

# LISA KIRK AND LIA GANGITANO

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**LIA:** In relation to your project *Revolution* do you see it as a comment on the fact that notions of revolutionary activity have lately been deployed for commercial or aesthetic purposes (i.e. fashion, lifestyle, and so on)?

**LISA:** Yes, but what concerns me is the danger of re-creating or reifying that, inadvertently; or worse, becoming too didactic about this tendency.

**LIA:** I guess there's always a danger that the critique will be lost. It's like John Waters's film *Cecil B. Demented*—he seemed to understand that there's a lot of confusion between what is radical and what is mainstream.

**LISA:** But with a ridiculous level of camp?

**LIA:** No, I don't mean a ridiculous level of camp. I mean he's sort of poking fun at the tendency of a younger generation to adopt revolutionary activity as style. He creates a film ensemble as a supposed countercultural force, with members who tattoo experimental filmmakers' names on their arms and set their hair on fire. I mean, it is absurd, but it is commenting on the sad state of affairs when the revolution is kind of reiterating itself.

**LISA:** What I'm worried about is how to critique that without being didactic—perhaps Waters avoids this via humor and self-effacement. I don't know if this can work in a nonnarrative format, exactly. I really thought that in doing the research about perfume industries, the history of perfume, and perfume advertising, I'd arrive at something that was just going to work. And it hasn't happened so apparently. But, I think it's a successful sort of art idea—people will like that.

**LIA:** Right, but that's part of the problem, actually.

**LISA:** Yeah. So I don't know how to fuck that up. Maybe it has to do with the audience—how to implicate the consumer somehow. So the person who purchases the work has to wreck it or something to that effect.

**LIA:** Right. That's like a Dale Chihuly joke, isn't it?

**LISA:** I don't know who that is.

**LIA:** He's that glass-blowing artist from Seattle.

**LISA:** And then he smashes them?

**LIA:** No, most people wouldn't smash them. But an alternative space in Seattle did a benefit where they raffled one off, and if you won you got to smash it.

**LISA:** Well, maybe that's a good idea then.

**LIA:** I thought it was hilarious. And also, if you're posing a question to the audience: What do you think revolution smells like? It's also very close to what *Comme des Garçons* did with *Odeur 53*—the perfume that smells like “the absence of structure.”

**LISA:** The people who developed that are the same people who are doing my perfume. I don't feel like I'm doing anything new but I wanted to do something that signified the slippage between substance and style that exists—maybe to own or reclaim some of the things that have been corrupted. I think that's a really good place to work from.

**LIA:** Well, I think the seductiveness of revolutionary groups of the past cannot be denied. And, unfortunately, it's made its way into fashion magazines. And you feel guilty because you're supposed to be looking at what they accomplished, but instead you're looking at their clothes. I don't really know about revolutionary fashion or whatever, but it certainly has this '70s ring to it that has its reverberations in style, and often relies on the distancing effect of nostalgia. I can understand this tendency within the framework of retro fashion, but it seems entirely more problematic in the field of art. By aestheticizing radicalism, does this relegate such activity to some kind of past tense? Rainer Werner Fassbinder sort of refrained from commenting on the Baader-Meinhof Gang, for example, because he felt it was too close, too out of control to aestheticize. It's like trying to conduct a revolution using the very mechanisms of the dominant controlling force. Then it becomes a utopian thing, where it's like wanting to change the world using the same means that are oppressing us. We get caught in this bind.

**LISA:** Well, I guess that's why I keep feeling like I can't really get anywhere else beyond a preliminary model. But I feel like there's tons of space to occupy; I'm just not sure how all of the time.

**LIA:** Space?

**LISA:** Well, I think there's a lot of room to operate in art now because so much other space has been occupied for so long. Now that the preoccupation with easily marketable art is waning, there's room opening up for other ways to produce art. But then again, I also feel like there's a brand of supposedly content-driven art that's being recycled.

**LIA:** Right. There's a lot of work that is really just appropriating the facade of a revolutionary or counter-cultural moment.

**LISA:** And putting Aquafresh on it.

**LIA:** Or just adopting a political style.

**LISA:** Yeah, confusing the political and the Warholian.

**LIA:** I do think that Warhol embodied certain politics in the styles that he was appropriating, unlike some artists working today. His images were distilled, not drained of their meaning. I see a lot of work by artists who seem to be obsessed with certain styles or activities from the recent past—but clearly from a position of distance, not like they experienced them directly—kind of with the same lag-time of a fashion trend.

**LISA:** So do you think that Mark Leckey, who is also working with similar images and content, is draining them? Or is he commenting on the idea of an underground, like in his video *Fiorucci Made Me Hardcore*? I think his work is really good, despite the fact that he's my ex-husband.

**LIA:** I think the work is good beyond the obvious fact that the archival footage is great to look at; you see some kind of identification of the artist with this material.

**LISA:** How does he avoid a potentially frivolous approach, like, say, the curatorial efforts of assume vivid astro focus, in which the content, or context, sort of gets lost, and it becomes mainly about visual style and glamour?

**LIA:** I think he stylistically elaborates on it, but doesn't really deal much with the content. Then there is the danger of failing to subvert the nostalgic impulse, because it's merely appropriating, or recombining certain aesthetics, devoid of the cultural context that made them relevant—emphasizing the benign qualities of what were really kind of transgressive or subcultural activities in a way that is equally good-looking, but has the opposite effect.

**LISA:** What bothers me most about this tendency is that it seems like since March 2002, when the general public started rallying against the war and the US government, all protest has been completely erased, and made benign. Art seems to be mirroring this erasure. People were thrown in jail and left there, and then all the footage simply disappears; demonstration is rendered invisible and therefore obsolete. At least the riots in Europe got some coverage. But then again, that was probably because it was over there, and it wasn't here.

**LIA:** Was that the stuff that was drowned out by Michael Jackson?

**LISA:** I didn't know Michael Jackson had another episode.

**LIA:** I was talking about the time Bush went to England and there were massive demonstrations in protest that were conveniently buried in the news of Michael Jackson's latest escapade.

**LISA:** It happens all the time, and people just don't seem to mind because any kind of opposition is meant to seem futile, as if we live in this imperialist government, and there's really no way to get around it. And, you know, the joke is in the perfume. I kind of wanted to build something around that.

**LIA:** Well, I guess these issues of silence and so on, on the part of artists, have yet to be addressed in institutional terms—take for example, the 2004 Whitney Biennial. Who knows if this one will be any different? The last Biennial, with a few exceptions, of course, seemed to adopt a standard of acceptance that the world is completely messed up and we're in this horrible political moment, so art is relegated to the status of giddy reprieve, and isn't it beautiful? Shouldn't we just use art as this placebo to make us feel better? Which of course made some people feel worse. Like, if art is the last place where people can actually resist, comment, and present some sort of outside to the monolithic culture of war—or whatever it is—why aren't artists doing so? But instead of being on the outside, what that particular Biennial showed us is that artists are totally on the inside, enforcing the same dulling kind of amnesia.

**LISA:** Is it symptomatic?

**LIA:** It's symptomatic of the way in which the avant-garde, or the underground, or whatever you want to call it, can be turned into a palatable marketing tool.

**LISA:** What about this Biennial?

**LIA:** This show seems to be moving toward this idea of some sort of exquisite demise. Or a postponed end of the millennium or something. I don't fully understand it—even while making a somewhat vague cultural assessment, with barely any tone of critique, it requires the curatorial displacement via a fictitious curator, as if there can be no real author for even that level of polite critique. I personally hope that the scandal over literary figures like J.T. Leroy will have an effect on the fictitious authors of the art world as well. Maybe it's time to just say what you want to say.

**LISA:** Maybe that's the problem. There is this kind of muteness that comes with being polite, or veiling one's real opinions in polite packages that people want to consume. And with the "success" that comes with pleasing the crowd, people's lives are implicated, their careers are implicated, and all these sort of problems arise. I wonder if we're in a crisis of authenticity.

**LIA:** I'm not sure I really know what authenticity might be in this context.

**LISA:** It seems like the luxury-branding of artists drains any potential sincerity. Art isn't allowed to get beyond that these days.

**LIA:** Well, it seems like everyone wants to be liked so badly all of a sudden, whereas when I think of artists who really took risks and made strong statements, they certainly weren't very well-loved for doing so, necessarily. It can be super-alienating. Or maybe it's a post-Warhol sort of problem, in which wanting to be famous and wanting to have money became the ultimate underground goals.

**LISA:** The idea of the underground is slippery. Maybe everybody does want to be liked so badly, and everybody does need to survive, so there isn't as much visibility for the people who are willing to take certain risks. It can't just keep going the way it's been going.

**LIA:** You mean the market is gonna tank?

**LISA:** No, I don't think so at all, because too many banks are banking on it. It's a bigger market than it's ever been, and that's really good for artists because they can survive. I don't think that's bad. But certain artists can't really make money because they're making work that challenges some

of those very ideas. I guess that's why we see so much painting, so much art that's nice to look at. But there are also a lot of galleries now hiring in-house curators, so maybe there's a chance for things to shift around and maybe the focus can be less on money, and more on quality art that has historical impact, not just relevance. The market is so stabilized now. I just went to another group show containing mediocre work referencing this kind of history of art so you could sell it. We may as well be in one of those mall expos where you can buy copies of masterpieces and paintings of dogs playing cards. It's kind of the same thing, except that a "real" gallery implies that it's reputable and has some semblance of value. So it makes me frustrated, sad, and worried that younger people might not be pushing their ideas hard enough because they don't have to. Then again, there's some really fantastic work being made. Some of it is being shown in more alternative commercial galleries. I think that that's why so much focus is being put on something like Reena Spaulings. People are taking different approaches to dealing with the system of the art market. And that might hopefully supersede the way art history has been dictating itself for the last half decade. One of the things that made me sort of frustrated with teaching art history last semester at the School of Visual Arts was that I kept saying, we're going to look back in ten years, and we're only going to be able to talk about how the art market infected art history, because there's no art history really being made right now. It's really just the art-market focus of art history—the fact that there are art fairs and all these things going on that generate more interest in buying and selling art than actually making interesting art.

**LIA:** But, as you said, it's kind of systemic. It's not only galleries and museums; it's also what is being taught in MFA programs right now.

**LISA:** These kids already have galleries and they're not even done with school.

**LIA:** They are taught how to succeed in a business. We're doing a show next season curated by two artists, Shannon Ebner and Adam Putnam, which is in some way a reaction to the kind of finishing-school/art-market factory of graduate programs. It will favor works that are made for purely experimental purposes—works that were not meant to go directly into the public realm or to a gallery to be sold. That's not why they were made. It's about actually trying something and maybe failing, or making something to trade with a friend, something that has intimate or private value. Historically, people valued

the experiment in a different way from how they valued the finished, mature work. Now it's all the same. Maybe it gets to the point of what the goal or the motivation is. Artists can commit themselves to a studio practice of any kind, for a lot of different reasons, and be just as serious and diligent about making work whether their goal is to become a famous artist, to become a lucrative artist, to have stability in their life, or, if they are trying to actually accomplish something else, to change or critique something. Those things don't have to be mutually exclusive. But I think that the market favors an artist who's committed to success, because that's what ensures that the market will remain strong and stable. You can't maintain that if you're willing to piss off your collectors. I am trying to not be stuck in the past, although my models are not all that current, except for maybe a few. I still kind of stand in awe at the sort of success of Antony and Johnsons, for example, because this is a person whose work is about real issues. So that gives me hope that without toning down the ideas or content, people are willing to listen. That's kind of remarkable. Because one would think, especially in the music field, that there's just nothing like that going on.

**LISA:** I guess I'm feeling more optimistic. I believe that people need authenticity and sincerity, and a sense of realness. And I am relieved to know that I'm not alone here, feeling this way.

**LIA:** I think realness is different from "authenticity."

**LISA:** I guess I'm talking about artists' responsibility to have an authentic kind of approach to things, like a sincere arrival at something. In the past, art galleries were also involved in "authoring" a program or platform for artists and ideas. Everyone worked from a perspective of really giving a shit about what they represented, because there was an acceptance of the fact that they might not make any money anyway. Then all of a sudden this market boom happens, and a false economy takes over the art world and it becomes more of a luxury market. And there are art fairs every five minutes. It's basically another investment industry like the stock exchange, and banks recognize it—UBS brings their clients to art fairs, and tells them what to buy. Not that this is entirely bad, but recently there hasn't been the kind of emphasis on other values besides those defined by the market. A different kind of investment also needs to be made. I think that's what Matthew Higgs was talking about when he said, "I'm gonna change the art world in two years." I think he believes that the good part of the current situation is there's a lot of money for art, so

certain things can happen if you can successfully shift the focus or the dialogue. This idea that he was talking about in terms of networks has stretched beyond the art world just being this provincial space, which was what it felt like when the art market was smaller. It sort of extends beyond just White Columns.

There's also been a lot of space generated by artists curating. Artists are doing shows with people that nobody really knew about, so that affords more space to open the dialogue up. "Bonds of Love" got so much attention—I never expected that. Three of the artists got selected for the Whitney Biennial, and that's great, you know? I think people are starting to recognize that there's something to be said about a perspective that isn't so insular and dominated by the economy of money. And it seems that now there might be more attention focused on artist-curated shows, or galleries that have interesting curators, and institutions like nonprofit spaces—it can't continue to be just the art market.

**LIA:** I think it's complicated. Or maybe it's just overly simple, in a way. I think, for example, Matt Higgs has accomplished so much. He is astutely culling from the history of that organization—which is a really rich history to draw from. He's made it a point to reflect upon the early years, whether it's Gordon Matta-Clark or Sonic Youth. There's a rich, multi-disciplinary archive that people are now ready to look at again. The 1970s are incredibly resonant now. He's sort of reconfiguring this background into the foreground that he creates with his projects, which is also a very diverse platform of artist-driven, artist-centered practices. That's what White Columns was, and what it's becoming again.

I think people have been paying attention to what nonprofits are doing in ways that have been incredibly gratifying. However, that doesn't mean there's an economy that supports what we're doing. So it gets confusing. Because I realize that critical recognition for what we do is not merely about stylistic or aesthetic difference. It's more the core motivation—even if it is painting, photography, or sculpture, which, most often, it isn't—and that our activities have stretched the traditional exhibition format. It's become an unstated motivation for us to work with artists to change the experience of going to a show. Whether it's a live exhibition or live video or a film we make in the gallery, we're very motivated by artists reinventing the whole experience. It's different from what people experience in Chelsea or in a museum. And a lot of the process amounts to failed experiments that lead to successful experiments—people sense this experience. They don't just glaze over and walk out, the way in which

one can robotically walk through a gallery. Maybe the other aspect is that it's a very social space. Matt Higgs is probably pretty good at creating those situations, or maybe that's what he means when he's talking about networks. It's kind of a weird family. People feel at home here as artists, whether they have shown here or not. This is just another line to draw between "commercial" and "noncommercial," or "mainstream" and "alternative." For me, one of the highest values of being an "alternative space," whatever that term means, is not just about physical or financial resources, it's about other kinds of resources—an audience and a peer group that actually cares that you succeed, and that will help you. It's kind of the way that a gallery-roster used to function in the not-so-distant past, when it wasn't just one singular artist doing well that made the gallery good, but rather the whole platform of artists.

**LISA:** That time was exciting, too, because people were breaking through these obvious sorts of answers that we'd been looking at through the '80s.... And then the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for example, caused some kind of shift. It was like we'd been looking at these sort of dumb paintings and glamour-art for so long, and then finally it went to this other place that seemed much more sentimental and content-driven at the same time. And this shift seemed to resonate throughout the entire art community. You know, like, everyone would see that show. Now there are so many galleries in Chelsea that no one can possibly see everything, and it's dispersed. What's really nice is that there are other places generating something else—a dialogue. And for artists who feel like outsiders, like Michel Auder, for example, a sense of belonging somewhere is important.

**LIA:** Well, Michel is like the ultimate outsider on the inside. He has a unique perspective. He can see what's interesting about being in the "in crowd" and chooses to not be in it. He can appreciate it but keep a distance. I certainly have that fascination with successful art dealers who are, for the most part, a great deal younger than me. I'm in awe of their professional skills and ambition—but I realize we probably don't want the same things. Maybe that's the hard part about what Participant Inc. is trying to do. We're trying to reinvigorate a certain energy or model that is perhaps made obsolete by the current state of the art market. We do not necessarily fit into the established structure and we do not really gain the approval of collectors because we don't necessarily have a stable product.

**LISA:** But what about people like Virgil Marti?

**LIA:** That was something very unanticipated. It's fantastic that he has succeeded on his own terms in the commercial sector. But if someone would have asked either one of us at the time we did that show in 2002 if we thought it would sell—we never really thought about it. We kind of vowed to one another we would just do it, even though what we were doing wasn't really particularly feasible. For him to make that show and for us to open the space were both relatively impossible tasks. And, in this case, taking a huge risk, being so far out on a limb, did kind of pay off. We certainly didn't expect it. There was no plan, and there was no strategy. And there was no real expectation.

**LISA:** So do you think it boils down to taste? I think that's what it's about for commercial galleries—that's what having a store is about. I learned that when I was doing a skate park project—we had a store. We thought we were buying things that everybody would want. But then you eventually realize who your client is, and you have to build the store around the client in order to survive.

**LIA:** Well, that's what galleries seem to be doing now. It's funny—for me, the most I've ever thought about "taste" is in relation to Virgil, because, in a sense, one of his key ways of making work is by trying to distinguish what he's learned as taste versus what he just likes. So it's this constant struggle to resist what you aesthetically think is your taste, versus the tacky thing you actually really love—you know, like a suburban kid going to Spencer's Gifts. I remember at a certain age, I would prefer to buy a Queen poster with some bloody robot on it at the record store, rather than some tasteful thing for my room. You know, it's very hard to unlearn good taste. I tend to gravitate toward a lot of artists who are just interested in challenging that. I think I learned a long time ago that, as a curator, sometimes it's the things that you have the strongest aversions to that are really what you think are the best art.

**LISA:** I think Mike Kelley put all that right into perspective...

**LIA:** Well, he's a genius at that. I found it strange that his Gagolian Gallery show didn't get more attention in New York. I don't know if that's just another symptom...

**LISA:** I think it's because it wasn't socially acceptable or easy to deal with. It was disturbing and awkward...

**LIA:** Maybe that's what we're talking about. I don't think it's good to make generalizations about the country as

a whole, but there are certain things about the United States at this particular point in time that are notable. We're also living in a city that used to pride itself on being different. And it's becoming more and more the same as the rest in terms of its conservatism, in terms of our willingness to let the Park Plaza be renovated, and so on. These things that make New York... we are allowing them to disappear. Delancey Street is going to have a blue skyscraper hovering above the Gem store. We're tearing down the Lower East Side to build luxury condos and hotels.

**LISA:** But so much of all of this is about rent. Galleries in Chelsea have to pay crazy rent, so they have to sell art. And they have to show art that's going to sell. Maybe they don't have time to deal with difficult stuff.

**LIA:** I'm not here to congratulate or critique commercial dealers for making or not making money. That's what they're there for. That's what they're supposed to do. However, I think the conservatism of New York in general is being given a pretty clear mirror in the conservatism of the commercial gallery sector right now. So I'm very appreciative of anything that scratches this surface.

**LISA:** Going back to this idea of the underground, maybe it's this "network" model that challenges the corporate grid by not championing the individual. What I feel is so crucial to my experience as an artist is having a dialogue with other artists. I imagine that's what your experience is here at Participant.

**LIA:** Well, I think that's one reason artists like Charles Atlas, Lovett/Codagnone, Kathe Burkhart, or Michel Auder—who I think should be able to show wherever they want—are willing to work with us. It's not like there's a lot of financial support, that's for sure. I get the feeling that they want to have a more meaningful engagement, or some sort of depth to their relationship. I think a sad moment for the not-for-profit was when there was this attitude like, why don't you just drop your painting off and pick it up when the show's over? There seemed to be a period of time in which there was just this lack of investment in the projects, or maybe it was too focused on the curator instead of the artists. Artists want to be given an experience, too, which enables them to make new work, or to network with a new peer group. Or just to be told "do whatever you want, and we'll support it—we'll roll the dice with you." That's why I think people want to work with a space like this.

**LISA:** But what's so nice about what you generate here are projects like John Brattin's movie. This show is amazing. There's this investment—you provide a space and the project gets executed in the space and then it gets presented within the space. It sort of lays out the whole story of Participant. This guy is showing the magic of taking a really small space and creating this huge amount of space. So in a way there's an interesting parallel, I think, to one of the most important things that you do.

**LIA:** Yeah, this project really showed us a lot about what we are. Some of our most successful shows have been when the artist has turned the space into their studio—when an artist literally used the space. Like Julie Tolentino's project—she made her performance, *For You*, during the times we were closed leading up to her show. At that point I was like, we have nothing. We have no money. We can't pay the rent. No one's getting paid. All of a sudden an artist showed us that we have the most valuable thing. We just let Julie in to develop and rehearse for a while during those couple of days between shows.

**LISA:** That was such a great piece.

**LIA:** It was great to realize, when I thought we had nothing, that we actually have something that is so useful to an artist. Also, for Charles Atlas to make his work every day of his exhibition—these experiences absolutely led into working on something like this project with John Brattin. There was nothing I wanted more to exist in the world than another John Brattin movie. He hadn't made one in some years. He didn't have a studio. He didn't have a space to do it in. And we just kind of actualized all these other learning experiences and thought, we can make a movie right here. So you're right, this project is like this microcosm of what it means to work with an artist to make something that they wouldn't have been able to make if you hadn't just made everything you had available—which was not necessarily money, but was more like the space and time between the holidays when we would've been closed. John's film was also very motivational. He has been working in and out of the art world for a long time, with friends and connections outside of the art world, this reservoir of extremely talented people who contributed their time, music, and acting skills. It was just mind-blowing—the idea that you could make something without a huge budget and that people were happy to work on it during a week that they usually wouldn't have to work. They worked like twenty-four hours a day. And then we kind of missed it when it was over. It was a brief

moment in which we perhaps thought we were in this impossible, exhausting situation, but actually we were in the situation that we always want to be in: surrounded by generous, creative people. I don't want to be totally utopian about it, because that's sort of a trap too—like everything's great, we made a movie! There's also a lot of hard work and soul-searching and bills and all that. But it's one of the main points I have to always remember: If there's any relevance to "alternativity" or whatever you want to call it, it is about having other values than the ones that are dictated to you by mainstream culture, such as a big-budget, high-production values, fetishizing technique. In this very rudimentary way, with the making of John's film, these impossible things did happen. It did remind me of the smoke-and-mirrors of running a place like Participant—it's the most humble gestures that come off as the most meaningful. Doing something that you know is slightly impossible in the current economy is a really radical thing to do. It was similar with Julie Tolentino's later project for PERFFORMA05—she literally wore herself out physically to deliver these incredibly emotional experiences for people that she didn't even see (she was blindfolded during her twenty-four-hour piece). One of the other artists in the performance series was walking home after being out at like two in the morning while Julie's piece was going on. He saw the lights on and he came in and was like, I can't believe you're actually doing this. He joked that if it were LA they'd just say they were doing it; but they wouldn't really do it. Then he proceeded to stay up with us all night. There was this overall disbelief that someone would actually put out that much effort. Lots of people are very cynical about how much work it is to be an artist. That's the kind of project we want to get behind and work as hard as we can for, so artists are not alone in taking these risks.

**LISA:** I just had this image of all these artists that have been in this space making things and thought if the space were in Chelsea, it would be a complete spectacle. It would be like visiting a zoo. Like "Look! There's an artist making something!"

**LIA:** Yeah, it's a different context.

**LISA:** There's a certain kind of privacy here that allows you that space. And, it's true, because I remember that people would come in, and would be like, "What are you doing?"

**LIA:** Right, or people who know what it is actually comment a lot. I've had people say it makes them happy

to walk by and just see people doing stuff here. There's a real sense of activity rather than the stillness of a gallery. Even when we have a show up, there's often stuff happening. I mean, I think the worst experiences I've had dealing with the sort of mall-ish feeling of Chelsea were when I thought, I don't feel anything; just a great sense of stillness and ambivalence.

**LISA:** I really do think that's the biggest disease our culture is suffering from, this level of apathy and disconnection. And that's why so much work, even though it has a facade of being something, referencing something, most of the time really has no position, and doesn't really generate anything. There's no emotional content, like Prozac art.

**LIA:** Sometimes an artist will make all of the right choices, but the end result doesn't achieve the intended goal.

**LISA:** Well, maybe this is about spectacle. The spectacle has become so commonplace—the spectacle of war, shock and awe, September 11, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods—we have been shocked out of being able to witness any spectacle without feeling numb, it's as if we don't have the capacity to experience empathy or compassion anymore. And so there is this appropriation of imagery that should be problematic, but there's no reaction and no emotion, no sincere relationship to it.

**LIA:** Well, a strong art-market also levels more difficult work, makes it palatable or invisible. It is difficult to realize that, looking back on the past decade, things like political art, identity politics, the "Black" Biennial, and so on, all seemed to coincide with times of art-market decline. It's such a cliché, so one does not want to accept that it could still happen. And whether it's investment value or fancy parties, it's like, well, what are we selling here? I guess it's like, give the client what they want.

**LISA:** Well, when did we ever think that an art dealer was anything short of a salesperson?

**LIA:** I did.

**LISA:** Yes, it's true. I did, too. People like Pat Hearn, Colin de Land, Simon Watson, and others in the early '90s...

**LIA:** For me it has been this really sad realization that the gallery as a place where art is contextualized and made meaningful has had to face potential obsolescence because of things like the art fair becoming the place

where sales occur. Well, an art fair isn't really a format. It's not even a context. It's completely devoid of context. So if that is where the value of art is determined, then we're in a bit of trouble.

**LISA:** The thing is that this also influences institutions. I think it's a sorry state. It's funny, people ask me if I would want to curate for a museum. I'm like, are you crazy? That'd be like dying.

**LIA:** People ask me that, too. Like wouldn't it be nice to have a job and a salary and insurance?

**LISA:** Yeah, that would be nice. But why would you want to work in an institution? What have I been doing all this time, so that I can go there? It's like being buried alive.

**LIA:** Yeah, that was the section of my essay for the Whitney that never materialized. It was called "Museums Bury the Underground Alive." I took it out. But then I regretted that when an important image by Rene Ricard was edited out. Or they failed to obtain the permission to reproduce it. Although, it was sort of odd because Rene traipsed in here and made me call 411, and I was able to find the contact person using Information. But they couldn't secure that permission.

**LISA:** The power of the institution.

**LIA:** Yeah, I guess they're not familiar with directory assistance.

**LISA:** Our conversation started before the Whitney Biennial and was inspired by the theme of the underground; or the question of what is the underground now—is it historical? It's very typical of your writing to bring all these cinematic ideas in.

**LIA:** Part of the reason I often reference filmmakers is that they provide certain clarity to me in terms of their willingness to collaborate with huge ensembles of people. There's a very familial, social aspect. I'm not an art critic, and I'm not in a position to judge anybody else's work. I'm just looking for positive models.

**LISA:** What I was bringing up by looking at the actual 2006 Biennial are the ways in which institutions try to represent something that they perceive to be underground—which might not be so underground anyway—because it represents a stereotypical image that we've been looking at since the '90s, if not before that. And the other thing I was

feeling was that if they really needed to make that kind of a statement about that particular brand of art, why did they pick the particular artists that they did? Why couldn't they have picked somebody who might be less obvious?

I just was watching this thing on TV and Rosanna Arquette made a documentary with all these rock 'n' roll people. And because in a way rock 'n' roll has been sort of dead, but now it's coming back or something, there was something about rock 'n' roll that she missed. They showed this clip of Chrissie Hynde from the Pretenders in which she said the worst thing that ever happened to rock 'n' roll was fashion, basically stylists. Because they took this thing that was really natural, where you stumbled into a club and you'd see something that you'd never seen before, and it sounded totally different from anything you'd ever heard before—and they capitalized on that and turned it into this sort of commodity, which totally changed the way people perceived the music. And I think the same thing is happening with the art world. It's been co-opted by banks, the media, and collectors; and the museums started the problem. The capital that's built on an art object exceeds the stock market, and it exceeds the gold market, because people's careers can be turned into these giant gold mines. There's no giant record industry backing up this one artist. There's a very small industry. So, you could stand to make a lot of money off of an artist. It just has more economic value.

**LIA:** Especially in any sort of artistic endeavor, whether it's music or art or anything else, the minute people are no longer the authors of their own images, because they're fulfilling a demand, it's going to change things. And this is why I feel like the John Currins and Matthew Barney's, even though they're receding in some ways as models, so clearly fulfill this bourgeois desire for what an artist is—possibly a Republican, really good-looking, a former model, married to a pop superstar, and so on. When I read this thing about the founding of the NEA in the 1960s, it described supporting artists as "the incorruptible outsiders." Nothing could be further from this description than the current crop of "successful" artists.

**LISA:** Dave Hickey said something like, "the right wing seeks to censor any art that might generate healthy anxiety, and the left explains away art's ability to challenge us individually by presenting art to us in perfectly controlled, explained, and contextualized packages." So, that's basically what we're dealing with now.

**LIA:** But he's really talking about a historical moment in which museums were very active in the reshaping of the image of the artist. He was really ahead of the curve in



noticing that. But maybe that's because he worked with institutions, so he could see it coming. Before the market boom just propelled it at a much faster pace into what we have now—kids in art school talking about the salability of their work in crits, as if salability is really a value to be discussed in art school.

**LISA:** Friends of mine have galleries and are producing work for the Armory Show, and they are still enrolled at Columbia—that's how they're paying for it.

**LIA:** Someone was telling me that right now there's this huge market for Dana Schutz's student-work, and that paintings she made in graduate school are actually considered more valuable than the more accomplished work she's making now. Frankly I think it's just an eBay kind of mentality. And this is where the pivotal role of the art dealer comes into play—I don't know that art dealers feel like they have the authority to say no to a collector. Like, no, what you should be buying is this better work. Because, you know, who's gonna say no to the money? I find that to be just sad, a little bit. And I don't really know how to feel like a part of it. I feel completely outside of any sort of market system, really. Then something happens like writing this thing for the Whitney. And you go to that opening and feel like people are like, oh, you're part of this. I'm actually not a part of it at all. I was extremely conscious of the fact that, while I felt very honored to be invited to write, I felt like rebelling at the same time. I selected artists for the reproductions who had been, in my opinion, systematically overlooked or rejected by that particular institution. And, as I mentioned, the concluding image by Rene Ricard was not obtained. I was pretty disappointed because I felt like Rene's poem in this painting was such an answer back to a certain problem. The poem goes something like, "...beware of the styles of other times, you'll never do it right." It's a longer poem, but that's kind of the point of it. This obsession with the styles of the '70s and '80s, for example, is presented as having some sort of political content, which, in fact, has been drained out in its reiteration. I guess that's another part of the institution's embrace of things that have the look of something revolutionary or anarchic or underground, but by the very virtue of putting them in a museum, they no longer have that resonance. That's not a new problem.

**LISA:** Maybe it's because we come from a generation interested in this idea of identity politics, which seemed to get erased really quickly and hasn't really been re-addressed. Now it's starting to look like some of the aes-

thetics of that are coming back, but nobody is dealing with the content.

**LIA:** Well, you can look at so many different throwback moments. I feel like there was some sort of simultaneity between these two different things going on in the art world in the late '80s and early '90s. But maybe in some way one led to the other. I entered the field at a particular moment, when identity politics was really important. And it just seemed necessary to the growth of culture. It occurred shortly after what I recall to be this kind of theoretical moment, when a lot of art was being made that was somewhat of a literal manifestation of certain theories, like text pieces that somehow illustrated Deleuze or something. It was kind of good because it made you read up on certain things. I do feel like it paved a way for identity politics and political art—investing in the idea that art can actually do certain things. I think those things are all related. But it kind of went away....

**LISA:** I feel like we keep going back to the issue of the commodification of political imagery. And then the sort of relational aesthetics thing tries to insert "politics" back into the realm of actions. That's at least what I'm attempting to do—I don't know if I am.

**LIA:** I guess that's why I referenced Fassbinder's film *Beware of a Holy Whore* in the Whitney essay. For me that movie showed the glamorous failure of trying to do something within a system that didn't really want you to try to dismantle it. And how destructive that can be, but how you have to do it anyway. Fassbinder had a real awareness that the culture around him was somewhat hostile, although he was complicit in it. In order to be successful you have to operate in the same world that you're trying to oppose, for lack of a better word. I've never viewed what we do as oppositional. I just viewed it as something that didn't really have a place in the commercial sector, or didn't really have a place in the institution of the museum. But we still want their approval—that's the sort of thing that I feel Fassbinder really put forth in that movie. Like you want to be your own rebellious, crazy self, but you still seek acceptance. The quote I used in the essay is: "It draws a grotesque picture of the relationships within a group that idealistically confronts a society that at the same time dictates the conditions of its functioning." I related to that.

**LISA:** I feel like a lot of what you're saying, or the undertone of what you're saying, is that you're feeling excluded by the institution's championing of individualism. And

that your goal is to evoke a sense of generosity—using your resources to generate work made by artists who normally wouldn't get that kind of support.

**LIA:** Well, I don't necessarily feel excluded. I actually feel like, for example, the Whitney's inclusion of me or Participant via this text is sort of a co-optation of a certain constellation of people that they now do not really have to deal with. I don't feel that I am alone in articulating the purpose of the space. I feel like the meaning and the function of the space has evolved through the articulations of artists. So, while super-honored to reflect on the origins of this in the essay, I feel like the artists who have co-authored whatever Participant is have been somewhat excluded from the Biennial itself. So the people upon whom I base my goals and ambitions and work are not there. And I tried to quietly state that. I don't think I would be the same kind of curator had I not met Michel Auder when I first came to New York, for example. And I wouldn't understand what it means to be an artist who came to prominence in the era of identity politics had I not worked with Lovett/Codagnone. They are currently making their best work ever, which continues to overlap with the present.

I think it's time for you to wrap it up, Lisa Kirk.

**LISA:** I'm supposed to wrap it up? Can I do that later?

**LIA:** Yeah, you can make up the whole thing if you want... Which is what we're gonna have to do. Because there's gonna be none of this talking about the Whitney. ¶¶



