army," the online first-person-shooter video game used by the U.S. Army to recruit new soldiers. DeLappe logged into the game with the user name "dead-in-iraq" and proceeded to use the game's text messaging system to type the names, ages, divisions, and dates of death of all recently deceased U.S. soldiers in Iraq. Then he waited to be shot by other players, died, and began the process again (after being "reincarnated"). *Dead-in-Iraq* is a provocative co-opting of the tools of digital culture in order to engage with the political issues raised in an era of high technology propaganda and war.

Aleksandra Domanovic (Slovenia, 1981, lives in Berlin, Germany)

Holivud, 2008

<http://aleksandradowanovic.com/holivud.html>

This online triptych notes the divergent paths Google Maps suggest to Serbians and Albanians for travel between Pristina and Beograd, based on assumptions about the citizens' political differences. The map is bracketed by videos of celebrities George Clooney and James Belushi speaking on behalf of Serbians and Albanians, respectively. The juxtaposition calls attention to foreign countries' use of Hollywood brands to galvanize national identity and support on the world stage.

Sam Durant (USA, 1961, lives in Los Angeles)

See You in Chicago in August, 2002

Electric sign with vinyl text

55" x 46" x 9 1/2"

Edition 3/3

Photo credit: Achim Kukulies

Collection Rebecca and Alexander Stewart

Reproduction of source drawing

Washington, D.C. 1968, 2002

Graphite on paper

15" x 20"

Courtesy the artist

See You in Chicago in August, 2008

Print on paper, distributed in stacks throughout New School campus

35" x 24"

Courtesy the artist, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Photographic documentation of historic protests, culled mostly from newspapers, makes up the source material for Durant's light boxes and posters. They are faithful reproductions of slogans from protest signs—adopting their graphic shape, but isolating them from their context, thus transforming them into enigmatic and yet shockingly generic logos. Gestures of protest, freedom of speech, and public expression—essential elements of any democracy—are stripped of the cause they meant to support.

On the one hand, Durant seems to suggest that protest itself, as a demonstration of power, is what matters in a democratic society. On the other, he points out the problematic of the image of protest as it circulates in the mass media, losing its meaning as it is easily appropriated by those in power, for instance when President George W. Bush, questioned about anti-war protests, remarked, "See, this is what we're fighting for." Durant critiques the mechanisms of branding that transform desires and relationships into emotionally charged but essentially meaningless icons.

Project assistance: Jakob Schillinger

See also charrette and presentation on October 22.

Kota Ezawa (Germany, 1969; lives in San Francisco)

Hand Vote, 2008

Paint on wood

17" x 6" x 11 1/2"

Edition 1/3

Courtesy the artist and Murray Guy

New work, commissioned by Parsons for *Ours*

Guide-by-Cell

Dial (718) 362-9597 on your cell phone, followed by # 5

Kota Ezawa re-presents iconic moments from the media and the history of photography in animated videos, slide projections, light boxes, and prints. Each project graphically reduces source material (such as the moment of the “Not guilty” verdict in the O.J. Simpson trial, or the Yoko Ono and John Lennon 1969 “bed-in for peace”) to a pared down animation that explores the mutable role of the camera and photography in the reception and understanding of reality.

For OURS, Ezawa has produced a new sculpture, a laser-cut wooden tableau of a group of people, raising their hands in what is read as referendum but might just as well be a confession. The sculpture is based on an anonymous photograph found in a Web encyclopedia under the entry for “Policy Making Process.” The detached gaze at democracy is free of any political view. All that is revealed in this picture are the pure mechanics of voting which is the mode under which democracy operates. As a non-U.S. citizen, Ezawa embraces this agnostic look at democracy.

Kota Ezawa

A Space of Your Own, 2007

Transparency on light box

40" x 30" x 5"

Edition 4/7

Courtesy the artist and Murray Guy

Celebrate Your Everyday Life, 2007

Transparency on light box

40" x 60" x 5"

Courtesy the artist and Murray Guy

The artist’s light boxes from his IKEA series feature his signature computer drawing style. They further simplify the physical properties of the over-designed objects, suggesting that gesture, color, and context are used to formulate lifestyles that lead via branding to contemporary identity. Reminiscent of President George W. Bush’s post-9/11

call to shop as an act of patriotic solidarity, these works also suggest that self-fulfillment and power can be obtained through the material satisfaction of desire.

Andrea Geyer (Germany, 1971; lives in New York)

Parallax (Media), 2008

Digital C-print

20" x 30" each, 6 altogether

Edition 1/5

Courtesy the artist

Guide-by-Cell

Dial (718) 362-9597 on your cell phone, followed by # 6

Parallax investigates notions of citizenship and national belonging, and their role in creating individual and governmental spaces of action. The work comprises two series of six photographs, one of which is on view in the exhibition, each taken in 2003 in Los Angeles and New York, combined with text excerpts from news agencies.

Some of the photographs document the peripheries of protests against the war in Iraq and civil rights infringements; others are staged and follow a kind of universal protagonist through her everyday life, anchoring the work through the projection of this subjective view. In combination, the photographs and the texts in them point to the gap between the "objective" knowledge of official news reports and state politics on the one hand, and individual experience on the other.

See also performance on November 3.

Liam Gillick (England, 1964; lives in London and New York)

Revised Sochaux Structure, 2008

Benches and platform, Ultralite and paint

Platform, approx. 60' x 47' x 12"

4 circular benches, 94" in diameter, 19 1/5" high

Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

New work, commissioned by Parsons for *Ours*

Guide-by-Cell

Dial (718) 362-9597 on your cell phone, followed by # 7

Gillick's site-specific installation occupies a central place in the exhibition and is the stage for a series of charrettes (solution-driven workshops) as well as other participatory events. It consists of four circular benches atop a low platform that divides the gallery space into zones of activities and zones of passive contemplation.

Participation demands commitment; in order to join the activities on the platform, the visitor must step into the limelight. This creates an area of heightened awareness, a border between inside and outside that is open to everyone, but demands a conscious act of

engagement. At the same time, the area does not have one center and thus—like the process of democracy itself—does not afford a truly unified perspective. Similarly, the circular benches are complex and contradictory, and offer both intimacy (by facing inward) and exposure (facing outward). The installation triggers a process of continuous reevaluation of one's actions and position. "Participation" is possible, but the facilitating structure also determines its limits.

Project assistance: Bartholomew Ryan

Sharon Hayes (USA, 1970; lives in New York)

My Fellow Americans 1981-1988, 2004/06

Documentation of performance

9 hours, 30 minutes

Courtesy the artist

My Fellow Americans documents a performance by Hayes in which she read all thirty-six of Ronald Reagan's official "Address to the Nation" speeches, beginning with the "Address to the Nation on the Economy" delivered on February 5, 1981, and ending with "Farewell Address to the Nation" from January 11, 1989. A specific category of presidential address, these speeches are always given from the Oval Office and are presumably spoken directly to the American people.

Hayes, however, strips them of the branded performance—the choreographed gestures and refined dramatic intonation—which presidents, and especially Reagan, employ on such occasions. As she reads the transcripts, which range in topic from the laissez-faire economic policies dubbed Reaganomics to the Iran-Contra affair, her affectless voice transforms the sentences into a series of dry, flat phrases. The individual's recitation is perfected by a chorus of off-screen assistants who audibly correct the artist's at times flawed rendition.

Susan Hiller (USA, 1940; lives in London)

The Last Silent Movie, 2007

Video, black-and-white with sound

21 minutes

Exhibition copy

Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

This work will be presented after Election Day.

The Last Silent Movie's black screen illuminates how individuals and communities become victims as they are swallowed up, involuntarily assimilated, into the global circulation of ideas and capital branded as "democratization." The work features archival sound recordings of extinct or endangered languages, subtitled on the screen.

However, Hiller's film not only looks at the marginalized but also addresses the mechanisms of cultural hegemony and homogenization, and of closure. In addition to her

unsettling “anthropological” material as such, Hiller’s spotlight is on the machinery through which we commonly approach it—the intellectual, emotional, and ideological processes whereby these materials are comprehended and classified. She addresses a fundamental problem of democracy, particularly in the age of branding: the ongoing muting of our differences and the spread of a common mindset in the service of conformity.

Ashley Hunt (USA, 1970; lives in Los Angeles)

A World Map: In Which We See... 2005, ongoing

Chalk and soft pastel on blackboard

Courtesy the artist

This work will be generated during a charrette on October 23.

Guide-by-Cell

Dial (718) 362-9597 on your cell phone, followed by # 8

Ashley Hunt uses video, photography, mapping and writing to engage social movements, modes of learning, and public discourse. He is interested in how societal structures both allow some people to accumulate power and prevent others from getting it, and how people come to know, respond and conceive of themselves within these structures. Rather than treating art and activism as two separate spheres, he approaches them as symbiotic and complementary.

Hunt is presenting *A World Map*, an ongoing project in which he maps structures of power that determine exclusion and inclusion, using soft pastel and chalk on blackboard. The work will be created in collaboration with Parsons students via a design charrette (a solution-driven workshop) in the gallery space, one week after the exhibition opening. Deliberately positioned in a state of anticipation—not unlike electoral processes—the work will initially consist of the large empty wall that defines the area as a “temporary classroom.” Once up, the map will also generate an open glossary on the chalkboard where viewers are invited to expand on ideas raised by the piece, thus sharing in the ongoing classroom experience. Each week, the most recent version of map and glossary will be uploaded to the exhibition’s Web site to expand the structure of the work itself beyond the gallery space.

See also charrette and presentation on October 23.

Walker Art Center, UpTake, and UnConvention (USA, 2008)

I Approve This Message, 2008, ongoing

<http://theunconvention.com/iapprove/>

This participatory project was initiated by the organizers of the UnConvention, an umbrella for art projects and interventions happening in the region of the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul. Sidestepping efforts by authorities to keep voices of dissent or other visual distractions at bay during this quadrennial spectacle, and

taking its title from the obligatory statement uttered by candidates at the end of campaign ads, “I Approve This Message” gives the public a chance to address delegates at both conventions. Touted as “a community-generated media response” giving people “a voice and an opportunity to promote thinking about what participating in democracy looks like,” the project revolves around a Web site in which users’ two-minute videos are posted to paint a collective picture of what this process means to them.

Institute for Infinitely Small Things (USA, 2004; active in Boston)

Transferring Patriotism, 2008, ongoing

<http://www.ikatun.org/transferring-patriotism>

At once a promotional ad and a speculative performance, *Transferring Patriotism* is the trailer or placeholder for an exchange in which the artists would—for the cost of their travel expenses—travel to a buyer’s home country and sell their patriotism. The transaction has precise terms and must occur over a table evenly riding the border between the buyers’ nation and the territory of the local American Embassy, around which the respective parties would first sit and consume an American beer. The terms of this contract recall the patriotism-stoking genre of American Westerns in which contention over frontiers entrenched imperialist fantasies.

Emma Kay (England, 1961; lives in London)

The Future From Memory, 2001

Digital animation, projected

Approximately 12’ x 16’

55 minutes, looped

Courtesy the artist and Galeria Toni Tàpies, Barcelona

Emma Kay’s work deals with individual memory in relation to authoritative discourse. For *The Future From Memory*, Kay transcribed a text based on theories of the future culled from a variety of sources, ranging from science to spirituality, from culture to economics. But the transcriptions are not entirely direct: they are based solely on the artist’s recollections of her wide-ranging materials. The film projects the text in an animated scroll that aptly resembles the title sequence of “Star Wars.”

Democracy, as is evident from the fevered punditry around the current presidential campaign, is charged with anticipation and speculation about the future. It is, one could say, addicted to futurity. In integrating various ideas and voices into one memory, one discontinuous stream of conscience or consciousness, Kay addresses fundamentally democratic conflicts and questions: if the outcome of democracy is always deferred, does our subjective future remain forever open? If the future is both the object of constant anticipation in a process of endless debate and, at the same time, constituted through this process, is democracy essentially a mandate to challenge any authoritative claim to objective knowledge and truth?

Komar & Melamid (Russia, 1943 and 1945; live in New York)

America's Most Wanted, 1994/2008

Photographic reproduction of oil painting with statistical charts

Photo credit: D. James Dee

Dishwasher size (24 x 35.8")

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Guide-by-Cell

Dial (718) 362-9597 on your cell phone, followed by # 9

Public opinion polls and market research ceaselessly measure all aspects of society. So, in 1994, the conceptual artist collaborative Komar & Melamid wryly asked why the world of aesthetics should be any different. They went out and hired an actual market research firm to determine the public's aesthetic preferences and taste in painting. The poll was conducted in fourteen countries and resulted in a series of paintings by the artists titled *People's Choice* that attempted to translate the desires of each nation's public onto idealized canvases.

America's Most Wanted is the first work from that series that the artists produced. The work reflects the findings that 33% of Americans prefer the fall season, and 56% want historical figures in their paintings. Thus, in the hands of these Russian immigrants, the required historical icon becomes George Washington, depicted in a fall forest landscape reminiscent of the Hudson River School landscapes, and, in line with other poll results, standing near a beach and some deer. The project pokes gentle fun at rhetoric calling for the democratization of art, while also revealing traditional prejudices about artistic content. At the core is the immigrants' fascination with American consumer polls and the expectations of instant gratification they raise—not foreign to the political realm either.

Asaf Koriat (Israel, 2006; lives in Tel Aviv, Israel)

The Brave, 2006

Video, color with sound

2 minutes, 15 seconds

Courtesy the artist

The Brave is a one-channel, split-screen video simultaneously playing recordings of nine different celebrities singing the "Star Spangled Banner" at the opening celebration of the Super Bowl. Each performer attempts to make the anthem his or her own and to establish a claim to it in competition with his or her predecessors. In the temporal unity of the video, they melt into one uncanny disharmonious chant.

This discordant national anthem provides both a concise critique and a celebration of mass culture: the singers embody the complexities of the democratic system, simultaneously touting the mythology of a collective national identity and the ceaseless insistence on individuality that are the bedrock of the American dream. The video's presentation, via a large TV entertainment center, highlights the function of media events as the primary form through which the nation exists and perceives itself in unity.

Runo Lagomarsino (Argentina, 1977; lives in Malmö, Sweden, and New York)

Casi Quasi Cinema, 2006

Single slide projection, foam, table and wooden trestles

48" x 39 1/2" x 16 1/2"

Wooden trestles 27 1/2" high

Courtesy the artist and Elastic, Malmö

On the temporary worktable sits a model movie theater. Looming over it, projecting a text against the miniature movie screen, is a slide projector. The text reads,

“How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sounds familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film.”

No film ensues, the slide does not surrender to a successor slide—the little cinema features this one lonely frame. Distributed by the Directorate for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict at the Pentagon in 2003, the text stems from a flier advertising a screening of the 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*. The film was shown within weeks of President Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech proclaiming the end of “major hostilities” in Iraq. *Casi Quasi Cinema*’s aesthetics are not coincidental: popular culture and the mass media form the terrain for the “battle of ideas” and the branding of democracy. That *The Battle of Algiers* is an important staple in alternative film circles implies that “high” culture may have a role to play after all.

Runo Lagomarsino

If You Don’t Know What the South Is, It’s Simply Because You Are From the North, 2008

Masonite and paint

Two pieces, each approx. 12’ x 13 1/2”

Courtesy the artist and Elastic, Malmö

New work, commissioned by Parsons for *Ours*

Lagomarsino’s site-specific piece is a phrase divided in two parts, installed in the bridged gap that exposes the white box gallery’s ceiling and walls as theatrical gestures by revealing the rough infrastructure of the building behind. The text reads, IF YOU DON’T KNOW WHAT THE SOUTH IS [left wall] ITS SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU ARE FROM THE NORTH [right wall].

Taking as point of departure the assumption that communal spaces such as nations work simultaneously as forms of inclusion but also of exclusion, Lagomarsino works in the space between universalism and the post-colonial realities defining the present day. This in-between space is home to classifications and discriminations, but also to potentiality and other forms of discourse of democracy and participation. In the exhibition, that in-between space quite literally frames all other works.

Project assistance: Jakob Schillinger

See also charrette and presentation on November 7.

Steve Lambert (USA, 1976; lives in New York)

Whytheyhate.us, 2006, ongoing

<http://whytheyhate.us>

This Web site acts as a scrapbook for public photos uploaded to Flickr and tagged “whytheyhateus.” The site’s call for contributors explains only: “The images on WhyTheyHateUs fit a theme. If you don’t know what that theme is, please do not add images.” Viewers are thus left to draw conclusions about who “they” and “us” are, as they surf through thousands of images collectively documenting American patriotism, military bravado, homeland-centric rhetoric, naiveté, or blatant consumerism. This framing of the tagged photos raises the question of local culpability for the image we export to other nations and the extent to which Americans “buy into” this image.

Les Liens Invisibles (Italy, 2007)

Peking2008, 2008, ongoing

<http://www.peking2008.com/>

This source project “Fake is a Fake” by the Italian collective Les Liens Invisible makes it easy for internet users with access to free Word Press blogging software to mimic high profile sites like news and government agencies, while inserting their own statements. Constantly updated and refined by a group of devoted developers, the list of available spoofs continues to grow while blending art, advertising, and activism. The newest available Web site template, “Peking2008,” used the Olympic Games in Beijing as a backdrop for discussing China’s attitude towards human rights. In demonstrating that the ubiquity and recognizability of branded messages make them particularly vulnerable to forms of plagiarism, the site looks just like the Olympics homepage, while addressing issues censored in China.

Ligorano/Reese (USA, 1955 and 1956; live in New York)

Pure Products, 1993, ongoing

<http://www.pureproductsusa.com/>

Pure Products is an online store initiated by the artists to sell “pseudo-patriotic consumer goods.” In the fifteen years since the store first opened, there has come to be an ever closer, and unfortunately ever more ironic relationship between the items for sale and the lack of critical discourse about consumer debt, national debt, and even American obesity. Taking the form of t-shirts, tschochkes, and food products cleverly branded in alignment with American political personae and ideology, the site’s inventory has a tongue-in-cheek

reliance on the adage “you are what you eat.” Highlighting the American ideal of capitalism, the novelty items become touchstones for a conversation about the ways in which national identity is packaged, distributed, and consumed.

Miguel Luciano (Puerto Rico, 1972; lives in New York)

Cuando las Gallinas Mean (When Hens Pee), 2003

Coin-operated vending machine, with chicken and eggs

67” x 32” x 32”

Edition 1/2

Courtesy the artist

Cuando las Gallinas Mean (“When Hens Pee”) is a Puerto Rican saying meant to silence children: “You can speak again when the hens pee.” And chickens never pee—except for the one in Luciano’s vending machine. After the viewer inserts a quarter, the plastic hen rotates, pees, and releases one of 500 eggs, containing prizes. The vending machine greets visitors upon entering the gallery, and anchors a complex and highly interactive process creating and propagating countless democratic mini-brands. The actual prizes—buttons expressing thoughts and ideas that today are not ordinarily voiced—are generated and designed in a charrette (a solution-driven workshop) with Parsons students.

See also charrette and presentation on October 16.

Michael Mandiberg (USA, 1977; lives in New York)

Oil Standard, 2006, ongoing

<http://www.mandiberg.com/?q=oilstandard>

Oil Standard is a post-Gold Standard measure of the state of the U.S. economy, in relation to the current cost of oil. Internet users who download Mandiberg’s Firefox plug-in can visit sites like Amazon or Orbitz and see U.S. dollar amounts converted into relative barrels of oil, according to their current cost. The project speaks to the relationship between American foreign policy and the branding of the U.S. economy, creating the context for a conversation about the impact that the often violent exportation of “democracy” is having on the U.S. economic health and about the ways in which consumer habits are implicated in this cycle.

Emery C. Martin (USA, 1984; lives in Los Angeles)

The Neighborhood Network Watch, 2008, ongoing

<http://www.dhsnnw.org/>

This project mimics the means by which Americans are on the one hand inculcated in a culture of fear and on the other sign off on policies that sacrifice their rights to privacy—protecting democratic processes in order to protect their self-image as participants in a democratic state. Modeled after the history and ideals of the U.S. Department of

Homeland Security, the *Neighborhood Network Watch* (NNW) is a fictitious community organization recruiting residents to spy on themselves and their neighbors in vigilant protection against suspected terrorists. The Web-based organization boastfully updates guerrilla tactics and counterinsurgent warfare techniques by using emergent technologies in strategic, if vague, new ways.

Aleksandra Mir (Poland, 1967; lives in Palermo, Sicily)

Che and Concorde, 2004/2008

Posters displayed in stack in gallery

32 1/2" x 23"

Courtesy the artist and Mary Boone Gallery

Che and Concorde consists of posters designed by the artist and distributed for free during the exhibition. The work depicts two iconic brands: Che Guevara, a symbol of socialist liberation, and the Concorde, a symbol of capitalist ambition. Set against a bold red background the implication is that Che, like the Concorde, is moving towards obsolescence. The lost potential of these icons to promote actual change (social or technical revolution, respectively) clashes with the aesthetic appeal they still carry and the delight with which visitors commonly take away their free posters. *Che and Concorde* documents the power of branding to condense complex ideas into effective signs and invites us to contemplate the traces of the ideologies they invoke.

As a further complication, the edition here is the copy of an invitation that announced a group show on communism at the Project Arts Center in Dublin. In its current reappearance, *Communism: A Group Show* flows into *Ours: Democracy in the Age of Branding*, and the mutability seems entirely natural in this relativistic time.

The back of the posters features an interview between the artist and the designer of the original iconic image of Che, the Irish illustrator Jim Fitzpatrick who released the image many years ago sans copyright.

Carlos Motta (Colombia, 1978; lives in New York)

The Good Life, 2005, ongoing

<http://www.la-buena-vida.info/>

The Good Life is Motta's expanding online archive of over 360 video interviews conducted with pedestrians in the streets of twelve cities in Latin America, regarding what the artist describes as "individuals' perceptions of United States foreign policy and its history of interventions in the region, local democracy, leadership, and governance." The archive can be searched in a variety of ways, for instance according to the content of the questions or the demographics of the respondent, thus serving as a sort of census of the large and diverse response about the local repercussions of the political, economic, and military actions of the U.S. Viewers can also make their voices heard by contributing answers to the central query of what constitutes the good life.

Dave Muller (USA, 1964; lives in Los Angeles)
Extensions (Interpolations and Extrapolations), 2008
Acrylic on paper, four parts, either 32" x 40" or 40" x 32"
Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles
Installed in atrium of Alvin Johnson/J.M. Kaplan Building
66 West 12th Street

For *Ours*, Dave Muller has expanded his site-specific work *Interpolations and Extrapolations* (2002-03), which features various signature logos and “looks” that The New School has adopted since its founding in 1919. Installed in the lobby of The New School’s first “signature” building, Muller’s work refers to the multiple re-branding initiatives of the exhibition’s host institution, The New School, and reflects the changing political and economic conditions both within and outside the university.

Over the years, the university’s logo with an image resembling a tree of life was replaced by abstract coat of arms signifying The New School’s various divisions, as seen on the wall behind you. The university’s current brand emphasizes a youthful, urban character. In the artist’s brush, the banner bearing this new logo is split both literally and metaphorically over two frames.

Timo Nasser (Germany, 1972; lives in Berlin, Germany)
Mimikry, 2001
C-print behind acrylic
Edition 3/5
40” x 40”
Courtesy private collection Alexander Ochs, Berlin

Mimikry depicts a large group of Arab men looking out toward the photographer, sitting on a small hill in a rural, mountainous landscape. They echo the shape of a huge mountain in the background, forming a strong image of unity and strength. The photograph evokes a whole art history of representations of the “body politic,” from Abraham Bosse’s Leviathan frontispiece to Mount Rushmore. It also has the potential to confront the viewer with a range of prejudices about the Muslim world that are constantly reinforced within Western media and culture.

There are more layers. The Pakistani men are watching a game of polo, which, while popularized by the British, is derived from the princes of the Tibeto-Burman kingdom of Manipur (now a state in India), who played the game while they were in exile in India sometime between 1819 and 1826. The work thus alludes to a complex history of colonization and emigration, where exclusion from the sanctified brand “democracy” has been the norm.

Ariel Orozco (Cuba, 1971; lives in Mexico City)
Contrapeso, 2003
C-print

27 1/2" x 19 1/2"

Exhibition copy

Courtesy Myto Gallery, Mexico City

Contrapeso shows the image of a man against the sky, holding a flagpole, stemming his body horizontally into the air. It is a photographic document of the artist performing his own flag, actually becoming the flag himself. *Contrapeso* aesthetically confronts the complex relationship between the nation and the individual, of the (in)divisibility of sovereignty. The half-naked, sun-tanned, muscular body evokes numerous glorifications of the worker appearing throughout Western art history. However, the viewer learns that the artist had to practice for months in order to attain the physical fitness required to perform the flag for one second, just long enough for the photograph to be taken. *Contrapeso* then functions as a critique of the politics of representation.

Trevor Paglen (USA, 1974; lives in Berkeley, California)

Five Classified Aircraft, 2007

5 fabric patches, framed

15 1/4" x 32 3/4" x 2 1/2"

Edition 2/5

Courtesy the artist and Bellwether, New York

Five Classified Squadrons, 2007

5 fabric patches, framed

15 1/4" x 32 3/4" x 2 1/2"

Edition 1/5

Courtesy the artist and Bellwether, New York

Trevor Paglen's work is an exhibit into itself, a collection of sew-on military badges depicting sinister symbols ranging from the mysterious to the overtly aggressive. The badges belong to the complex universe of secret visual codes, a subculture powered by the Pentagon's classified "black budget" that delivers billions of dollars each year to stealth armies of high-tech warriors. Paglen's work is a thorough investigation of the branding of democracy addressed to a different target group.

The installation for *Ours* also features texts by some of the designers of the badges as well as by Paglen himself that help decode the symbols and writing on the badges.

See also charrette and presentation on November 19.

PETLab (USA, 2007)

Re:Activism NYC, 2008, ongoing

<http://petlab.parsons.edu/reactivism>

Re:Activism NYC is a participatory project initiated by Colleen Macklin and other members of PETLab, at Parsons The New School for Design. Structured as a team-based urban street game using mobile technology, the project offers a tour of New York City through an exploration of its history of activists, protests, and riots. As participants carry out a clue-based scavenger hunt and site-specific challenges, they are informed of the ongoing resonance of historic issues fought for in the battleground of the city. Winning the game necessitates collective action and proactive problem-solving, thus teaching players how to be effective activists while challenging the definition of “playing by the rules.”

See also game gathering on November 4.

Nadine Robinson (England, 1968; lives in New York)

Americana, Version Two, 2008

18 speakers, audio components, DVD

Dimensions variable, sound looped

Courtesy the artist

New work, commissioned by Parsons for *Ours*

Guide-by-Cell

Dial (718) 362-9597 on your cell phone, followed by # 10

Americana is a sound sculpture created for the Kellen Gallery and consisting of two speaker-stacks facing each other, each bearing a logo with the American flag. The speakers play historic and present-day samples of American political speeches, however, the artist has replaced moments of applause with stock recordings of laughter. This slapstick-like gesture expresses Robinson’s deep mistrust of democracy’s power to bring about justice and real change. It is her conviction that the “little improvements” that democratic politics offer are merely cosmetic, distractions from deep, long-term injustice that displace the desire for real change.

This critique of mild-mannered hope for progress, the better future that is so central to the democratic process, is reflected in the visual aspects of this work as well. The perfect geometric shapes of the black speakers built into the white cube of the gallery allude to the sites of Modernist art and African-American urban “sub-cultures.” Robinson confronts two sets of aesthetic codes as markers of social difference, and at the same time conflates them into a hybrid object of displaced desire, pointing out that in their respective cultures they both signify taste and status.

Project assistance: Jakob Schillinger

Anri Sala (Yugoslavia, 1974; lives in Paris, France)

Dammi i colori (Give Me the Colors), 2003

Digital video, projected, color with sound

15 minutes 25 seconds

Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Johnen + Schoettle, Berlin, Cologne, Munich; Gallery Hauser & Wirth, Zuerich, London; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Dammi i colori is an enthralling portrait of a city in transition, the Albanian capital Tirana, and its mayor, the artist Edi Rama. Shot in what one might call “documentary style,” the video captures Rama as he speaks to the camera in a car riding through his city, reflecting on his project to have Tirana painted in vivid colors, the dramatic results of which can be seen in the background. The mayor/artist conceives of the community as a super-brand, a literally all-immersive utopia for everyone to buy into, but derived from one central and sovereign mastermind (even if it is supposedly “popular sovereignty” in this case). As the mayor reflects on what comprises community, the artist in him suggests that political problems may really be problems of form and design. *Dammi i colori* highlights the conception of the (democratic) body politic as in fact one (sovereign) body, and poses the question of the form that a “multitude” in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s sense would take.

Hank Willis Thomas (USA, 1976; lives in New York)

Branded Head, 2003

Lambda photograph, digital C-print
99” x 52”

Edition 1/3

Courtesy Beth Rudin DeWoody

Hank Willis Thomas’ *Branded* series depicts the bodies of African-American men literally branded with a Nike logo. The muscular men bearing the scarred Nike swoosh—an international symbol of strength, freedom, and victory—evoke slavery as well as actual Nike advertisements. They become symbolic of the complex dualities of history and identity, explicitly connecting the brand to its original function as a symbol of ownership and control. Now the brand has become a catalyst for purchasing a sense of identity in a society where cultural belonging has become ever more intertwined with the politics of consumption. The work proposes the urgency of developing alternative modes of identification.

Johan Tirén (Sweden, 1973; lives in Stockholm, Sweden)

Notes in Connection with the Celebration of a National Day, 2007

Poster series of 7 different posters

Lambda photograph

19 1/2” x 27 1/2” each

Courtesy the artist

Tirén’s posters employ familiar and somewhat generic-looking imagery: a line of people holding hands, scenes of nature and historical monuments—all of which suggest quotidian bourgeois life. The friendly black-and-white silhouettes are accompanied by familiar slogans often heard in debates about nationality and patriotism. Here, however, they are curiously

devoid of any attribution to a specific political figure or party (not just because they are in Swedish). Some of the familiar slogans are slightly altered, like “A democratic nation has never started a war.” The combination of the images with the texts is gently discordant as the seeming affability of the works is undermined by a deeper, more reflective sense of unease.

Brian Tolle (USA, 1964; lives in New York)

Man of Characters, 2006

Digital Iris print on paper, 100 parts

Overall dimensions: 10' x 7 3/4'

Courtesy Ann and Ron Pizzuti

Guide-by-Cell

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Franklin's head, as printed on the one hundred dollar bill, is blown up to cover the wall from floor to ceiling, greeting the gallery visitor from afar. Upon inspection, the lines comprising this giant drawing emerge as writing: aphorisms by Franklin himself. They reveal something of the complexity of this multi-faceted revolutionary. Tolle's play with distance points towards the relationship between the iconic symbol and its everyday referent, i.e. money, and suggests how the manipulation of “character(s)” or letters produces both an iconic image as well as latent meaning. Challenging what we think we know, the work makes us look twice, and questions the ways in which a culture saturated with logos and icons allocates meaning.

Tolle's work is strikingly graphic, as if to acknowledge that the brilliant populist Franklin himself employed cartoons and then state-of-the-art public communications strategies to promote political unity.

Brian Tolle

Die, or Join, 2006

Mixed media

Approx. 7' x 9 1/2" x 6 1/2"

Courtesy the artist and CRG Gallery

Tolle's elaborate sculptural installation refers to a famous political cartoon by Benjamin Franklin from 1754. Titled “Join, or Die,” the original publication featured a woodcut of a snake severed into eighths, each segment of which was labeled with the initial of a British-American colony. The cartoon appeared along with Franklin's editorial about the disunited state of the colonies. The impact of the work was such that during the wars the snake became a popular symbol illustrating the importance of colonial unity.

Tolle has updated Franklin's snake to reflect current political circumstances: made up of red and blue segments, it is aggressively animate and its two heads further complicate notions of unity and the nation-state. By updating the historical image, Tolle creates a highly ambiguous and complex emblem that deconstructs the ideas and genealogies underlying present global politics and their imagery. After the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center,

the U.S. Navy created a new flag to be flown on all ships “during the global war on terror.” It replaced a blue flag bearing 50 stars that represented 50 equal states. In the new flag the snake is aggressively lashing out, all its segments in full support, with a text warning “Don’t tread on me.”

Judi Werthein (Argentina, 1967; lives in New York)

Brinco, 2005

Installation with 3 pairs of sneakers, vinyl, paper, and monitors

Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and inSite_05

Guide-by-Cell

Dial (718) 362-9597 on your cell phone, followed by # 12

In 2005, Judi Werthein, an Argentinean artist based in New York, came to national prominence when she was accused by CNN anchor Lou Dobbs and Fox News reporters of aiding and abetting illegal immigration. Her uniquely designed sneaker, manufactured in China, had been distributed for free to Mexican immigrants about to attempt an illegal crossing into the U.S. Trademarked “Brinco” (Spanish for “jump”) after the local nickname for crossing the border, each pair contains a map of the border-area (on the inside of the soles), a compass, a wallet, pockets to hide money and medication, and necessities, such as an image of Santo Toribio Romo, the official saint of the Mexican immigrant.

Meanwhile, Werthein sold the sneakers for \$215 a pair at a boutique store in San Diego, explicitly linking migrants’ efforts to illegally cross the Mexican-American border to the global circulation of goods and labor. The heavily branded sneakers are exhibited in an installation that includes video documentation of the media firestorm that ensued.

See also charrette and presentation on October 20.

Wooloo Productions (Denmark, 2006; active in Berlin and Copenhagen)

Rebranding Acts, 2006, ongoing

<http://www.wooloo.org/rebranding/>

Rebranding Acts is, according to this artists’ collective, “an investigation into cultural identity in an age of global migration.” The initiative uses the online platform wooloo.org to invite artists from around the world to consider the ways in which “nationality” is manufactured in their home country, and to “rebrand” these concepts, from their own perspective. While the open call is predicated on the argument that such hegemonic nationalist constructions often exclude identities that don’t fit the mold, *Rebranding Acts* invites anyone to add their voice to the discussion by uploading videos of their own public interventions. The project draws on previous interventionist and participatory works by the collective’s founders in which the concept of national identity is revealed to

be anything but black-and-white, and the resulting archive documents the myriad ways in which people around the world respond to this problematic notion.

The Yes Men (USA, 1999)

Even When Social Censorship of Beliefs Is Not So Strict, Social Conditions May Fail to (...) Provide Any Material Support and Reward to Those Who Entertain Them. Hence They Remain Mere Fancies, Romantic Castles in the Air, or Aimless Speculations (After John Dewey), 2008

Mixed media

Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artists

New work, commissioned by Parsons for *Ours*

The Yes Men use “culture jamming” and “identity correction” as devices to resist and expose the machinations of corporate and political culture. The activist group was founded by Andy Bichlbaum, a faculty member at Parsons, and Mike Bonnano. As an employee of the computer games company Maxis, Bichlbaum inserted controversial code into the game SimCopter which caused male sprites in swimming trunks to appear on certain dates and kiss each other. The code was intended to highlight harsh work practices.

In 2004, Bichlbaum appeared on BBC News as “Jude Finistera,” a supposed representative of Dow Chemical, whose subsidiary Union Carbide was responsible for the Bhopal chemical disaster in India. Finistera accepted full responsibility for the disaster, igniting one of the biggest controversies in art activism as Dow virulently denied the claim. The Yes Men will present a new work that considers personal responsibility in an age of war.

Project assistance: Bartholomew Ryan and LeAnne Wagner

Carey Young (Zimbabwe, 1970; lives in London)

Conflict Management, 2003/2008

Professional mediator, table, chairs, two notice boards, media advertising, members of the public

Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

In her performances, Carey Young investigates the spread of corporate branding techniques and interactions that are increasingly taking over the personal and public domains. Young appropriates these techniques, deconstructing them through a process of inhabitation. In *Conflict Management*, the services of a professional arbitrator are offered to students, gallery visitors, and passersby. Referring to the larger problem of conflict, and the necessity of agreement as the basis for social interaction, the performance points to the gap between dialogue and the law. It evokes Walter Benjamin’s critique of the violence inherent to the law, and his conception of “pure means” such as diplomacy.

See also performance on October 26.