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 “Utopian Strategies: Artists Anticipate their
 Audiences”
The Brooklyn Rail.
 June 2011, page 28-29.

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DISCUSSION AT PROTEUS GOWANUS, MARCH 26, 2011

Carol Becker (Rail): Artists are concerned with the question of audience—the relationship between objects and/or process and audience. They are also concerned with art’s ability to mirror the sociopolitical reality and, in fact, to even transform it. Although questions about the relations between artists and audience have always existed and been theorized, this is a particular moment when the place of art and the act of art making continue to allow people to think utopian thoughts and to engage in micro-utopian actions; therefore, the relationship between artists and audience is even more omnipresent. Utopia by definition is a communal affair—an affair of the commune, of collective possibility. You cannot have a utopia of one, so these acts are by definition social in nature.

Because many competing forces are vying for our attention, distinct publics need to ask, yet again, what are the particular functions that art serves now and how have those functions evolved, changed, reimagined themselves over time? Or perhaps is the experiencing of art—and in its widest understanding we could include theater, film, writing, reading, and, of course, viewing visual art also in this category—that is essential now because art creates a location where people come together as a public to have a shared experience of consciousness given a material form. Art, in its best sense, represents a manifestation of consciousness. Particularly now as so much that we navigate in our world has become disembodied, including has become disembodied, including basic human interaction, the embodiment of ideas in art offers an opportunity to think through complex thoughts with the audience as interpreter and translator, following Rancière. Viewing art in a museum or gallery is a live, physical, and private experience that we nonetheless, have together. Even when we are in such spaces surrounded by people, we are taking in something that affects us personally.



Portrait of Paul Ramirez Jonas. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

We are engaged together in a private moment set in a public space. Art belongs in the public realm—even painting. For me the experience of art needs to be experienced in the presence of others. And, perhaps, at this moment in time, this collective embodiment or action of viewing and participating, has particularly great value as we try to reconstitute a public sphere where we can encounter each other. Art is a place of ideas and as such can serve to counter spectacle culture that reduces everything to a commodity.

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Can art create private space? Can it create public space? And are there virtues to such results?

Janine Antoni was born and raised in the Bahamas, Paul Ramirez Jonas was born in California but raised in Honduras, and Ernesto Pujol was born in Cuba but raised in Puerto Rico. Their own cultural layerings have created another dimension to their understanding of the world and perhaps to the urgency of their work. They all now live in Brooklyn. Let's begin.

Ernesto Pujol: I went to school in the Caribbean and Spain. I studied humanities with a major in fine arts. What I studied was not a definition of art, but a definition of culture. Art had to do with social, political, and economic portraiture; art was the portraiture of a people. After five years of studying humanities and fine arts, I spent four more years in a cloistered monastery, a Trappist Abbey. I gave myself a second education because I did not care for the cynicism of the art world. I was seeking a peaceful utopian community, as well as silence and solitude as ways of fostering interiority in myself and my work.



Portrait of Janine Antoni. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

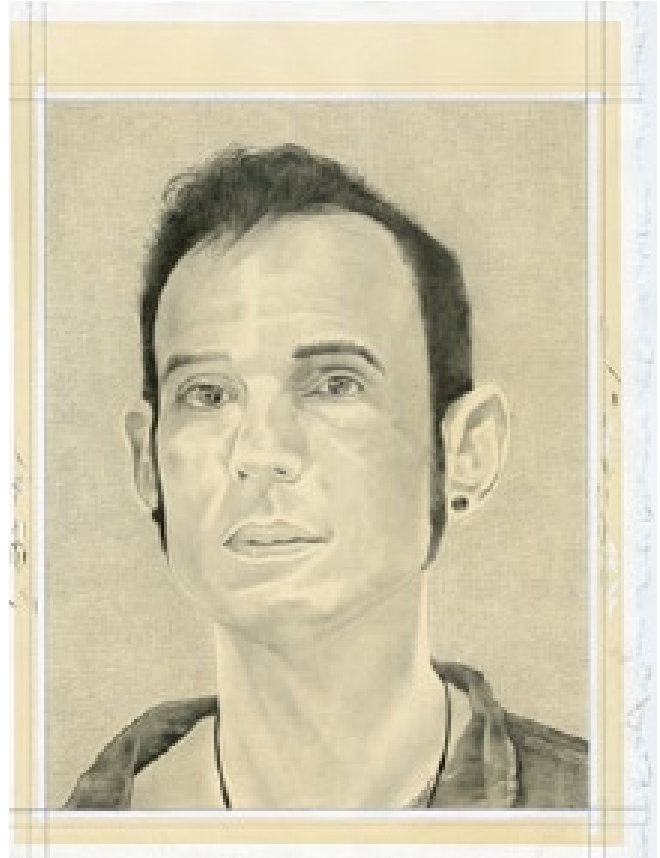
Ultimately, I would say that 30 years later I am still looking for a community of sincere people who approach each other without cynicism. As I became an American artist with roots in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Spain, I felt that the only way we would become a truly tolerant society would be by fostering interiority among the American people. The American democratic experiment could only be sustainable by creating individual and collective time and space for reflection.

The first project I want to share is what I just staged in Salt Lake City at the invitation of the Department of Art and Art History at the College of Fine Arts, University of Utah. For the first time, they created a semester-long artist residency to provide a graduate seminar on a topic they do not teach, such as performance art, culminating in a public art project. So I prepared, spending a year studying American occult religions, historical and contemporary Mormonism, the second internal wave of religious exiles, the crossing of the Great Plains, pioneer mythology, and the history of the Utah territories. I then moved to Salt Lake City and led a performance studio, I also issued a call to the Salt Lake artistic community for all interested in public performance art.

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I recruited 100 volunteers from which 40 performed and the rest were support staff. The resulting durational piece was called “Awaiting.” I was very interested in the Mormon “utopian” social contract of waiting for the end of time, not just as a spiritual but also a physical transformation. I was interested in how that contract created a way of life that was both religious and secular, creating relationships not only between people, but also between them and the environment. There is often very little regard for the environment, because it is going to be transformed, so there is no need to conserve it. Mormon women not only wait for the return of Jesus; widows also wait for their husbands to call them into heaven. Even though there is a goddess—God the father is married to a female divinity—no theology or imagery is allowed about her. Mormon men obey their God; Mormon women obey their husbands, and wait.



Portrait of Ernesto Pujol. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

My performance embodied this collective awaiting as a sunset-to-sunrise durational piece. We sought official sponsorship at all levels, so my proposal was read by the state attorney general. In the end, we were able to perform due to the First amendment: the right to peacefully assemble on public grounds. We tried to democratize public space in Utah, so we staged the performance on the grounds of the Utah State Capitol using its grand public stairway as a kind of Jacob’s Ladder, the communal dream of bodies rising from ground to sky all night long, in spite of bitter cold winds blowing down from nearby mountains. We wore contemporary white clothing; when you enter the Mormon temple, you switch from color to white garments, to imitate being in heaven. And you perform a language of secret encoded hand gestures, much influenced by Masonry, through which the saints recognize each other and communicate. We developed our own performance language of gestures.

During the project, we held three town hall-style meetings, the first at the University of Utah’s Museum of Fine Arts (UMFA), presenting my previous work and the current proposal. The second, one week after the performance concluded, was titled “After the Silence,” because we had been in silence during the 10-hour piece. The community was eager to hear the silent performers speak. What was fascinating was hearing both the performers and the community talk about finally becoming conscious of their individual and collective waiting. It was not a town hall meeting about art, but about claiming and critiquing a regional culture of waiting, particularly

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for women. The final meeting was at the Salt Lake Art Center, mostly for artists, unpacking the piece for those interested in performance as public art.

Anything that hints at religion or spirituality in the art world is like the kiss of death. You might as well move to Kansas (where I actually work a lot). It is fascinating because I am very close to atheism. I call myself a Zen Buddhist, but it is mostly a metaphor for the ethical system I espouse, and for a relationship with nature. I find that even though we like to think that we are beyond religion, the pursuit of other more evolved, secular utopian notions inform and guide our lives—liberalism, socialism, environmentalism—religion is the dirty little primitive secret that still rules the world.

Ultimately, religion is information about the past and present human condition, the sign of an ancestral yet ongoing effort at transcendence that causes terrorism and war, that impacts women’s rights, and gay and lesbian rights. And so it remains a fascinating raw material. As the human animal deals with the inevitability of death, trying to surpass it, utopian mythologies are created. Man and woman are religion-making machines, and I sample from this.

Rail: Ernesto, can you talk about who was the audience for the Mormon piece in Utah?

Pujol: I started that process hoping that it would be the entire city. In fact, my 40 performers walked from their homes, starting from 40 different sites across the city towards the Utah State Capitol, beginning the performance as pedestrians. But, in the end, it became a performance by and about women.

I found that Mormon, ex-Mormon, and gentile women who deal with Mormonism as their overall framework were both the participants and the audience. Out of the 100 volunteers, probably 80 were women; out of the 40 performers, about 30 were women. Something amazing happens during a public project’s process. It gets to be owned by a cross-section of the greater public that claims it as uniquely theirs.

Paul Ramirez Jonas: I’m interested in space, specifically public space, and the two parts of that compound word: what is “the public” and what is “the space” of “public space.” I’m interested in public forms, the form; could be a public road, or a public school, or a public office, or a public monument. What public is related to the forms I have listed? How can I use road, school, or monument forms? They could all be used for some kind of art situation. I can give an example of how I have taken some of these pre-existing forms and used them to ask questions: What can be done with these forms? What public do they address? How can the dynamic be changed?

My first example of a public form that I have used is the Key to the City of New York. Ancient cities were surrounded by walls and, once upon a time, there were keys that allowed passage through those walls. At the threshold between inside and outside of the city, between citizen and non-citizen, you would find the gates to the city. The form of those gates became one of our ubiquitous public monument forms: the triumphal arch. Presently, the “key to the city” has in actuality become a medal. In the case of New York City, the mayor can award a non-citizen the key in recognition of some

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extraordinary deed. My project aimed to do two things: It wanted to take this medal and turn it back into an actual key—one that could open spaces around the city. In order to achieve this, we replaced the locks of 24 spaces around the city so that they could all be opened with a new “key to the city.” All these spaces together were an attempt at creating a portrait of what the city is. For example, we rented an individual P.O. Box, changed its lock so that it could be opened with the “key to the city,” and therefore be shared by anyone who had a “key to the city.” The locks were changed on the gates of a community garden in the Bronx; one of the oldest burial grounds in the city; a locked vitrine housing an American flag outside the office of City Councilman Daniel Dromm in Queens; the kitchen door to the only Tortilleria in New York City that makes fresh masa. Some of the interactions were simple, and some very complex. At the Tortilleria, when you presented your “key to the city” you were led to the door of the kitchen, and once inside, the cooks helped you make a tortilla by hand. This interaction was completely invented and implemented by the participating restaurant, but in addition and quite spontaneously. Things of this sort happened a lot with this project. The public began to sign the kitchen door. By the end of the project, the entire kitchen door, front and back, was autographed by the public. Another space was the baptismal chamber of St. John the Divine; its lock was changed so it could be opened by any bearer of the “key to the city.” Likewise, the lock was changed for a concealed door in the Brooklyn Museum—right next to the George Washington portrait. With the “key to the city” you could now open this concealed door and discover what was behind the white wall of the museum. I also had the chance to change the locks to the actual gates to the city of New York—the double doors in the pedestrian crossing at the George Washington Bridge, which you go through as you enter or exit New York City.

The second part of the project was to do something about the power to award the key. It is the mayor who has the exclusive power to award the key to a non-citizen, or a hero, or a notable person. Through long and careful negotiations with the mayor’s office, it was agreed that this exclusive power would be devolved. The mayor agreed that for one month the new key I designed would become the official “key to the city”; and furthermore, that any of you could award it to anyone you saw fit. On the first day of the project, the mayor came and explained everything I’ve just told you. He declared that for the month of June, 2010 the new key would become the official “key to the city,” and, in addition, anybody would be able to award it to anyone else they chose, for whatever reason. Immediately after the mayor finished his declaration, I used the power he had granted all of us, including myself, and I awarded him the “key to the city.” I’m just a regular citizen, he’s the mayor and he’s never been awarded the “key to the city.” The project could and did begin as I enacted this strange reversal, where I played the part of the mayor, and he the part of the recipient of the key. The main hub of the project was sited in Times Square where a small commons was built; it was staffed by many volunteers. It was open for one month, seven days a week, eight or nine hours a day. Throughout the duration of the project, people would stand in line, and volunteers would prep them for the bestowal ceremony, because giving the key was a ceremony. After a few minutes, participants would get to a booth, where they were given

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the key they would give away. They would also get a passport-sized book that contained the oath they would read out loud to bestow the key as well as directions to all 24 sites. They would then march down a red carpet, enter the small commons, and approach the plinth in its center. The plinth contained ledgers where it was recorded who gave the key, to whom, on what date, and for what reason. And as it usually was a mutual exchange, people filled out facing forms. As they got ready to give the key to each other, they would perform the ceremony and hand each other the key. The entire process, including waiting in line took 15 to 30 minutes. 24,000 keys were made, and we gave 18,000 away. To be more precise, we didn't give them away—people gave them away to each other. The key is a small, metal monument that has many of the characteristics that a monument should have: permanence, ideas of civic duty, pride, and responsibility. The key went further than a normal monument as it connected civic communal ideas to personal motivations—and all along, it made people happy. A very emotional moment in the piece was when Mierle Laderman Ukeles participated. She is one of my heroes. From 1978 to 1980 she shook hands with every sanitation worker in the city of New York, and thanked them personally for keeping our city clean. She is a role model.

Forms such as the “Key to the City” are everywhere. I'll look at a boring and tired-out form such as a boulder with a bronze plaque that is supposed to tell us something important and worthy of permanence. “They” inscribe the public space permanently with a material that can only be inscribed once. Once the metal cools and the message is set, unless you take graffiti to it, it is never going to say something different. I would like a monument that is more like a bulletin board, where any of us can publish our messages. For a project in Porto Alegre, Brazil, I made monuments with boulders and plaques, but I replaced the bronze plaque with a corkboard and push pins. I placed several of these monuments throughout the city. They did not need any explanation or instructions. The public knew how to use them right away. The work created a space for a public to come and fill in. The piece was called “Publicar,” which is Spanish for “to publish.”

Recently, in Honduras, I finished a project called “Dictar y Recordar,” which means “to dictate and to remember.” Honduras has a peculiar history. It has more governments than years of independence. Growing up there, I didn't study a large chunk of our history—it is kind of impossible. We studied independence, our very own civil war, and the present. There were about 100 years that were just too messy to include in our history lessons. There were no comprehensive history books when I grew up. I went back last fall and I created an event that sent out an open call stating that we had hired eight typists from a typing academy and that they would be on duty for a 24-hour period, and that anyone could come at that time to dictate their memories—national and personal. The open call was a challenge and an experiment, asking whether we could write the history of the country in 24 hours, based on our dispersed and individual memories. In comparison to “Key to the City,” very few people participated, maybe 300. But when you think that each one contributed a story or two, it resulted in a substantial manuscript. Part of the work was to make a situation where people told their

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memories out loud. As the memories were typed up they were put on the walls of the space. Visitors could eavesdrop on stories being dictated or read what had been typed up so far. The stories varied from a love story to a 14-page confession about being kidnapped and tortured by the government. The whole range of history was represented.

Janine Antoni: I wanted to start with a recent piece I made for a show that opened at the Hayward gallery and is presently at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. The show is called Move: Choreographing You and its theme explores how the art object choreographs the movement of the viewer. The piece I made for this context is a love letter written from the perspective of an artwork to its viewer. It is written on a torn-out floor plan from the gallery guide, and is slipped into people’s personal belongings when they check their stuff at the coat check. The letter reads:

The minute you saw me, you came straight over and then stopped. As if you couldn’t think and move at the same time, it seemed that you’d come to some conclusion because your thoughts started to lead you with such intensity. It was as though you had taken me into your body, I remained still, quietly absorbing my surrender to your desire. You came so close to me that I felt the breeze of your movement on my surface. Swept away by your burning attention, I felt as if I was made for you. I was completed by your presence. Will you carry me in your memory? Or is that too much to ask?

This letter sums up my relationship to my audience. I have a deep love for the viewer; they are my imaginary friend. When I’m making work I spend a lot of time fantasizing about what the viewer will do and think; I enter their body, and imagine them walking up to my sculpture—what they’re going to think at that moment, and what will call them to walk in one direction or another. I take great care in orchestrating how the meaning of the work will unfold through the physical discovery of the form.

As research for this project I went to the Met to see what people do in front of an artwork. I intentionally chose classical figurative sculpture because I wanted to observe bodies looking at other bodies. I was fascinated. The first thing I learned is that we don’t really look at the sculptures anymore; we look at them through our cameras and iPhones. We pose in front of the sculpture or we pose mimicking the sculpture. The other interesting thing I noticed was how people interact with labels—people are very concerned with the labels. Usually before people even look at an object, they go to the label. Again, photographing the label, audio recording themselves reading the label, writing the label down. What is especially intriguing about this area of the Met is that all the labels are below the sculpture, which creates a strange behavior—everybody sort of bowing or kneeling to the sculpture. I also observed that for some people the artwork is just a backdrop for another social kind of behavior. These two women for example were just chatting about their day; they would walk, stop, and look without interrupting their conversation. As you would imagine the

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museum is also a big date place, so there were couples pausing in silence and holding each other in front of the work for long periods of time.

Which comes to my relationship to the public: I see the public as a group of individuals. It is the intimate moment between the viewer and me that I am seeking. I am interested in the fact that we meet there on the surface of the object. When it comes down to it, I feel very lonely—I feel very frustrated by my own skin. I feel like it separates me from you. My work is a way for me to feel connected and to feel present in the world. I try to make work that elicits empathy. I’ve been known for chewing on 600 pounds of chocolate, being dumped in tubs of lard, and mopping the floor with my hair. I do these extreme acts because I feel like it puts the viewer into a very empathetic relationship to my sculpture. The way we usually approach a conceptual work of art is through objectively decoding its meaning. I want people to think “what did she do to this thing with her body?” and then imagine it themselves. This puts them in a subjective and therefore empathetic relationship to my process.

“Tear” is a recent installation in which I explore empathy from the perspective of the witness. I came up with the idea for the piece after 9/11 when we were about to go to war. I was thinking about destructive behavior. I cast a two-ton wrecking ball out of lead, a soft metal, and used it to demolish a building. Unlike an actual wrecking ball, this one is vulnerable; each strike left it permanently scarred. The ball shows the history of its destructive behavior on its surface.

When I was asked to participate in “Prospect.1,” the first New Orleans Biennial, I did a site visit. I couldn’t help but be struck by Katrina’s presence. I started to think about our delayed response to that tragedy which we all saw on TV. It brought me to think about the nature of seeing: once you have seen, you are responsible. I wanted to connect the wrecking ball to the eyeball. I decided to use a video image of my eyeball blinking. I used the formal similarity between the two balls to bring the unexpected forms together. From there I drew them closer by synchronizing the sound I had recorded of the ball crashing against the building with the movement of the eye. The lid slams shut at the precise moment of impact.

I was interested in the natural reflex of the eye to protect itself physically. We also close our eyes to protect ourselves psychologically, like when we go to a scary movie and cover our eyes. I played with the editing in such a way that you aren’t sure whether the eye is blinking because of the smash or if the blinking of the eye is causing the crash.

In earlier work I thought the most generous thing I could do was to give information as directly as possible. But I think I’m changing. I am now more interested in leaving a gap at the center of the work, like the gap between the ball and the eye. The viewer is asked to bridge this gap, thus completing the story.

Rail: So I have one question for all of you, and it’s about process. Because you each alluded to the research—how you get what you need to know how to make a particular object or event. In a sense you were talking about process. Process is the invisible work behind what artists do. This

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part of the work is very much like scientific research or experimentation. Artists observe, digest, and transform this enormous amount of information into an image. I guess the question is: How do you think about process? Will this work always be invisible? Do you want it to be visible? Usually that part of the work doesn't get translated, except in language— through talking about it.

Antoni: Maybe this is too literal a way to answer your question, but—

Rail: I think it's a literal question, so don't feel bad. [Laughs.]

Antoni: My work is often based on something I don't show. For example, I never show the ball hitting the building. This is important because we are a culture that responds to spectacle. When I remove the thing that people most want to see, I activate the viewers' imaginations. This is a more intriguing and lasting way for me to create meaning.

Rail: That's a great answer.

Jonas: My current attitude to that comes from when I realized that it's not “the public,” but it's “the publics,” and that these publics come in all sizes. In “Key to the City,” something amazing transpired in a boardroom at Port Authority; it led to getting a lock in the George Washington Bridge changed. For that “amazing something” the public was the people in that boardroom. It had a great effect on them, and it had a great effect on me—it was an art experience for eight people. But, there was another part of the same project that was for tens of thousands of people. There are different kinds of audiences for different kinds of projects, and even for different parts of each project. Taking photos and recording process is confusing because the genuine impulse to share and show also means the impulse to take the ephemeral and make it into an object. It also confuses who was being addressed in the first place and the specificity of that address. Sometimes, maybe, it's better to let go of the impulse to show everything to everyone.

Pujol: There is not only a lack of collective history, but also a lack of the history of interiority, of individual consciousness, so that individuals do not know themselves. That is why I think Janine's work is so important, because it is about the individual, about self-knowledge as activated through relationships. Janine performed in “Awaiting,” and this was very meaningful for the women of Salt Lake City. She flew in, humbly walked into the silent performance, performed all night long with us braving the bitter cold, and then very humbly left the next day. Everyone was speechless, amazed at her generosity.

Antoni: And meaningful for me. I learned a lot.

Pujol: I have a commitment to durational performance because it is inconsumable. It is not something you can possess. Photographs and videos are very poor shadows of what actually happened. It is something that you can only experience, like the moon. We see it in the sky. We can only experience it. We cannot put it in our pocket, think that we really own it, know it, understand it.

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I love creating performances that belong to the performer, to the audience, to the architecture, to the wind and the weather, to wild animals, to the passage of time—to innumerable constituents. To create something that, just when the public thinks it is predictable, changes again, so there is always something ungraspable about it.

Rail: Because you work in many locations and with people who are not necessarily artists, how do they handle the situation when you come in and say, “We’re going to do this: Walk up and down the steps of the State Capitol for 12 hours or 15 hours?” Do you find that people organically understand the durational component?

Pujol: This is a process that I trust immensely by now. I do not know if all the participants understand it in the beginning, but they do by the end. The process has a self-editing quality. It is truly an experience that is already happening long before we are performing for 10 hours, walking round and around. By the end, something has opened up and they understand it. They know what they were within; they grasp something of what they just constructed.

Antoni: I have a question, and I think it relates: you told me once that when you were in the monastery the monks woke up at three in the morning to pray over the world, and that they believe that their prayers are having a profound effect on the world. In light of this I have a question about your work: Do you believe, even if you don’t have an audience, that what you’re doing is having an effect?

Pujol: That is a wonderful question. I do believe that. First of all, because my consciousness is my first order of homework, so that, if I am working on it, if everybody worked on themselves, that would be enough. I seek to perform for an audience whom I want to touch collectively, as you want to touch them individually. But, ultimately, whether they are there or not, I believe in the act, even as a solitary act.

Antoni: I have another question in relationship to having an audience: By being in a contemplative state, do you think your audience can enter this space through you? Is this what you desire from your work?

Pujol: In the most performative technical terms, that is what I hope. Technically speaking, if a body starts walking this room, the perimeter of this room, repeatedly, that body is going to eventually create a space-within-the-space. Because it is drawing a second space, all of a sudden we will have to make a decision as to whether there is a threshold, and decide whether we stay outside of it, or enter it. So, performatively, something happens at the purely physical level. At the level of the performer, the zone in which the performer is, something happens there, too. If you are a pedestrian, and you find me in silence, and you become silent, too, now it is times two. And slowly we have a cloister wall. The pebble fell in the pond and now we have a first ripple. And then someone else comes after that and there is a second ripple, so it expands. I believe in that.

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Audience Question: This question of “the gap” keeps coming up and I think it’s so interesting in relation to this question of utopia or paradise because you were also talking about the impossible, and that the gap is that leap towards the impossible thing you’re trying to accomplish. This is an odd question for me to ask in the context of utopianism, but I’m just curious if you had real experiences of failure that have been productive or not, in thinking about Utopia as the impossible, the nowhere, paradise is the walled city.

Antoni: Failure is such an important part of the creative process. My studio is full of boxes filled with failed projects. Often times years later I realize that a work I have made is actually the resolution of many other failed projects. As artists who work in the public realm and within institutions we are often put in a position to convince people to do something that could completely flop. Nevertheless it is our job to push the envelope. We have to maintain our utopian vision and remember that even if a project fails it’s worth it.

Pujol: I think it is interesting when you said, “Utopia, it’s impossible.” Utopia is one of those words that has a really bad rep because it has killed so many people. [Laughs.] The Aryan utopia created a genocide of Jews; and paradise—all the native people who were killed trying to convert them, so they would enter paradise. There is no question that “utopia” is a really problematic term in history as we know it. And yet, I think that what we are aiming for with this term is something very different. It is about a better society, a human condition that evolves.

I think that all artists speak about failure and, yes, it is such an important part of the creative process. But if you fail in public, it is very hard to survive it. It is fascinating to actually fail in public and learn a lot from it, but then watch no one around you learn anything. [Laughs.] And yes, I had two pieces that fell flat because I experimented wildly in public.

We also do not talk about the cathartic element of all this. We are not machines. We are also working out our histories. I had a lot of crimes to put on the table for the first 10 years of my installation work. The performance work is much gentler, definitely.

Rail: I want to say something just because we have so many people in the audience from MoMA, the Queens Museum of Art, and the Brooklyn Museum: Without the imagination of certain people working in such public spaces, it would be impossible for all of you to try to make things you do. It’s a relationship we won’t get to talk about today, but someday we should. And some of these incredible people are here now. Many of these people who are very risk-taking in institutional structures, have a lot to answer for when things don’t work.

Jonas: This is really taking the high-road, but something that I have figured out in shifting from being exclusively an exhibition-based artist to one who works outside of exhibitions is that the meaning of failure is complicated: failure for whom? The first piece that I made that was really public took me two years to make. At the end of it there were no reviews, nothing to sell, and the public who enjoyed and enthusiastically received the piece did not know who made it, nor did they care. It was a failure for my ego. As an artist I have a big ego; I want to succeed. My piece was a failure in relation to that

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definition of success, the one that is attached to my name rather than the success attached to the work or to the public. The question of who you are addressing, and what is failure, are intertwined. Failure is extremely relative. There are many publics for an artwork, and then there are the institutions and the artists. Failure for one of these parties may not be failure for another, and the same could be said about success. So there are no failures or they are all failures.

Rail: Probably a good place to stop. I want to just add one more thing about failure. I'll say it as a writer. My first book, which I spent five years writing, was about women and anxiety and change. But when it came out, I felt the book was 10 years too early. The book discussed things that women and the society did not yet want to hear. Sometimes there is something missing, and sometimes not. Sometimes there is a conflation or integration of history, individual consciousness, collective consciousness—what things are ready to be talked about, when and how. It all comes together or it simply does not. So that's why you can't make an evaluation of work in terms of failure. We are part of a collective consciousness. One of us puts an idea out there and the world may or may not be ready to take it or to think about it, but then down the road someone else will put the same idea out there in a somewhat different way and the world and the collective consciousness will grab it. We're all standing on the psychic shoulders of everybody who came before. Ideas, art, are just drops of water in the pond. At some point everyone is ready to receive them. But you can't ever predict any of it while making something—that's part of the risk and the challenge.

JANINE ANTONI is an artist who is known for her unusual choice of materials such as chocolate and soap. Her artwork captures the human condition and takes on a physicality that speaks directly to the viewers' body.

PAUL RAMIREZ JONAS has been based in New York since 1989. His work currently explores the potential between artist and audience, artwork and public.

ERNESTO PUJOL is a site-specific performance artist and social choreographer. He is the founder and director of the UteHaus performance group and The Field School Project.