

A Constructed Situation and a Cotton Banner

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Abstract

In 2009, British artist Jeremy Deller's work *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq* entered the permanent collections of three US museums. It is described by the collecting institutions as a "constructed situation and cotton banner." Curatorial research intended to address questions about its future exhibition instead generated further questions about the banner's condition and location, the status of the work's material aspect, and the parameters of particular modes of dematerialized artwork more broadly. The analytical framework is based on notions of care and feminist contributions on the centrality of maintenance. This article posits that both material and immaterial aspects can remain at play in a work of social practice, and its operations exceed its exhibitionary phase.



Installation view Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*, 2009. Photo: Analu Maria Lopez, © MCA Chicago

In 2009, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York opened an exhibit of a new work by British artist Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*. The exhibition consisted of the remains of a car that was destroyed by a bomb on Al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad, maps of Iraq and the US, a cotton banner that read "It Is What It Is" in both Arabic and English, and conversations among many different publics about Iraq.

During the run of the exhibition at the New Museum, between February and March 2009, and in the subsequent iterations that same year at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA), invited guests were scheduled to prompt ongoing discussions with museum visitors about Iraq. According to the artist, these guests included “journalists, Iraqi refugees, soldiers, and scholars with first-hand experience in Iraq.”^[1] The controversy surrounding the 2003 US invasion of Iraq under the George W. Bush administration was that no evidence of weapons of mass destruction was found, though that had been the justification for the war. Although the country was divided about support for this military engagement, few US citizens were familiar with Iraq beyond current events, including its histories and culture. The project intentionally did not communicate an explicit political agenda and was described by the New Museum at the time as “politically neutral.”^[2] Curator Ralph Rugoff has described it this way:

... it was distinctly apolitical, including no explicit protest against the invasion for which it drew criticism from left-leaning journalists (even as some mainstream art critics dismissed the project as activism rather than art). As usual, however, the artist had been more interested in creating open conversations than a platform for readymade opinion.^[3]

Explicit in the title *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq* the conversations were foregrounded and understood to be at the center of this work of social practice.^[4]



Installation view Jeremy Deller: *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*, 2009. Photo: Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago

Speaking to her own experiences as a curatorial fellow at the MCA Chicago at the time, curator Diana Nawi describes the project’s impact: “This was an incredible project changed my life and how I think about what institutions are for and can do, and *who* they are for and can connect with... I first encountered collaborating colleagues and brilliant Iraqis and their families my family is originally from Baghdad so it was extra special in that way... It is among my most treasured professional experiences.”^[5] During the weeks between the New York and Los Angeles exhibitions, New York-based public arts presenter Creative Time co-organized a road trip in which the remains of the exploded car were taken cross-country to continue to elicit these conversations. As they moved across the country, talks were facilitated in fourteen US cities, and the crew included artist Jeremy Deller, US Army reservist Jonathan Harvey, Iraqi citizen and artist Esam Pasha, and curator Nato Thompson.

Most people associate *It Is What It Is* with the road trip, the most extra-institutional aspect of the work. Fewer people know about the exhibitions, and even fewer understand it has been acquired and made available in three public US collections.



Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*, 2009. Photo: Jeremy Deller, courtesy Creative Time

The *It is What It Is* exhibition was supported in part by the Three M Consortium, a collaboration among the Hammer Museum, the MCA Chicago, and the New Museum. Established in 2004, the goal of the Three M Consortium was to partner in the commission, exhibition, and acquisition of new works of contemporary art. According to the New Museum, “All three museums share... the belief that ambitious projects on a national scale can be produced through efficiency, knowledge, and resource sharing.”^[6] All of the Three M commissions are part of the permanent collections of the three museums and are therefore ostensibly accessible to publics across three regions of the US. However, when a particular institution commissioned a work, that museum was responsible for the work’s maintenance and upkeep. In this case, the New Museum would have retained Deller’s banner as the object representing the project in the permanent collection of all three museums.



Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is*, 2009, cotton fabric, 192 x 166 in (488 x 422 cm), collection of New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

The cotton banner was made by British banner maker Ed Hall, who had made banners for Deller's past work. After seeing one of Ed Hall's banners for the first time, Deller describes "[i]t seemed a fantastic combination of the tradition of banner making with a contemporary subject. It was a key moment for me as an artist and that's why he [Ed Hall] is my icon."^[7] Soon after discovering Hall's work, he included it in *Folk Archive*, an exhibition of popular British culture in 2005 with artist Alan Kane. In her book *Fray* (2018), art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson states: "in the case of textiles, fine art and amateur practices are mutually constitutive, constantly informing each other and viewed radically differently depending on context."^[8] As distinct as their forms appear, the constructed situation and cotton banner are different aspects of one work. The Hammer's database describes the work as a "constructed situation," but lists the medium as "cotton fabric." The MCA Chicago simply describes the work as a "constructed situation and cotton banner," but includes the dimensions of the banner: 192 x 166 in (488 x 422 cm).^[9] Although there is a slight discrepancy between their descriptions, both material and immaterial aspects are explicitly identified by each institution.

To be clear, the idea of collecting works of art with little to no material presence is not new. There are many examples in the collection of the MCA Chicago, where I worked when I began this research in 2015. Among them were wall installations by Sol LeWitt and Lothar Baumgarten (to be implemented by strictly adhering to the artists' directives, including working with trained fabricators), a diminishing stack of paper by Félix González-Torres (with explicit parameters on paper, printing, and replenishing), and a Pierre Huyghe work in which a hired actor announces people to the space of the gallery as they cross the threshold. All of these essentially exist by way of certificates of authenticity documents that give evidence of the institution's right to realize the works and, in many cases, inform staff how to construct, produce, or display them. After such works are exhibited, their physical instantiations are concluded, distributed, or destroyed.

Tino Sehgal's *Kiss*, a constructed situation from 2002, is also in the MCA's collection. This work does not allow any form of image documentation or label interpretation. In fact, the work is transferred to an institution by word of mouth, so even the logistics of transfer and information sharing must be achieved without violating the artist's intent for the work's immaterial conveyance. Such works obviously need less physical space and labor to maintain as part of a permanent collection, but they can require a host of other financial resources and forms of human support and participation. At times, they require someone specially trained in a specific work's installation or include the compensation of performers. Their realization, therefore, requires more sustained resources, as well as a more nuanced level of maintenance and care. In the case of Sehgal's *Kiss*, common administrative procedures are interrupted from the outset and a different kind of institutional performance begins even in preparation for the work's acquisition.

In the 1969 catalogue for the Whitney Museum of American Art's exhibit *Anti-Illusion: Procedure/Materials*, curated by James Monte and Marcia Tucker, who would go on to be the founding director of the New Museum, Monte writes:

After visiting numerous studios and galleries, as well as viewing slides and photographs, we discovered that the bulk of the exhibition would be comprised of painting and sculpture which we had not seen and would not see until perhaps one week before the opening date of the show. That this method of putting together an exhibition is risky for the artist as well as the Museum goes without saying.^[10]

A radical shift for curators at that time, decades later exhibitions are very often conditioned by these contingencies. Site-specificity and dematerialization are prevalent in contemporary art practices and have been since the 1960s, and so curatorial and exhibitionary practices since then have also necessarily expanded beyond traditional modes of mediation. This cross-pollination between dematerialized artistic and critical practices was signaled through Lucy Lippard's work. In 1968, Lippard and John Chandler produced their pivotal essay "The Dematerialization of Art," which reflected and set the stage for many explorations of these definitional boundaries. Revisited in the Brooklyn Museum's catalogue for the 2012 exhibition, *Materializing "Six Years": Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art*, Catherine Morris and Vincent Bonin describe Lippard's curatorial and writing practices of the 1960s and 1970s thus: "The assumed differences between a book, an exhibition, or an article in a periodical were supplanted by inquiries into their similarities, or how they could be operationally linked, thereby permanently altering the existing disciplinary models."^[11] More recently, Okwui Enwezor's work not only expanded the political and geographic purview of Western contemporary art, but importantly here also connected multiple platforms under one collaborative curatorial project, as in his landmark Documenta 11 in 2002. Maria Lind has also done extensive rethinking of institutional methods and formats. She describes her thinking on "the curatorial" thus: "[a] way of linking objects, images, processes, people, locations, histories, and discourses in physical space" that can include "curators or artists, educators or editors."^[12] Both the production of art and curatorial research and thinking that engages it have undergone seismic shifts since the mid-twentieth century.

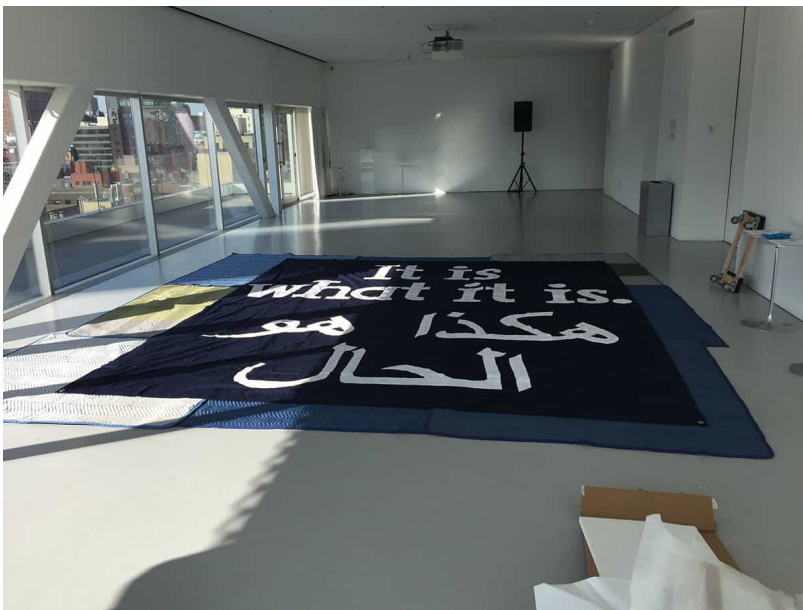
In 2015, I began a Mellon postdoctoral curatorial fellowship at the MCA Chicago. My research at the time was focused on how social practice is collected and then subsequently displayed in collecting institutions by looking at some case studies in which works of social practice had already entered major museum collections.^[13] Art objects associated with social form may be exhibited as archival material, objects or detritus that represent the substance or thrust of a past work, or some object or prompt to reactivate ensuing social encounters. During my initial forays into the MCA's permanent collection, I became interested in *It Is What It Is*. Now that the original project had ended, and it was acquired presumably to be accessed and interpreted by future publics, what was the status of the work, and what part did the constructed situation and cotton banner each play in constituting the work of art? Notes from the collections committee meeting in which the work was officially acquired by the MCA in 2009 explicitly state: "acquisition consists of the banner and permission to restage the conversations."^[14] I found no further parameters that dictate the conditions of its future exhibition.

Considering how to engage *It Is What It Is* outside of its original exhibitionary context meant understanding its visual, discursive, and phenomenological potential. Although there appears to be clear consensus among those involved with the work's original production and presentation that the project was about dialogue, seeing the banner and understanding its role was an early step in the research. Since the work was owned in partnership with the MCA, my home institution at the time, I contacted the New Museum and requested to see the banner, then presumably housed at the New Museum as the Three M Consortium partner responsible for guiding the commission, acquisition, and care of the work. After a brief exchange, my emails received no further response. The collections and exhibitions department at the MCA then began communicating with the New Museum on my behalf, with the same results a brief initial exchange followed by silence. I eventually asked the MCA's chief curator at the time to reach out, and my understanding was that there were requests for me to access the object, followed by further silences that were professionally respected, and then the cycle would repeat. I left my curatorial post at the MCA in 2017 when my fellowship ended without ever having gained access to the cotton banner, despite the efforts of the MCA Chicago's staff.

The New Museum's opacity surrounding the object had brought the banner's status under scrutiny, and I

remembered having seen an exhibition of Deller's work at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. This exhibit, *Joy in People*, originated as Ralph Rugoff's survey of Deller's work organized for the Hayward Gallery in London in 2012. The original survey had included *It Is What It Is*. Because the work would, therefore, have been on display three years after the initial 2009 exhibitions in the US, I contacted staff at the Hayward to inquire. It was then that I learned that the banner in that exhibition had not been borrowed from the New Museum, as the associated publication indicates, but rather re-made. I wondered if the original banner, in the possession of the New Museum, had been misplaced, but after consultation with both Hayward staff and banner maker Ed Hall, I was told that the second generation of the banner was commissioned at smaller dimensions to accommodate the specifics of the different exhibition space.

In my correspondence with Ed Hall about the banner in 2018, he stated that he had made the larger original banner for the New Museum in 2009 and the smaller second version for the Hayward in 2011. He also clearly declared: "No other 'It is what it is' banners were made. It was certainly not made after 2011 only two were made."^[15] That same year, I notified the MCA's then chief curator that I intended to write about the ostensible disappearance of the cotton banner from the collections of the members of the Three M Consortium. Curiously, less than a week later, and three and a half years after my initial request to view the banner, I was notified that the New Museum was, in fact, in possession of the banner. I made an appointment to finally view it on 3 December 2018, when the museum was closed and the banner could be laid out for viewing. Although I inspected the banner and it matched the dimensions of the first generation object, I did not have detailed reference to Ed Hall's work, so was not able to make any assessment on its authenticity, which I took in good faith at that time.



Visit to the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, December 3, 2018. Photo: Joey Orr

Nearly two years later, in 2020, a story was published in the *New York Times* that revealed the New Museum's banner I had seen was not the original. Sam Rauch, the former director of exhibition management for the New Museum, was quoted as saying: "On several occasions, they [museum superiors] asked me if it [the banner] would be possible to refabricate, even without the knowledge or permission of the artist... I had to decline that request and felt very uncomfortable that I had been asked in the first place."^[16] The New Museum has denied this, but it was striking enough news for me to follow up with banner maker Ed Hall. Hall then revised his earlier 2018 declaration that only two banners existed, to now include a third generation of the banner made in 2017.

Regarding his conflicting accounts, he replied that after pulling some notes, he could provide email documentation with the New Museum about the third commission.

In the end, I had at least finally learned over much time and through great effort that the New Museum had not been in possession of Deller's cotton banner when I made my original request to view it in 2015. Frustratingly, it seems like such a simple question that could have been answered so easily among colleagues, but even now many details remain unclear. In an introductory note to the 2018 Paper Monument collection *As salad, as mother, as shelter: What should art institutions do now?*, the editors describe the challenges of getting museum workers to go on record:

... people working within art institutions are placed in a difficult position when asked to comment on their jobs. Many people who wanted to respond for this book simply could not, and those who did respond often had to limit what they talked about and how, sometimes in consultation with their internal censors, and sometimes directly with their superiors. Given how rare testimony from behind the scenes is, we thought a limited account was better than no account.^[17]

This is an incredibly powerful statement, especially as readers of this essay have not been privy to all of the conversations and struggles it took me to extract and reconstruct information from the beginning of this research in 2015 to writing this essay. Although reconciling some of the conflicting claims is beyond the scope of this project, they are precisely the point of its analysis. Given this context, how might dematerialized artistic and curatorial work pass into other futures? When museums fail to support the openness required for the conveyance of such work and ideas, they expose, and as public institutions hopefully acknowledge, their limits in a given moment.

From the New Museum's founding in 1977, Marcia Tucker gave concrete evidence of its commitment to contemporaneity by taking a bold stance regarding its collection policy, intending to only ever hold works produced in the last ten years. Deaccessioning works of art, however, can be difficult and controversial, as museums are expected to hold their collections in the public trust.^[18] It was a radical curatorial experiment whose legacy continues to move through the institution like a work of social practice, exposing the capacities of its own structure.

Today, the New Museum is no longer a collecting institution. Although losing track of the object is certainly not an enviable professional situation, the history of its radical and logistically unwieldy collecting vision was certainly compounded by a new collecting partnership that straddled three institutions, as well as the open question about how to collect works of art that take a social form. Requesting access to the object was simply a habitual early step in my research. Discovering the location and condition of the cotton banner was intended to track the collected material to see if it might reveal something about the social work with which it was associated. And so it did and still does through ongoing questions and various modes of circulation, like the *New York Times* article and this essay. As a discursive art practice, then, the work is still active far beyond the scope of its exhibition.

Although the cotton banner is generally understood to stand in for the constructed situation, the banner itself certainly seems to still be prompting conversations. The possibility of acknowledging the misplacement of the cotton banner created a significant enough anxiety within the institution that it resulted in the intentional and uncollegial obfuscation of information concerning the banner's location and condition. When the engagement of

the work of art resulted in institutional opacity, the work began to operationally shift more toward institutional critique than even the original context it was intended to address.^[19] If the institution is an object of critique, however, we might also remember that the project began as an institutional site of social organization, even as its goals were defined as apolitical at the time. As interdisciplinary artist Zachary Cahill stated in a recent interview: “I’d say if you are trying to organize, you are appropriately situating yourself as an object of critique as well holding yourself to an ethical standard that you want your project to aspire to.”^[20] Being a site for organizing and also an object of critique are necessarily coextensive.^[21]

From the perspective of the initial curatorial research, one point of interest is that an object associated with social practice went missing, while earlier forms of dematerialized art have taken on near canonical status in other institutional collections and exhibition programs. Carolee Schneemann’s performance *Interior Scroll* (1975), for example, exists now in the Tate’s collection as beet juice, urine, and coffee on screen-print on paper. David Hammons’s performance urinating on a Richard Serra sculpture is the subject of Dawoud Bey’s series of archival inkjet prints, *David Hammons, Pissed Off* (1981, printed 2019), and is in the collections of the Seattle Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. There was also the 2012–13 *Materializing Six Years*, which, among other things, took an early treatise on conceptual art by Lucy Lippard and transformed it into a major exhibition and scholarly reconsideration at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. These are only a few examples from a long list of art that continues to serve as crucial moments for imagining different futures.

Such collected and exhibited objects and documents are not, of course, exact equivalents of the original works they reference. They do, however, circulate the performative and critical functions of the works and open the possibility of future social formations around them.^[22] This can provide deeply meaningful experiences for artists, curators, art historians, and other researchers studying their impact on the field of contemporary culture. They are not only historical references, then, but can also catalyze present and future identifications and responses.^[23] The Three M Consortium commissioned the conversations about Iraq, not just the cotton banner as a discrete object, and that was what the institution intended to acquire. At this writing, however, with the revelation of the three existing banners, *It Is What It Is* is now both constricted by and able to leverage its institutional context as a collected work of art, available for ongoing configurations.^[24]

At the time of its commission in 2009, Laura Hoptman was the lead curator for the project at the New Museum. In 2015, while at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) New York, she stated: “*It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq* was both site specific to the U.S., and time specific— during wartime. In another country at a time when there is no war between the U.S. and Iraq, there would be no reason to recreate the conversations.”^[25] In this view, the meaning of the constructed situation was fleeting, as it was relegated to the exact historical and political moments it addressed. Hoptman claimed that it was like the props from Paul Chan’s *Waiting for Godot* in MoMA’s collection, “souvenirs, or artifacts that commemorate the exhibition, which cannot be recapitulated.”^[26] Of course, she is absolutely right in one sense. Situated durational practices cannot be fixed in the way institutions attempt to preserve the more traditionally understood objects with which they are associated. But this view leaves unconsidered the possibility of the work as an ongoing or even active provocation.

The third generation cotton banner that exists in the Three M Consortium’s collections took no part in the 2009 work, so it is not exactly archival, at least in any strict sense. And if it were never to be recapitulated, what then would be the conditions of the “constructed situation”? But the work was recapitulated. For the exhibition, *Joy in People*, at the Hayward Gallery in 2012, *It Is What It Is* was re-staged with the second generation of the banner made at smaller dimensions, the exploded car now in the collection of the Imperial War Museum London maps

of Iraq and the UK, and a seating area. Gallery visitors could, at most times, find someone with a connection to Iraq, like in the US version of the work.^[27] Although the UK's conflict with Iraq was officially over at that time, it certainly was recent enough that it would still have been relevant and topical. Though to Hoptman's point, one critic described this instantiation as an "archive" that seemed forced in its new context. At the time of writing, the 2012 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery is still the only attempt at exhibiting the work outside of its original commission context.^[28]

If we read the piece as if it were a work of conceptual art, in which the work is the idea and not the material that provokes it, similarly, the social relation is not reducible to any one particular, unique object. Deller himself alludes to this when describing the road trip that used the remains of the exploded car alone as a prompt for public conversations about Iraq. He describes the idea of driving the remains of the car from New York to LA as follows: "This would effectively instigate a more random version of what had already taken place in the museum."^[29] There is a kind of equivalency among the material objects meant to prompt the social interaction in this case, the car remains function without the cotton banner. A replacement banner in this context would not disrupt the work in the least. In fact, based in histories of art production that attempt to thwart being subsumed into a system of commodity exchange of which museums are certainly a part, the fact that the banner managed to evade collection might make this piece particularly successful. The constructed situation can still be activated, while the cotton banner is perfectly replaceable and decidedly not a precious object.



Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2009. Photo: Jeremy Deller, courtesy Creative Time

If the cotton banner's status as craft or textile is read in contrast to the constructed situation's status as dematerialized contemporary art, this is a division that Deller's work is certainly not interested in maintaining. Bryan-Wilson offers important insight here, especially with regard to textiles: "Within the twentieth century, art has constantly tested and refined itself against a series of ostensible opposites, such as 'work,' 'life,' or 'craft'; the history of recent art is in part the narration of what happens when those divisions collapse or bleed into each other."^[30] Here the banner is not only tied to craft, but also to the institutional and social work involved in activating and maintaining it, forms perhaps once considered far removed from heady notions of situated contemporary art practice. In the spirit of Deller's work, however, I have come to imagine it after all these years displayed on a wall in a former intern's flat in Brooklyn, thoughtfully illuminated by a red lava lamp on a vintage,

mid-century end table. If somewhere down the line the cotton banner was not understood to be a collection object, despite its formal acquisition through the Three M Consortium, its absence has certainly not rendered it mute.

An early proponent of the comingling of art and life, Alan Kaprow, once explained, “the art is the forgetting of art.”^[31] He also claimed that all elements people, time, space, detritus are part of a work, whether they are aware of it or not, and this insight seems very helpful.^[32] Instead of the constructed situation having some sort of cultural or historical expiration date, as Hoptman suggested, what if it never ended, even after its exhibition? What if the institution and its players are all part of the work, whether they are aware of it or not? *It Is What It Is* could then be understood as another formation of dematerialized art, exposing its roots in conceptual art, institutional critique, and happenings. The institution obscuring its practices, the curator doing the research, and the readers of this text are all elements of the ongoing interaction, the constructed situation that exceeds its moments of exhibition.

In citing some of the work’s precedents, I also want to unsettle the possibility of fetishizing the dematerialized. In an early, widely-cited essay from 1958, Kaprow tracks the merging of art and life through Jackson Pollock’s work and describes his all-overness as a gesture that is “manifestly frank and uncultivated, unsullied by training, trade secrets, finesse.”^[33] He goes on to describe him as “amazingly childlike” and even references ritual and magic.^[34] This kind of romanticizing of everyday ritual echoes the problematic ways in which pre-industrial and non-Western societies have been reduced to encompassing more authentic times of living that are decidedly past on a chronology of progress.^[35] Or as artist, critic, poet, and curator manuel arturo abreu more explicitly traces the problem in a contemporary context in 2019:

Meaning is created socially, in a network of contemplation and action. Focalizing art’s social component is at best redundant and at worst exploitative of the marginalized communities from which it so often draws. Its foundational structure as a terminology and presumably contemporary praxis is steeped in whiteness: in many Black and Brown cultures, the idea of social engagement having aesthetic dimensions is very old (just as abstraction, the aniconic, tropical color palettes, automatism, spirit possession, and other art techniques are very old and nonwhite in origin and were refashioned as new by modernism).^[36]

Framing the social construction of meaning as a recent development in contemporary art severs it from other historical and cultural contexts. But just as socially created meaning is neither invented nor rescued by the rise of social practice in contemporary art discourse, it should similarly not be relegated to an outdated art trend. Or as Irit Rogoff more eloquently describes her notion of participation: “Participation is not an art world strategy. Participation is us. And it cannot be over because we are not over, and therefore this kind of periodization of when we count and when we don’t count is an impossible one for me to think about.”^[37]

When social practice is taken up in strictly formal terms, or when the labor involved is not seen as integral to works about social interaction, it creates a massive erasure of feminist precedents in contemporary social practice. Neysa Page-Lieberman and Melissa Hilliard Potter’s co-curated exhibition *Revolution at Point Zero* at Glass Curtain Gallery in Chicago in 2017 is, among other things, a nod to the work of Silvia Federici, underscoring that the invisibility of female labor has been repeated in the erasure of feminism’s legacy to social practice. Their “Feminist Social Practice Manifesto,” which was circulated on the occasion of the exhibition, states: “We identify the work of feminist artists from performance to protest, to consciousness-raising, to collaboration as equal to any other form of artistic practice, and to reveal the influence of these artists on social practice.”^[38] In an earlier

critique of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, curator Helena Reckitt asserts his "blindness to the role of human and institutional structures of maintenance and support."^[39] She cites visual and performance art scholar Shannon Jackson's example of the maintenance required to continually refresh such works as Félix González-Torres's that invite participants to take paper from an ever-diminishing and invisibly replenished stack, as in the MCA's collection. In her book, *Social Works*, Jackson addresses the supporting systems of socially engaged art. She states: "... the trick will be to place social systems in the foreground of analysis despite the fact that they usually occupy the background of experience."^[40] Foregrounding social systems in works of art means considering their agency beyond their exhibition.

This perspective has been important to my research, which began by simply trying to locate a cotton banner, but has since expanded to consider how researching and caring for the object extended the work's social operation. When an artwork in a collection is directly acting on the institution, decisions about its care are, at least in part, a curatorial concern. In discussing the Whitney Museum of American Art's replication committee, Ben Lerner states: "To treat conservation as it has traditionally been treated as the behind-the-scenes work of minimally invasive technocrats, bursting onstage every few decades during a cleaning controversy and then receding into the shadows is to exclude essential questions about culture and value from the domain of contemporary art."^[41] The New Museum's former director of exhibition management described being redeployed to search again and again for the cotton banner each time I was able to manage a new push to view the object from the MCA's curatorial department. We repeated this performance together multiple times from different departments inside our respective institutions without ever knowing each other.^[42] This performance of research and upkeep suggests that the cotton banner can prompt social relations in ways that reveal value and hierarchy beyond its exhibition, even when the institution is not intentionally activating it for a public good. Riffing on Mierle Laderman Ukeles oft-quoted question from "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!," "after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" in this case, after the acquisition and exhibition, in what manner will social work be maintained and activated in its present and futures?^[43] Or perhaps more to the point, in what future can situated, durational, and discursive practices (art) and their maintenance (work) exist on one continuum?

One curator who worked on the original commission of *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*, Amy Mackie, usefully describes the banner as "a prompt, a prop."^[44] It may be worth considering the prop as Fred Moten describes sharing terms with collaborator Stefano Harney:

... there are these props, these toys, and if you pick them up you can move into some new thinking and into a new set of relations, a new way of being together, thinking together. In the end, it's the new way of being together and thinking together that's important, and not the tool, not the prop. Or, the prop is important only insofar as it allows you to enter; but once you're there, it's the relation and the activity that's really what you want to emphasize.^[45]

But even though this clearly articulates something about the banner, it still feels somehow inadequate when exported as a tool for thinking through how the constructed situation and the cotton banner constitute the work of art together. The prompt is only useful "insofar as" and not "really what you want" as if prompting the work somehow excludes the banner from being intrinsically linked to it. The banner, after all, is only fungible in material, not function. Perhaps slightly more helpful, artist Julie Ault has described such things as exhibitions as "contrivances to punctuate or frame a period of research," outside the temporally unbound inquiry itself.^[46] "Contrivances" that "punctuate" surely have greater capacities to inflect an ongoing inquiry. They can at least

muster trickery and flair. They may not be the point, but they are not exactly beside the point, either.

That the cotton banner is not essential to the exhibition of the dematerialized work of art, but also extends the life of the work seems paradoxical. But the cotton banner, or some other material, is essential in prompting the work in any case, and Ed Hall's work makes it very distinctly a Jeremy Deller piece. Here, it was its absence that gave rise to unforeseen social relations around issues of maintenance and care. Any valuation of the work's social form over the cotton banner ignores the accumulating social life of the banner. It also gives the false impression that a constructed situation leaves no trace or mark in its wake, however personal or embodied. *It Is What It Is* does not vanish into thin air after its exhibition. In addition to a material prompt, the work requires many labors to commission, acquire, care for, circulate, and participate in it. Constructed situations refocus attention by emphasizing the dematerialized aspects of their form, but they cannot exist without the material and institutional supports that enable them. In fact, they at times bring them into acute focus.

What this investigative, practice-based research offers is that the constructed situation is never actually dormant while the cotton banner is active, including at the level of care, inquiry, or even institutional posturing. The Three M Consortium's work was always intended to include maintenance and upkeep beyond the fleeting moments of commission and exhibition. In fact, the periods of exhibition seem like fugitive moments compared to the longer duration of the artwork's life. The manner in which the constructed situation and cotton banner will be exhibited in the future remains an open question. Will the work be enlivened by some unforeseen development in US relations to Iraq or some transformation of Iraq on the world stage, turning its former exhibition structure toward a future that will need it? Will the curator see herself as re-launching the work, or as making public again an ongoing operation that was begun in 2009? In whatever manner it happens, will the institution have readied itself for the next brief moment in which the constructed situation and the cotton banner might do their more public-facing work?

Footnotes

1. Deller, Jeremy. *It Is What It Is*. New York, NY: Creative Time. 2010. p. 1.
2. New Museum and Creative Time press release. New Museum and Creative Time Present *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*, A New Commission By Jeremy Deller For The Three M Project. New York. December 19, 2008.
3. Rugoff, Ralph. "Middle Class Hero." In *Joy in People*. London: Hayward Publishing. 2012. p. 19.
4. Social practice in contemporary art has many conflicting histories, but loosely described, it is considered an artistic practice that centers social relation in one form or another as the locus of the work of art. Suzanne Lacy's *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (1995) and Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998) are two early and very differently oriented defining texts. Debates over this category of practice have passionately continued, however, including origins in early avant-gardes and also cultural precedents outside the Western canon.
5. Email from Los Angeles-based independent curator Diana Nawi to the author, February 13, 2021.
6. New Museum of Contemporary Art. Three M Project. See <https://archive.newmuseum.org/series/1564> (accessed 2021-01-18).
7. British Council, Visual Arts. "On the March—An Exhibition of Banners Made by Ed Hall." 2011. Available at

- <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/exhibitions/exhibition/on-the-march-an-exhibition-of-banners-made-by-ed-hall-2011> (accessed 2021-02-03).
8. Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: art + textile politics*. Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press. 2017. p. 5.
 9. The New Museum agrees with the description used by both the Hammer and MCA Chicago, as confirmed by. Abby Leopold, New Museum registrar, in an email to the author, January 29, 2021.
 10. Cited in Reiss, Julie. *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*. Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press. 1999. pp. 82-83.
 11. Bonin, Vincent and Morris, Catherine (eds.). *Materializing Six Years: Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art*. Cambridge, MA; London; and Brooklyn, NY: The MIT Press and Brooklyn Museum. 2012. p. 4.
 12. Lind, Maria. "The Curatorial." *Artforum*. October 2009; reprinted in Maria Lind, *Selected Writing*, edited by Brian Kuan Wood. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2021. p. 65.
 13. See Orr, Joey. "Collecting Social Things." In *Rhetoric, Social Value and the Arts*. Edited by Charlotte Bonham-Carter and Nicola Mann. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 2017. pp. 143-154. Also, Lacy, Suzanne and Orr, Joey. "Joey Orr interview with Suzanne Lacy 19 July 2015." *Art & the Public Sphere*. Vol. 6. Nos. 1- 2. 2017. pp. 117-127.
 14. Citation from Acquisition Meeting Minutes shared by staff, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, November 17, 2009.
 15. Ed Hall in an email to the author, September 29, 2018.
 16. Pogrebin, Robin. "The New Museum Is World Class, but Many Find It a Tough Place to Work." *New York Times*. October 5, 2020. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/05/arts/the-new-museum-is-world-class-but-many-find-it-a-tough-place-to-work.html> (accessed 2020-11-01).
 17. Petrovich, Dushko and White, Roger. *As Radical, as mother, as salad, as shelter: What should art institutions do now?* New York, NY: Paper Monument. 2018. p. 4.
 18. There has been a great deal of debate in the US in the last few years about institutions selling collected works, even when intending to fund the acquisition of art by women and nonwhite artists. See the recent controversy surrounding the Baltimore Museum of Art, and even more recent discussions about the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York trying to weather the Covid-19 pandemic.
 19. Ongoing and more focused work on subsequent waves of institutional critique specifically can be found with Steyerl, Hito. "The Institution of Critique" (2006). In *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*. Edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson. Cambridge, MA, and London, England: The MIT Press. 2009. pp. 486-492. Also recent work by Curator of Contemporary Art at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Archey, Karen. "After Institutions." Lecture, Curatorial Studies at KASK and SMAK Gent, February 4, 2021.
 20. Cahill, Zachary. In *As Radical, as mother, as salad, as shelter*. p 13.
 21. This statement bears repeating: "...democratic institutions do not exist to preserve themselves over the freedoms they purport to strengthen." John Q (Ditzler, Andy and Orr, Joey). "We Rode a Train to Write This Essay." *Journal of American Studies*. Vol. 52. Issue 4. 2018. p. 890; and "The most effective museum worker may be the one whose allegiances are ultimately to self-criticism, especially when the institution is the subject of that critical reflection." Orr, Joey. "What Do You Do When a Project You Curate Is Censored by the State?" *Hyperallergic* August 17, 2018. Available at <https://hyperallergic.com/455690/what-do-you-do-when-a-project-you-curate-is-censored-by-the-state/> (accessed 2021-02-11).
 22. Though examining slightly different subject matter and historical contexts, this work is very helpful in parsing out the relationship between ephemeral works and their material remains. Widrich, Mechtild. *Performative Monuments: The rematerialisation of public art*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

2014. p 3.
23. An important move from memorizing to investigating in memory studies can be found in Terdiman, Richard. *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*. Ithaca, NJ, and London: Cornell University Press. 1993. p 59.
24. Widrich, *Performative Monuments*, pp. 3-4.
25. Orr, "Collecting Social Things," p. 150.
26. *Ibid*.
27. Rugoff, Ralph, Director Hayward Gallery, London in an email to the author, January 18, 2021.
28. Brazil, Kevin. "The Surrealism of Everyday Life." *The Oxonian Review*. Vol. 19. No. 4. April 6, 2012. Available at <http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/the-surrealism-of-everyday-life-draft/> (accessed 2021-06-27).
29. Deller, *It Is Wat It Is*, p. 1.
30. Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*, p. 13.
31. Kaprow, Allan. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Expanded edition. Edited by Jeff Kelley. Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA, and London: University of California Press. 2003. p. 249.
32. Kaprow, Allan. *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams. 1966. pp. 197-188.
33. Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, p. 7.
34. *Ibid*.
35. An interesting example here is a text that is a touchstone for the field of memory studies and continues to be useful even in critically exploring some of its assumptions. See Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire." *Representations*. Vol. 26. 1989. pp. 7-25.
36. abreu, manuel arturo. "We Need to Talk About Social Practice." *Art Practical*. March 16, 2019. <https://www.artpractical.com/column/we-need-to-talk-about-social-practice/> (accessed 2021-1-04).
37. Here Irit Rogoff qualifies the "we": "... not as an expression of either the individual or the multitude, but to think the 'we' as a kind of cadre of epistemic inventions that enter the notion of account giving." (January 20, 2021). "Not Yet." [Closing Proposition]. "The Postresearch Condition," European Artistic Research Network (EARN) and x Smart Culture Conference (NOW), HKU Utrecht and Art, Design & Museology, UCL Institute of Education, London. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4XQa0XwbR0&t=3544s> (accessed 2021-06-27).
38. Page-Lieberman, Neysa and Potter, Melissa Hilliard. "Feminist Social Practice: A Manifesto." *ASAP/Journal*. Vol. 3. 2018. pp. 335-352.
39. Reckitt, Helena. Forgotten Relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics. In *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, exhibition cultures and curatorial transgressions*, Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry (eds.). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 2013. p 139.
40. Jackson, Shannon. *Social Works*. New York and London: Routledge. 2011. p 6.
41. Lerner, Ben. The Custodians: How the Whitney is transforming the art of museum conservation. *The New Yorker*. 11 January, 2016. https://www.newyorker.com/?p=3150466&mbid=social_tablet_e (Accessed 2021-6-30).
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43. Ukeles, Mierle Laderman. "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!—Proposal for an Exhibition, 'Care.'" In *Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art*. Edited by Patricia C. Phillips. Munich, London, and New York, NY: Queens Museum and DelMonico Books. 2016. p. 210.
44. Orr, "Collecting Social Things," p. 150.
45. Harney, Stefano and Moten, Fred. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Wivenhoe,

New York, Port Watson, NY: Compositions/Automedia. 2013. p. 106.

46. Ault, Julie. "Interview." In *Doing Research: Writings from Finnish Academy of Fine Arts*. Edited by Annette W. Balkema, Jan Kalia, and Hank Slager. Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. 2012. pp. 57-58.