

# Recuperation of Art and Activism.

## An e-mail correspondence

### Alistair Hudson, Jeni Fulton, Paul Stewart, Sam Thorne

The following is an email correspondence facilitated by Paul Stewart, artist and writer, in conversation with Alistair Hudson, Director at mima, and Sam Thorne, Director at Nottingham Contemporary. The contributors were chosen specifically based on both of their shifts from running art projects situated outside the institutional system in the UK—Griezdale Art Projects and Open School East respectively—and their transition to becoming directors at very mainstream institutions, specifically how this affects their politics and the work they do. Jeni Fulton, writer and editor based in Berlin, also shares with us her perspective on the limits of activism. Does this shift from outside to inside the institution suppress the intent of outside projects and their attempt at estranging from the institution?

**Beginning of correspondence:**  
 Monday, 2 November 2015, 18:03

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**From:** Paul Stewart <\_\_\_\_\_  
**To:** Sam Thorne <\_\_\_\_\_  
**Cc:** Alistair Hudson <\_\_\_\_\_  
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This correspondence will map our thoughts on the canonization or recuperation of art activism into art history and how this is translated in our biennials and exhibition programming. Is this recuperation an attempt to take ownership to avoid estranging forms of dissent emerging in the institutional structure?

My opening thoughts are:

I see a dilemma with the art and activism we are discussing due to the willingness of institutions

and biennials to make space for this form of practice, since it is presenting their own critiques. Maybe it is a gentrification of art and activism. Perhaps we could see this as the Institution becoming ‘transparent’, but I feel that would be too generous ... Or maybe they have just institutionalised their own critique, and possibly this is the paradox of institutional critique, or the gentrification of art and activism. What are your thoughts? I always felt that art activism, as a form of estrangement, is the fact of no longer being on friendly terms with a group, in this case the neoliberal capitalism purporting the art world, but if it is recuperated, does this nullify the attempt to estrange?

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**From:** Alistair Hudson <\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date:** Wednesday, 11 November 2015, 17:31  
**To:** Paul Stewart <\_\_\_\_\_  
**Cc:** Sam Thorne <\_\_\_\_\_  
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My first statement begins with this in mind:  
 Could we distinguish (but not separate) Radical Performance and Radical Competence or Performative Activism and Competent Activism?

It’s maybe worth trying to get away from an anxiety of being in or out, which I attribute to some kind of avant-garde hangover—something we cling onto like a piece of broken wreckage after the storm.

In a similar vein I often find activism, like radicalism, to be something we more often tend to act out, rather than apply, within the framework of art—being radical is one of the most conservative things in the socio-cultural sphere we art animals inhabit.

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**From:** Paul Stewart <----->  
**To:** Sam Thorne <----->  
**Cc:** Alistair Hudson <----->  
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Wreckage is a nice analogy, but I agree and disagree. I feel uncomfortable about competence, because I feel that becomes complacent and sits similar to a liberal agenda.

I would like to introduce The Silent University by the artist Ahmet Ögüt into the discussion, which could be described as an autonomous knowledge exchange platform by refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants held in galleries, such as Tate in 2012. This is an art project, a political action that gives identification to individuals who otherwise are ignored by liberal agendas inside the institution. I see The Silent University's format as resisting but possibly becoming blurred with the host institution's own mission. Sam, do you have any further thoughts on this?



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**From:** Sam Thorne <----->  
**To:** Paul Stewart <----->  
**Cc:** Alistair Hudson <----->  
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I do feel conflicted about what Paul describes as "the recuperation of art activism into art history". (I'm not so sure if it's recuperative—more like a first attempt at broadening the constrictive terms of the more conventional art-historical accounts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.) Certainly, it's become increasingly familiar to see the work of collectives like, say, Group Material or Gran Fury shown alongside contemporaries from the other side of the tracks, such as Haim Steinbach or Jeff Koons. That's a function of the 1980s and even

the '90s coming to be historicized, in museum shows like *This Will Have Been* (2012) at the MCA Chicago or *NYC 1993* (2013) at the New Museum. I think there's some danger that strong graphics become too primary when they're exhibited, while some important conversations get sidelined.



Alistair—your suggestion that activism is something that we (the art world, the institutions of art etc.) 'act out' feels convincing to me, and very familiar. This kind of performance of radical politics, lip-synched by tenured professors, *October Marxists*...

I'm less sure about 'competent' activism though. Paul worries that it's too complacent, but to me it feels a bit self-effacing or self-deprecating. You know, the anger of activism gets pulled into line by good behaviour, common decency, 'mere' competence...



aspects of what would have once been thought of as community or activist art. I spoke to Pablo Helguera about this recently, and he argued that:

Education and social work are deeply unsexy activities. They can be very cumbersome, annoying and thankless. You do these things because you are committed to ideals and projects that might supersede your own life span. The reward is in doing it, not receiving media attention or financial rewards. That's one of the realities of many artists' incursions into activism. If what motivates you is the art world being impressed with the adventures you were able to develop with your work, that's very different from inserting yourself into a social reality and trying to transform it. If you look at the history of activism, or artists who came to prominence in the '70s, it's a never-ending task.<sup>1</sup>



Paul—you mentioned the 'gentrification' of art and activism. Rick Lowe has said he worries that community art is being gentrified by social practice. It's telling that the term is used, because it suggests the anxiety that notionally politicized practices are not only pale imitations of the work of previous generations, but actually *gentrifying* actions. Probably not a coincidence that the title of *The New Yorker's* profile of Theaster Gates was "The Real-Estate Artist". I can't help but think that artists like Gates—whose prominence is so important in terms of mobilizing funds, city support, etc.—are really removed from the more on-the-ground, long-term

Paul—you also mentioned that you see *The Silent University's* format as resisting becoming blurred with the host institution's own mission. I'd agree, but I think that it managed to do this precisely because from the very beginning it sat 'between' institutions. That is, founded in 2012, it was like a collaboration between Tate and the Delfina Foundation. In the first year, Delfina hosted Ahmet, but then began to play more of an active role, hosting *The Silent University's* library, etc. Tate was only involved for the first year, and after that other organisations became involved, like *The Showroom* in London or the *Refugee Studies Centre* at the University of Oxford. Since then, it's moved on to very different institutions in Hamburg, Mülheim, Stockholm and Amman.





The platform was shaped by Ahmet’s visits to a number of community organisations around South London. He regarded this as his context, rather than, say, the learning spaces of Tate Modern. Education departments often pursue projects with a relatively short lifespan. Ahmet wanted to do something long-term that wasn’t just a project or series of workshops, which is important. That’s gestured to by his choice of title, ‘university’ rather than ‘project’. He later found out that it’s actually illegal to call something a ‘university’ without authorisation. This is telling, because I know Ahmet is very interested in how an initiative can be unauthorised but legitimate. Rather than imitating mainstream education, he wanted to transform it on a small scale, using the facilities of existing institutions as progressive tools.

When I spoke to Ahmet about this earlier in the year, he asked, “How can we bring something like this *inside* the institution?”<sup>2</sup> I suppose I’m sceptical about what kind of longer-lasting impact or imprint the Silent University has on the institutions that have hosted it. Certainly I don’t see it as having made any changes or transformations within Tate. I wonder if this was because it was commissioned by the Learning Research team, rather than by the exhibitions team?

There’s an essay by Suhail Malik, titled “Educations Sentimental and Unsentimental: Repositioning the Politics of Art and Education”, where he talks about the potential of these kinds of projects to change institutions from within. He argues that the most visible artist-led education initiatives are more involved with “parasitizing other kinds of art institutions as expanded educational initiatives”<sup>3</sup>. Malik notes that biennials and publicly funded institutions “provide willing host sites for such educational endeavours, their ambitions chiming well with their aim to provide a public good through ‘creative’ activity, or the affirmation of creativity as public good”<sup>4</sup>.

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**From:** Paul Stewart <----->  
**Date:** Monday, 23 November 2015, 14:22  
**To:** Sam Thorne <----->  
**Cc:** Alistair Hudson <----->, Jeni Fulton <----->  
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Sam—with regard to The Silent University, you give great thought especially to how they actually don’t seem to overlap with the overall museum agenda but are instead learning or sidelined activities. I think there is something in parasitizing, and maybe that is what a learning project offers, rather than an exhibition as you have stated, and I would agree that there needs to be a complete overlap of programming across learning and curating for such endeavours to even have the chance to shift agendas from within. I have cc’d Jeni Fulton, a writer and editor, as I think she has also a great perspective on this around ideas of symbolic gestures.

I think, though, that the performativity of such an activity could be a representation, or more, the simulation of change. Maybe it is through the simulation that it is possible to demonstrate how counter or opposing narratives can be formed. I agree in your point, Sam, about the scepticism of the project’s longevity, as it is maybe something institutions need to consider about the embodiment of the aims of the project further than, say, hosting for a short-term commission. Furthermore, I think you hit the nail on the head with Malik, which is my exact scepticism of the current issues with the representation of these practices at present—‘creativity for public good’.

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**From:** Jeni Fulton <----->  
**To:** Paul Stewart <----->  
**Cc:** Sam Thorne <----->, Alistair Hudson <----->  
**Subject:** Re: On the Limits of Activism  
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Hi all,  
 The recent political upheavals in Turkey have thrown the limits of artistic activism into sharp relief. The 2013 Gezi Park protest was driven in no small part by artists—a reminder that the most effective activist art takes place in public, where the bodies on the streets serve as physical disruption and symbols of protest. Confining activist art to the gallery or

museum renders it as a symbolic gesture, as other commentators in this essay have observed.



Recently, Ahmet Ögüt argued that “architects are the better activists”. They are “aware of their own rights, and the collective rights to the cities we live in”. The right to freedom of assembly is, after all, a universal human right, and by circumscribing public space, one automatically infringes on this. In Turkey, architects had a say in whether urban development projects would be approved—a strong indicator of their political influence, and, thus, power. This was removed following the 2013 protests—a typical reaction to ensure that dissident voices are silenced. Nevertheless, Ögüt’s claim deserves further examination.

The debate over public space in Istanbul carried over to last year’s biennial, Saltwater, which was curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. She included Armenian art and made numerous references to the Armenian genocide, but this was neither remarked upon nor censored. It was, after all, not ‘public’, but took place in privately owned spaces. “How can we then talk about the biennial as a public event where freedom of expression exists that is truly public?”, Ögüt asked. Freedom of expression, of course, is a precursor to making political art, but in order for this art to have an impact, it needs to be visible in public, and perceived as political act. Else we risk ‘activist’ or ‘political’ art being reduced to Ai Weiwei’s recent portrait of himself posed as the drowned Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi on a Greek beach, and a group of champagne-sipping patrons ignoring the real world implications entirely.



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**From:** Paul Stewart <----->  
**To:** Jeni Fulton <----->,  
**Alistair Hudson** <----->  
**Cc:** Sam Thorne <----->  
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Thank you Jeni,

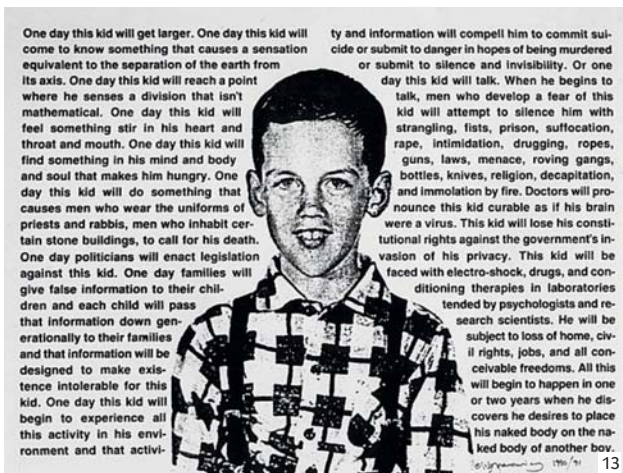
You are right, we need to consider the implications of what is public and what is private, and how a gesture towards activism in private space does seem to only make those champagne-sipping patrons you mention feel better about themselves, rather than what this reaction has to the real world.

Alistair—I want to pick up on the ‘performative radicalism’ you mentioned at the beginning. I cannot help but think about Griselda Pollock, who stated: “[Performance] is more open, without an overwhelming history, without prescribed materials, or matters of content”<sup>45</sup>. Pollock is arguing against the ideas of a structure of sexism that perpetuated a gender

hierarchy, through omission and forgetfulness by institutions and the art world as a whole. I am trying to get at the importance of performance as a practice of radicalism, as a critique of a patriarchal canon, whether that is the practice of Marina Abramović, Andrea Fraser, Carolee Schneemann, the Gorilla Girls, or others. As well: David Wojnarowicz's text work *Untitled (One day this kid...)* from 1990, in relation to ACT-UP (the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power), about the persecution of homosexuality.



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I think we should be mindful of our position and acknowledge the initial representation of performing radicalism and maybe its role to demonstrate what is often excluded. I know we are not specifically talking about this, but Jeni really highlights my issue with activism being canonized into art practice. The idea of art world elites watching a re-enactment of a real world horror to only then discuss its relationship as an artwork just gives me visions of using another's suffering for some need to make the work or institution feel worldly or, worse, wholesome.

I do not wish to go to far off-topics, but my issue with the idea of saying we 'perform radically' in the way you have described is that it is bound up in rhetoric and positions that need to be really interrogated. If we want to successfully offer this idea of 'competence activism,' which I would rather see as just activism...Maybe we should be discussing how the 'act' or 'object' is situated in terms of public/private that Jeni has brought to the fold?

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**From:** Alistair Hudson <----->  
**To:** Sam Thorne <----->  
**Cc:** Paul Stewart <----->  
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I think Pablo puts it rather well in the quote Sam has given, and it illustrates what I mean regarding the distinction between performance and competence—if we take competence to be the ability to do something successfully or efficiently—which, in the context of the traditions of community activity, actions or activism with specific groups, translates as doing something primarily for the benefit and effect of the user groups involved. The ambition here would be 'to get the job done' rather than create 'a project' to be viewed in a historical context or to do it with a high degree of aesthetic surplus (i.e. making a song and dance of it). Of course, there is not always a clear distinction between these polarities, and different projects sit at different points in a graded field between intrinsic and extrinsic, local and international narratives.

Many projects or actions only have the ambition to work within the tight parameters of a particular constituency, but often as part of that there is a need to act up to increase resources, maximise effect, or to fulfil a need to share the story with a wider community of interests. Here, we might



consider the need to raise awareness, to mobilise a population, and this often involves a degree of performativity, you could even say, to operate in the performative frame of the art world itself.

In this light, I am always hesitant to fall into the trap of saying whether something is art or not and more inclined to consider to what *degree* is something 'art', or what is its 'co-efficient of art'.

As we discuss the capture/recapture of activism into the art world, there is an equal and opposite force of capture of art by the world of activism. Here, for example, we might look at the Granby Four Streets CLT bringing in Assemble to assist in their campaign for ground-up regeneration in Toxteth. The point I'm trying to get across here is the highly complex ecology of interdependent relations that are in play when we analyse this—and the danger is that our art-historical bias has a habit of seeing all the world ultimately serving a universal art-historical narrative, which still privileges the idea of autonomous art and, to one degree or another, objecthood.



How endeavours such as the Silent University operate in relation to the 'Institution' as we know it depends greatly on whether we see our museums and galleries as autonomous zones or active players in society. The habit, of course, is the former, and in this scenario as Sam points out, these projects will always have a supplementary relationship to the main business of the day.

With Arte Útil and other related work around Usership culture, we have tried to be quite clear what the terms are—particularly through the *Criteria*—to

drive this home and break away from the mindset of an art world operating in a closed system. To my mind, there is no reason why the Institution cannot also operate in this way, but it will surely take a bold step for those in charge to test out these possibilities.



One of the dangers here is the continuing need for artists and art galleries to operate in an attention economy—to continue a need to produce art, make things visible, produce exhibitions, to generate knowledge within the conventions of museum and expert culture. In these conditions, there is an inevitable pull to perform radicalism, to simulate activism that comes primarily from a need to make art, to play the role of the radical institution, rather than allowing specific and timely demand for a project to initiate an activity.

This is something I've been wrestling with a lot—how to resist the impulse to create and maintain a planned 'artistic programme' and rather to operate in response to urgencies on the ground. It should also be said that, whether we like it or not, there are conventions in art activism that expect a particular kind of aesthetic and behaviour—actions that fall outside these parameters are often harder to assimilate into the canon. This does change over time, and we have seen an assimilation recently of projects once dismissed as too uncool to be part of a grand narrative being brought back 'into the fold'—for example, the recent discourse in Liverpool around The Blackie in the context of the Visible Art Award. However, is there still an expectation for community projects to perform a degree of art-world know-how before they can be accepted beyond their immediate conditions?

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**From:** Paul Stewart <----->  
**To:** Sam Thorne <----->  
**Cc:** Alistair Hudson <----->  
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I feel the term competence could be seen as slightly exclusionary, as I don't feel it acknowledges perspectives I mentioned earlier with Grizelda Pollock or the issues of representation. Picking up on the two definitions of the institution as either autonomous or active players as you position earlier, I think maybe it is more important for the institution to acknowledge its privilege to even choose between these two positions in the first instance.

I feel that art as an action is so important to social change. Maybe it's something that can facilitate a space to open up outside of the dominant liberal politics for different conversations and political ideologies of representation to emerge?

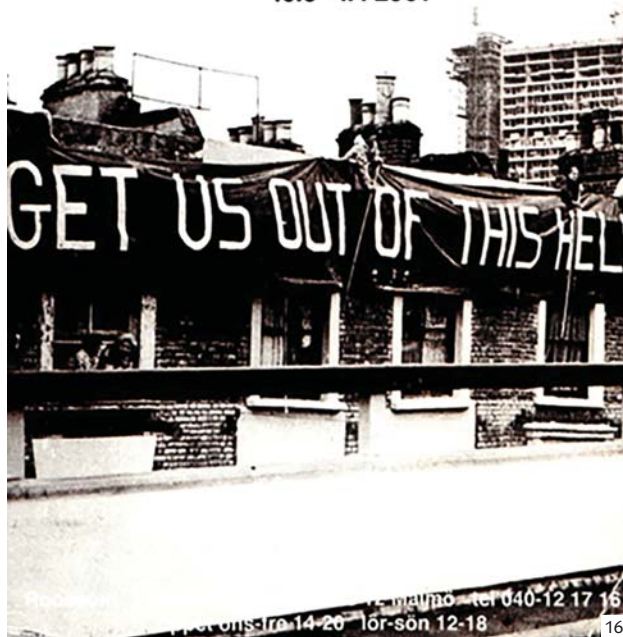
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**From:** Sam Thorne <----->  
**To:** Paul Stewart <----->  
**Cc:** Alistair Hudson <----->  
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Recently I've been going back over some of the conversations of just over a decade ago that emerged around what became known—somewhat uneasily—as new institutionalism. The question that was posed by these experiments with (mostly) mid-sized public art institutions was what might happen when curatorial thinking was directed to every aspect of an institution. Charles Esche, for example, defined his vision of Malmö's Rooseum in 2001 as part community centre, part laboratory, and part academy, with less need for the established showroom function. But funding cuts, governmental pressures, and closures meant that many of these 'new institutions' did indeed end up re-embracing their showroom function.

Over the last five or so years, it seems to me that all of us are saying that certain art institutions are trying to recalibrate again. Many institutions today are thinking about how—as Alistair suggests—activism, education, or civic action could be their *principal function* rather than some peripheral or short-term programme. But how does this get integrated with that 'showroom function'? What can we learn from what Paul calls the paradox of institutional critique, whereby critical practices become (in both senses) institutionalised?

## There's gonna be some trouble, a whole house will need rebuilding

10.3 - 1.4 2001



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**From:** Alistair Hudson <----->  
**To:** Sam Thorne <----->  
**Cc:** Paul Stewart <----->  
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It is possible to see institutional critique as just another manifestation of the 'showroom function,' and I must ultimately contest the conviction that art must be purely representational, a mirror of reality, and cannot ultimately operate beyond this. We must be really careful not to think that the neoliberal agenda has a monopoly on effecting change and equally that 'art practice' has a monopoly on highlighting social issues. Many of the case studies 'Arte Útil' archives cannot be reduced to simply delivering a service but offer hybridisations and relationships in opposition to a dominant system. Art can only produce collective realisation when, through use, re-use, misuse and repurposing, it operates outside of confines of the consensus of an art world. Yet again, I would assert this is not the 'with us or without us' question that this debate has unfortunately been drawn into of late, and we should allow for a more



complex paradigm that accommodates the ecology within which we all operate. As such, the reflective role of art is not lost with the introduction of having a useful function, but rather it is embedded in a broader socio-cultural matrix.

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**From: Paul Stewart** <\_\_\_\_\_>  
**To: Sam Thorne** <\_\_\_\_\_>  
**Cc: Alistair Hudson** <\_\_\_\_\_>  
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Alistair, I do feel you are right about institutional critique 101, but isn't that what we are trying to locate is a space to reclaim some level of agency to critique the dominant structures around us? Maybe we are trying to find how to critique the institution of institutional critique without getting lost in hyperbole and rhetoric? Also I feel this conversation has so far avoided the 'with us or without us' issue you pose, but focused around ideas of recuperation, voice, ownership and the ability to critique. Maybe we should be listening to the questions, 'What about us?' or 'What about something else?' Might those be excluded from the broader socio-cultural matrix you mention? These aspects relate, I think, to what Sam is talking about with a new Institutionalism, but correct me if I am wrong. Is the ambition of some aspects of art practice to open up a space for consideration in which these things might take place?

In reflection, I would say the role of the institution is to be critiqued continuously as to make sure that what might have become invisible to our already predefined subjectivities is not excluded or sidelined, as we have seen throughout art history. What is haunting from this conversation is Jeni's imagery of 'activist' art being reduced to Ai Weiwei's work posing as Alan Kurdi, and a group of champagne-sipping patrons watching on.

That is what concerns me about the institution's/art world's current take on art and activism as a genre of art. Maybe we just need to estrange from this and look for something else?

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**End of correspondence:**  
**Tuesday, 9 February 2016, 12:32**

**Captions**

1 Image of "The Silent University Archive" at Tate Modern, 21.11.2012. Tate Gallery, 2012.

2 Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is...*, "This Will Have Been: This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s" Installation view; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2012.

3 *Gran Fury: Read My Lips* "Welcome to America," left, a billboard sponsored by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1989, was part of the show about the art collective Gran Fury, at New York University's 80WSE gallery, 2012.

4 Jeff Koons, *Play-Doh*, Polychromed aluminum; 120 x 108 x 108 in. (304.8 x 274.3 x 274.3 cm). Bill Bell Collection, 1994–2014. © Jeff Koons

5 Haim Steinbach, *Untitled* (locks, friar, sister) sculpture, Wood, metal, plastic and lacquer, displayed: 860 x 840 x 410 mm 1987. © Haim Steinbach

6 "NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star," Exhibition view: New Museum. Photo: Benoit Pailley, 2013.

7 Theaster Gates surrounded by some of the reclaimed raw material of his trade. The Guardian, Photograph: Sara Pooley, 2014.

8 *Silent University Identification Cards* "Former West: Document, Constellations Prospects at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2013.

9 A Turkish art group preforms in support of protesters at Taksim Square Uriel Sinai/Getty Images, 2013.

10 Ai Wei Wei Recreating the image of the drowned toddler Alan Kurdi, 2015 Image shared via Twitter by David Beard, Screenshot, 2016.

11 The original image that Ai Weiwei referenced of Alan Kurdi, 2015.

12 Carolee Schneemann, "Interior Scroll" Photo by Anthony McCall, 1975.

13 David Wojnarowicz (1954 – 1992), *Untitled* (One Day This Kid...), 1990.

14 *A Showroom for Granby Workshop* by Assemble, Tate Britain, Turner Prize Image by Keith Hunter, 2015.

15 Museum of Arte Útil, 2013–2014 Installation view: Van Abbemuseum, Photo: Peter Cox, 2013, © Tania Bruguera.

16 Exhibition poster of "There is gonna be some trouble, a whole house will need rebuilding" at Rooseum, Malmö, 10.3-1.4.2001. Design by Andreas Nordström, 2001.

**Notes**

1 Sam Thorne in conversation with Pablo Helguera, 2015.

2 Sam Thorne in conversation with Ahmet Ögüt, 2015.

3 Suhail Malik, 2011. "Educations Sentimental

and Unsentimental: Repositioning the Politics of Art and Education." <http://www.bard.edu/ccs/redhook/educations-sentimental-and-unsentimental-repositioning-the-politics-of-art-and-education/>. Red Hook Journal. Accessed: 11.01.2015.

4 Ibid.

5 Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-85*, Pandora, London, 1987, p. 45.

**Alistair Hudson** is the Director of Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art. Hudson's mission for mima is to be a Useful Museum, as an institution dedicated to the promotion of art as a tool for education and social change. Former Deputy Director of Grizedale Arts in the Lake District, which gained critical acclaim for its radical approaches to working with artists and communities that were based on the idea that art should be useful and not just an object of contemplation. He is co-director of the Asociación de Arte Útil with Tania Bruguera and a jury member for the 2015 Turner Prize.

**Jeni Fulton** is a writer and editor based in Berlin. She will receive her PhD from Humboldt University, Berlin, in 2016, and is art/commissioning editor for Sleek Magazine. She contributes to Spike Art Quarterly and frieze.com, among others.

**Paul Stewart** is an artist, curator, and writer based in the UK, currently a PhD-by-practice researcher funded by IDCA (Institute for Design Culture and Arts), focusing on the role of the gallery as a site for learning. His work has been shown recently as part of the Edinburgh Artist Moving Image Festival 2015, and at Bank Street Arts Gallery. Stewart was the curator of the 'Situation Unit' commission series at mima (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) in 2015. His next book chapter, "Art and Commitment: Galleries Without Walls", will be published this year in a book collection on Adult Education by Sense Publishing.

**Sam Thorne** is director of Nottingham Contemporary, a contributing editor and columnist at Frieze magazine, and a co-founder of Open School East. His book, *School: Conversations on Art and Self-Organised Education*, will be published this year by Sternberg Press.