

# Letters

## Ourganisation: An Open Letter of Invitation

"In this utopia the common bond lowers the threshold of doubt." **Barrett Watten**

There has been some talk of DIY culture and 'post-media operators' in recent years and yet one of the facets of such cultural production that gets overlooked is the means of organisation, the institutional creativity that arises to generate and sustains such cultural work, such 'social doing'. In many ways the creative dynamic of co-operation and mutual influence has the added effect of producing the subjectivity of participants and exposing the myth of a separation between the 'individual' and the 'collective' as it has already been instituted by capitalistic social relations. So, with cultural work and 'social doing' becoming central to the economy, such collective self-institutional endeavours (or 'constituent power' as Toni Negri calls it) reveal to us how cultural production is a 'social wealth', a pooling of experience and knowledge, that can be resistant to the private form of ownership.

Such activity can thus mark a shift from the individualist creativity involved in making cultural products to the creativity of the social relations that surround it. It is often the case that groupings institutionalise around a practical activity and by doing so they thus create a context for that activity, create a means of expression, a mode of relating, that can, in its wider political ramification of 'giving voice', create other channels of power in culture that resist and form alternatives to the use of culture as an alibi, as a motor of the economy. Is it not that such activities highlight a variety of human desires that outstrip their deformation into values that can be measured and made profitable? Is it not that the practices they encapsulate are modes of working together? 'living associative labour'? that can find no place in the labour process?

The history of these forms of self-organisation reaches back into the workers movement and autodidactic groups, into avant-garde groupings, into attempts to forge community and into the sound systems, pirate radio and micro-distribution networks of various musical scenes. These initiatives have been a constant means of not only creating physical and psychical spaces for critique and sustainable oppositionality, but of creating different social relations, means of being and doing together that are not imperilled and restricted by the 'need' to be profitable. Maybe, as the crisis of democratic representationality becomes even deeper, as the division between the social, the political and the cultural becomes revealed as a seamless continuum, these self-institutional practices come not only to give us the social confidence to be expressed, but, from that, become forms of revolutionary organisation that do not seek to represent the 'mass', but give articulation to divergent desires; a "freeing of the radical imaginary" as Cornelius Castoriadis has put it.

Maybe this marks a step away from the 60s notion of anti-institution, from the hierarchic and dogmatic political party and the cultural recapitulations of 'alternative spaces', into a wider recognition of self-institutions as creative, constituting forms and not just means of reproducing a bureaucratic and alienated social relation. It maybe, also, marks an acceptance of institutional internalisation or, to put it another way, how we produce ourselves by being together. As Castoriadis has said: 'Individuals become what they are by absorbing and internalising institutions. This internalisation... is anything but superficial: modes of thought and action, norms and values, and, ultimately the very identity of the individual as a social being are dependent upon it. So the first object of a politics of autonomy: help the collectivity to create the institutions that, when internalised by individuals, will not limit,

but rather, enlarge their capacity for being autonomous.'

If, for DIY culture etc, the aim was to secede from an increasingly modelised culture, then, could it be that self-institutional initiatives become organs of an 'engaged withdrawal' or 'exodus' from capitalist social relations? Could it be, after the celebration of the divergent desires that have been given form by self-institutions, that the long term aim of such endeavours could be a re-creation, a re-assessment, of the 'public sphere', a linking-up of dispersed 'public spheres'? This would raise many questions, not least of which would be the status of the 'political' in this society: our cultural production, our 'social experience in the process of organising itself' through a variety of means, represents a social force, a power to create new social relations, that should no longer be separated from us in the form of political force, as the glare of representative politics that reflects back to blind us from our own power.

It is with such notions as these in mind that the Ourganisation project (<http://docs.ourganisation.org/twiki/bin/view/Main/SecBackground>) was developed. It is an open-access web site through which it is hoped that, by means of your participation, we can, together, build up an ongoing resource, archive and tool of collective investigation into the issues of self-institution. This process was initiated by an 'exchange situation' (<http://docs.ourganisation.org/twiki/bin/view/Main/ExchangeSituation>) held at the Copenhagen Free University (<http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/>) and from this it was decided to offer other institutions and self-organisations the opportunity to self-interview and post the result to us in whatever format is most suitable (if it is in tape format we will do the transcription and liaise with you before posting; if it is written out in longhand we will do likewise). It was decided not to offer up a set of questions to participants as it was felt this could overdetermine response as well as foreclose areas that we haven't thought about. We will obviously respect the wishes of those groups and participants who wish to remain anonymous.

comradely greetings,  
Howard Slater

<http://www.ourganisation.org/>

### Flaxman Lodge

-Flaxman Lodge is a transitional space currently located at Flaxman Terrace, London WC1 (020 7692 1693) and online at <http://flaxmanlodge.omweb.org>

-This [the website] is where registered users can post articles, comments, suggest research, discussion topics and events. Users can also upload images, create, move or edit forums, open wiki's and alter the overall look of the site.

-It is also a key administrative motor for the space, with all decisions regarding content, organisation and economy passing through the forums and then into the public domain.

-The forums have been set up to facilitate exchange on all matters related to FL: users can post and respond in the Events (proposals) forum for example, set up open or closed meetings in the Meetings (proposals) forum, or discuss general issues by creating topics of their own.

-The space runs adjacent to the website; here anything proposed and discussed in the forums can be further played out—in meetings, presentations or any other use the space can be put to.

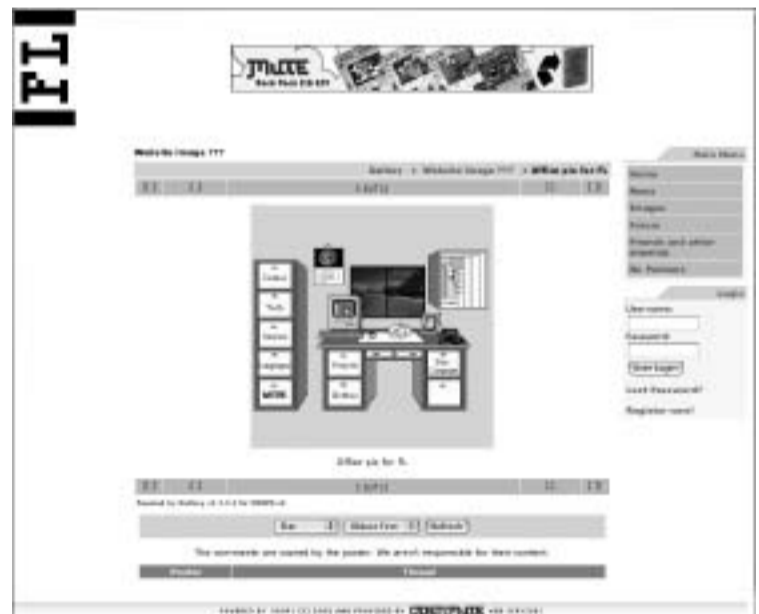
-There are no defined roles, no administrators, moderators, managers, directors, curators, editors,



committees, consultancies or funding bodies attached to FL and whatever happens here will be the result of negotiation between users (on the site, on the phone, in the space). See [FlaxmanLodgeInvite](#) on the wiki.

-There are also no salaries or programming budgets. After the initial six month period, which is secure, the space will operate on a self-financing model or die. Proposals under consideration combine ideas of shadow, parallel and gift economies (eg. via irregular subscriptions, drinks sales, redirected resources/monies/grants, events etc.). See [April1stMinutes](#).

-At present there are 30 registered users and this is now open to anyone who would like to participate.



### FBI Abducts Artist, Seizes Art

**Feds Unable to Distinguish Art from Bioterrorism**

**Grieving Artist Denied Access to Deceased Wife's Body**

#### Defense Fund Established

Steve Kurtz was already suffering from one tragedy when he called 911 early in the morning to tell them his wife had suffered a cardiac arrest and died in her sleep. The police arrived and, cranked up on the rhetoric of the "War on Terror", decided Kurtz's art supplies were actually bioterrorism weapons. Thus began an Orwellian stream of events in which FBI agents abducted Kurtz without charges, sealed off his entire block, and confiscated his computers, manuscripts, art supplies... and even his wife's body.

Like the case of Brandon Mayfield, the Muslim lawyer from Portland imprisoned for two weeks on the flimsiest of false evidence, Kurtz's case amply demonstrates the dangers posed by the USA Patriot Act coupled with government-nurtured terrorism hysteria.

#### Fear Run Amok

Steve Kurtz is Associate Professor in the Department of Art at the State University of New York's University at Buffalo, and a member of the internationally-acclaimed Critical Art Ensemble.

Kurtz's wife, Hope Kurtz, died in her sleep of cardiac arrest in the early morning hours of May 11. Police arrived, became suspicious of Kurtz's art supplies and called the FBI.

Within hours, FBI agents had "detained" Kurtz as a suspected bioterrorist and cordoned off the entire block around his house. (Kurtz walked away the next day on the advice of a lawyer, his "detention" having proved to be illegal.) Over the next few days, dozens of agents in hazmat suits, from a number of law enforcement agencies, sifted through Kurtz's work, analyzing it on-site and impounding computers, manuscripts, books, equip-

ment, and even his wife's body for further analysis. Meanwhile, the Buffalo Health Department condemned his house as a health risk.

Kurtz, a member of the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), makes art which addresses the politics of biotechnology. "Free Range Grains," CAE's latest project, included a mobile DNA extraction laboratory for testing food products for possible transgenic contamination. It was this equipment which triggered the Kafkaesque chain of events.

FBI field and laboratory tests have shown that Kurtz's equipment was not used for any illegal purpose. In fact, it is not even possible to use this equipment for the production or weaponization of dangerous germs. Furthermore, any person in the US may legally obtain and possess such equipment.

"Today, there is no legal way to stop huge corporations from putting genetically altered material in our food," said Defense Fund spokeswoman Carla Mendes. "Yet owning the equipment required to test for the presence of 'Frankenfood' will get you accused of 'terrorism'. You can be illegally detained by shadowy government agents, lose access to your home, work, and belongings, and find that your recently deceased spouse's body has been taken away for 'analysis'."

Though Kurtz has finally been able to return to his home and recover his wife's body, the FBI has still not returned any of his equipment, computers or manuscripts, nor given any indication of when they will. The case remains open.

## Artists Subpoenaed in USA Patriot Act Case (May 25, 2004)

### Feds STILL unable to distinguish art from bioterrorism

#### Grand jury to convene June 15

Four artists have been served subpoenas to appear before a federal grand jury that will consider bioterrorism charges against a university professor whose art involves the use of simple biology equipment. The subpoenas are the latest installment in a bizarre investigation in which members of the Joint Terrorism Task Force have mistaken an art project for a biological weapons laboratory. While most observers have assumed that the Task Force would realize the absurd error of its initial investigation of Steve Kurtz, the subpoenas indicate that the feds have instead chosen to press their "case" against the baffled professor. Two of the subpoenaed artists—Beatriz da Costa and Steve Barnes—are, like Kurtz, members of the internationally-acclaimed Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), an artists' collective that produces artwork to educate the public about the politics of biotechnology. They were served the subpoenas by federal agents who tailed them to an art show at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. The third artist, Paul Vanouse, is, like Kurtz, an art professor at the University at Buffalo. He has worked with CAE in the past. The fourth, Dorian Burr, is a founding member of CAE.

The artists involved are at a loss to explain the increasingly bizarre case. "I have no idea why they're continuing (to investigate)," said Beatriz da Costa, one of those subpoenaed. "It was shocking that this investigation was ever launched. That it is continuing is



positively frightening, and shows how vulnerable the Patriot Act has made freedom of speech in this country." Da Costa is an art professor at the University of California at Irvine.

According to the subpoenas, the FBI is seeking charges under Section 175 of the US Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Act of 1989, which has been expanded by the USA Patriot Act. As expanded, this law prohibits the possession of "any biological agent, toxin, or delivery system" without the justification of "prophylactic, protective, bona fide research, or other peaceful purpose." (See <http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/18/175.html> for the 1989 law and <http://www.ehrs.upenn.edu/protocols/patriot/sec817.html> for its USA Patriot Act expansion.)

Even under the expanded powers of the USA Patriot Act, it is difficult to understand how anyone could view CAE's art as anything other than a "peaceful purpose". The equipment seized by the FBI consisted mainly of CAE's most recent project, a mobile DNA extraction laboratory to test store-bought food for possible contamination by genetically modified grains and organisms; such equipment can be found in any university's basic biology lab and even in many high schools (see "Lab Tour" at <http://www.critical-art.net/biotech/free/> for more details).

The grand jury in the case is scheduled to convene June 15 in Buffalo, New York. Here, the jury will decide whether or not to indict Steve Kurtz on the charges brought by the FBI. A protest is being planned at 9 a.m. on June 15 outside the courthouse at 138 Delaware Ave. in Buffalo.

## Six Subpoenas Issued in FBI Case Against Artist (June 4th, 2004)

Yesterday two more individuals were subpoenaed to appear before a Federal Grand Jury on June 15th. Thus far subpoenas have been issued to: Adele Henderson, Chair of the Art Department at UB; Andrew Johnson, Professor of Art at UB; Paul Vanouse, Professor of Art at UB; Beatriz da Costa, Professor of Art at UCI; Steven Barnes, FSU; and Dorian Burr.

## Help Urgently Needed

A small fortune has already been spent on lawyers for Kurtz and other Critical Art Ensemble members. A defense fund has been established at <http://www.rtmk.com/CAEdefense/> to help defray the legal costs which will continue to mount so long as the investigation continues. Donations go directly to the legal defense of Kurtz and other Critical Art Ensemble members. Should the funds raised exceed the cost of the legal defense, any remaining money will be used to help other artists in need.

To make a donation, please visit:

<http://www.rtmk.com/CAEdefense/>

For more information on the Critical Art Ensemble, please visit:

<http://www.critical-art.net/>

On advice of counsel, Steve Kurtz is unable to answer questions regarding his case. Please direct questions or comments to Carla Mendes: [CAEdefense@rtmk.com](mailto:CAEdefense@rtmk.com)

## Free Range Grain

A project by Critical Art Ensemble, Beatriz da Costa, and Shyh-shih Shyu

