What Business Are You In?

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Preface

Frustrated with the conflicting demands on her time as artist, mother, and home worker, in 1969 Mierle Laderman Ukeles declared, "Everything I say is art, everything I do is art." Similarly, artists in this show reconcile their suspicion of the commodity-driven art market with their need to make a living. Drawing on their experiences of corporate and academic life, and incorporating these fields' visual and behavioral codes into their work, they invite us to reconsider art's look, value and function.

For some artists, art/business collaborations have tremendous potential. In her 2002 essay, "What business are you in?" (whose title we borrowed for this show), Lucy Kimbell remarks on the blurred boundaries between art, design, architecture, science and technology. She concludes, "Art practices are also business ventures, we all have to make a living. Is business a new site for making art?"[1]

Unlike first generation conceptual artists, who claimed the moral high ground, these artists are not strictly oppositional. Instead, by highlighting the codependence of individuals and organizations, they evoke the strategic identifications demanded in our ideologically impure times. Carey Young keenly remembers, after five years in the corporate world, "the first time I said 'we' and meant the entire corporation: a sort of personal 'merger' must have occurred."[2] Aware of their dependence on the hands that feed them, these figures harbor no illusions of artistic autonomy. The myth of the rebellious outsider is replaced by a be-suited administrator, researcher or entrepreneur. Concerned with brand identity, artists incorporate logos into their work and outsource its production. Conversely, the CEO emerges as the new celebrity, with a flamboyant personality, penchant for creative accounting and ability to persuade venture capitalists to invest in companies whose profits can evaporate overnight.

The ease with which we talk of the "art market" shows how fully we have internalized the idea that performance and performance evaluation are as appropriate to the artworld as they are to the corporate environment. Perceptions of value affect a company's fate on the stock market as much as an artist's in the art market. But "performance" also dominates higher education, notwithstanding academics' desire to believe otherwise. Academics coming up for tenure are subjected to intense evaluation and students demand customer satisfaction. Despite their own performance anxieties, professors remain sites of identification, with the ability to profoundly influence their listeners. Our expectations of "authorized" speech—in form of the academic lecture, docent tour or public address—makes the spoken word a seemingly neutral, and highly effective, conduit for institutional values.

Yet all institutions call out for resistance, and so the idea that one's day job is a cover for sleuth-like activities has undeniable appeal, especially to someone like me who has spent her working life in offices (in my secretarial days, Martin Sprouse's anthology of officer misbehavior, *Sabotage in the American Workplace*, was never far from my desk). Through mimicry, subterfuge, parody and satire, these artists suggest fresh forms of institutional commentary and critique. Whatever business they find themselves in, minding their own business is clearly out of the question.

Many people worked on this exhibition. Sheep (aka Nick Dalton) introduced me to the work of several artists, which stimulated the idea for the project. Thanks are due to Angela Bilksi and Robert Del Principe at the Adrian Piper Research Archive, Rebecca Cleman at

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William Wood

Those working with contemporary art might feel uncomfortable when asked, "What business are you in?" Myself, I teach, research and write mainly about contemporary art and the history of the avant gardes but none of these activities has—as yet—been reducible to a business bottom-line, I suppose, because the exact product of the activities is—again, not as yet—available for analysis or evaluation in strict business terms. Indeed, something of the repudiation of business models which once sustained the façade of comfort, gentility and connoisseurship veiling aspects of the economics of art remains in the habit of speaking of the "art world" rather than the "art business" and, even more limiting, when the trade in fungibles is deemed the "art market" as if educational, scholarly and display institutions were easily separable from the promotion and actualities of that trade.

Yet, as Thomas Crow has argued, and Andrea Fraser has developed along lines prepared by Pierre Bourdieu, the contemporary art world "is, to a great extent, an economy of services more than of goods."[1] Here consecration and autonomy, cooptation and self-determination, market values and cultural capital contribute to a series of conflicts which define a specific cultural field. That field may contain commodities and dealers, but, as Crow writes:

> Art may have been overtaken by the universal commodity form, but it was (and remains) clearly a commodity with a difference that makes all the difference. Disembodied information about the smallest event in a Brooklyn backstreet or a Venice Beach alleyway can mobilize human energies, financial transfers, and intellectual attention on a global scale. That sort of cultural leverage—in material terms—would have to be measured in multiple orders of magnitude.[2]

Fraser, concentrating more on the question of the interest of producers, claims:

> Am I really serving my own interests? According to the logic of artistic autonomy, we work only for ourselves; for our own satisfaction, for the satisfaction of our criteria of judgment, subject only to the internal logic of our practice, the demands of our conscience or our drives. It has been my experience that the freedom gained in this form of autonomy is often no more than the basis for self-exploitation. Perhaps it is because the privilege of recognizing ourselves and being recognized in the products of our labor must be purchased (like the 'freedom' to labor as such, according to Marx), at the price of surplus labor, generating surplus value, or profit, to be appropriated by another. In our case, it is primarily symbolic profit that we generate.[3]

So, whether encouraging forms of speculation or practicing "self-exploitation" in "the economic world reversed," the forces and values governing the economy most broadly have spread comprehensively throughout every sector of contemporary life and undeniably become part of the culture of contemporary art—"art business," then.

It was, of course, the idea of non-utility, of being beyond mercantile calculation, which promoted that peculiar nineteenth-century notion of artistic autonomy. Such an illusion of leisured aloofness from markets was eroded in the early twentieth century; Yve-Alain work. Instead, whether it be the dilettantish compiling of the scholastically parodic notes for the *Green Box*, acting as broker between artists and collectors, designing catalogues and displays or putting together the reproductions of his work in the traveling salesman's kit of the *Boîte-en-valise*, the public face of Duchamp's artistry after the 1920s was filling secondary and tertiary roles in the art world. Arguably, it was as a post-Second World War public relations representative for his own career—in interviews, photographs and celebrity appearances—that Duchamp filled his most persuasive service economy position.

While this is not the most common reading of Duchamp (or of its more lucrative derivative, the "business art" of Andy Warhol Enterprises), it does offer a way to regard much of the work in this exhibition. As with Duchamp, the main theme or device is the artists' affiliation with and investigation of institutions where supposed or assumed differences between conventional artistic working and the environment of academic and corporate working will prove to indicate links if not an overall homogenization through "self-exploitation" of players in each sector. Alongside runs the growing professionalization of the culture industry since the Second World War, a move that parallels the expansion of universities and colleges, not to mention the proliferation of further levels of administration which includes, for producers and practitioners of many sorts, increasing pressure for post-graduate, university-based training in masters of fine art programs. Similarly, arts administration courses in business schools and curatorial studies and ongoing professional development programs from art history departments ensure a substantial and continuing overlap between academic study and the everyday tasks and expectations of producers and administrators across a wide range of cultural ventures and practices. Where once producers moved from being self-taught or after receiving art-school diplomas to professional practice —or art historians with bachelors degrees "fell" into museum or gallery posts—today, the MFA is almost required to be considered professional and MAs and PhD's in art history look underskilled (or irrelevantly skilled) compared to museum and curatorial studies graduates.

Such moves towards a more professional cadre go together with the application of corporate management techniques and outcomes-orientated strategic planning to "academic life"—like the "art world," a genteel, vocational term to describe simple overwork. Implementation of new programs under number-crunching strictures and performance measurements, intensified quantification of "merit" achievements and professional goals, encouraging students (and their parents) to regard themselves as consumers, each of these and other administrative tactics start with the generally ameliorative goal of accountability and turn it into oversight and surveillance. This is the area occupied by Michael Aurbach's evocation of the lair of *The Administrator*, a 2001 metal construction of malignant and sadistic portent masking as efficient management. Aurbach concentrates on the probing, piercing and literally overbearing role that the bureaucratic "human use of human beings" has on lesser or non-quantifiable areas of life, and it is easy to see his own role as an art professor as one of those areas. If the professor openly fears—but seemingly defies through satire—the power of the administrator, Alex Bag, in her video *Fall '95*, deals with the conflicting demands and desires of the female art student caught up in the midst of instrumentalized instruction, rumors of self-expression, constrictions of gender and cultural attainment—not to mention the depredations of the bombastic but boring visiting artist, the small, small world of studio critiques and faculty-infighting that are some other outcomes of professional models. Another, more traditional take is offered by John Salvest's chewing-gum *Stalactite* accumulating under the student writing-desk, as if accounting for all the misery and self-doubting boredom inflicted by poor teaching and not exactly relieved by multiple-choice evaluation forms and academic growth seminars.

the sometimes dispiriting humour of Bag, Fraser and Salvest, yet administration does bring rationality and clarity to the negotiations involved in the complex relations with funders and benefactors, government representatives and corporate sponsors who have become unavoidable features of what were once not for profit sectors. As Fraser has described, the professionalization of the museum and gallery—and here can be added the professionally managed foundations and politicians quoted in her *Inaugural Speech* for "InSite 1997"—grew from aspirations towards the democratization of culture in the 1960s and 1970s, including the aims of groups such as the Art Workers Coalition and Artists Meeting for Cultural Change. The carving of a professional sphere distinct from the privileged amateurism of the past coincided with neoconservative questioning of government-sponsored culture and an amplification of hands-on corporate sponsorship of the arts as promotional marketing. The result was less a clash of cultures than a meeting of minds as professional identities and managerial consciousness were reinforced by critiques of élitist culture as especially exclusive.

Recalling that moment, with the "de-skilling" and "re-skilling" of artists which Ian Burn analyzed,[6] Adrian Piper's 1982 *Funk Lessons* is notable for its trenchant diagnostics. In offering to contemporary art audiences in art school and university programs the opportunity to learn about and learn how best to appreciate the working-class African-American idiom of funk music, Piper hoped to share her knowledge of the form and its cultural density as well as giving practical lessons in dancing to a predominantly white audience. She knew some (white) acquaintances dismissed the genre as repetitive, sexually unsavory and full of hedonistic bravado but she wanted everyone to "GET DOWN AND PARTY. TOGETHER." Some performances of *Funk Lessons* achieved this aim while others drew out the stereotyping and "fear of the Other syndrome" Piper had hoped to counteract.[7] While the video shows Piper presenting working-class African-American culture through academic analysis and consciousness-raising, there is also a defaced poster advertising one performance—where Piper's name is followed with the hand-written addendum, "The black chick", and her photograph bears a cartoon bubble reading "I'm black. O.K.?"—attesting to the discomfort this sort of "lessons" produced in some fraction of a supposedly liberal grouping.

Irene Moon offers lessons as well, but if Piper occupies a historical context of some intensity, Moon's *My Queen and I,* an "Entomelodic PowerPoint lecture concerning details in the evolution of the sociality of the insect order Hymenoptera," parleys scientific information in a comic mix of lecture, media presentation and musical theater. That she is a trained, professionally employed researcher and artist makes the lecture credible in terms of information if not ridiculous in its seeming subjection to current demands that knowledge be reduced to entertainment and that all things be made comprehensible in the simplest of terms. In another way, involving learning and teaching of a different order, Christian Philipp Müller presents *The Campus as a Work of Art*, from 1997–1998, where through comparison of the overall plan of a recently relocated new campus in Lüneburg, Germany, with the plans of 100 international campuses, he discerns the literal dislocation of knowledge by tracing the migration of the library from the center of campus to its periphery. Presented as a series of silk-screens with Lüneburg University's plan overlaid by those of Harvard, Stanford, Pennsylvania and many others, the new university's priorities seem to put the repository of bibliographical and archival information for research in a nugatory position in the administrative hierarchy. In a second project, also with Lüneburg University, Müller prepared a set of logos and prototypes for mass-produced goods branding different aspects of the university programs. Here, the sort of sweatshirt, coffee

kind of product-tracking, being available for a *Free Evaluation Service*, where, in aurally sealed but visually transparent rooms, she will evaluate persons and "define a set of performance indicators for their practice" no matter what field they come from. This use of techniques associated with human resources departments is also Young's forte, though her work is so riven with reference to Joseph Beuys as to be a conflation of the two, as in *Social Sculpture*, where a short roll of normal beige office carpet uncannily raises the spiritual hobgoblin's wrapped felt and cane pieces that similarly leant against the wall. Entering the last bastions of avant-gardist rhetoric—motivational seminars and venture capital analysis—Young finds that she can take Beuys' proclamation of "Everybody is an Artist" and mix it with his notorious *La rivoluzione siamo noi* to produce a video in which a motivational coach aids her in convincingly announcing, in full corporate costume, the phrase *I am a Revolutionary*.

Young and Kimbell, akin to Fraser in some ways, see the self-consciously business-averse art world as denying its internal workings, its competitiveness, its status markers and its pursuit of singular positions contradicting its convenient faith in its radical past of autonomy from business concerns. It would be too much to say, as some British critics have, that the two capitulate before the corporation because they also work to render transparent some of the veils and willful delusiveness that infects the ways business looks at art and the reverse. A similar thematic is part of Irene Moon's teaching and Müller's notion of the university, where critique seeps from inhabitation rather than direct assault. It could be possible that by bringing corporate architecture's infantile fixation on mirrors and monumental forms to floor sculpture, or the seemingly inescapable iconic association of executives to lions and tigers in his wall work, Jason Irwin is hyperbolically reproducing the glitzy veneer of corporate mental décor. Yet his is also a type of withdrawal not unlike that performed by Gunilla Klingberg in *Non Stop Unfold*, a video shot in a Stockholm IKEA where aisles of piled fresh goods lose something of their immediate allure through the images being quadrupled and presented as a mandala-like hypnotic spectacle, or her *Transtube System*, where a series of the Swedish chain's rice-paper lamps are linked to form a biomorphic, cartoonish figure. The accompanying *Feedback Soundtrack* seems particularly metaphoric—representing not just consuming "noise" but also the notion that, although all is business there is nothing but the look being sold. The thing withdrawn here, protected for the moment by the non-utility it is still possible to experience in some aesthetic situations, is the potential of thinking—even while not living—outside of administered systems.

William Wood is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art History and Visual Art of The University of British Columbia. He has held editorial positions with *C, Vanguard, Parachute* and *Public* magazines and written articles and essays on artists such as Roy Arden, Stan Douglas, Mike Kelley, John Miller, Scott McFarland, Becky Singleton and Ron Terada. He is completing a study of English conceptual art of the late 1960s and planning research on the theme of the artist as charlatan.

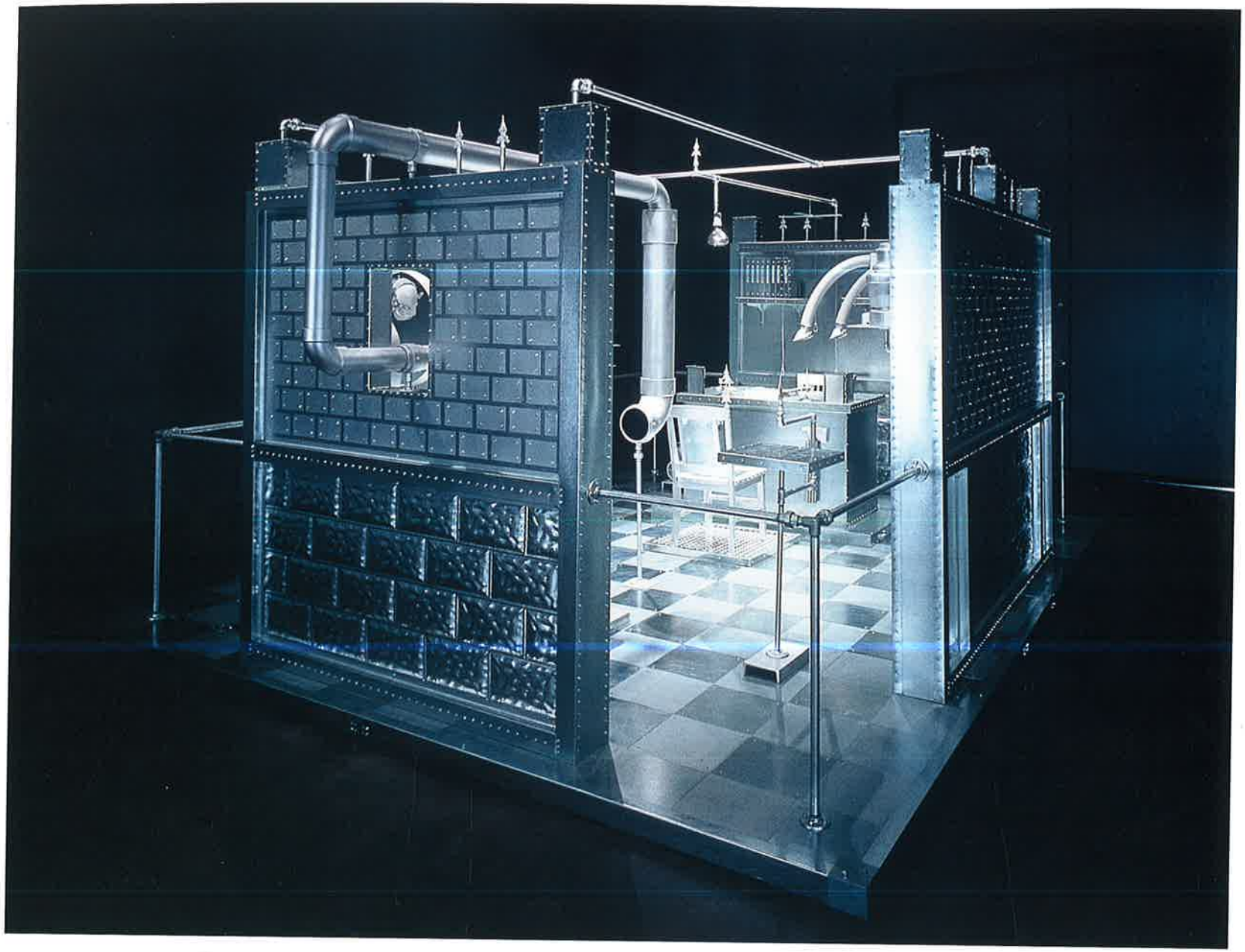
Notes

1. Thomas Crow, "The Return of Hank Herron: Simulationism and the Service Economy of Art," *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (Yale, 1996), 81.
2. Crow, 78.
3. Andrea Fraser, "How to Provide an Artistic Service," at http://adaweb.walkerart.org/%7Edn/a/enfra/afraser1.html.
4. Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: the Task of Mourning," *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture*, (ICA Boston, 1986), 37–28.

Adrian Piper, *Funk Lessons*
November 1983 performance,
University of California, Berkeley
single channel video, color, sound
15:17 minutes
Courtesy the artist

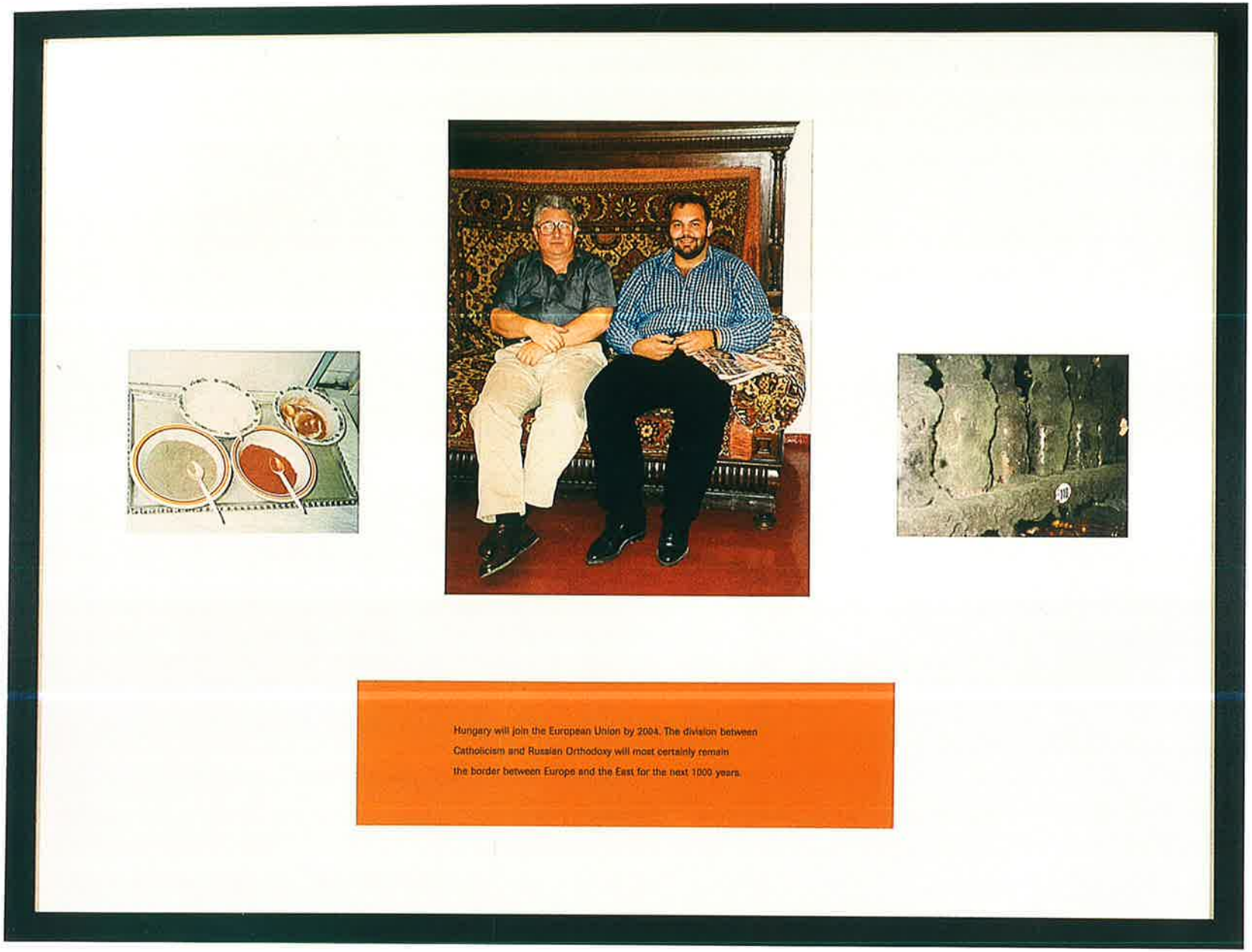
Alex Bag, *Untitled '95*, 1995
single channel video, color, sound
57:00 minutes
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

Andrea Fraser, *Inaugural Speech*, 1997
single channel video, color, sound
27:00 minutes
Courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York

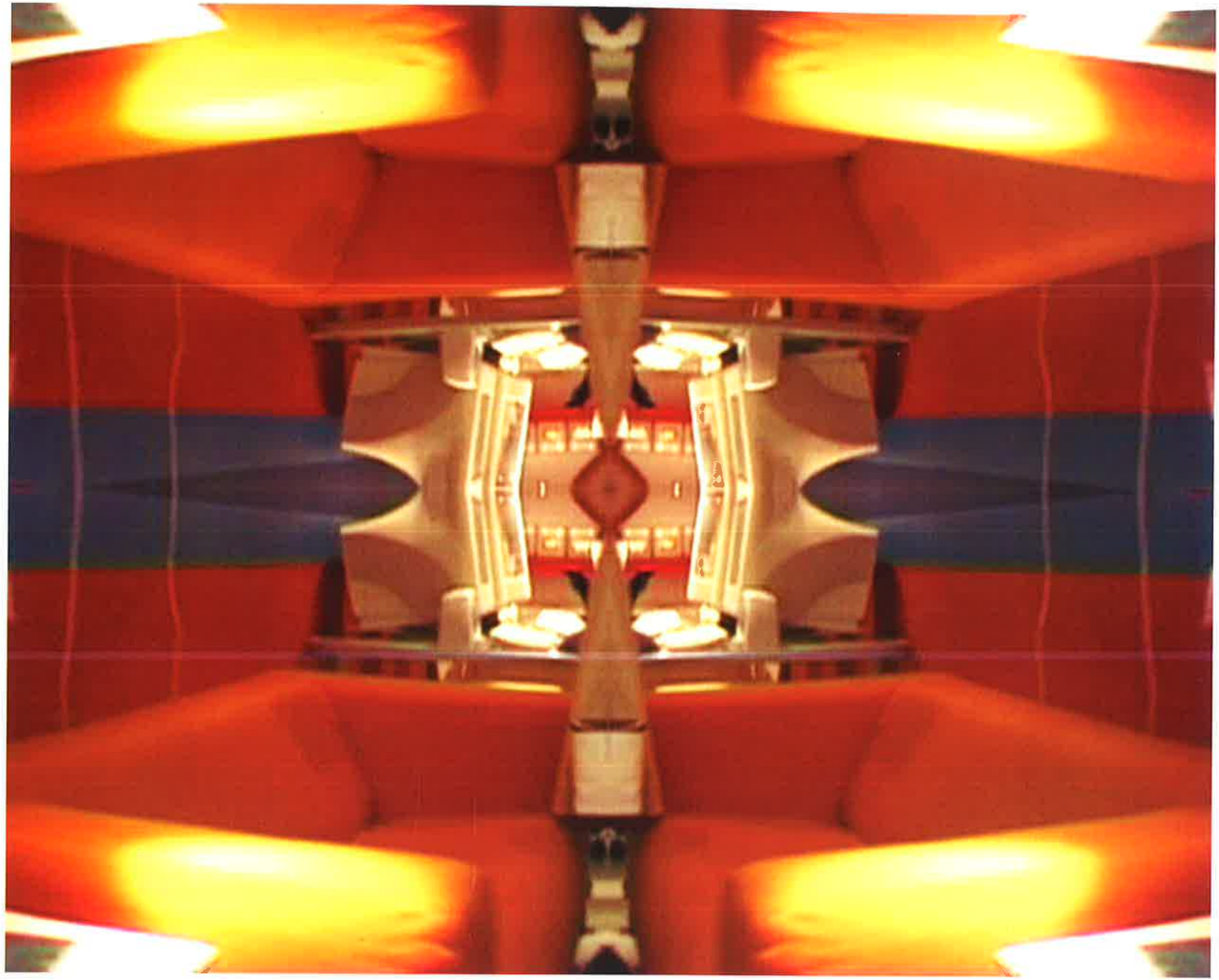


Michael Aurbach, *The Administrator*, 2001
8' x 18' x 12'
mixed-media
Courtesy the artist

Carey Young, *I am a Revolutionary*, 2001
production still



Christian Philipp Müller, *Hungary October 1, 1999*, 2000
(Ferenc Pallagy, Tolcsva, Hungary)
photography and text
38.5" x 58.5"
Courtesy the artist



Gunilla Klingberg, *Non Stop Unfold*, 2001
single channel video
6 minutes
Courtesy Gallery Nordenhake Stockholm/Berlin

Irene Moon, *Charming of Form*, 2002
performance with PowerPoint presentation
Courtesy the artist

Jason Irwin, *Tiger-Gold Edition*, 2003
laser-cut acrylic
68" x 68"
Courtesy the artist

Lucy Kimbell, *Free Evaluation Service*, 2004
performance/service
variable dimensions
Courtesy the artist