

Subject To Capital

Reproduced with permission from the Estate of Allan Sekula, the Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and MACK Books.

Sekula, Allan. "School Is a Factory." *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973 – 1983*. (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 197 – 234.

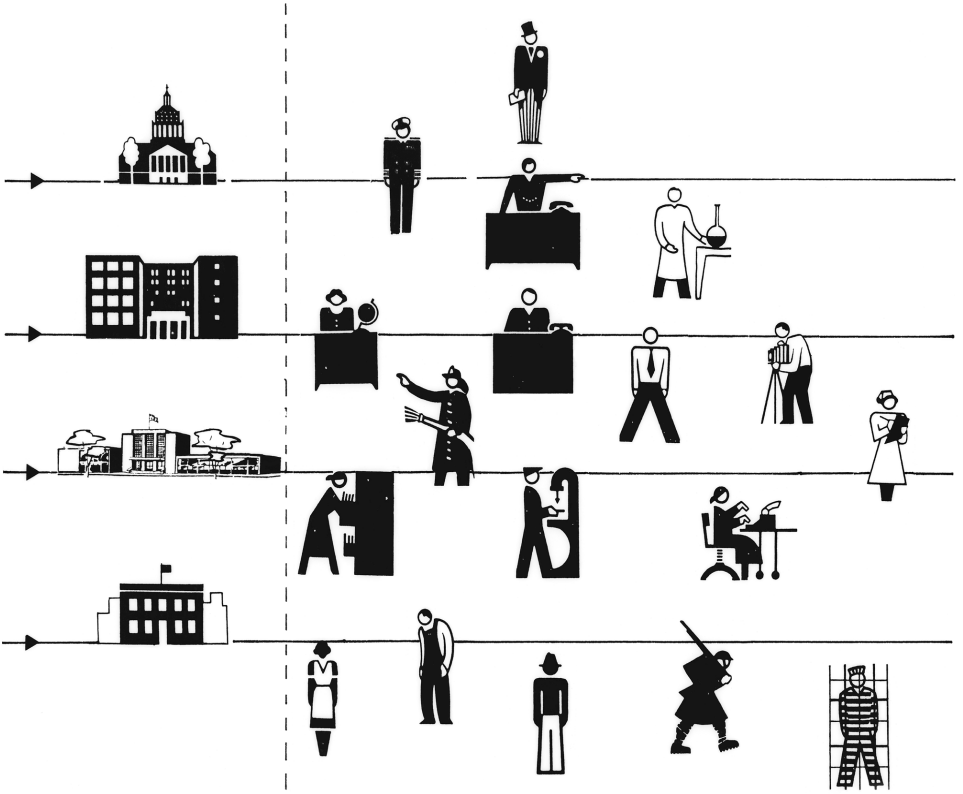
Sekula, Allan. "School Is a Factory." *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973 – 1983*. (London: MACK Books, 2016). Forthcoming.

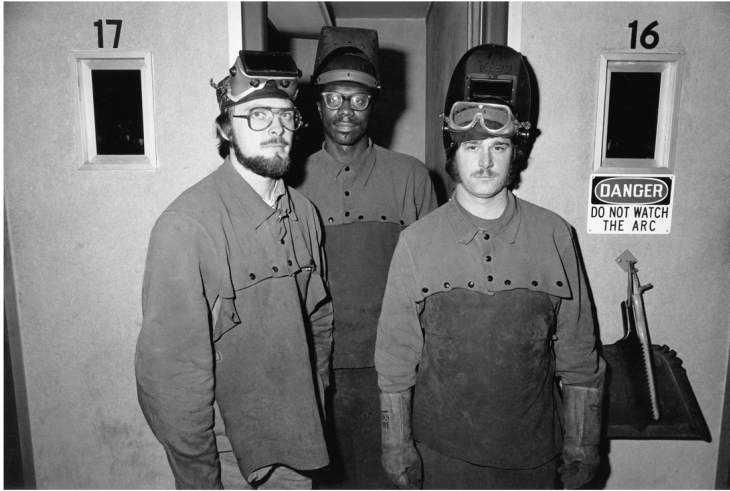
School Is A Factory



Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw materials are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of the twentieth century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils to the specifications laid down.

Ellwood Cubberly, **Public School Administration**, 1916.





This photograph was taken at a community college in Southern California, as were all the following pictures of school situations. Three welding students pose for a portrait. They hope to graduate into jobs with metal fabrication shops in the area. Their instructors act like bosses, supervising the action from a glassed-in office. This apprenticeship program, like public education generally, is supported by taxes that fall heavily on working people and only lightly on corporations. Spared the cost of on-the-job training, local industry profits from the arrangement. Social planners also like the idea that vocational courses keep unemployed young people off the streets and dampen discontent. A lot of Latino and Black students are tracked into these courses. Despite such programs, unemployment continues to increase as industry cuts back production and moves its operations to the non-unionized labor markets of the South and to the Third World. These students may never find steady work as welders.



Two students look up from their machines. They are learning keypunch operation in a business information systems course. This junior college delivers a lot of students, mostly women, to surrounding corporations with a need for clerical and low-level computer workers. Keypunch is the lowest level of computer work, rivaling the assembly line in its brain-numbing routine.



In the room next to the women keypunch students, a computer programmer stops for a moment, smiles, then looks solemn. I don't talk to him much, but later a friend, a union activist at the college, tells me a story about programmers. Most move frequently from job to job, since their skills are in high demand. Some are active in the faculty-staff union, which is auditing the financial records of the college in an attempt to prove that administrators and not workers are responsible for a serious budget crisis. Some programmers know that computer records have been deliberately altered to obscure illegal administrative expenses. They know how to help open the books, and they know the risks involved. This may or may not be a true story or a lesson in resistance.



A businessman holds a plastic schoolhouse, a funnel full of figurines, and a good cigar in front of one of the many computer firms in this region. The streets here are named for famous scientists, inventors, and industrialists. Even maps celebrate the fusion of organized science and big business. One can stand at the intersection of Dupont and Teller and think, or not, about the march from gunpowder to the hydrogen bomb.

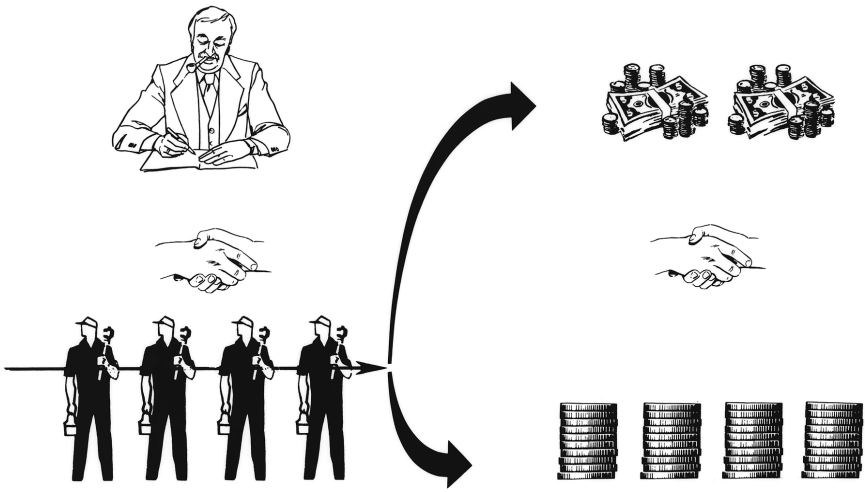


A mathematics instructor quizzes his students. Most of them are taking math for practical, vocational reasons. Very few, if any, will get to be scientists, engineers, or mathematicians. This is not a matter of talent or ability, but a matter of social channeling. There are more prestigious schools for the higher professions.



A half-abandoned shopping center, only minutes by car from the college scenes you've been looking at.







Funny things happen in this landscape of factories disguised as parks. Corporate executives decide to relocate their plants, often moving from the Latino and Black inner districts to the orange groves near the coast. Now, these managers drive only a short distance from their beach-front homes to their work. But somehow real-estate interests and manufacturing interests come into conflict. Things are not working smoothly here under the palm trees. Escalating property values make it impossible for lower and middle level employees to find housing. So now a new, less privileged group of commuters join the traffic on the freeways of Southern California, cursing and dreaming their long way to work.





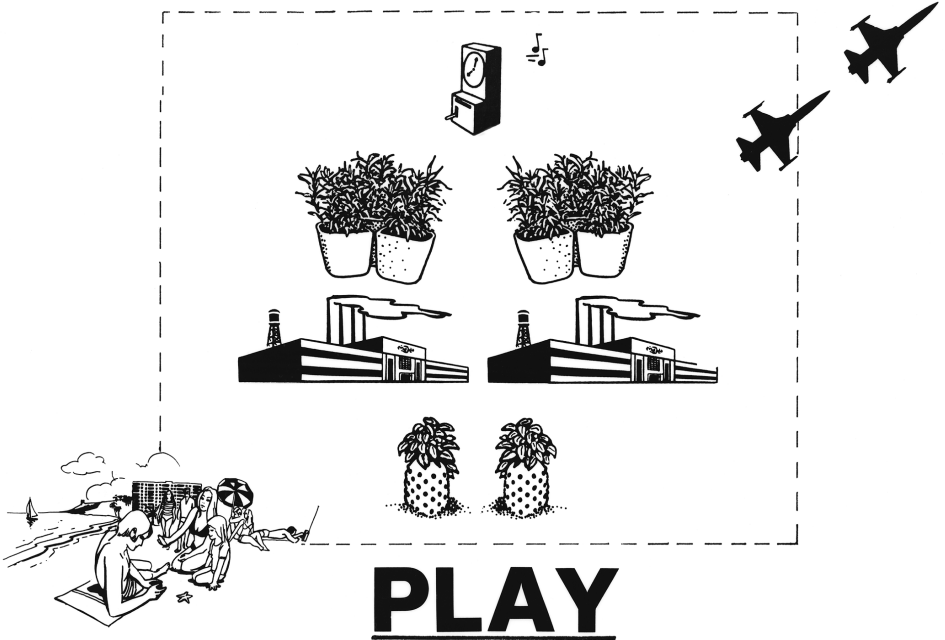
This student runs a milling machine. He studies machine technology and business administration, hoping to own his own machine shop one day. Around him are newer computer-controlled milling machines, machines which require less graceful, careful attention but rather a nervous, jerky movement between the machine and the punched tape which controls the machine. Also around him in this big room are many Vietnamese refugees, some of who will become machinists in the military production plants in the area.



One of my students, a welder, had worked in a large shipyard in Los Angeles harbor, but poor wages, periodic layoffs, and danger drove him to a better-paying job at Disneyland. Now, instead of building bulkheads for Navy frigates and repairing oil tankers, he constructs the hidden skeleton of an amusement park, commuting to the night shift after class. He remarks drolly on the button-down fun-loving ethos of the place, and on the snobbery directed at Disneyland's manual workers by the college students who serve as guides and performers. So he prefers the solitary nighttime work, welding as the fog rolls in from the Pacific, softening the contours of Fantasyland and obliterating the artificial peak of the Matterhorn.



WORK



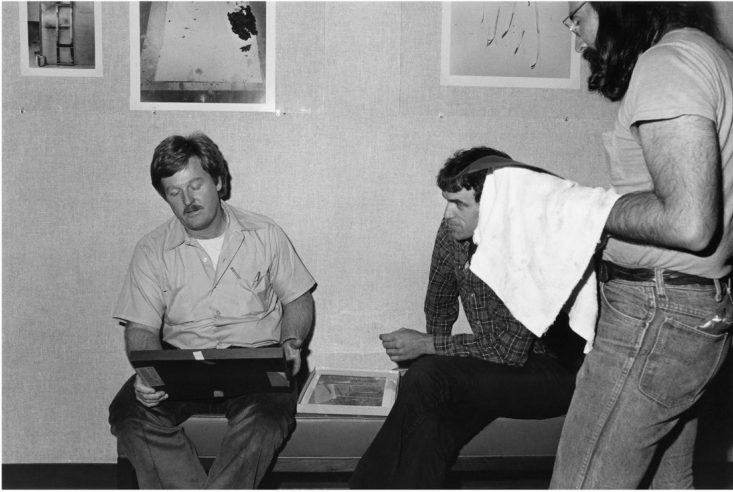
PLAY



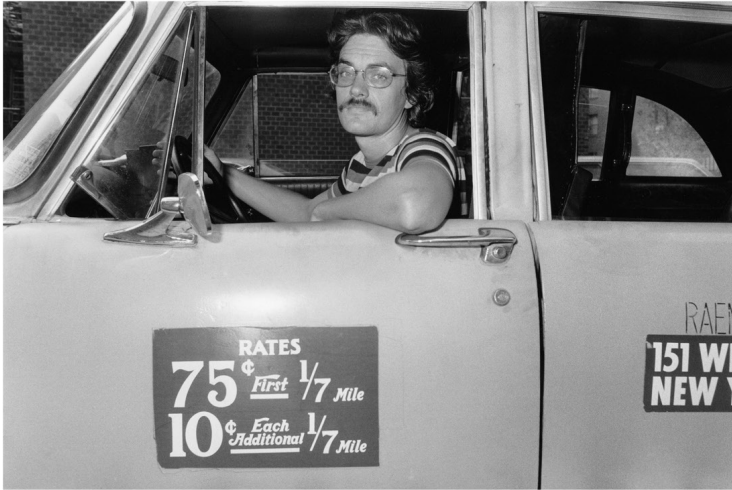
Four male commercial photography students inspect a camera in front of an exhibit of a well-known woman art photographer's work, prints with certain vegetable-erotic overtones. Most commercial photography students learn to concentrate on technical matters. Nevertheless, their instructors periodically expose them to certain privileged examples of the beautiful.



A male biology instructor looks on as a female student pours a chlorophyll solution into a funnel. More than half of the students at this college are women, while the faculty is predominantly male (and white).



This photograph was taken in a space that serves both as a gallery and as a darkroom foyer for a large photography department. A well-known photographer sits in front of an exhibit of his own color prints. He critically inspects a student's work while a second student, holding an unwashed print on a towel, looks on. Although some students from this department land commercial photography jobs, very few, if any, become exhibiting fine art photographers.



A film critic drives a cab in New York City. He was a working-class kid who managed to attend the creative writing program of an elite university. Since his writing tends to deal with the politics and ideology of Hollywood movies, he's not well paid for his efforts, and publishes in a collectively edited film journal.



An artist paints her loft, an abandoned *yehting* in a Chinese neighborhood on the Lower East Side of New York City. She works as a clerk, and barely makes ends meet. Although she's in her late thirties, she's considered a "young artist" because she's just begun to be noticed by curators and critics. Six months after her first one person show at a Fifty seventh Street gallery, she mysteriously disappears from the art world.



Not far from Disneyland, an art museum stands at the edge of a huge "exclusive" shopping center. The trustees of the museum are aerospace executives, bankers, and fast food and car wash kings. As collectors, they seem to favor Pop art and minimalist painting and sculpture. Art instructors from the community colleges bring their students to the museum to see the latest trends.

7—TELEVISION ANNOUNCING I (3-3) CSU

Prerequisite: Speech 3 and Television 9 and 46 with grades of "C" or better, or by examination.
Required of all TV Broadcasting majors.

Training in radio and television announcing for newscasts, ad-libbing, commercials, sportscasts, and various program performance assignments with emphasis on the development of the student's individual style and personality. Practice in presenting the "personal you" over the mike and to the TV camera.

Los Angeles City College General Catalog, 1978-79

Beginning Video/Performance

Howard Fried
class defies description
teacher defies description
teacher defies class description

teacher defies convention
students defy conventions
students defy conventions teacher

art defies authority
revolution defies authority
art defies revolutionary authority

San Francisco Art Institute College Catalog, 1979-81

In the midst of standardized and administered human units, the individual lives on. He is even placed under protection and gains monopoly value. But he is in truth merely the function of his own uniqueness, a showpiece like the deformed who were stared at with astonishment and mocked by children. Since he no longer leads an independent economic existence, his character falls into contradiction with his objective social role. Precisely for the sake of this contradiction, he is sheltered in a nature preserve, enjoyed in leisurely contemplation.

Theodor Adorno, **Minima Moralia**, 1951

13—WORKSHOP IN THE ANIMATION FILM (4-4) O

Prerequisite: Cinema 1 and 2 with grades of "C" or better, or by permission of instructor. Equipment deposit, \$10.00

*Required of Cinema majors.
Laboratory, 10 hours.*

An introduction to the theory and practice of animation. An examination of the different types of animation, and the creative use of titles in films. Emphasis on design, timing and the technical possibilities of the camera. Drawing skill is not essential.

Los Angeles City College General Catalog, 1978-79

800 Film Cartoonists Threaten Strike

Walkout Planned Monday Over Work Being Sent Overseas

BY TIM WATERS
Times Staff Writer

Hanna-Barbera declined to comment on the matter, but the producers who are talking admit that much work is being moved overseas. And they also estimate a studio can generally cut total production costs nearly 50% by having the work done in Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Australia and other countries.

The local, which is a member of the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees, was given the authority to call a strike by its members Aug. 1. It was the first time members have authorized a strike over the loss of work, although the leadership has twice before asked them to do so.

Hester attributed this to a new activist spirit within the union, especially among the younger women, who compose the majority of the local's technical workers.

"Now, without a doubt," he said, "nine-tenths of our women are self-supporting. Before, most of them were married and they accepted the five or six months of employment and then collected their unemployment checks. Now we have a lot more women who need a steady paycheck coming in."

Los Angeles Times, August 11, 1979



This photograph was taken at a Hilton Hotel in Los Angeles. A well known avant garde artist and tenured professor at a university in Southern California interviews a less well known artist for a teaching position. Since she's a Latina, the mere fact of the interview satisfies affirmative action requirements. She doesn't get the job.



SCHOOL IS A FACTORY

- The following texts below accompany images on p.199-225 in the original text

Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw materials are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of the twentieth-century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils to the specifications laid down.

Ellwood Cubberly, **Public School Administration**, 1916.

This photograph was taken at a community college in Southern California, as were all the following pictures of school situations. Three welding students pose for a portrait. They hope to graduate into jobs with metal fabrication shops in the area. Their instructors act like bosses, supervising the action from a glassed-in office. This apprenticeship program, like public education generally, is supported by taxes that fall heavily on working people and only lightly on corporations. Spared the cost of on-the-job training, local industry profits from the arrangement. Social planners also like the idea that vocational courses keep unemployed young people off the streets and dampen discontent. A lot of Hispanic and black students are tracked into these courses. Despite such programs, unemployment continues to increase as industry cuts back production and moves its operations to the non-unionized labor markets of the South and to the Third World. These students may never find steady work as welders.

Two students look up from their machines. They are learning key-punch operation in a business information systems course. This junior college delivers a lot of students, mostly women, to surrounding corporations with a need for clerical and low-level computer workers. Key punch is the lowest

level of computer work, rivaling the assembly line in its brain-numbing routine.

In the room next to the women key-punch students, a computer programmer stops for a moment, smiles, then looks solemn. I don't talk to him much, but later a friend, a union activist at the college, tells me a story about programmers. Most move frequently from job to job, since their skills are in high demand. Some are active in the faculty-staff union, which is auditing the financial records of the college in an attempt to prove that the administrators and not the workers are responsible for a serious budget crisis. Some programmers know that the computer records have been deliberately altered to obscure illegal administrative expenses. They know how to help open the books, and they know the risks involved. This may or may not be a true story. This may or may not be a lesson in resistance.

A businessman holds a plastic schoolhouse, a funnel full of figurines and a good cigar in a corporate landscape. This crude drama of educational opportunity takes place in front of one of the many computer firms in this region. The streets here are named for famous scientists, inventors, and industrialists. Thus even maps celebrate the fusion of organized science and big business. One can stand at the intersection of Dupont and Teller and think, or not think, about the march from gunpowder to the hydrogen bomb.

A mathematics instructor quizzes his students. Most of them are taking math for practical, vocational reasons. Very few, if any, will get to be scientists, engineers, or mathematicians. This is not a matter of talent or ability, but a matter of social channeling. There are more prestigious schools for the higher professions.

A half-abandoned shopping center, only minutes by car from the college scenes you've been looking at.

Funny things happen in this landscape of factories disguised as parks. Corporate executives decide to relocate their plants, often moving from the Hispanic and black inner districts to the orange groves near the coast. Now, these managers drive only a short distance from their beach-front homes to their work. But somehow real-estate interests and manufacturing interests

come into conflict. Things are not working smoothly here under the palm trees. Escalating property values make it impossible for lower and middle level employees to find housing. So now a new, less privileged group of commuters join the traffic on the freeways of Southern California, cursing and dreaming their long way to work.

This student runs a milling machine. He studies machine technology and business administration, hoping to own his own machine shop one day. Around him are newer computer-controlled milling machines, machines which require less graceful, careful attention but rather a nervous, jerky movement between the machine and the punched tape which controls the machine. Also around him in this big room are many Vietnamese refugees, some of whom will become machinists in the military production plants in the area.

One of my students was a welder. He had worked in a large shipyard in Los Angeles harbor, but the danger, low pay, and periodic layoffs drove him to a better-paying job as a welder at Disneyland. Now, instead of welding navy ships and oil tankers, he helps build the hidden machineries of an amusement park. He works the night shift, since all construction and repair work is done when the park is closed. So he goes off to work after class. He tells me of the disdain directed at Disneyland's manual workers by the middle-class college students who serve as guides and performers. He tells me of welding at night, as the fog rolls in from the ocean filling the streets of Fantasyland, and obscuring the artificial peak of the Matterhorn.

Four male commercial photography students inspect a camera in front of an exhibit of a well-known woman art photographer's work, prints with certain vegetable-erotic overtones. Most commercial photography students learn to concentrate on technical matters. Nevertheless, their inspectors periodically expose them to certain privileged examples of the beautiful.

A male biology instructor looks on as a female student pours a chlorophyll solution into a funnel. More than half of the students at this college are women, while the faculty is predominantly male (and white).

This photograph was taken in a space that serves both as a gallery and as a darkroom foyer for a large photography department. A well-known

photographer sits in front of an exhibit of his own color prints. He critically inspects a student's work while a second student, holding an unwashed print on a towel, looks on. Although some students from this department land commercial photography jobs, very few, if any, become exhibiting fine art photographers.

A film critic drives a cab in New York City. He was a working-class kid who managed to attend the creative writing program of an elite university. Since his writing tends to deal with the politics and ideology of Hollywood movies, he's not well paid for his efforts and publishes in a collectively edited film journal.

An artist paints her loft, an abandoned yeshiva in a Chinese neighborhood on the Lower East Side of New York City. She works as a clerk, and barely makes ends meet. Although she's in her late thirties, she's considered a "young artist" because she's just begun to be noticed by curators and critics. Six months after her first one person show at a Fifty-seventh Street gallery, she mysteriously disappears from the art world.

Not far from Disneyland, an art museum stands at the edge of a huge "exclusive" shopping center. The trustees of the museum are aerospace executives, bankers, and fast food and car wash kings. As collectors, they seem to favor Pop art and minimal painting and sculpture. Art instructors from the community colleges bring their students to the museum to see the latest trends.

In the midst of standardized and administered human units, the individual lives on. He is even placed under protection and gains monopoly value. But he is in truth merely the function of his own uniqueness, a showpiece like the deformed who were stared at with astonishment and mocked by children. Since he no longer leads an independent economic existence, his character falls into contradiction with his objective social role. Precisely for the sake of this contradiction, he is sheltered in a nature preserve, enjoyed in leisurely contemplation.

Theodor Adorno, **Minima Moralia**, 1951

This photograph was taken at a Hilton Hotel in Los Angeles. A well-known

avant-garde artist and tenured professor at a university in Southern California interviews a less well-known artist for a teaching position. Since she's female and Hispanic, the mere fact of the interview satisfies affirmative action requirements. She didn't get the job.

I. THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION AND THE TRAFFIC IN PHOTOGRAPHS

The arguments made by this brief text, and by the sequence of photographs and captions that precede it, refer to a problematic intersection in advanced capitalist society, that of "higher" education and the "culture industry."¹ I suspect that you and I are situated, as social actors, in that intersection, maybe directing traffic, maybe speeding through, maybe hitchhiking, maybe stalled, maybe in danger of being run over. I am interested here in speaking to whatever comforts or discomforts you might feel by virtue of the way these highways have been engineered into a larger social geography. This essay is a deliberate provocation, less an intervention from some fictitious "outside" than an argument from within.

In the "developed" world, school and the media bring a formidable play of forces to bear upon the self, transforming and supplanting the more traditional patriarchal authority that emanated from religion and family in the epochs of feudalism and entrepreneurial capitalism. Both mass schooling and mass media are developments intrinsic and necessary to the corporate capitalist world order that emerged in the very late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the United States, the decade after the First World War saw the triumph of a new national culture, a "business" culture, reproduced through compulsory education and promulgated by mass circulation periodicals, radio and the movies. These forces sought to organize people as atomized "private individuals," motivated en masse by the prospect of consumption, thus liquidating other dangerously oppositional forms of social bonding based on class, sex, race and ethnicity.

We have been led by the champions of corporate liberalism to believe that schooling and the media are instruments of freedom. Accordingly, these institutions are seen to fulfill the democratic promise of the Enlightenment by bringing knowledge and upward social mobility within reach of everyone, by allowing each individual to reach his or her own limits. This ideology hides the relentless sorting function performed by school and media. Both

institutions serve to legitimate and reproduce a strict hierarchy of power relations, tracking individuals into places in a complex social division of labor while suggesting that we have only ourselves to blame for our failures. School and the media effectively situate most people in a culture and economy over which they have no control, and thus are mechanisms by which an “enlightened” few promote the subtle silencing of the many.²

School and the media are inherently discursive institutions, sites within which discourse becomes a locus of symbolic force, of symbolic violence. A communicative relation is established between teacher and student, performer and audience, in which the first part, as the purveyor of official “truths,” exerts an institutional authority over the second. Students and audience are reduced to the status of passive listeners, rather than active subjects of knowledge. Resistance is almost always limited only to the possibility of tuning out. Domination depends on a monologue of sorts, a “conversation” in which one party names and directs the other, while the other listens deferentially, docilely, resentfully, perhaps full of suppressed rage. When the wholly dominated listener turns to speak, it is with the internalized voice of the master. This is the dynamic of all oppressions of race, gender, and class. All dominating power functions semiotically through the naming of the other as subordinate, dependent, incomplete as a human being without the master’s discipline and support. Clearly, such relationships can be overthrown; the discourse of domination finds its dialectical antagonist in a discourse and practice of liberation. Like home, factory, prison and city streets, school and the media are sites of an intense, if often covert, daily struggle in which language and power are inextricably connected.³

Most of us who have managed to develop a professional relation to the traffic in words and images (as artists, writers, or teachers) share, often unequally and competitively, in a *symbolic privilege* which situates us above whole populations of the silenced and voiceless. This role, the role of cultural mouthpiece, normally partakes in the privileging and accreditation of its own status, and that of its patrons and employers, while suggesting that culture exists for everyone, or for its own sake. A contradiction has developed between the bureaucratic and professional organization of all cultural work and the Janus-faced mythology of culture, which suggests, on the one hand, that mass culture is popular and democratic, while arguing, on the other, that high culture is an elite activity, an Olympian conversation between genius and connoisseur. High culture is increasingly no more than a specialized and pretentious variant of mass culture, speaking to an audience composed

of the upper class and the intermediary strata of professionals and managers (and especially those professionals and managers whose business is culture). The star system prevails in both SoHo and Hollywood: all culture becomes publicity, a matter of *exposure*.⁴

But artists and intellectuals do not control the interlocking apparatuses of culture and education. Increasingly they are the functionaries and employees of corporate and state institutions: primarily as teachers and grant recipients. The ideology of autonomous professionalism serves to legitimate and defend career interests while, particularly in the case of artist-teachers, building on a hollow legacy of romantic individualism. Although the myth of the lonely oppositional path retains its redemptive ideological force, artists are forced into a dreary upwardly-mobile competition for visibility, with reputation translating into career-capital. Those who refuse or fail are officially invisible, without voice. (I once heard a well-known artist characterize less well-known artists, generally, as lazy)

The case of photography is especially poignant in this regard, since historically the medium has been central to the development of mass culture, with its necessary industrialization and proletarianization of much of cultural work. The dominant spectacle, with its seductive commodities and authoritative visual “facts,” could not exist without photographs or photographers. Treated by the vigorous new art history of photography to an expanding pantheon of independent *auteurs*, we forget that most photographers are detail workers, makers of fragmentary and indeterminate visual statements. These photographs take on a more determinate meaning as they pass through a bureaucratically organized and directed process of assembly. The picture magazine is a case in point. Even the curated fine art exhibition, such as John Szarkowski’s “definitive” *Mirrors and Windows* at the Museum of Modern Art, may be another. A bureaucratized high culture needs to celebrate the independent creative spirit while functionally eroding the autonomy of the artist.

If school is a factory, art departments are industrial parks in which the creative spirit, like cosmetic shrubbery or Muzak, still “lives.” Photographic education is largely directed at people who will become detail workers in one sense or another. Only the most elite art schools and university art departments regularly produce graduates who will compete for recognition as fine artists. Nonetheless, the ideology of auteurism dominates the teaching of the medium’s history at all levels of higher education, even in the community colleges. This auteurism actually oscillates in and out of view, sharing

prominence with its opposite, technological determinism. Students learn that photographic history is driven by technical progress, except in some cases, when history is the elevated product of especially gifted artists, who are to be admired and emulated. Very few teachers acknowledge the constraints placed on their would-be *auteurs* by a system of educational tracking based on class, race, and sex.

Thus, most of us who teach, or make art, or go to school with a desire to do these things, are forced to accept that a winner's game requires losers. One can either embrace this proposition with a social-Darwinist steeling of the nerves, or pretend that it is not true while trying to survive anyway. Otherwise we might begin to work for a method of education and a culture based on a struggle for social equality.

II. PHOTOGRAPHING SCHOOL

Most of the photographs included here were made while I was employed as a part-time junior college instructor in one of the largest photography departments in the United States, teaching the history of photography to night students. These two-year "community" colleges constitute the lowest level of higher education in the United States, serving as training camps for technical, service, and lower-level administrative workers, and as "holding tanks" for high school graduates who would otherwise flood the labor market. These institutions have developed since the end of the second world war.

Most of my students worked: as technicians, as postal clerks, electronics assemblers, fast-food workers, welders, social workers, high-school teachers, and as housewives and mothers. A few retired people took courses. Many students had an amateur interest in the medium. Some night students would jokingly rate the classroom events against what they had missed on television. A good number of the younger students entertained serious thoughts about a career in photography, although many were confused, uncertain about the path to take, knowing that a community college education was not enough. Generally, the committed photography students felt a certain vague pride, feeling that the reputations their instructors claimed made this department a better one than most in two-year colleges. Since a number of faculty members exhibited locally and nationally, this suggested that perhaps the students, too, were on the right track. For the most part, though, the students were learning to become image technicians. Their art historical

education was icing on a cake made of nuts and bolts. I tried to teach a different history of photography, one that called attention to the historical roots of this contradiction. *School Is a Factory* emerges from the problems I encountered in teaching.

I was asked to exhibit some of my photographs in a gallery run by the students. The space intrigued me not for formal reasons, but because of its dual uses, mixing both an esthetic and a technical pedagogy, while also serving as a convenient student hang-out. The work of reputable art photographers hung on the walls, almost all of it in the fine-print tradition of photography. The gallery also served as a foyer to the student darkrooms, the spaces in which purely technical concerns prevailed. I decided that the appropriate thing to do in such a space was a kind of internal critique — a questioning, fragmentary at best — moving outward from photographic education, to community college education, to the larger political economy which motivated the educational system, and then moving back to the immediate environment in which the students were situated.

A sound track provided a background of anti-Muzak, beginning with mechanically seductive disco music and ending with the flat, deadened rebelliousness of a new wave version of “Summertime Blues” recorded by the Flying Lizards. Most of the students seemed to like the Flying Lizards part a lot. The intermediary material on the tape was vocal, punctuated with the loud ticking of a darkroom timer. A monotonous monologue goes on about a “sanitary landscape,” about “factories disguised as parks,” while shifting suddenly to the authoritarian, double-binding voice of the institution itself: “Learn to earn, work, don’t work, play, don’t play. Everyone is looking at you, no one is looking at you”

But it is impossible to question authority without questioning the language of authority. These photographs are intended to work against the typical lyricism of college catalogue photography, with its celebration of joyful encounters between individuated students and the environment, objects, instruments and agents of knowledge: manicured and shaded lawns, dissected frogs, microscopes, and gesticulating professors. So I have adopted the hard flash light and the single point perspective appropriate to a rationalized, bureaucratically administered environment which is trying to pass itself off as the site of collegial pleasures and self-discovery. But it seemed important also to work against the prevailing formalism and otherworldliness of art photography, the hegemonic mannerism of a professionalized avant-garde that has turned in upon itself. I wanted to suggest that it is possible for art

to deal critically with the social ground on which we stand, to speak of people's experiences in terms other than those dictated by individualism. This project involved a break with the cult of the self-sufficient visual image. I am not suggesting that this break necessitates a reversion to some rigid, positivist version of documentary characterized by an obsession with the "facts" overlaid with liberal humanist "values." It would be a mistake therefore to assume that the captions bring a clarifying or restricting sociological facticity to these photographs. Both words and pictures constitute arguments, operating at different levels of specificity, about the prevailing, rather than the idiosyncratic effects of education upon students. Although I am concerned here with the rule rather than the exception, the photographed moments are in no way evidence of an iron determinism at work. I cannot speak for the inner experience, ambitions, or future of the students and teachers who posed for me. The serious looks are as much evidence of guarded caution as anything else, since our brief interactions in the midst of business-as-usual did not provide much time for explanation. Most administrators assumed that a photographer was a potential publicist, rather than a critic, of their domain. Students were understandably reluctant to contribute to the image of the "happy scholar" — and I did not coax them.

It may appear that I am being presumptuous, immodest in my attempt to construct, with words and pictures, a modest essay on the politics of schooling. I am well aware that this project violates a normal separation of tasks which demands that photographers restrict their activity to the field of the visual, and to the cultivation of esthetic effects. The either-or-ism that rules this separation suggests that either one makes pictures, which speak from and to the emotions, or one writes, speaking thus to the intellect. But neither words nor pictures speak exclusively to one "faculty" or another; this separation is a triumph of a specifically bourgeois psychology and philosophy of mind, enacted in the rigid division of mental labor within the culture industry.

III. AN OPEN CONCLUSION

The celebration, by ruling class commissions, of universal art education,

of art education as the “Fourth R” in a revamped, redecorated system of schooling, must be questioned when the same ruling class is promoting educational cutbacks at the same time.⁵ When functional literacy rates are declining, what does it mean to promote a massive shift of educational attention to the development of the esthetic faculties? This plan reads like a technocratic perversion of the liberating pedagogy envisioned by the German romantic poet Schiller in his 1793 letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.⁶ The estheticism encouraged by the cultural bureaucrats of the 1980s stops short of a necessary integration with critical consciousness. Rather, what seems to have taken shape in these plans is a technocratic vision of a society of expressionist *units*, playing happily as consumers (of less and less) in a world in which political life is increasingly limited to a spectacle of representation. The task of progressive teachers, artists, and students is to critique this vision and combat its further realization, while preserving the awareness that utopian esthetic possibilities must be struggled for as intrinsic to a genuinely democratic future, but cannot be achieved in a society governed by a mechanical and world-threatening lust for profit and control.

1980

POSTSCRIPT

School Is a Factory exists in several forms and continues to change. Since 1979, I have presented it as an exhibition, primarily at junior colleges, state universities, and art colleges. Some of the photographs appeared in a journal called *Radical Teacher*. A shorter captioned sequence of the photos appeared in *Exposure* along with the above essay. In these various contexts, the work was intended to initiate an institutional critique of a familiar social environment. In the present context, I would like to comment briefly, as a critic and historian of photography, on the pictorial conventions I am working *against*. These, then, are negative examples, although a more dialectical and detailed understanding should develop in a less schematic look at these pictures.

Figure 1: Frances Benjamin Johnson, *Stairway of Treasurer's Residence. Students at work*. Platinum print from Hampton Institute album, 1900.

Consider two photographs. First, a photograph made in 1900 by the Washington, D.C. commercial photographer Frances Benjamin Johnson. Johnson came to photography from a *beaux arts* training and an early career as a commercial illustrator. The photograph comes from an album made by Johnson for the Hampton Institute, a vocational college for blacks in Virginia.⁷ The caption reads: "Stairway of Treasurer's Residence, Students at Work." The purpose of the album was promotional, serving as an aid to fundraising. Thus the attitude of diligent and industrious servitude exhibited here might have been intended to impress white donors, like the steel manufacturer Andrew Carnegie, with the promise of converting a supposedly indolent and uneducated rural black population into disciplined, productive, and unrebelling proletarians. That this careful carpentry is being performed on a "bourgeois" interior, on the bannisters of the Hampton Institute treasurer's house, is no accident. The Hampton photographs were exhibited as well at the Paris Exposition of 1900, following the presentation of a series of Johnson photographs of the Washington, D.C. city schools at the 1899 Paris Exposition. Many of these earlier photos appeared in a series of pamphlets called *The New Education Illustrated*.

It can be argued that, although less engaged than Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine in direct Progressive Era reform politics, Johnson is an equally important pictorial ideologue of that period. Although most of her work was

governed by commercial possibilities, she seems to have touched on some of the principal themes of Progressive Era politics, moving from first generation feminism, on the one hand, to the celebration of American imperialism on the other. Thus she was able to photograph both Susan B. Anthony, the feminist leader, and Admiral Dewey, commander of the victorious American fleet at Manila, in a highly celebratory fashion. Johnson was able in her school photographs to suggest the new spirit of scientific and ameliorative education. (The pragmatist John Dewey can be said to be the principal philosopher of that movement.⁸) Johnson presents the school as a total and encyclopedic institution. But the black schools like Hampton and Tuskegee were limited to vocational ends: this limitation was the source of an intense debate between the reform-minded black educator Booker T. Washington and the more radical W.E. B. DuBois, who argued for a black educational system that would include the liberal arts.⁹ Thus, what underlies the educational system that Johnson is promoting, both in her photographs of the black institutes and the then largely white public schools of Washington, D.C., is the process of a thoroughgoing *division of labour*, a division made along racial, and ethnic, lines. Although, relatively speaking, the black institutes were progressive institutions, they accepted the assignment of blacks to a subordinate position, as manual workers, in a society increasingly dominated by intellectual labor. Also, the black institutes attempted to educate for a craft system of production that was disappearing under pressure from industrial centralization and scientific management. Johnson's photographs, with their mix of realism and an idealizing and academic neo-classical arrangement, are related to what I would call the *instrumental realism* of late nineteenth century social scientific photography.

Like many psychiatric and criminological albums, these photographs, viewed in sequence in the original album, illustrate the so-called disease and its institutional correction and cure: a kind of "before" and "after" narrative structure that in the Hampton album involves the juxtaposition of images of rural southern life with the "improved" conditions of the vocationally educated and industrially disciplined Black. Thus, behind the realist appearance of these images lies the substance of a new rationalized, and abstract, system of bureaucratic command. One could argue that the speaking subject of these photographs is not black people, taken either collectively or individually, but the *institution* of modern education. I am taking Johnson's photograph here as a *model* for what followed in virtually every college catalogue published in America. What I wanted to achieve in *School Is a Factory* is a

way of turning such conventions inside-out, or upside-down, to reveal their contradictions.

But just as I am opposed to the optimistic and disciplined realism of the Johnson photograph, so also I have problems with the following example of American late-modernist photography. Consider a photograph by Lewis Baltz published in 1975 by Castelli Graphics in an English and German language book called *The new Industrial Parks near Irvine California*.¹⁰ This happens to be the “landscape” in which I taught, the “landscape” within which *School Is a Factory* was made. What seems crucial to Baltz’s work, and what makes it an exemplar, along with the work of Diane Arbus, among late-modernist photography in the United States, is its fundamental ambiguity in relation to the question of genre. Is this a documentary photograph or an abstraction? Baltz himself makes statements which embrace this ambiguity. And a whole new genre, a genre between genres, has arisen to give this ambiguity its proper place. The American curator William Jenkins has christened this work, along with the much more rigorously typological work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, and that of Robert Adams, Joe Deal, Nicholas Nixon, and others as the New Topographics.¹¹ These “photographs of a man-altered landscape” derive their ambiguity precisely from the absence of the human figure. (By the way, I am not suggesting that the addition of a human figure would necessarily humanize these images.) In the case of Baltz, a depopulated industrial environment provides the source for photographs that often resemble late-modernist abstract painting, in this example the work of Barnett Newman is suggested. Obviously, art photography is still haunted by the ghost of pictorialism, the need to affiliate itself referentially with painting. Baltz then, is a good example of the so-called “loss of the referent” within late modernist culture. Increasingly, one specialized sign system can only refer to itself, or to, another specialized sign system. Problems of communication are reduced to problems of self-referentiality, or to problems of translation. I should note that the very term “industrial park” is a linguistic trick, a mystifying translation of a site of production into a site of imaginary leisure. No two terms could be more incompatible, and yet what is suggested by this oxymoronic rhetorical construction is “clean industry,” industry without industrialism.

What I hope to criticize here, then, are two related kinds of abstraction. First, we have the *abstraction* inherent in the supposedly *realistic* world picture of a bureaucratic, commodity centered society: the abstraction that emerges from the triumph of exchange value over use value, from the

triumph of abstract intellectual labor over manual labor, from the triumph of instrumental reason over critical reason. (My thinking on these issues owes a lot to the German philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel¹²) The second abstraction is that which emerges from the separation of esthetic culture from the rest of life, the abstraction process central to the career of modernism (and postmodernism), the abstraction that finds an exemplary esthetic freedom in the disengaged play of signifiers. What I hope to substitute for these two powerful tendencies, which correspond roughly to the realms of “applied” and “pure” photography, is for the moment a kind of political geography, a way of talking, with words and images about both the system and *our* lives within the system.

1982

¹ Conversations and teaching shared with Martha Rosler were a significant starting point for this project. Campbell Skillman offered useful advice, as did Fred Dolan, who lent a very valuable and visible hand as well. The version published here could not have appeared without the intelligence, support, and montage-sense of Sally Stein. My biggest debt is to my students, too many and at too many schools to name, who taught me a lot about dealing with these issues. The dedication is to them, and to my sisters, Victoria Sekula and Michelle Sekula, who are still dealing with the educational machine.

² Clearly, an adequate account of the developments alluded to in the last two paragraphs would require volumes. Several recent texts come to mind as especially important: Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, New York, 1974, and David Montgomery's *Workers' Control in America*, New York, 1979, are about the corporate struggle to seize control of the labor process by means of “scientific management,” thereby isolating and deskilling workers; Stuart Ewen's *Captains of Consciousness*, New York, 1976, about the growth of a consumer culture motivated by corporate advertising; Samuel Bowles's and Herbert Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America*, New York, 1976, about the historical relation of educational reform to the changing demands of a capitalist economy; and David Noble's *America by Design*, New York, 1977, about the corporate role of science and technology, with an emphasis on the instrumentalization of higher education. David N. Smith's *Who Rules the Universities?*, New York, 1974, is also valuable, as is Allen B. Ballard's *The Education of Black Folk*, New York, 1973, and the hard-to-find text by the Newt Davidson Collective, *Crisis at CUNY*, New York, 1974.

³ See Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, 1970, for a very important dialectical understanding of the educational process in its dominating and liberating modes. Ira Schor's *Critical*

Teaching and Everyday Life, Boston, 1980, does an admirable job of translating Freire's insights concerning peasant societies into terms compatible with the experience of North American working-class students. Pierre Bourdieu's and Jean-Claude Passeron's *Reproduction*, London, 1977, is theoretically dense but valuable in its attempt at a "theory of symbolic violence" in the pedagogical sphere. Adrienne Rich's essays on education in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, New York, 1979, especially the one entitled "Toward a Woman-Centered University," are among the most lucid statements I have read on the radical remaking of educational possibilities, and I am grateful to Sally Stein for directing me to them.

⁴ Thus there is something revealing about the very title of the journal in which this essay originally appeared. *Exposure* was founded in 1964 as a forum for college teachers of photography. In contrast, *Aperture*, founded in 1953, suggested that the practice of fine-art photography involved a small hermetic circle around the guru-like figure of Minor White. One entered this circle through the smallest of apertures (*f*/64?), rather as if through the New Testament "eye of the needle." *Exposure* supplanted this inner-directed estheticism with a belief in outward-oriented professional boosterism appropriate to the mid-sixties era of Pop Art and growing college art teaching. Both titles share, however, in a venerable fixation with the techniques and apparatuses of photography. Thus "aperture" unites technologism and a spiritualism, while "exposure" unites technologism and an incipient photographic star system, realized in the 1970s.

⁵ See David Rockefeller, Jr., chairman, *Coming to Our Senses: The Significance of the Arts in American Education — A Panel Report*, New York, 1977. See also the ominous remarks by Zbigniew Brezinski, who later became director of the Trilateral Commission and national security advisor to President Carter, on a projected "democracy," based not on the popular ability to influence "policy making," but on "autonomy for individual self-expression," in Daniel Bell, ed., "Toward the Year 2000: Work in Progress," *Daedalus*, Summer 1967, p. 687.

⁶ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, New York, 1977. See also Herbert Marcuse, "The Aesthetic Dimension," in *Eros and Civilization*, Boston, 1955.

⁷ Frances Benjamin Johnson, *The Hampton Album*, New York, 1966. This Museum of Modern Art catalogue includes 44 photographs from the original Hampton Institute album, as well as a text by Lincoln Kirstein.

⁸ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, New York, 1916.

⁹ In addition to Allen Ballard's *The Education of Black Folk*, see W. E. B. DuBois, *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, New York, 1973. For an amusing and partisan summary of the differences between Washington and DuBois, see Dudley Randall's poem "Booker T. and W. E. B.," in *Poem Counterpoem*, Detroit, 1966. Randall was writing during a time of rising black demands for open admission to higher education in the United States.

¹⁰ Lewis Baltz, *The new Industrial Parks near Irvine, California/Das neue Industriegelände in der Nähe von Irvine, Kalifornien*, New York, 1975. I am referring here to Plate 47, which we were

unable to reproduce.

¹¹ *The New Topographics*, curated with an introduction by William Jenkins, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, 1975.

¹² Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, London, 1978.

Curatorial Statement
by Joshua Lubin-Levy

“The object of art – like every other product – creates
a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty.
Production thus not only creates an object for the subject,
but also a subject for the object”
- Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*¹

We are not only subjects of, but also subject to capitalism. This statement will hardly come as a surprise to the reader, and certainly not to those attentive to the preoccupation with capitalism in much of contemporary art. Volumes have been written detailing the many ways capitalism works precisely by exploiting the worker: by paying a wage that offers just enough for those of us subjected to live another day but not enough to dissolve the division between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Given that art, even today, seems to be perpetually attended by the question of its value (is art worth anything at all?), it has provided a number of artists and theorists with a productive site for interrogating the reproduction and circulation of wealth and value in a variety of forms. Such critiques illuminate the repressive nature of life under capitalism, making legible various facets of a system that operates precisely by keeping its subjects in the dark.

Conceiving of capitalism in this way, while certainly powerful, often entails imagining an abstract system that dominates our everyday lives. Even the word “capitalism” is enough to alienate many readers. Yet if we remember that capitalism is not an impossibly complex economic system, but a lived experience of economic *exploitation*, we may begin to perceive this system as a fundamentally social relation.² Karl Marx famously argues that the violence of the wage is not merely that it is unfair, but that it is founded on the assumption that one individual can sell their labor to another, thereby constituting a subject that accepts an equivalence between life, work and money. What, we might wonder, would it take for us to disentangle this equivalence between *being* and *being exploited*?

“Subject To Capital” begins with the proposition that this

struggle is an inherently queer and feminist practice. Take the notion of the “haves” and the “have-nots,” or more concretely, property and ownership. Especially within the history of the United States, property indicates not only a division between the wealthy and the poor, but also raises questions about the status of women and racial minorities as property; the tactics of dispossession used in the genocide of Native Americans, the waging of global warfare and local practices of gentrification; the privileged relation of the marital contract and the laws inheritance; and perhaps most powerfully the very definition of the human as a subject capable of owning. Along these lines, being subject of and to capitalism means engaging and contesting an ideological subjectivity that is deeply embroiled in structures of patriarchy, heterosexuality and whiteness. Interrupting the subjects and relations of capitalism has always been a project of the queer, feminist, and black outside – subjects who have historically been kept outside the domain of the legible and legal human, property owner.

The tumorous glass sculpture *NEO (plasm)* (2015) by **Doreen Garner** serves as a reminder of the very visceral and violent dimensions of subjugation, particularly in relation to black life. In these outgrowths, which are both self-contained and menacing, Garner presents the viewer with fragments of a human body without realizing its more familiar form. Gorgeous and gory, fragments of hair, petroleum jelly, condoms, beads and other items blend together. As the abnormal growths fold in and around one another, viewer becomes voyeur in an act of looking which itself is subverted by any attempt to partition *Neo (plasm)* into its component parts Garner’s work highlights how the advancement of medical knowledge is historically connected to the dissection, experimentation on, and exposure of black bodies. At this intersection, knowledge is not liberatory but oppressive – a paradox gestured towards in a number of the works included in “Subject To Capital.” .

The consumption of subjects within systems of capitalist exploitation is similarly at the heart of “Second Skin” (2016) by artists **João Enxuto & Erica Love**. Comprised of two large panels of a perforated stainless steel used in the cladding

of a building, “Second Skin” is salvaged from repairs done to the exterior of 41 Cooper Square. A small sample of this perforated steel skin was embedded in acrylic to commemorate the completion of the \$166 million academic building in 2009. A card accompanies this memento attesting to its provenance while illustrating that the building marks a sense of futurity for the university, one comprised of technological advancement and expansion. In fact, a bank loan to pay for 41 Cooper Square has been the major cause of the university’s debt, resulting in the 2014 decision to begin charging tuition after 155 years of offering students free access to higher education. The worn skin presented here illuminates the labor of maintaining the false promise of this monument. Through the financial structures of the university, the student is figured as both a future subject (potential beneficiaries of this expansion) while in the present becoming legible only as a source of income as the university’s debt is displaced onto the student body.³

Sites in which subjects become legible to, and productive for, capitalism inform a number of the works featured in “Subject To Capital.” Pairing capitalist critique with notions of subjectivity, these works are in concert with a range of marxist theories – particularly the work of Louis Althusser. In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation” (1970), Althusser gives the famous “theoretical scene” of interpellation in which a police officer calls out to an individual “Hey, you there!” and in turning around the individual “becomes a *subject*.”⁴ As Althusser argues, in recognizing that the hail is directed at you, in turning around, you become physically and cognitively situated within a system of power. Countering capitalist ideology, in that sense, demands that we interrogate both how we know ourselves as subjects as well as, to borrow from Saidiya Hartman, the scenes of subjection. To propose, as Althusser writes, that the solution is to simply “*get rid of the cop in your head...deserves a place in the Museum of the History of Masterpieces of Theoretical and Political Error.*”⁵ This crude sense of liberating one’s thoughts from repression, as he continues, “quite simply replaces ideas [...] with the cop

[...] replaces the role of subjection played by bourgeois ideology with the repressive role played by the police.”⁶ Alongside Althusser’s caution, the works in “Subject To Capital” resists any direct representation of alternative subjectivities, while at the same time raising questions about the value of ideological debates at a time in which we increasingly inundated with directly repressive violence. Not merely social and symbolic death, but biological death looms large in today’s culture of police violence, global war and rising cost of health care.

The very force of ideological discourse plays a central role in the work of **Aliza Shvarts**, who employs the aesthetics of heavy metal music to probe the sonic materiality of interpretive authority. Shvarts installs a series of QR codes alongside the existing wall labels of the gallery— a familiar strategy of museum and gallery spaces for sharing prerecorded discourse around exhibited works. Rather than finding a traditional audio tour, the listener instead hears a narration of the space that makes use of the low bass frequencies of metal. As Shvarts wrote in a recent article, “Metal is an overwhelmingly white and heteromasculinist subculture. Yet as such, it offers something useful to a prurient queer feminist interest.”⁷ Shvarts inhabits the dual superlatives of metal’s brutality and didacticism’s perspicacity. In doing so, she uses metal as a critical tool to make audible what weighs so heavily in the seeming neutrality of such explanatory text: its interpellative call to established notions of aesthetic value.

Hong-Kai Wang’s *Accept Me for What I Am, If You Want Me* (2009) explores the function of interpellation through various dynamics of politics, gender and nationality. This video work documents a public intervention staged in the streets of Incheon, South Korea in which a van drives around campaigning for a fictional female political candidate from Taiwan. While gesturing towards the twinned political histories of these two nations, the viewer watches as individuals throughout the street are hailed by a series of ambiguous questions posed as political slogans. Countering the declarative statements reminiscent of these campaigns, Wang presents a political subject motivated by the desire for

acceptance. The campaign becomes a locus for the beliefs of its viewers who fill out this political program with what we ourselves desire in the form of answers to these questions.

Operating through discursive exchange, *Hoch Buncher* (2015) is a video work by artist **Baseera Khan** which combines the artist's own transcription of the documentary "The Emperor's Naked Army Marches On," by Kazuo Hara (1987) as well her notes on Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (1921). Khan becomes the cipher for these texts, constructing a new script that takes the form of a testifier and interrogator relationship. The viewer hears the work read aloud while watching a video of cable wires dancing in a thunderstorm. Lines of communication are blurred as telling one's own history, or the practice of self-disclosure, becomes a fraught if not impossible task of conveying truth to another. The listener is presented with several layers of violence, from war and intimacy, as the script circles around Benjamin's own preoccupation with the duality of a violence that preserves the law and a violence that posits it. As with Wang's political subject, Khan's legal subject is both accountable and exceptional, illuminating the very contingency of these structures of power and the forms of subjectivity that reproduce them.

Another way of understanding this dynamic relationship between capitalism and subjectivity is to say that the principles most valued by capitalism (productivity, efficiency, autonomy and accountability) are often reproduced as the values we seek in one another. Indeed, capitalism not only tells us how to be but also what to want. Noting the way capitalism circumscribes life to a relation with the market, artist **Allan Sekula** writes "[t]hese forces sought to organize people as atomized 'private individuals,' motivated en masse by the prospect of consumption, thus liquidating other dangerously oppositional forms of social bonding."⁸ Illustrating capital's control over the form and function of subjectivity, Allan Sekula's *School Is a Factory* (1978/1980) meditates on the intersection of higher education and the culture industry as systems complicit in upholding existing divisions of labor. Sekula's work resonates with Althusser's claim that the school is

where one acquires both knowledge and knowledge of “the ‘rules’ of good behaviour, that is, the properties to be observed by every agent in the division of labor [...] rules of *respect* for the social and technical division of labor.”⁹

School Is a Factory mimics the form of a college brochure, including familiar imagery depicting the joys of campus life in and out of the classroom. With a bluntness that subdues the more optimistic messages of these marketing materials, Sekula photographs a school that, by all appearances, could be a factory – a space where classrooms provide hands-on training in operating heavy machinery, computer programing, and secretarial work. For the most part, the faces we see offer neutral, if not sullen, and ungiving affections that seem to mark the intrusion of the camera. The photographs are interruptions in the routine of the school day, cuts within the rhythm of a pedagogy that aims to model these individuals for work.

Based on Sekula’s work as a photography professor at a community college, these portraits are paired with images of the landscape of local industries where students may eventually seek employment. In the foreground of these landscapes we see a set of hands holding a cigar and miniature schoolhouse atop a funnel filled with plastic figurines of anonymous bodies. This recurring symbol literalizes the way the schoolhouse *funnels* students into the existing divisions of labor.

Simply reproducing the given relations of production would run the risk of making bearable (and consumable) the conditions of exploitation being depicted. In a postscript to the work, Sekula explicitly writes against this mode of photography, which abstracts and alienates the viewer from real material conditions. Instead, he proposes that *School Is a Factory* is “a kind of political geography, a way of talking, with words and images about both the system and *our* lives within the system.”¹⁰ Each image is accompanied by a caption which (re)tells the story of its content. In this repetition, the unity and authenticity of both text and image are called into question. To see Sekula’s photographs as a form of writing is thus to pay closer attention to the way he uses the apparatus of the camera as a strategy for disarticulating the stranglehold

of this system over the bodies it supposedly captures.¹¹

By diagramming exploitation, *School Is A Factory* participates in and shifts a kind of topographical thinking present throughout a range of marxism. More explicitly, it demonstrates the notion of an economic base which both founds and is maintained by formations in the superstructure (i.e. the Ideological State Apparatuses described by Althusser, including the school, the family, politics, law, religion, culture and the media). Widely and usefully criticized, this idea is often paraphrased from Marx, wrongfully proposes that subjectivity is necessarily determined by, or only ever a product of, capital. Yet to take this metaphor of the edifice as pointing towards the dynamic infrastructure of capital, we get closer to the kind of *political geography* proposed by Sekula. Such mappings provide opportunities to consider capitalism as a condition of relations not only between subjects but with the space around them.

Similarly, **Alan Ruiz**'s work explores formal and perceptual conditions that illuminate the infrastructure of late capitalism. Working site-reflexively, Ruiz transforms a window at Abrons Arts Center into a one-way mirror by installing a film more conventionally used to create the illusion of privacy inside the glass curtain-wall of office buildings. This intervention calls into question legacies of Modernist architecture's pursuit of transparency, suggesting such transparency is a fallacy. In relation to the gallery's other windows, which supposedly give unmediated access into and out of the cultural space of the gallery, the one-way mirror creates a perceptual condition in which the shifting position of the viewer illuminates the dynamic power structure of seeing and being seen, access and refusal. Simultaneously Ruiz installs two clear plastic prison televisions, transparent objects (designed to mitigate against contraband) that although transparent to their technological function in many ways obscure the controlled way in which they control a primary means of communication between the outside world and the interiority of the prison. Installed in the gallery, these televisions become non-functional objects playing a static gray that is as impenetrable as the mirrored-

window. Like Sekula, Ruiz's work similarly works in the interplay between transparency and opacity, exploring formal and perceptual configurations at play in the politics of control.

Intervening in the space of capitalism is fundamental to *Block-Experiments in Cosmococa – program in progress* (1973) - a series of immersive participatory environments conceived of by Brazilian artist **Hélio Oiticica** and filmmaker **Neville D'Almeida**, during Oiticica's self imposed exile in New York City (1971 – 1978). Implemented in the privacy of Oiticica's loft, each block consists of a soundtrack, a script of performative actions for viewer participation, a selection of props and other items (such as hammocks) that inform the way viewers inhabit these environments, and a series of slides shown on loop and projected on various surfaces. Prominently featured in many of the slides are images of cocaine powder cut into graphic formations atop the surface of various books and magazines. This work is presented in "Subject To Capital" by way of two C-prints mounted on aluminum from the *Cosmococa* slideshows, one featuring Marilyn Monroe and the other Jimi Hendrix.

In spite of the charged references and array of materials, the *Cosmococas*, as Sabeth Buchmann and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz write, "address not the fleeting gaze of the thrill-seeker, but a long-term inhabitant who is open to contingent experience [...] what both Minimalism and the *Cosmococas* share is an interest in how the viewer perceives: the challenge is patently to neither look passively nor 'stare romantically'; this art clearly intends to support neither sublimated commodity consumption nor identification with the values of high culture."¹² Unbounded by the momentary strike of enlightened viewership, the work instead activates a different sensorial experience of art, soliciting a complicity between producer and consumer in the constitution of the work.

Contemplation and consumption take on a particular valence in relation to the presence of the cocaine. Max Jorge Hinder Cruz's work has been instrumental in conceiving of the ways the presence of cocaine pushes these images beyond the merely representational, calling "the contradiction of legality

and ethics permanently at stake in the handling of cocaine.”¹³ Of this medium, Oiticica himself writes:

“the COKE copies the surface (uncritical of its plagiarism) playing playing: (petit bourgeois values lost in discussions who did this or that before...) and to think that some <<artists>> submit their own work to an evaluation grounded in falsities and infantile class hang-ups: if that which is supposedly superior (presumably the work in this case) can be submitted to such discrepancies then it cannot be the work: it may well be work but it will never be SOMETHING NEW: S-O-M-E-T-H-I-N-G-N-E-W...”¹⁴

As Oiticica explains, cocaine as a medium offers a mode of unselfconscious plagiarism. The form of the white lines are informed by the preexisting surface of the image. This, in turn, refuses the very bourgeois values of authorship, authenticity and authority. At the same time, the drive towards self-abandonment is mirrored in the neurological disinhibition offered by cocaine-as-drug and the perpetual negation of each iteration of lines as Oiticica and D’Almeida consume and redistribute the coke. Even the figure of Marilyn Monroe, more readily associated with Andy Warhol’s screen prints, points to work of art suspended in progress (not to mention Oiticica’s criticism commercialization of queer arts). “[T]he glory and fall of MARILYN MONROE,” Oiticica writes, “where IMAGE’s supposed unity fragments itself by resisting the stereotype that attempts to define and limit it leading in most cases to frustration and catastrophe: something had to happen.”¹⁵ *Block-Experiments in Cosmococa – program in progress* (1973) employs the strategy of immersing the viewer in an installation designed to sustain the possibility of *something* happening beyond more confining relationships to the self and subjectivity. And yet, it also shares in the work Allan Sekula describes of “break[ing] with the cult of the self-sufficient visual image.”¹⁶

Two installations included in “Subject To Capital” share in this practice of producing environments that unmoor the conventional scenes of our subjugation. *Capital Improvements* presents a new installation in the Culpepper Gallery of Abrons

Arts Center by artist **Kembra Pfahler**, continuing her ongoing work of availabism – making the best of what’s available. The title refers to an addition or alteration made to property that increases the property’s value. Landlords often claim “Major Capital Improvements” as a means of increasing the stabilized rent of protected tenants, raising the larger question of who actually benefits from the accumulating value of property. In her artwork and through her band *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*, Pfahler demonstrates a longstanding commitment an aesthetics of low tech props and costume, and the use of the body as a site. Pfahler’s work opens up the possibility of ingenuity as a queer and feminist practice of self-making and remaking against the confining relations of given identity formations and the structures of power that often overwhelm and seem to dominate everyday life.

Located in the Upper Main Gallery of Abrons Arts Center, **Jennifer Moon & laub** present *Phoenix Rising, Part 3: laub, me and The Revolution (Theory of Everything)* (2015). Originally presented at Commonwealth & Council (Los Angeles, CA), this series of diagrams, models, science displays and video mirrors a laboratory in which Moon & laub present an experiment in expansive relation love that extends beyond the constricting affective relations of capitalism. In the video *3CE: A Relational Love Odyssey*, the viewer is invited to embark on this journey into revolutionizing the boundaries between selves, while the *JLS (Jennifer laub Smasher)* and *GFT (Gut Fairies Transplant)* present schematic proposals for conceiving of merger, inside and out, as a way of breaking down the compulsion to be an autonomous and self-contained individual within the structures of neoliberalism.

Lastly, the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres is not represented in “Subject To Capital,” though it has, nonetheless, been instructive for my thinking. In particular, it had been my hope to exhibit “Untitled” (*Monument*) (1989), which features two take-away stacks of printed sheets one proclaiming “Memorial Day Weekend” and the other “Veterans Day Sale.” As with all of Gonzalez-Torres take-away pieces, “Untitled” (*Monument*) functions through the process of its own

disappearance. Visitors are invited to touch and take the art with them. As the stack of paper diminishes it is replenished by the host institution, thereby ensuring that the monument's duration is tied to timeframe of its exhibition.

These work are often noted for their ephemerality. The form of the work is its perpetual disappearance, which in many ways functions as a counterpoint to the durability and perpetuity often expected of works of art. That the life span of a work is circumvented by its own display (it disappears precisely by being exhibited) presents a fundamental contradiction to the visibility of this visual art – suspending the work somewhere between its production and its consumption. Yet, this disappearing act is more than merely a subversion of art historical precedents. Gonzalez-Torres use of ephemerality mobilizes and obscures more conventional associations between art and identity – to living with HIV/AIDS, to queerness, to *cubanía*. Referencing an interview between Gonzalez-Torres and Tim Rollins in which the artist describes navigating the expectations placed upon him as a “Latino,” critic and theorist José E. Muñoz writes, “[b]y refusing to invoke identity, and instead to connote it, he is refusing to participate in a particular representational economy. He does not counter negative representations with positive ones, but instead absents himself and his work from this dead-end street.”¹⁷ To disappear, to become invisible, presents an “obstacle to facile conceptions of identity”¹⁸ and the dominant paradigm which “positions minority identity designations within a syntax of equivocations [race, gender, class, sexuality] that defers the work of theorizing relations of power.”¹⁹

Similarly, one might speculate about the durability this untitled work as a monument. Unlike other attempts to topple the monuments of history with a single blow, Gonzalez-Torres disintegrating monument creates a condition in which the work diminishes slowly, through a series of interactions and exchanges. It is both curious and poignant that the art institution must constantly sustain the conditions for loss and disintegration to occur.

Or perhaps we might say the moment is within an

impossible process of formation – completed only when the last instance of its existence is finally taken away. Here, the shifted temporality of Gonzalez-Torres' work sheds light of Marx's own desire for "a reader who is willing to learn something new and therefore to think for [onself]."²⁰ Thinking freely hardly occurs at a glance, but rather like "*Untitled*" (*Monument*), gradually forms through time, through sustained engagement and through a willingness to develop a "knowledge' altogether different from repressive-authoritarian knowledge."²¹

"Subject To Capital" propose nothing like a concrete answer or thesis. Rather it suggests that if we are stuck with capitalism, then capitalism is stuck with us – it flows through us as pedestals and frameworks that sustain its very function. In that same interview with Tim Rollins, Felix Gonzalez-Torres offer what I take to be his approach to this contradiction – precisely through art and theory as "queer thing[s]" instrumental in producing "pleasure through knowledge and some understanding of the way reality is constructed, of the way the self is formed in culture, of the way language sets traps, and of the cracks in the 'master narrative' – those cracks where power can be exercised." He goes on to state, in the same passage Muñoz quotes from:

"Felix: Last but not least, Brecht is an influence. I think if I started this list of influences again it would start with Brecht. I think this is really important because as Hispanic artists we're supposed to be very crazy, colorful – extremely colorful. We are supposed to 'feel,' not think. Brecht says to keep a distance to allow the viewer, the public, time to reflect and think. When you get out of the theater you should not have had a catharsis, you should have had a thinking experience. More than anything, break the pleasure of representation, the pleasure of the flawless narrative. This is not life, this is just a theater piece. I like that a lot: This is not life, this is just an artwork. I want you, the viewer, to be intellectually challenged, moved, and informed.

Tim: Some people don't like that.

Felix: Of course not because they have an investment in the narrative."²²

Endnotes

- 1 Karl Marx. *Grundrisse*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 92.
- 2 Louis Althusser. *On The Reproduction of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2014), 125. Published posthumously: “the material basis...for the existence of every capitalist social formation is *economic exploitation* – economic exploitation, *not repression*.”
- 3 For more information visit: <http://freecooperunion.org/>
- 4 Althusser, 264.
- 5 Ibid, 178.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/02/criticspage/black-wedding>
- 8 Allan Sekula. “The Politics of Education and the Traffic in Photographs” in *Photography Against The Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973 – 1983*. (Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 226.
- 9 Althusser, 51.
- 10 Sekula, 234.
- 11 Sekula makes the photograph useful, conceding to Walter Benjamin’s declaration, in his essay “The Author As Producer,” that “what we demand from the photographer is the ability to put such a caption beneath his picture as will rescue it from the ravages of modishness and confer upon it a revolutionary use value. And we shall lend greater emphasis to this demand if we, as writers, start taking photographs ourselves.” (95) Here Benjamin is writing of problematic way in which photographs transfigure material conditions, rendering consumable even the most nefarious of social and political contexts or environments. Simple re-presenting the world is not enough for Benjamin, the world must be rewritten.
- 12 Sabeth Buchmann and Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz. *Hélio Oiticica and Neville D’Almeida: Block-Experiments in Cosmococa – Program in Progress*. (London: Afterall Books, 2013), 38.
- 13 Buchmann and Cruz, 67. Max Jorge Hinderer Cruz’s work on Oiticica has been highly instructive for my writing and in particular, his attention to cocaine not only as a drug prevalent in the 1970s artworld, but deeply tied to a colonial past of conditioning the productivity of colonized subjects. For more, *The Long Memory of Cocaine* (https://potosiprincipleprocess.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/noid_paper_final_spr_cropmarks_low.pdf)
- 14 Hélio Oiticica. “Block-Experiments in Cosmococa-Program in Progress” in *Hélio Oiticica: Quasi-Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Basualdo (Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2001), 99.
- 15 Oiticica, 100.
- 16 Sekula, 230.
- 17 José E. Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 166.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid, 167.
- 20 Karl Marx. *Capital: Volume 1*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 90.
- 21 Althusser, 180.
- 22 Tim Rollins. “Interview with Felix Gonzalez-Torres” in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed William S. Bartman. (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1993), 19.

Artist Bios

D-L Alvarez works through drawing, sculpture, video, and prose to extend the psychological and political potency of particular historical moments via imagery representing them. The images are never as found, rather they endure distortions: blurring, doubling, folds and degradations. He does this to mimic the way loaded representation exceeds the viewer's ability to fully process its significance, as well as to echo the way each history is scripted with the bias of its author. His own history includes chapters of working with experimental and deaf theater companies, AIDS activism, San Francisco, New York, Berlin, and frequent collaborative work. He exhibits internationally (Spain, Italy, Germany, the UK, the US, Latvia, France, Mexico, and South Africa), and his art can be found in the collections of the SF and NY MoMA, the Whitney, Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archives. His next solo-exhibition is scheduled for next winter at Derek Eller's new space in the Lower East Side.

Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas is a theater-maker based in New York and Artistic Director of the Obie winning company Fulcrum Theater. His most recent solo-performance piece, *Backroom*, was presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art. His play, *Bird in the Hand*, was a New York Times Critics Pick and is published by Dramatic Publishing. His play *Blind Mouth Singing*, also a New York Times Critics Pick, completed runs at Chicago's Teatro Vista, and the National Asian American Theatre Company (NYC), productions The Chicago Tribune praised as having "visionary wit" and that The New York Times called "strange and beautiful". His many awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts; as well as the Helen Merrill Award; the Anschutz Distinguished Fellowship at Princeton University; "playwright of the year" in El Nuevo Herald's 1999 year-end list; a Writers Community Residency from the YMCA National Writer's Voice; and the Robert Chesley Award, among others. He has been commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum, South Coast Repertory and Playwrights Horizons. He is a Usual Suspect at New York Theatre Workshop and an alumnus of New Dramatists. He teaches playwriting at Bard College.

João Enxuto and Erica Love collaborate on projects that focus on the art field, its systems of valuation, and the datalogical structure of exhibition spaces, institutions, and built environments. They have given talks, written essays, and exhibited at the Whitney Museum of Art, Anthology Film Archives, Walker Art Center, Pratt Institute, Yossi Milo Gallery, Carriage Trade, Vox Populi, Georgia State University, Louisiana Museum in Denmark, and the Tamayo Museum in Mexico City. Enxuto and Love were fellows at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program for 2012–2013. Their writing has appeared in *Wired Magazine*, *Mousse Contemporary Art Magazine*, *X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly*, and *Initiales*, among others. João Enxuto received an MFA in Photography from RISD and Erica Love received an MFA in New Genres from UCLA.

Doreen Garner (b.1986) is a Brooklyn-based artist born in Philadelphia, PA. Select exhibitions include “SHINY RED PUMPING,” Vox Populi Gallery, Philadelphia, PA (2015), “Abjection” at the Rhode Island College Bannister Gallery, Providence, RI (2014), “Pussy Don’t Fail Me Now,” Cindy Rucker Gallery, NY (2015) and “Something I can Feel” curated by Derrick Adams at Volta Art Fair (2016). Garner has recently completed residencies at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (2015) and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2014). She holds a BFA in Glass from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University and an MFA in Glass at the Rhode Island School of Design. Currently Garner is a 2015-2016 Artist in Residence at Abrons Arts Center and Van Lier Fellow at Wave Hill.

Baseera Khan is a New York based artist. Her visual and written work focuses on performing patterns of emigration and exile that are shaped by economic, social, and political changes throughout the world with special interests in decolonization practices. Khan is preparing for her first solo exhibition at Participant Inc., New York City (2016). She was an artist-in-residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Artist Residency, Skowhegan, Maine (2014). She was recently an International Fellow in Israel/Palestine through Apexart,

(Khan Cont.) New York City (2015) and an artist in residence at Process Space Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (2015). Khan is currently part-time faculty at Parsons, The New School Design. She received her M.F.A. at Cornell University (2012).

Within realities constructed by normative modes of representation, **Jennifer Moon and laub** are artists with the appropriate degrees to signify them as such. Within realities of the impossible, the unknown, and the unimaginable, Jennifer Moon is an android-like humanoid creature from outer space. laub is a magic-infused wood nymph from an alternate dimension. Every lifetime, Jennifer and laub meet in a serendipitous manner to realize revolution; and every lifetime, so far, they (Moon & laub cont.) they eventually get co-opted into the system, sometimes by seeming choice, sometimes by oppressive force, and sometimes one of them gets co-opted and the other must kill the other. After each deaths, they take what they have learned from past lives and leave their reborn selves clues to expand beyond previous unexpansive behaviors and co-option, which detour their quest for revolution. laub and Jennifer have faith that revolution already exists in everyone.

The work of Brazilian artist **Hélio Oiticica** (1937–1980) figures centrally in the postwar Latin American avant-garde, in queer underground experimental performance and in conceptual and somatic practices of fellow artist working in a post-minimalist, post-Pop context. Most readily associated with the Rio de Janeiro based neo-concretist movement, Oiticica's formation of "the concept of Tropicália set a precedent for exploring the way Latin America art figures within the context of modernist art discourse, working through and against the principles of cultural appropriation and essentialism. Elaborating on the idea for a film by Brazilian underground filmmaker **Neville D'Almeida**, Oiticica developed the concept for *Block-Experiments in Cosmococa—Program in Progress* (1973–1974). Presented publicly for the first time in 1992, these works have been included in major international exhibitions in Los Angeles, Chicago, London, and New York.

Kembra Pfahler is an artist and rock musician, best known as the painted lead singer of The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, a theatrical death rock band she co-founded in 1990. The band uses music, drawings and films to spread a clear message of love in a beautiful, tsuristic, anti-natural, and fearless way to dispel the antiquated notion that there is a hierarchy of artistic mediums. Pfahler follows the philosophy of availabism, making the best of what's available. Exhibitions include: The Manual of Action, Lisa Bowman Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 2015; Future Feminism, The Hole, New York, NY, 2014; Fuck Island, Participant Inc., New York, 2012; Giverny: E.V. Day & Kembra Pfahler in Monet's Garden, The Hole, New York, NY, 2012; Heaven & Hell, Deitch Projects at Bas Fisher Invitational, Miami, FL, 2007. Pfahler currently runs Performance Art 101, a course based on availabism

Alan Ruiz is a visual artist whose work explores the intersection of site-reflexivity, architectural discourse, and urban policy. Engaging constructed space as a perceptual and a political medium, his projects have been shown both nationally and internationally, including in exhibitions at Wave Hill, the Bronx Museum of the Arts (NYC); Ortega Y Gasset Projects (NYC); Y Gallery (NYC) ; Horatio Jr. (London, UK); Johannes Vogt Gallery (NYC); Tape Modern (Berlin, Germany); Andrew Edlin Gallery (NYC) Y; and Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) Building 110, Governors Island (NYC). Forthcoming exhibitions include the "Queens International," Queens Museum, Queens, NY. Ruiz has participated in residencies with the Whitney Museum of American Art's Youth Insights Program, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The Art & Law Program, AIM, and the Yale Norfolk Summer School for Art and Music. His work has been featured in *TDR (MIT Press)*, *BOMB Magazine*, *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, *Architizer*, *Hyperallergic*, *Purple Diary* and he is a contributing editor to *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*. He received an MFA from Yale University and a BFA from Pratt Institute, and is a 2015 - 2016 participant in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program.

Allan Sekula is a renowned photographer, theorist, historian of photography and writer. His work is concerned with the consequences of the economic changes arising from globalization and questions the function of documentary photography in the media, in art and in society. Sekula has a unique, intelligent, and formally rigorous perspective toward the tradition of social or critical realism, a photographic lineage that stretches back to Lewis Hine. Often depicting labor within the workplace, he has developed a visual language, which describes people both in their individuality and in a more human condition.

Aliza Shvarts is an artist and writer whose work deals broadly with queer and feminist understandings of reproductive labor and temporality. She holds a BA from Yale University and completing a PhD in Performance Studies at NYU. Her artwork has appeared in venues including MoMA PS1 in New York and the Tate Modern, and has been the subject of recent work by Carrie Lambert-Beatty, Wendy Steiner, Joseph Roach, and Jennifer Doyle. Her writing has been published in *TDR: The Drama Review*, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*. She was a 2014–2015 Helena Rubinstein Fellow in Critical Studies at the Whitney Independent Study Program and a 2014 recipient of the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. Currently, she teaches at Parsons/The New School and is a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Born in Huwei, Taiwan, **Hong-Kai Wang** is an artist and researcher based in Vienna and Taipei. She is a PhD in Practice candidate at Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and part of the History from Below Network. Her interdisciplinary practice is driven by a preoccupation with listening and sound as research methodologies, modes of collaboration, and pedagogical tools. Spanning sound work, video installation, performance, workshop and publication, her works are consistently concerned with organizing sociality, disrupting accepted geopolitical chronologies, and complicating conception of knowledge. Wang has presented her work internationally at Kunsthalle Wien,

(Wang cont.) Parasophia Kyoto International Festival Contemporary Culture, Kunsthall Trondheim, Para Site, Museum of Modern Art New York, IASPIS, the 54th Venice Biennale, Casino Luxembourg among others

ABRONS
ARTS HENRY STREET
CENTER SETTLEMENT

Special Thanks

Jonathan Durham

Zhen Xieu

Maedhbh McCullagh

The Estate of Allan Sekula

MACK Book

Sally Stein

Ina Steiner

Commonwealth & Council

Young Chung

Visual AIDS

Nelson Santos

Alex Fiahlo

Galerie Lelong

The Estate of Hélio Oiticica

Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory

A PRODUCT OF

LUMPEN: A Journal of Queer Materialism