



## Autonomy, Participation, And

*Claire Pentecost  
2006  
for my students*

We can do our work wherever we want or wherever we can afford to do it. In the end though, what we do must be condensed into forms that fit nicely into clean white rooms. Under certain conditions it is possible to include living organisms, edible and potable things to share, still-growing and still-dying things in addition to the resolutely inert. But these will be subject to intense oversight and containment, especially if other precious things are kept on the premises. The more prestigious and well funded the rooms, the more rules there will be. At the consummate level, only electronic or mechanical animation is allowed. Many of us have toiled to create the option to be there with the work, if we choose. Or to appoint other people to be there performing and/or speaking with it, as long as behavior complies with well understood disciplinary agreements.

We will not have ultimate control over who is allowed to come visit our materialized language, or when they visit. Visitors of course must conform to proper behavior.

Our work will be called autonomous. The autonomy in question refers to the perceived freedom of the forms we have used, and the alleged freedom of the motive ideas justifying those forms. It is their special privilege to be free from the demands of utility or any substantive connection to social, political, or economic reality, which are deemed dreary by comparison. Conditions notwithstanding, it is part of our job to express or perform freedom as it is tacitly defined and valorized by our culture. More often than not, this expression will include gestures directed at the conditions stated above, eloquent gestures

that make interesting marks on the surfaces of these containment sites, obscuring their function again.

We will accept the rules because we will have worked so hard to get there, and because in every way we are starved for validation. We have lived a long time with the image of that validation; we know what it looks like, have entrained our ambitions there and will not be thrown off course by lesser objectives.

Since the performance of freedom is part of our inheritance, a right and a privilege, we are not likely to abuse it. Done properly, it offers many rewards, a sense of autonomy first among them. Done well, it also offers the prestige and material rewards that signal autonomy, and the opportunity to command resources in the realization of increasingly ambitious future projects. It will be generally understood that we express freedom for everyone; thus, only the bitter, the reactionary, the puritanical, or the thick-headed would begrudge us the autonomy we have earned through our talent and effort.

Illustration:

Once at a party in New York I asked a very successful painter what his day was like. He flashed a big smile, "I get up in the morning and I do exactly what I want." It's understood that painting is exactly what he wants to do and he paints exactly how and what he wants to paint. He has a loft in the city and a house in the country near where his friends, other successful artists, have houses in the country. Autonomy achieved.

And what if this understanding of autonomy is deeply unsatisfying to us? What if we are not interested in the typically individual location of freedom and material well-being, but would rather forge and foster a shared autonomy?

We might devise projects that solicit participation from other people. We find that we can get a lot of support for this. After all, sociologists, politicians, academics, religious figures, and many other professionals with voices have been articulating the loss of community for some time. In various ways enough members of an affluent liberal democracy understand that material prosperity alone, unevenly distributed as it is, will not make up for the disruptions and dislocations of competitive consumer capitalism. In the protean enzyme of popular culture, the more constitutionally elite art institutions can't survive without a more permeable, relaxed interface. The institutions of culture and many of its practitioners evolve myriad participatory opportunities. In the rooms, artists cook food for visitors, provide writing or drawing materials, set up recording studios, issue a casting call, release pheromones, ask questions, create choices for visitors. A freelance curator writes a book naming the phenomena and is appointed to direct a major cultural institution in Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century.

Underlying the recurrent reinvention of the aesthetic encounter, the idea persists that an aesthetic encounter can change consciousness. What may or may not be up for reinvention in the process are the terms of the encounter and the constitutive definition of aesthetic: where is aesthetic experience situated and where then is the encounter, who is entitled to

initiate or enter the process and at what point of its creation or presentation, how determined are the outcomes of the encounter. . . .

For most people who become artists the encounters that decided their fate were with the process itself. Spectatorship may cultivate an infinite spectrum of desires, but under any regime offers only limited forms of participation.

We notice that the “auto” in autonomy starts to resonate with the auto, that all too precise symbol of individual freedom that appears indispensable to a life of agency in America. The auto that creates tedious traffic jams, respiratory diseases, wars, and deformed environments and, as long as we have one, saves us the inconvenience of coordinating our needs and desires with a larger populace. The lubricant of individual freedom so complicit in the erosion of community and social encounter that symbolic micro-gestures of participation are meant to salve.

We, for one, are too busy to figure out how to live without it, we’re busy trying to get our work into the rooms. Still we are troubled. We can’t help noticing the paucity of the rooms to which so many resources are devoted. As attached as we are to all the things that have gone on in those rooms, the things and rituals preserved there for our contemplation, we aren’t satisfied. We are unsatisfied and at the same time nostalgic. Nostalgia gives us a mixed picture and begs to be investigated. We recall that several generations have attempted to dismount the impoverishing specialization of creativity. We are not the first, in fact many previous models were much more disruptive, wild, willing to sacrifice the usual reward system. So we wonder why what we see in the rooms is so tame and yet construed as innovation even when it replays the innovations that came and went decades ago. We watch the replenishment of a sanitized archive limning a history from divergent counter cultures to formulaic encounter culture and going on as though little has changed.

Where do we look for the accumulated consequences of a century of repositioning, of genuine overhaul to the functional definitions of artist, creativity, audience, culture, autonomy, participation, and power? Outside the rooms, people and groups have been creating and developing forms of cultural production and participation that assume and offer entirely different subject positions, but it is hard to see it, much less value it, if you don’t ask a lot of questions first.

If we haven’t already, it is certainly high time that we ask, “Who is the ‘we’ in this story?” However we define ourselves— as artists, as creative human beings, as people affirming or challenging cultural forms; what do *we* participate in, what terms of participation do we ourselves model? When we make culture, because everyone does, what kind of invitation are we extending to others in our social ecology?

To make spaces inside these questions, the first thing I want to perturb is my relationship to the systematic ignorance about how our world works. The befuddling irony of the information age is the institutionalization of a profound ignorance about everything: how food gets on our table, who is buying all the new condos in the neighborhood and where the money is coming from, why more and more people I know have cancer, who is living in our cities and how they get around, whether hosting the Olympics actually helps most residents

of a city, why education costs more than ever, why there are shelves of lawn pesticides in the home improvement stores, why the Mexican economy is so distressed that thousands risk their lives to come to the U.S., why pledging allegiance to the flag now means pledging allegiance to the approval of torture and trials for certain people without access to the evidence against them.

The stories behind this kind of question are the substance of our culture, and culture is a substantive portion of our selves. Presently, a determining dimension of that culture is ignorance. We are ignorant and it's no accident. Despite the appearance of an overwhelming quantity of information, knowledge is guarded jealously by groups who benefit from pervasive opacity and myopia. We unavoidably participate in these arrangements— in most cases without the benefit of relevant consciousness. Participation itself is a recurrent question: is it worth one's energy to "get involved," should we bother to vote, are the forms of participation currently on offer anything more than pre-scripted diversions. If an artist is attempting to restructure participation so as to devise robust autonomy she has to start living the refusal of ignorance. Of course it's daunting, complex, endless, but it's the foundation of autonomy; that's why redressing it is a way of life. If artists are as ignorant as most people, the structures of participation they offer audiences reproduce existing feelings of paralysis and powerlessness and ultimately contribute to prevailing cynicism about any kind of participation at all.

Illustration:

Natalie Jeremijenko has worked with different groups of students to upgrade and repurpose commercially available robotic pet dogs. Drawing on electronic and engineering basics she works with university design students and untrained teenagers to equip the dogs with all-terrain locomotion, wireless communication systems, and sensors for detecting toxins. The hacked toys are then released as packs of feral robotic dogs in mediagenic events at sites where the public has reason to be concerned about persistent toxic histories. It turns out a disturbing number of new schools and parks are built on toxic waste sites (defunded neoliberal governments can't afford better). A workshop of teens in the Bronx made their own pack and set them loose at the local park to call attention to what a fifty-page report couldn't advertise adequately.

Since then these teens have been invited to every public meeting as consultants on what to do about the park. Their relationship to toys and electronics is changed, offering new exits for passive consumption. Their relations to power and their role in their own environment is reengineered to create expectations of participation and the wedge of autonomy. Visit <http://xdesign.ucsd.edu/feralrobots/> for more information on this project.

Illustration:

Nance Klehm is an artist and grower who publicizes projects under the handle Salvation Jane. Because of the territory encompassed by her knowledge and the target

of its application, I would be tempted to call Klehm a guerilla urban farmer, but I would be mistaken because she does not at all identify as a farmer, choosing instead to emphasize the receptivity of the land and its yield of life in a much less institutionalized or conventionally bounded relationship. She locates unused ground in the city landscape that could be enlisted for cultivating food, then plants seeds appropriate to the land's condition, makes rounds throughout the season to check on the crops and eventually harvests. The harvest becomes part of a network she calls *Orchard*, which is an informal exchange of skills, stories, seeds, food, and labor, but not money. The exchanges that constitute Orchard begin in relationships and expand from there, so that the repurposing of land somehow shared in a lived compass—the edges of a parking lot, dog run, junk storage area, kids' play lot—is deepened with new layers of meaning and connection. In addition to growing, she forages for unused edible goods already existing on public and private lands and shares this experience in foraging forays, imparting a vision of abundance where the untrained eye sees generalized green. Through intervention and point of view, she is making a different landscape of the world we live in now, within the alchemy of relations with real people.

She continually experiments in vernacular technologies that transform cheap available resources into devices and substances that lay the groundwork for autonomous sustenance. She makes solar cookers from all manner of discarded materials, bread ovens from mud and refuse, cargo bikes from broken trash. Keenly interested in fermentation, she makes mead from urban honey; brew from fruits that grow all over the city; breads from wild yeast; and tofu, tempeh, and soymilk from soybeans homegrown in the guerilla growing network. Consistent with the logic of fermentation as biological perpetuation is her central project of a seed archive. She is constantly and rigorously collecting and archiving seeds whose life and meaning is extended through a network of swapping in the U.S. and beyond. This decentralized exchange perpetuates the agricultural biodiversity threatened by commercial regimes of monoculture and also provides structures of autonomous knowledge based on first-hand experience. Provide, provide.

Illustration:

The Yes Men impersonate representatives from multinational corporations and other macrosubjects like the World Trade Organization. They take their act to the venues where our participation is routinely denied, the exclusive meetings of such representatives, and also to the professional media who cooperatively amplify these authorities. The things the Yes Men say through their mimetically procured mouthpiece fall into two general categories: confessions and reversals we have given up hoping for, and flights of rhetoric and innovation that should make plain the sociopathic ruthlessness of these subjects with disproportionate power over our lives.

When the ruse is exposed, as it inevitably is, even if the Yes Men have to expose it in a follow-up press release, the mud kicked up is full of embarrassment, recrimination, disavowal, and protest. Power is forced to speak to truths it systematically avoids, or

to remain conspicuously silent. The rules of engagement, of whose voice matters, of what terms are eligible for negotiation, are called into question. The appearance of credibility briefly achieved by a couple of renegades shakes credible appearance across the boards.

Why don't more people replicate the strategies of the Yes Men to steal moments of participation in the fortress of power? Is it the sheer terror of taking such a risk? Is it the received notion that creative acts become authorial provenance and each would-be producer must come up with something that appears to be novel? Is it the exhaustive research necessary to craft such a performance in another sphere, the success of which is tested by reality?

Illustration:

The open source movement has been meeting the regime of proprietary and protected knowledge with a structure of participation based on entirely different premises. People who contribute to open source projects do so out of interest in their object of study and tinkering. The standards for what they contribute derive from an ethics of transparency and reputation; although the hours of trial and error that go into such collective production may ultimately translate to material gain for many individuals, the immediate motivation is much more complex. The social rewards are on the order of prestige and meaningful work in a self-identified community. Following from open source, which innovates the architecture of systems, are open content projects, or wikis, in which anyone with something to contribute to the contents of a system of knowledge and access to a computer has means to do so. A wiki is an invention with radical potential for participation and transparency in the production and sharing of knowledge.

I myself created a web-based project attempting to intervene in the pernicious secrecy surrounding the production and distribution of our food. For years I had researched the food industry, international trade agreements, grain cartels, biotechnology, and health issues expressed along economic and ethnic divides, but I didn't have a clue about how to make an open-content system. With the help of a programmer, I developed a database called VisibleFood, which can index any commercially available food item with information about the company that makes it, the parent corporation and their other holdings, the ingredients, where they are likely to be sourced, the labor conditions, the health impacts for the laborer as well as the consumer, environmental impact, and implications for various economies via relevant trade agreements. Anyone can contribute, but organizing one's findings for input into the database is cumbersome compared to using new and rapidly evolving open content methods.

I'm now in the process of redesigning this project to be more viable, in a form more similar to the increasingly common wiki. I include this example not only to note wiki potential, but also to demonstrate that these projects take time; failures and reworking are part of the process, but the potential is electrifying. It's clear that people want to

know more about their food. Corporations and government have no interest in opening the files, but people have the means to create their own truth-in-labeling act.

Illustration:

In *Timescapes*, Angela Melitopoulos partnered with artists in Ankara, Athens, and Belgrade to create an experimental video documentary project probing the changing infrastructure of southeastern Europe (the B-Zone) as lived experience. Long interested in the contrivances of image technology to provide incidents of memory and understanding for historical phenomena, Melitopoulos created a collaborative production structure that would make visible the unstable relationship of recorded material to point of view. The five participating artists, each moving in different parts of the designated geographic area generated a databank of raw footage. Five comparable nonlinear editing stations were set up with access to the entirety of the pooled footage as well as a website to uplink montage sequences as edit lists. The edits could then be downloaded so that authors could use or otherwise respond to each other's montage decisions as they simultaneously worked in different cities on the same twenty-five hours of material. The result is five distinctly different video works addressing the coping mechanisms of disrupted individuals and populations who are undergoing the capitalist integration of geographies previously disconnected from the anti-Soviet West, neo-colonial economic policies and intergovernmental deals, migration, and war.

In addition to offering an innovative model of participatory autonomy for the artists, the ensemble of works offers a very different kind of engagement for the viewer. We see the structuring of an interpretation of history; not only scenes and sounds, but also edits from one discrete piece haunt one or more of the other video essays and are inflected differently, multiplying meanings. We are engrossed not only by incredible human and geopolitical drama, but by the mechanics and artistry of presenting such dramas.

Illustration:

“...Even though we moved to big cities and found people like us, we still live in a country that fights wars so it can consume more. We are taking the urge to flee and heading for the center. We want to meet people who aren't like us. We want to meet ourselves at age 16. We want to be a living, kicking model of an entirely different world—one that in this case happens to float. . . . We're stopping in towns along the way, hosting musical performances and vaudeville variety-theater in the evenings, along with workshops and skill-shares centered around arts and environmental issues during the day. In our travels we intend to share stories and to solicit dialogue around subversive and constructive ways of living. We are a group of intrepids who believe in a hands-on, live-by-example approach to creating change within our culture.”

—from the website of the Miss Rockaway Armada, 2006, [www.missrockaway.org](http://www.missrockaway.org)

The "we" speaking from these bits of text is a group of artists and performers who hatched a plan in summer 2006 to build concatenated rafts and float down the Mississippi River. The rafts were made of "precycled" scavenged materials, were designed by the participants themselves, and even passed an inspection by the Minnesota Coast Guard. The energy pushing this flotilla was human, biodiesel, solar, and wind. It's a set of experiments in design, engineering, machines, sustenance, culture, experience, and sociality conducted as a large-scale carnivalesque experiment in autonomy. Participative? It wouldn't happen any other way. People are invited to participate at every stage of the process, including multiple nonchronotopic beginnings and divergent nonterminal endpoints.

An exuberant project like this is not for everyone, but it poses a challenge: what comfort and safety am I willing to forego in order to have an experience of autonomy, to rise to the demands of restructuring participation? Am I willing to make mistakes, feel foolish, do something outside the disciplined but safe route of reward? What do I have to offer outside of the closed circuit of specialized gestures and semiotics for which I am trained?

Currently models flourish for tinkering with the remaking of our selves and our world according to different criteria. If we are looking to splice autonomy with participation, we won't find much to work with in the rooms designed to tame our yearnings. When we shake that search off the map and into the many worlds, we might want to cultivate a set of questions, for example:

What is the artist participating in and how?

What is the invitation to others and at what point in the process is it issued?

Has the paradigm of the aesthetic encounter been redefined?

What seems to be the objective of the participation: is it to enhance the prestige of an artist or cultural institution or does it aspire toward a substantive experience for participants in their own lives?

What are the possible outcomes of the participation?

Is it likely to change our relationship to participation itself?

If autonomy is the object, what do you want to do with your autonomy?