

scan not quite big enough



Activists and artists Doug Ashford and Wendy Ewald and curator Nina Felshin joined Patricia C. Phillips for a conversation about collaboration in summer 2005 at Cooper Union in New York. The discussion was conceived as a chapter of a forthcoming book on artists and social collaboration edited by Tom Finkelpearl, Director of the Queens Museum of Art. Finkelpearl's book focuses not on collaboration among professional artists but on collaborative projects that include artists and sanitation workers, teachers, children, and other groups. These collaborations often cross boundaries of age, class, race, or ethnicity. While many artists have worked collaboratively on particular projects or at different times in their practices, the focus of this conversation is social collaboration that is unambiguously central to the work.

Patricia Phillips: Wendy, you have a significant history of collaboration. Looking back, when did artists begin to work this way? What were the significant influences that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s that catalyzed collaborative theory and practices?

Wendy Ewald: I know that Doug and Nina are more urban-based, and I have worked largely in rural settings. So my experiences may lead to different observations. While in college I had a summer job doing collaborative artwork and photography with kids on Native American reservations in Laborador and New Brunswick. At the time, I didn't think I would continue to do this, but I soon realized the imagery produced was different from anything else I had encountered. These Native American kids used the camera in ways that enabled me to see into their lives. After this experience, I stopped doing my own photography for quite a few years. When I graduated, I went to Kentucky—another rural setting—to work with Appalshop, a multimedia cooperative. A number of years later I moved to New York and discovered that the art world included collaborative practices, but in strikingly different ways.

Phillips: When did you come to New York?

Ewald: I started working in 1969 and came to New York in 1983–84.

Nina Felshin: If we go back to the late 1960s and 1970s, there were collaboratives or, more accurately, artists' organizations that were particularly issue-driven, groups like Art Workers Coalition. In this case, the members were not necessarily producing socially engaged art, but worked together in response to problematic power relations within the art world, on the one hand, and issues that confounded all of us in the world at large, on the other. In the 1980s, this country's role in Central America became a focus of artists' attention, and Artists' Call came into being. Artists have always been a part of the cultural fabric of the United States, but I think it was the civil-rights movement, the antiwar movements, and counterculture of the 1960s that were instrumental in bringing people together and perhaps ultimately working collaboratively.

Doug Ashford: It's difficult to get around the relationship of the historical and the biographical. As an older person now involved in making art different from our subject here today, it is interesting to recall how as a teenager I was inspired

Doug Ashford, Wendy Ewald, Nina Felshin, and
Patricia C. Phillips

A Conversation on Social Collaboration

Wendy Ewald, *Ashley*, 2004, installation
view, Margate, England (artwork © Wendy
Ewald)

by art in general that had the potential to create a shared emancipatory moment. I was ten in 1968 and remember a world falling apart. So we saw the possibility of cultural involvement, not necessarily a political solution, but as an antidote. Cultural work was understood as de facto collaborative. You went to a concert and shared the experience. I understood the sexual revolution as part of a collective and shared experience. Art, similarly, was something that was going to change the world—not necessarily in a direct or instrumental way, but because it had something to do with creating a larger dialogue about the liberation of pleasure. That there was a “we” was part of social practices.

Phillips: And who was the “we?”

Ashford: That’s the difficulty of the biographical and historical. For me, history defines a certain idea of authorship as shared and the cult of biography offers another more destructive one. Recently, at Leon Golub’s funeral, I was asked to recount how Artists’ Call began in New York. I remembered Leon’s loft, Daniel Flores Ascencio asking Group Material to do an exhibition, and then inviting Leon to be in the show . . . the whole story. I remember these personal relationships that are so important to me, but I feel strange relating these to history. I don’t want to get rid of biography completely, but I want also to be able—especially as a teacher because this is my primary practice now—to model an idea of art-making and of beauty in a way that young artists can see is not contingent. I needed Leon and we needed the friendships to start Group Material, or we needed issue-driven politics or the antiwar movement. The question is, what do we need now?

Felshin: Everything happens in a context. While the reasons may differ, most people’s practices do relate to the world. In recent years, the cultural disciplines are not as separate as they once were. There’s a lot of interdisciplinary work that reflects the way culture has evolved in general. In the academic world this has meant looking at things more contextually or within a broader framework. I work at a university, and the studio art department adheres to relatively defined mediums. This is an undergraduate program, and the pedagogical mission is different perhaps from that of more advanced graduate programs, but I guess I would like to see greater fluidity among the artistic disciplines. This goes for all of the arts, not just the visual arts.

Phillips: I expect that the relationship between schools, pedagogy, and collaboration is a subject we will continue to raise throughout our conversation. Often arts pedagogy is business as usual. Doug and Wendy talked about how they became interested in issues of collaboration, how it seemed an inevitable response to personal or political experiences. Nina, as a writer and curator, how did you become interested in collaboration?

Felshin: It was a matter of a number of threads coming together. I’ve been very politically engaged for a long time, although much more directly since 2001. My first job, in 1969, was at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington when Walter Hopps was director. He was very connected to the various local communities and reached out to them long before museum outreach programs were de rigeur, so I had this model that just felt right to me. Then I worked in the Art-in-Architecture

Program of the General Services Administration in Washington, D.C. It was a good experience because, among other things, it helped me to understand exactly what did and did not resonate with my own sensibilities as a curator.

Years later, in 1993, I did the exhibition *Beyond Glory: Re-Presenting Terrorism* at Maryland Institute College of Art Gallery in Baltimore. An interesting critique of the show asked why violence against women was not dealt with. I immediately responded that “the exhibition focused on global issues,” but I should have thought more about this other phenomenon. I decided to write an essay about it for *Violent Persuasions: The Culture and Politics of Terrorism*, the book that documented an exhibition and related symposia. I became interested in the collaborative process as a result of my research for this essay and my conversations with Richard Bolton, Suzanne Lacy, and others. I was asked by the now-defunct Bay Press that if collaborative practices like the kind I wrote about were more widespread in the art world, “why don’t you write a proposal, and we’ll do a book.” The book of essays, *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* connects all my interests—art, activism, our relationships to institutions.¹

Phillips: You can’t isolate the discussion of collaboration from politics or institutional structures, whether universities, museums, or other sites. Nina, you mentioned your work with Walter Hopps. Are there other people who influenced any of you in terms of how you work and your involvement in social collaboration?

Ewald: Lucy Lippard first wrote about my work and helped me realize I was part of something larger.

Ashford: In 1981 at Cooper Union, I was a student of teachers invested in different kinds of political practice, such as Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler. But it also was Lucy Lippard who helped me invest in the idea of shared responsibility as a nineteen-year-old. In the early years of Group Material, the idea of collaborative practice meant investing in the deprofessionalization of the context and each other—people doing things they hadn’t done and rejecting those hierarchies. Lucy helped Group Material by giving representation to different forms of group practices. It was a magical time. . . . I hate and love nostalgia, the way it marks defeatism. Nostalgia brings us back to the biography-history dynamic. It makes our students say, “Oh, it’s one of those things that doesn’t exist anymore.”

Felshin: But it’s up to them to make it exist again. That’s the real problem. There is motivation, a sense that people want this kind of work to continue, but they are scared. In summer 2005, I worked with an Iranian-American artist, Kouross Esmaeli, on a collaborative public project with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. The artist had been in Iraq working on an MTV project, and he took many pictures of Iraqis several months after the Iraq War officially was declared over (in 2003.) He approached me as someone to brainstorm with, and I was excited by the potential of his project to promote dialogue. To have images of Iraqis in Lower Manhattan might make people think, “Well, you know, they had nothing to do with 9/11 or the war.” The project involved enlarging these photographs to life-size and installing them in the city in conjunction with the conference *Art and Recovery* at the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

But the college rejected the project, illogically suggesting that it did not represent the student body. There is fear, of course, but you can seize the potential

1. David J. Brown and Robert Merrill, eds., *Violent Persuasions: The Culture and Politics of Terrorism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1993); Nina Felshin, *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).



[creator's name TKTK], *Democracy Wall*, aka *DA ZI BAOS*, 1982, installation view, Union Square, New York City (artwork © TKTK)

for dialogue around something like this. I spoke with a very progressive minister about having some of these images installed at St. Paul's. And the response was, "Well, it's very sensitive." I found myself saying, "Yes, I know." And then I thought, why am I saying this? Why did I agree that this is sensitive? If I agree, then I'm falling for the racist underpinnings of this situation. It is like saying, "You can't have images of Arabs at Ground Zero. All Arabs are bad. All Arabs are terrorists." How can this be turned into something constructive? How do you turn this into a collaborative dialogue? Institutional self-censorship is rampant at the moment and nips dialogue in the bud.

Ashford: The question is the management of expression and the interiorization of censorship at institutions, schools, and museums. Many have forgotten that at one time in the United States art institutions were more open, the NEA was funding progressive work, people like Jock Reynolds, Cee Brown, and Lucy Lippard had institutional capacity and were invested in our position on culture. Now the very idea of collaboration is coming back. After an eight-year hiatus, I'm sticking my head out of academia into art institutions invested in demystifying the auton-

omy of art into commercialism. Many institutions are looking back. The old fears of dematerializing art practices are coming back to, “Where’s the practice? Who’s the author. What’s his training?” We still hear too much about authorship and pedigree. And even though it is a very interdisciplinary time for many institutions, it’s not about direct politics. In 1983, Raymond Bonner and Susan Meiselas got the art world to acknowledge that El Salvador was fucked up. At the *New York Times*, they made a leap from journalistic practice to changing foreign policy. Professional lives like this that are truly non- or cross-disciplinary rarely exist anymore.

Phillips: Is there fear of collaboration because the outcomes—the consequences—are often unpredictable?

Ewald: In some places it is thriving. I recently worked in England where it seems very important. Look at the artists who have been nominated for the Turner Prize in the past few years. Most of the work was political.

Felshin: For the most part, I don’t believe that artists think they need to be careful, but my own experience is that when I propose a political exhibition at Wesleyan, it is looked at carefully in advance. And sometimes the programs that accompany it are scrutinized and criticized. Universities are being very careful these days. And I think that some of this has to do with corporate influence and funding.

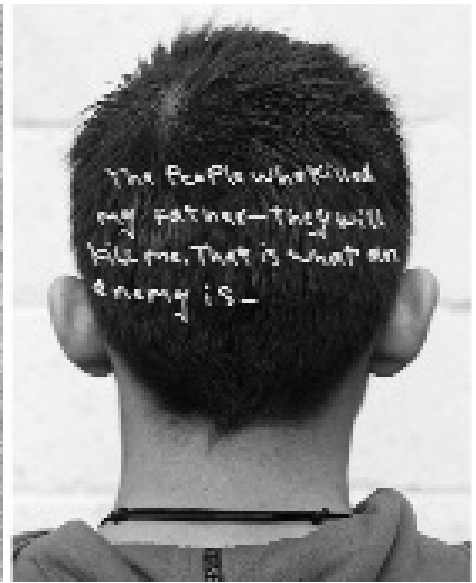
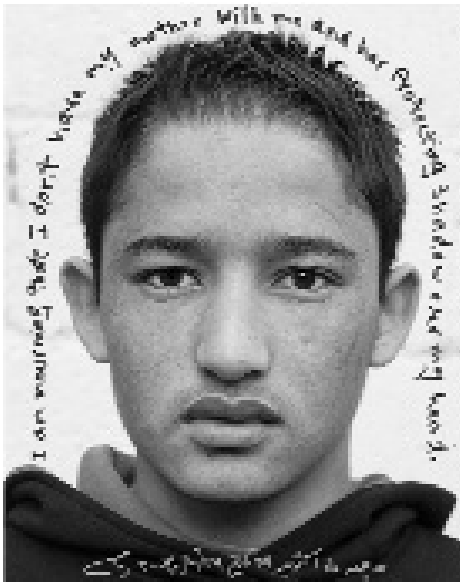
Ewald: People are scared to lose their funders, so self-censorship comes in. Even if they’re working outside of the art practice, most everyone wants to be part of the art world. There’s a flowering of people working with kids in photography, and where are those photographs sold? Sotheby’s.

Felshin: I am not critical of an artist making a livelihood if there is an integrity to the practice, but it’s a shame there are so few other ways to support this kind of work. In the 1990s, institutions, museums, and universities received funding for projects that tended to be more community-based.

Phillips: How does funding—priorities and initiatives—determine practice and criticism?

Felshin: During the late-1980s recessions, it didn’t look good for organizations to buy artwork, so they started funding educational projects, and this was true in the 1990s as well. Funding priorities can drive what happens, what is produced, the programs that are initiated. “If you do this, we’ll pay for it.” And it’s better for their image to fund things that involve the community.

Ashford: This is the dark side of community-based practices—the reorganization of collaborative art practices into a kind of measurable service economy that’s based in social effect and urban development. The idea of community has become instrumentalized. Take the artist, drop him or her into a housing project, take a picture with people of color, get your funding, move on. In my early thinking as an artist, audience participation—the idea that there could be a crossover—was exciting. Group Material would have openings where there was a crossover—like Bronx uptown and downtown—between the cultural communities, political constituencies, and neighborhood groups. This was everywhere, with the crossover of graffiti, punk, and early rap-music cultures. For me, this



Wendy Ewald, Ali Rezaa, 2004 [TKTK: medium/dimensions] (artwork © Wendy Ewald)

was an artistic model. I now worry that those crossovers, those places where audiences feel they are participating are made difficult because of branding and other forms of commercialization. The key part of collaboration is that producers and consumers see themselves differently. You do a show and there are people involved who have made something but don't consider themselves artists. There's a deprofessionalization of who the artist is and who the audience is.

Felshin: And now there's the Web.

Ewald: I received an e-mail from an author in Iran asking to translate one of my books into Persian. There is an active child-centered art forum there, but I didn't know it existed in photography. They saw something on the Web that created a connection and extension of the work.

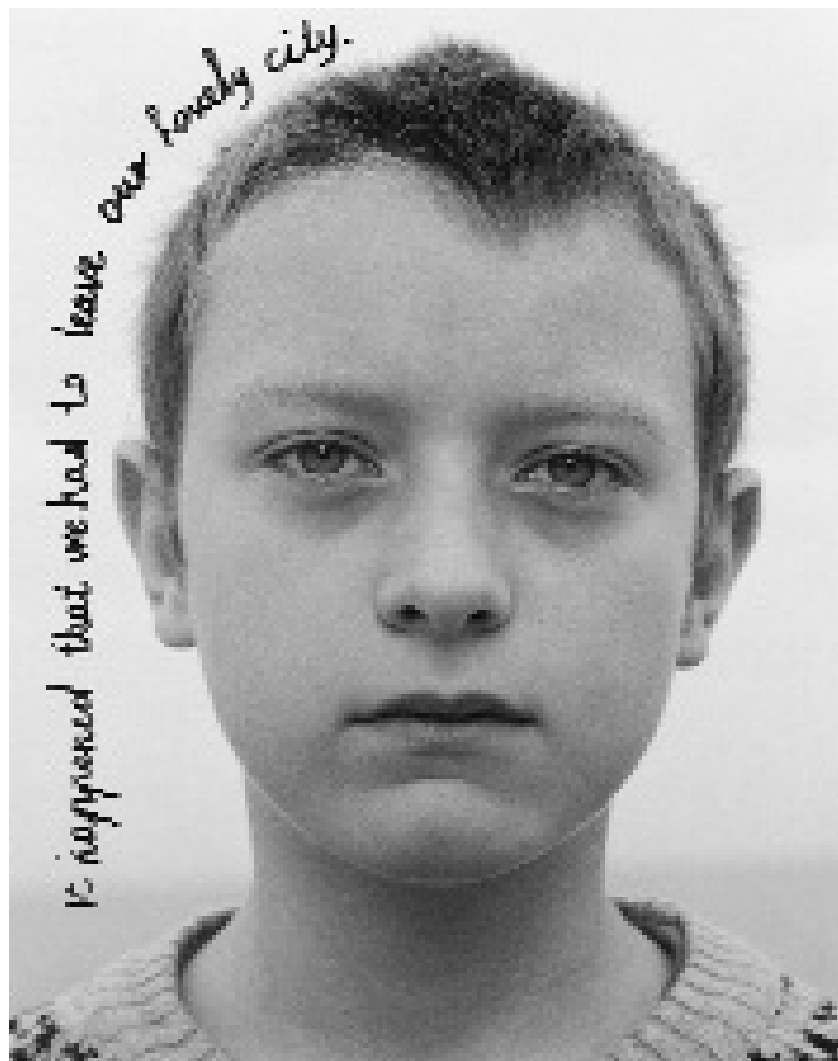
Ashford: My dear friend Steve Kurtz has written about the Web and a growing activist amateurism. The international response to his arrest is an example of its collaborative capacity. His arrest may be a sign of how threatening the idea of artist as a reprofessionalized, activist amateur may be.

Phillips: A fruitful direction for our conversation might be the question of audience and community, the history as well as the theories of contemporary writers such as Miwon Kwon, Grant Kester, and others.² A rhetoric has developed among audiences, collaborators, and the different shareholders in a collaborative process. Wendy, what are your thoughts on the fluidity of roles and responsibilities—the fact that often people work together within a collaborative framework, but with different expectations, objectives, and satisfaction.

Ewald: There are different streams. I come with my agenda, but that often changes depending on the situation or institution. In schools, I'll often collaborate in a classroom with the teacher, but then the students make something that creates a collaboration among all of us. I try to introduce a model, which a teacher can continue to adapt in her own way within the institution. For me, an

2. Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 2004).

Wendy Ewald, *Uryi*, 2004, [TKTK: medium/dimensions] (artwork © Wendy Ewald)



artistic outcome is central, but of equal importance is an educational or community outcome. It is crucial to protect the people in the community. An artist arrives, does provocative work, and then leaves the community to deal with the issues. I recently completed a project in Margate, England, with Artangel, which has pioneered new ways of collaborating with artists and engaging audiences in projects in Britain since the early 1990s. Margate, like nearby Dover, has been a destination for immigrants for years, and asylum-seekers are temporarily housed there. The project I worked on is called *Toward the Promised Land*. It involved twenty-two children who arrived from places affected by war, poverty, or political unrest; others found themselves in Margate simply as a consequence of changes in their domestic circumstances. We talked a lot about their experiences of relocation and the search for a better life. Finally, I installed three-by-four-meter banner-portraits of the children on retaining walls of the chalk cliffs. There's a large National Front presence in that area. National Front graffiti is all over the cliff walls. We had many community meetings to talk about what the outcome of this project might be and how to handle it.

Two days before the launch of the installation, in July 2005, the London transportation system was bombed. The next week, some of the images hanging in Margate were bombed—selectively. There were five installations, one for each child. One of the installations comprised three images made in collaboration with a Muslim girl from South Africa. Two images were burned: an image of her face and one of the back of her head with a scarf around it. We believe that petrol bombs were thrown directly at these particular images. We still don't know who did this. The third image from this installation included a pair of flip-flops and two copies of the book *The Principles of Islam*—things that she had brought from South Africa. This image was left alone.

Ashford: The hair on my neck is sticking up. There is the potential for dialogue—your work creates a possibility of democratic participation. It requires an engaged citizenry. And this might occur even under terrible, terrible circumstances . . .

Ewald: Although it is very important to ensure that the kids are safe. Bringing attention to these issues is problematic, too. It's complicated.

Phillips: What was the nature of collaboration in this project?

Ewald: Creative Partnerships, an educational project of the Arts Council, and Artangel invited me to do a project. The idea of people coming and going is central to the community of Margate. It was a popular resort until inexpensive flights to Spain were introduced: cheap flights, better weather. The result was that elegant hotels in Margate became vacant and could be used as temporary housing. So, asylum-seekers are housed in the grandest hotel where reportedly T. S. Elliot wrote *The Wasteland*. In the Margate schools there is a 50 percent turnover each year. I wanted to explore transience and worked with kids from the schools and a hotel for asylum-seekers. I taught the kids how to make images of their situation; I made portraits of them with things they had brought with them, and interviewed them about their experience. They wrote parts of their stories on the images.

Felshin: The banners are your photographs?

Ewald: Yes. When I make portraits, I ask them where and how they want to be photographed. Their ideas help to shape the work. They also did installations in a gallery in town

Ashford: What is a correct collaborative practice?

Phillips: And what are the possible connections between collaboration, communities, and the unsettled character of democratic projects?

Ashford: In terms of understanding culture's relationship to democracy, I find that many folks have a sense that culture is very separate from democracy. Yet they are surrounded by people who engineer the representation of politics every minute of every day—the Tom DeLays and Fox newscasters. We're living in this society that is determined by political design—from night vision-war scenes, to White House fake meetings, to iPod culture. How do we explain this generational disconnect?

Phillips: The visual dimension of politics is compelling and disturbing. We talked about the opportunities of collaboration within a democratic society, but what are the risks or problems? Doug, you started to talk about problematic models of collaboration that are not about creating and sustaining democracy. While collaboration is often demeaned and dismissed, sometimes there is a valorization of collaboration. How do we critically navigate between these positions? This is connected to the rhetoric about community—whether there is even a possibility of a coherent and cohesive community. If we continue to see the potential in collaboration, how do we encourage and advance this kind of work?

Felshin: Many find the notion of a leader problematic and feel that no one should have greater authority than anyone else in a collaboration. The real challenge is to remodel the notion of a leader. Most forms of democratic practice need leadership to function properly. What do you think, Doug?

Ashford: Ronald Reagan taught us that if it is populist, it isn't necessarily good. We all have experienced nightmares with collaborators. Recently, Miwon Kwon, and earlier, Richard Sennett, found ways to articulate resistance to simplistic definitions of community.³ Kwon's book on site-specificity has helped me invest in a new idea of community and collaboration based in intimacy and to rethink how those communities are fetishized. There is an idea that power in itself is bad. Sennett has argued how authority that is legibly democratic is not bad. The key here is legibility. Grant Kester, from a very different viewpoint, rescues certain ideas to make sure that as we critique activist notions of community and collaboration from the inside, we don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. The dialogue about aesthetics in this work is very valuable right now.

Phillips: There is a history that we cannot let disappear. And I believe Kwon and Kester feel a responsibility to be historians and critics who preserve and yet reexamine this history.

Ashford: Those who have been involved in this kind of practice, either as artists, curators, or educators, feel that we have to reinvent the wheel every few years. Let's have a different idea of collaboration. Let's have some sort of public practice that is accessible to youthful consciousness. Maybe it's nonhistorical, but from the perspective of 1960s babies like myself, contemporary political activism is difficult to understand. Maybe there's an idea of collectivization that's related to the Web that I don't understand. Maybe a flash-mob is interesting.

Felshin: If nothing else, it challenges a definition of community. I admit that I have a problem with the Internet. It is incredibly important in this post-9/11 environment that people constantly distribute information that you can't get from mainstream media, but there are problems. Tony Kushner did a fabulous rant about the Internet and armchair activists. You can't sit at your computer and consider yourself an activist. You need to do something visible. This is where artists come in.

Ashford: I ask my Friendster students, "Where are your real friends?—a question which connects to the theoretical conversation about how technology affects the subject. But there's no there there either. If Friendster actually created a labor union and people decided to work together on consumer justice, I would

3. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Doug Ashford, *Some of the the people who worked together to make Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America, 1983/84; the beauty that was embodied by their work, and a partial archive, 2006*, two details (site TKTK) (photograph by Oto Gillen; artwork © Doug Ashford)

Artists' Call Against US Intervention in Central America was a nationwide mobilization of writers, artists, activists, artists organizations, and solidarity groups that began in New York in 1983. Quickly mobilizing artists and their organizations across the country, Artists' Call collectively produced over 200 exhibitions, concerts and other public events over a period of twelve months. These events increased awareness of our government's involvement in state terrorism across the hemisphere, linked the notion of aesthetic emancipation to revolutionary politics, and provided concrete resources for the cultural workers and public intellectuals in the region and in exile.



change my tune. But for many, if it's not on the Internet, it's not a "real" interaction. So the nature of collaboration, like ideas of location and of physicality, has to change.

Felshin: MoveOn certainly has an incredible structure, but I'm not interested in its optimistic notion that liberal politics and the electoral process are the solution. But it is a master at using the Internet as an organizing tool.

Ashford: Collaborative practices or dialogical practices, as Kester calls them, enable different audiences to do things they see as instrumental. If the electoral result is not really of interest, perhaps building a homeless shelter is. The artist project attempts to create a sense of shared autonomy between groups of people. In a context like today, we really need concrete things. At the same time, I still hope there can be a new countercultural moment. The same gallery system was in place in 1983 when Group Material began. I wonder if the time is right for artists to identify with different kinds of practices again. The value of collaboration is that it is harder psychologically, but it's easier technically. I tell my students that you can't make a scene alone, you have to make it with a group. Find ten people who want to do what you want to do. Make it in a bus, make it in the park, and don't ask permission. The difficulty now is the post-9/11 management of expression dissuades people from doing public, collaborative works. But it doesn't mean it is impossible.

Felshin: What are your thoughts about responsibility—about sending the students out there? That's something I wrestle with.

Ashford: I don't teach collaborative practice, although I did for so long. I don't teach my work. I really try to avoid it completely because of the problematic master-and-apprentice dynamic. It sounds like false modesty, but it is hard to get students to look into something else. How do you help students value their own experiences? I give assignments where I ask students to work together, but it is tricky because the foundation for collaboration is often irrational—hard to



assign. I know they do collaborative work and try to celebrate it when I see it. For me, a far greater function is to encourage democratic practice in general.

Ewald: I give workshops in the summer because people kept asking for this. I started doing it with a few people and now I do three each year. The workshops deal with photography and collaboration. I do two with the Center for Documentary Studies in Durham, North Carolina, and one with an institution in Oaxaca in Mexico. I feel a certain responsibility that people who have seen the work want to work this way. I often cringe at the lack of sophistication and misunderstandings of issues and dynamics in collaboration.

Ashford: Of course, teaching painting can get reductive too. I have an aversion to a reductive or centralist relationship to more recent practices. I don't want to have a class called "Conceptual Art." I want students to move to it, rather than advise them how to do it. The inculcation into social aesthetics is bothersome to me: perhaps I should engage the subject. But I am concerned about it becoming reductive. I'm worried about PhD art as much as boutique culture.

Phillips: I understand your skepticism. I have doubts about the university public-art programs, issues of institutionalization, and the hardening of ideas in this area.

Felshin: It should be a more organic process. Collaboration is creative, and it doesn't work the same way in different situations. For example, does an artist arrive and determine the role of other people in a hierarchical relationship? Or does an artist seek the ideas of other people that are reflected in the process and—if there is one—product?

Phillips: And if these different models or scenarios that you describe are thoughtfully developed and deployed, are they equally viable? We talked earlier about authority and leadership. If an artist openly acknowledges that she or he is the intellectual engine that drives a collaborative project, is this acceptable?

Felshin: Yes, if the artist is clear and direct. But it doesn't mean that I appreciate every model equally. There are situations where the collaboration is not substantive or central to the concept.

Phillips: It is incidental. I think we have been trying to focus on forms and issues of collaboration that are intrinsically part of the process and outcome.

Felshin: I find, not so much as a curator but as a political, socially engaged person, that the most exciting collaborations are those that involve different people with different expertise. There may be actors, spoken-word people, artists, writers, and theorists who help to shape something. It's not a question of hierarchy, because everyone accepts that they are skilled at something and others bring something else to the collaboration. There's no struggle to take over.

Ashford: I second that. My interest in art has always been related to education and learning. To find correspondences between people who have different experiences and histories is amazing. Trying to design power-free areas and conversations that can move groups from history to a future . . . this is the idea of education. There's also what you do, what you bring to the process. People don't collaborate because it's easier, but because there are opportunities to learn. The idea of losing oneself in other people, whether in a museum or classroom, is the beauty of the work.

Phillips: And ideally this kind of freshness and vigor can occur even working with the same people over a long period of time.

Felshin: How do you sustain those relationships, and how do you bring new people into it? How can it have more of an impact on the audience? In many cases people in a group are sensitized, so how do you bring that model to other people?

Ashford: For *Democracy at DIA*, Group Material brought in other people to see if different kinds of expertise could inform a particular exhibition.⁴ We did town meetings as well, but they were criticized as an easily faked form of participatory democracy. People are here, but are they really involved? Who's in it and who's out? Who is getting to have those deep experiences of learning from other people? For me it is situational. Sometimes everyone gets involved. I saw ACT UP and Gran Fury emerge from this experimental history of 1980s cultural activism. They helped me fully understand what creates genuine participation.

Ewald: When I go somewhere to work, I often leave the equipment that I brought. I work with people in the community so that they can see what I do, and they can choose to continue the work. And it may be completely different. In India, I worked with a union of home-based workers. Their concern, which was very different from mine, was to use photography as an organizing tool. After I left, the women whom I worked with transformed it. This is fine. I don't know if it matters if it has the same artistic integrity. To me, the value is starting something.

4. Brian Wallis, ed., *Democracy: A Project by Group Material* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

Group Material, *AIDS & Democracy, A Case Study*, installation view, Dia Art Foundation, New York City, 1988 (photograph by Ken Schles; artwork © TKTK)



Felshin: I know people who belittle the notion of individual personalities, but I think it's important. There are people who are not able to work with others comfortably, even though they put themselves in situations that require it. It can be destructive. I love meeting people, working in different situations, and I'm committed to a different kind of world. Raising people's consciousness through conversation is really critical to me. I recently was involved in the project *Unconventional Heroes*, a performance to honor courageous resisters. It was not something that I normally do as a curator, but it was exciting to work with people with common goals and to see things come together.

Phillips: It requires clarity about issues and ideas and a tactical choice, whether it is more effective to pursue these independently or collaboratively. There are artists who work only collaboratively, but there are artists who, depending on the circumstances or situation, determine whether to work individually or cooperatively.

Felshin: If artists are involved, it will be creative, though not necessarily in the same way all the time. As a curator, I'd like to think that organizing a group exhibition about a particular subject is a creative act.

Phillips: Doug raised the question of deprofessionalization earlier. Does this open possibilities or possibly diminish the impact of collaboration? Some artists lament the deprofessionalization of the artist in collaborative situations. On the other hand, it seems to enable certain potentialities to flourish.

Ashford: You want to be open to a whole set of experiences, but you also you want to be an enlightened amateur. It is difficult to give up a professional sense of place at any given time, but we have to if we want to change our practices. Democracy has forms we might not even begin to imagine yet.

Ewald: Other than the involvement of more people, how does collaboration change the outcome?

Ashford: Things don't look the same. A collaborative project is never formally one-dimensional. With Group Material, projects were always multiform. Aesthetics were reflective of an idea of inclusive politics. There were traditionally modernist ideas that are really beautiful: ideas of juxtaposition and montage. Creating a third meaning is not, as the heroic defenders of artistic autonomy tell us, something that waters down aesthetic forms. We need historical, institutional, and educational contexts to remind people these collaborative projects are beautiful, not in spite of comparative forms and multiple methodologies, but because of them.

Felshin: And these people were not representing themselves solely as artists.

Ashford: That's the whole idea of collaboration. We can see people discover a creative context in daily life—that there is a potential in the everyday.

Felshin: And in everyone.

Ashford: I was dragged to museums as a child and saw in art and visual culture the idea of taking on a different identity, of changing subjectivity for pleasure and a different world. The idea that art could do that is a model for all kinds of practices—the idea that we want audiences, other kinds of practitioners, other workers to experience that on a daily level.

Felshin: It is a question of imagination—to be able to have the time and privilege to imagine and to bring this experience to others.

Ashford: We live in a culture now where daily moments and small actions, individual and collective, aren't described. I want artists and institutions to start to redescribe these things, because I remember that those things were always described to me. There was a viewpoint about a counterculture, where activities that didn't fit were discussed and described.

Felshin: Think of Greenpeace. They didn't consider themselves artists, but their capacity to visualize issues was so creative. It had a huge impact. Why shouldn't more people be encouraged to develop this capacity?

Ashford: My question to institutions is, why isn't this represented? It's not that collaboration doesn't happen. The real crisis is that it's not represented.

Phillips: If this work is not theorized, written, or talked about, it is as if it never happened. There is never enough discussion about aesthetics in relationship to collaborative work. Doug, the ideas you discussed about Group Material's projects—juxtaposition, montage, and comparative modalities—engage aesthetic strategies. Wendy, when you work with young people, they actually influence and shape the work. This is so frequently overlooked. The aesthetics in collaborative work is seen as inferior, undeveloped, or dismissed as well-intentioned social work. Where's the dialogue on aesthetic content?

Felshin: When content became more important in conversations about art, I paradoxically found myself writing about work in terms of form. Without form,

the content cannot communicate effectively. I started to take for granted the fusion of content and form. But then I realized you have to talk about it, because that's what makes work accessible to people—when the form actually promotes content. This creates dialogue.

Phillips: It is often perceived as a default situation—that there is a diminishment of choices that an artist might exercise within a collaborative circumstance.

Ewald: Or that you make no choice as artists and collaborators.

Phillips: Rather, there's a multitude of aesthetic choices, and they're often different and distinctive.

Ashford: As artists we can take responsibility for some of those problems. We positioned the idea of non- or antimaterial practices as anti-aesthetic in the early 1980s. It was a beautiful idea about reinvigorating the public sphere through the ways nonmaterial practices could engage audiences differently. I think this occurred to certain extent. Unfortunately, for many others, aesthetics were reduced to an idea of seduction or glamour. How this got sidetracked is one of those strange stories about modernity that we could discuss for hours. Political artists are anti-aesthetic, right? Politics do not allow people to identify with beauty. People invested in beauty have no sense of social concern. Do you find that when you talk about community-based practices, people think you don't want to talk about form? We, with our institutions, made ghettos for ourselves.

Ewald: Part of the problem is that when you acknowledge your collaborators, you run into trouble. When they're nameless, it's easier.

Phillips: Then you run into another kind of trouble!

Ewald: I remember an exhibition, and the designer didn't want to include the kids' names with the images. He proposed posting a list somewhere in the museum. I insisted that the name adds meaning. A kid's name with an image makes viewers read it in a different way. This is a problem for some people. It's when they ask, "where's your work?"

Phillips: But I do think that this really does connect to the aesthetic question—the connection of aesthetics and individual authorship. I don't think we've done enough work to critically engage this work.

Ewald: Photography complicates this, as well. There is an ease with which people can learn how to actually do it.

Ashford: We all indeed are photographers.

Ewald: It is aesthetically interesting to see an image made by someone who lives in a certain situation, because the choice of composition, where she stands adds, another layer of meaning to the image.

Ashford: An aspect of an aesthetic conversation about collaboration that I find difficult is that it feeds into the commodification of art. Since the 1970s, we live in a social economy in which it is difficult to see aesthetic value, because things are automatically turned into money or thrown away. The leveling effect of commodification means that it is difficult to make creative work into something that

can have a real effect. They will let you sell your labor. They will let you decorate. They'll let you polish vases in the burning house and even write critically about the ashes, but don't insist that the vase is a model of revolt. The direct relationship between aesthetics and politics has to be highlighted. I know this sounds crazy, but this is what Clement Greenberg wanted. His work tried to create a beautiful, special place for aesthetic experience, independent of commodification. In a sense, collaborative practices raise these questions. It's not that aesthetics aren't there, but our representations of them as part of new forms of resistance are lacking. We're at that moment. I'm really optimistic. I don't know why.

Ewald: Many people in photography are working this way.

Felshin: A question we could revisit is the institutionalization of this kind of work. I wonder whether the content, the tough aspect of the work, gets co-opted or, in effect, eviscerated by the institutional context. I don't think it should or has to, but I wonder if it has the same impact.

Ashford: I had a good fight with Jon Hendricks about this. He came into my class and said to the students, "You know that Rodchenko white-on-white painting at MoMA? Well, it's meaningless now." And I said, "No it's not. No it's not." Here's a foundational moment of someone making a something of nothing on nothing. Maybe this is my own optimism, but I think that art is able to do certain things regardless of the institution. Institutions come and go, but ideas and scholarship have a value that is more enduring. I think about Martha Rosler. I don't think the work sells, but it is out there. Seeing the collage *Good Housekeeping* (1965) with somebody dragging another man behind a tank. . . . it's so remarkable to me that it's there. I always hope there will be new communities of interpretation that will be able to make the insurgency a resurgence.

Phillips: Would it be fruitful to talk briefly about long-term and short-term collaborations? How does temporality affect the possibilities or consequences of these different collaborative models?

Ashford: I have an anecdote that has to do with Jon Hendricks, as well. He was instrumental in Guerilla Art Action Group and Artists' Call. After we had raised enough money to begin a more permanent institution, Jon said, "No. This is temporary; it's over. I was here in the beginning, but I'm arguing now that this is the end. Take the money, give it away, and go home. Let someone else start something." It was an amazing idea to me, that collaboration might be best if it is always temporal and never long-lasting. Group Material lasted for fifteen years, but maybe it went on too long. Those last five years were so hard.

Ewald: There are different models. Going in, starting something, and leaving is one. In many of the situations I've worked, this the best model, because if you stay you may too strongly influence what happens within a community.

Felshin: I don't think that an artist or group needs to stay in a community, but if it's a hit-and-run thing then it's . . .

Ashford: Another disaster.

Felshin: Yes. the process is really critical. Otherwise, like any reform within a

Wendy Ewald, *Patrick Riche, Canada 1971, 1971*, [TKTK: medium/dimensions] (artwork © Wendy Ewald)



Wendy Ewald, *Reaching for the Red Star Sky, Denise Dixon, 1980* [TKTK: medium/dimensions] (artwork © Wendy Ewald)



bad system, it doesn't mean much, if it doesn't change things. Ongoing collaborations might work for a while, but the energy of new blood or different people is significant.

Phillips: Wendy, will you generally say forthrightly to a community, "I'm here for a certain period of time, this is what I hope to do, and then I will leave."

Ewald: Yes, and "Here are the tools. Do you want to continue? How is this going to affect the people?"

Phillips: They can decide to do nothing after you leave, continue, or change the project. They could do something that hasn't been considered. It is a frank conversation that must be pursued in order to work this way.

Ewald: Definitely. On the other hand, I also have a project with the public-school system in Durham that has been going on since 1989. It has changed over the time: teachers work on it, new teachers come in and take it over, and different artists participate. It has been a challenge to understand how to let that happen—to find its internal logic. Brett Cook-Dizney and Alfredo Jaar have participated. I'm at the point where I'm ready to withdraw somewhat. It will keep going without my day-to-day involvement.

Phillips: I want to talk about success and failure and tie this together with open and closed practices. There are collaborations that work within a closed system where there are few variables or unknowns that can be easily negotiated. And there are collaborations that are more open: the outcome and results are less predictable, often very interesting, but possibly catastrophic because of that openness. How do we connect this to success and failure? Do you think about what this means in terms of your practices? Of course, you don't want to over-determine the work. On the other hand, I imagine there is analysis or assessment at the end of any process.

Ewald: I wrestle with this all the time. Perhaps I am a pessimist, but with each new situation I worry that I'm not asking the right questions and not clearly seeing from an inside perspective, which, for me, is essential to the success of a project. There's genuine anguish that this process is not working, even as I'm collaborating and listening in ways that I think make sense.

Phillips: You are humbled by all that you feel you don't know or cannot control.

Felshin: Of course, success or failure is not just about you, Wendy. There are many other factors.

Ewald: I can look at what occurred afterwards, the experience we had together or the work produced. For instance, it was very difficult to work in Morocco. I thought I was doing the right thing. I was consulting with the young Moroccan artists who were working with me all the way through the project. We asked the kids to go out and photograph the community. I kept asking the artists, "Are you sure this is OK? Does this really make sense to ask the kids to take cameras into the street?" The kids came back with lots of fuzzy pictures. I said, "What's happened here?" I knew they knew how to make sharp pictures. "We need to have a real conversation about this." The only way to have a conversation was to turn on

a tape recorder and later have someone translate the recording. I discovered that when the kids tried taking pictures, people yelled and threw stones at them. But the kids were so into it; they tried to subvert the situation and make the images. Still, I was appalled.

Phillips: Because you felt you had put them in harm's way?

Ewald: Yes. Culturally, this was not the right thing to ask them to do. This kind of thing is part of the aesthetics of collaboration. But the situation produced a fascinating conversation.

Phillips: Perhaps the lesson is that all projects fail and succeed in some way.

Felshin: The challenge of collaboration is that success is dependent on not just a final product, but other factors, as well.

Ewald: Which is why people want and need to write about this kind of work carefully, in a way that's different from conventional art criticism.

Ashford: The *AIDS Timeline* that Group Material did at the Whitney in 1991 was considered, both in terms of activism and art practice, a tremendous success. But for us, the project and gravity of the situation of governmental and cultural indifference required the entire museum. It should have been everywhere. It was, in a sense, not so much a failure as a compromise.

Ewald: Well, it's kind of a marginalization.

Ashford: This is why the institutionalization of collaborative practices is so interesting. Really, what is success? Is success just a different kind of marginalization? We have to keep that in mind. Wendy, although your experience in Morocco appears to be marginal, it was a better kind of success. These things are so turned around.

Felshin: Success seems so subjective. The piece at the Whitney was acknowledged broadly to be a huge success, but there's no way, just by looking at something, that we can know about all this other stuff. In collaboration we really have to reevaluate the terms.

Ashford: It gets back to the aesthetics of collaboration and the nature of work that actually produces new social practices. Success is often beauty. There it is. It worked to bring all kinds of concerns and folks into one room. We all have had that experience of the beauty of a room of people ready to work for each other. Nina, I know you have experienced this organizing shows. Maybe the exhibition was not great, but possibly the artist did something she or he never did before. Perhaps institutions were changed and people thought differently.

Phillips: And there's the success of exposure. Perhaps people had never seen this kind of work before. It's complex.

Felshin: I like that the idea that a project was a success because of the way people worked together seems very contrary to the market concept.

Ashford: It is modeling those forms of engagement that *are* the artwork. On a pedagogical level, how we are modeling that? What is happening? Who is speak-



Group Material, *AIDS Timeline* (New York, 1991), 1991, installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art (photograph by Ken Schles; artwork © TKTK)

Group Material, *AIDS Timeline*, [title and year TKTK], detail [info on site TKTK] [photo credit and copyright info TKTK]

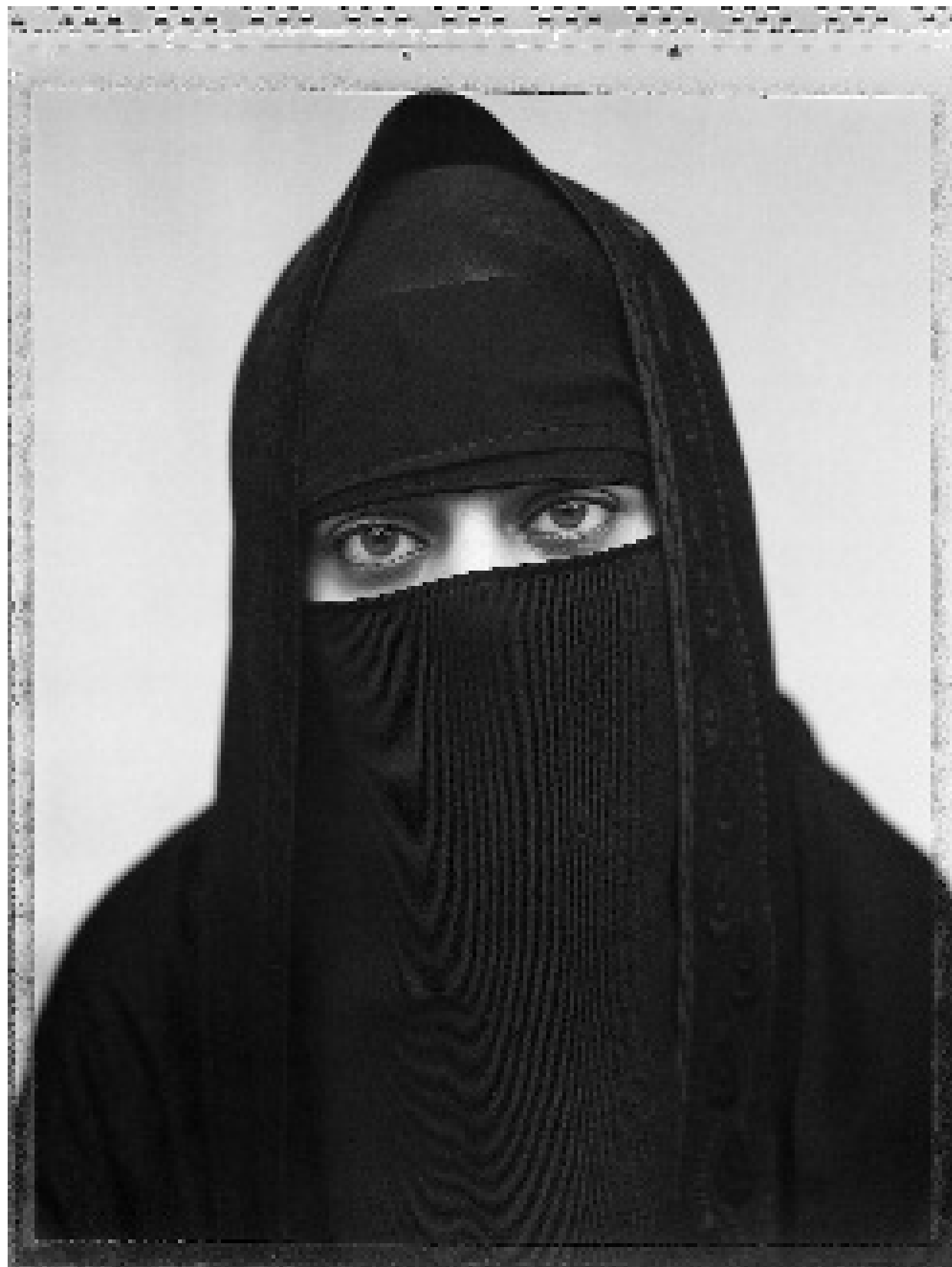
ing? Who's saying that this has value, and what kind of relationship was it to experience? This is where artists' ideas of success and failure might be different from the marketplace's, or collaborators' ideas about success and value differ from social work. Great project, but did it sell or did it get anyone off welfare? The instrumentalization of the market and social work are quite similar.

Phillips: We began this conversation by looking back at how these practices emerged and what some of the historical conditions and circumstances were. The question perhaps is too broad and generic, so let's talk more specifically and concisely about the historical conditions since 9/11 and what has changed, how collaboration now is practiced or perceived, and how you think about your own work.

Ewald: The way people can interpret my work is very different from the way it was before September 11, 2001. And it can be interpreted in a very dangerous way.

Felshin: Give me an example.

Ewald: Right after 9/11, I had a show at the Addison Gallery. The image used on the flyer was a veiled face of a Saudi woman. The women in Saudi Arabia who





Wendy Ewald, *Anonymous*, 1997 [TKTK: medium/dimensions] (artwork © Wendy Ewald)

Wendy Ewald, *Q*, from *A White Girl's Alphabet*, 2002, created with students from Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts [TKTK: medium/dimensions] (artwork © Wendy Ewald)

worked on this project had decided how they wanted to be photographed in order to open up ideas about representation. Now the images we made mean something very different. People are less willing to engage in multiple readings.

Ashford: Collaboration, by definition, is an aesthetic of multiple readings. And that idea of multiple readings is threatened. People want the security and consistency of a single idea.

Ewald: And to be in control of representation, so that other people or images are not powerful.

Ashford: It's one of the reasons the whole subjective moment of artistic production is threatened—the idea of being different, of being queered in culture. The definition of queering is a threat, directly in terms of institutionalized homophobia, but also indirectly as intellectuals and artists are warned through Patriot Acts and Kurtz cases to be careful about what we're doing. And we thought that culture didn't matter! Collaboration, like democracy, requires getting out of your mind and getting into another. Asking someone to get out of her or his mind

today is not safe. How can we model the idea of a public sphere in which people feel they can experiment? Speaking as a teacher, I also feel that students shouldn't have to automatically confront fear with everything they do. My students are either saying, "I don't want to do anything public at all, it's too scary" or "Fuck those bastards, we're really going scare them!" It's an either/or and extreme situation that discourages or diminishes a dialogue of subtlety.

Felshin: For a number of projects I've initiated at Wesleyan, I have been asked to make sure the related programming is balanced. My feeling is that attempts to promote balance often end up silencing progressive points of view. I also feel it a university's responsibility to provide balance that is not available from mainstream media and many other institutions.

Ashford: We are the balance.

Felshin: I have been forced to cancel two symposia because I couldn't ensure the kind of balance that was required by university administration. Does a leading liberal university really need to hear the Bush administration's views about the Iraq War? This becomes a form of institutional self-censorship. The AAUP [American Association of University Professors] courageously defends academic freedom and criticizes false notions of balance.

Phillips: Does this put collaborative practices at risk because of the multiple readings, the fact that they don't have an essentialist narrative?

Felshin: Collaborative practices, at least in the art world, tend to be more socially and politically progressive. I am a member of Artists against the War, an organization that works collaboratively and arrives at decisions through consensus. Despite the fact that the group has done some terrific projects, I personally find this way of working problematic because it can lead to watering down convictions. I think we must be cautious about working collaboratively, particularly in the current environment of self-censorship.

Doug Ashford bio TKTK (50-60 words, please)

Wendy Ewald is a conceptual artist who has collaborated with communities in the United States and throughout the world for more than thirty years. Ewald's approach to photography probes questions of identity and cultural differences. She has received many honors, including a MacArthur Fellowship in 1992. She has had solo exhibitions at major museums and was included in the 1997 Whitney Biennial. She is currently a visiting artist at Amherst College, a senior research associate at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and an artist-in-residence at the John Hope Franklin Center, also at Duke University.

Nina Felshin bio TKTK (50-60 words, please)

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