

The projects represented in “Interactivist” let you do something unusual. They each let you become part of a public, a grouping of strangers, whose makeup and potential for action is unknowable in advance. This reverses the experience that is common in most capitalist countries today, where participation in a public tends to be organized around consumer activity or demographic data (e.g. being a shopper or being a voter). “Public” here does not mean openly disclosed or highly visible. It is a concept for mediated interaction with strangers where the actions of the group have a wider social sphere as their backdrop, impetus or object of critique (e.g. the State, heteronormative society, patriarchy).¹ Today’s consumer and demographic publics— *those* ways of being with others— are constrained in both their actions and their constitution, constrained by marketing, constrained by statistics, constrained by the need to know and to plan. One vector of this constraint is time: such groupings of strangers are constrained because they are given in advance, pre-scribed in both their makeup and their actions. And so participation becomes an effect of good planning. For the four projects represented in “Interactivist,” becoming part of a public isn’t a product of good planning or good data, it is a catalyzing action, a *risk*. Each project unfolds as a bundle of actions, affects, intimacies, and forms, but only *after* the choice to invent a mode of participating in them has been made by

¹ In the work of Jürgen Habermas, the “public sphere” names an explicitly political, anti-state formation. In Lauren Berlant’s work, “publics” or “intimate public sphere” name groupings that exist next to, below, or entirely off the radar of recognizable politics. {{4 Habermas, Jürgen 1989;391 Berlant, Lauren Gail 2008;}}

those who encounter them. The publics thereby constituted are not just interactive or self-generating,² they are always about to happen, even as they are happening—to you, with you, or without you.

Of course, watching is a form of participation too (even when it is more useful as a way to avoid another sort of activity) and, as a screening, watching is what “Interactivist” asks you to do, initially. But who's to say that there are limits on the ramifications of this screening (other than the expected ones: expense, time, resources, resistances, exhaustion, apathy)? In any event, as documents of projects that took place elsewhere or elsewhen, each video shifts the time frame or the temporal envelope of the projects they represent in an important way—a way worth noting here, especially given the framing of the original projects as simultaneously present and always still to come.

The individual videos deal differently with this issue of time and timing, with questions of re-presentation and the risk of premature closure. Watching Sarah Febbraro's YouTube video “Global Dancing: LEARN THIS ROUTINE” we see a project that seems to have been successfully completed. The television news report in the middle of the video reinforces this sense of pastness. But the video ends with an explicit, open invitation for viewers to make their own video responses, and the television report's pastness is followed by outtakes which point formally to the unfinished business of the project.

Superflex marks the changed status of the work in time by modifying the

² Michael Warner writes that a defining feature of publics is that they are “autopoetic” or self-generating {{1 Warner, Michael 2002;}}

name of their project: a project originally called "Free Beer" becomes "Stealing Free Beer" when represented after the fact. The addition of the verb "Stealing," along with introductory titles which describe the actions documented in the video as "ransacking and looting," establish the artists' point of view on the original event as a form of meta-commentary and critique, not simple documentation. This opens the event up to a new thought, grants it a new present tense.

Bilal's video represents "Domestic Tension" in the tense of a missed encounter. Sitting here in the dark, we can no longer exercise the choice that animated the politics of the original project: namely, access to the trigger that controlled the paintball gun, and which rendered the artist vulnerable to anonymous attacks, a sitting target, twenty-four hours a day over the course of his month-long occupancy of the gallery. The same website that offered access to the gun also provided viewers with visual access to Bilal's living quarters via a webcam and verbal access via a chat client. Watch, talk or shoot: those were your choices. How did you want to participate in that public? What kind of public did you want it to be? Watching the documentation today, you have the choice to watch...or not watch. It's less of a choice, but to say so is not to discount the importance of the differences between modes of watching, or the potential significance of witnessing the event precisely *as* a missed encounter. The missed encounter is, after all, another way of describing the form of engagement with the events in Iraq that Bilal throws into question, what he calls the "comfort zone" of distanced participation in the war, actualized by television remotes and remote-

controlled missiles.

Like Febbraro's "Global Dancing," Temporary Services' documentation of "Construction Site" might have come across as a *fait accompli*, a record of the month they spent playing, transforming, interacting, building, collecting, and presenting on a formerly empty lot in Los Angeles. But that would convey none of the contingency or risk of their project, which could have gone so many ways. To miss this is to significantly miss the point and the politics of their work. Their video, therefore, gives a more ambiguously situated fragment of the project, a brief event in the long week, a jolt of laughter, an experiment, a jaunt. The scene answers a question that no one was asking: how does a park-full of kids react when they see a giant baseball rolling down the street toward them? If the question seems frivolous now, not the sort of serious question art should be addressing, then that feeling itself is another measure of the shift that has occurred between the original project and its representation here—because those kids took their hilarity, and their destruction of the baseball and its contents, *very* seriously. Just watch them. This, then, is another reminder of the importance of temporality, the play of time, to the four projects assembled for "Interactivist." Whatever the specific time signature and phase-shift of the videos in this screening, each sustains a relationship with an event (the original project) that puts its fate, and its form, in the hands of a public that is always to be determined, even as it gets determined through the video responses, paint pellets, and free beer that contingently determine it.

At this point in a certain kind of art historical conversation, references to the Situationists and to Fluxus Happenings tend to rush in. Let them. But what's changed in the present historical context are the forms that mediation takes and the intensity of those mediations. Mediation and re-mediation are persistently thematized in "Interactivist.": Specifically: the mediation of war and news about war (Bilal), the mediation of stranger intimacy (Febbraro), the mediation of innovation, cultural transmission and intellectual property (Superflex), the mediation of public space and waste (Temporary Services). And these changes—to the mediation of publics, intimacy and politics—necessarily shift the formal tactics, and impact, of work that takes mediation as its medium and its object of critique.

One such change is that affect, public feeling, is appealed to explicitly as a medium of official, state politics. In the U.S., for instance, likeability is now as popular a criterion for presidents as statesmanship, gravitas, or grandiose rhetoric. The problem is not the emergence of affect into political consciousness, but the ways that particular feelings get moralized—vilified or lauded or otherwise normalized—and the ways that this, in turn, can disguise racist, classist and sexist politics. What do we give up in order to have a likeable president? Why has the free software movement been so easy to tag with the epithet of being "optimistic," "idealistic," or "hippy"? Why is optimistic an epithet? Lauren Berlant explains how in the context of late 90s feminism and progressive politics, "You are so 68" could become an accusation, one that worked by fusing a political

position to a vilified set of affects, a set of affects no longer seen to be credibly or effectively critical (e.g. hope, optimism).³ In this context, the wide variation in the affective landscapes of the four projects assembled here is useful for the way it disassociates political positions and tactics from the affects to which they are conventionally linked. Superflex does this dissociative work by re-mediating the original project "Free Beer" through accusations—perhaps sincere, perhaps tactical—that visitors to the original installation who took bottles of beer were stealing, ransacking and looting. This is charged language that, at the very least, introduces a distinction between economic freedom (free beer) and political freedom (free speech). Juxtapositions between projects within the screening do a similar kind of work, cross-wiring affects. Febbraro's simple (copyable), exuberant dance routine, set to a bouncy Beck track, runs interference on Bilal's traumatic encounter with anonymous assailants. The reverse relation between Bilal and Febbraro is also true, because the same network that makes it possible to record and disseminate your own dance video also makes it possible for you to shoot an Iraqi, anonymously, from the comfort of your home or office.

These juxtapositions underscore the fact that it has become far too easy to think that projects in a show about interaction proffer a sociality that is non-confrontational, reparative, naïve, even apolitical.⁴ True, concepts like *public*, *community*, *belonging*, *participation*, and *interaction* have, each in their own way, become sloganized, often affirmatively attached to projects labeled "relational" or

³ {{210 Berlant, Lauren 1994;}}

⁴ {{302 Bishop, Claire 2004;}}

“dialogic.”⁵ True, too, that this leeches these terms of their distinction and their usefulness. But why limit our critical resources to only those projects which conform to particular forms of seriousness (e.g. the model of avant-garde self-reflexivity⁶ or modernist negativity⁷)? And what keeps us from noticing how challenging, antagonistic, critical, and self-reflexive it can be to manifest any sort of hope or optimism in the face of contemporary politics? Imagining new worlds is always a risky business. The activist group Feel Tank invented a slogan: “Depressed? It might be political.”⁸ Another might read: “Happy? It might be political.” The projects represented in “Interactivist” aren’t happy or depressed, they simply don’t believe that our feeling for the present should be dictated by our ability to plan its movement into the future.

INTERACTIVIST
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⁵ “Relational” is Bourriaud’s term: {{243 Bourriaud,Nicolas 2002;}}. “Dialogic” is Grant Kester’s term: {{246 Kester,Grant H. 2004;}}

⁶ See for example: {{91 Krauss, Rosalind 1999;}}

⁷ See, for example: {{392 Adorno,Theodor W. 1997;}}

⁸ <http://www.feeltankchicago.net/>