reStAGE<deep breadth>activist art/disruptive technologies

Karen Keifer-Boyd
The Pennsylvania State University
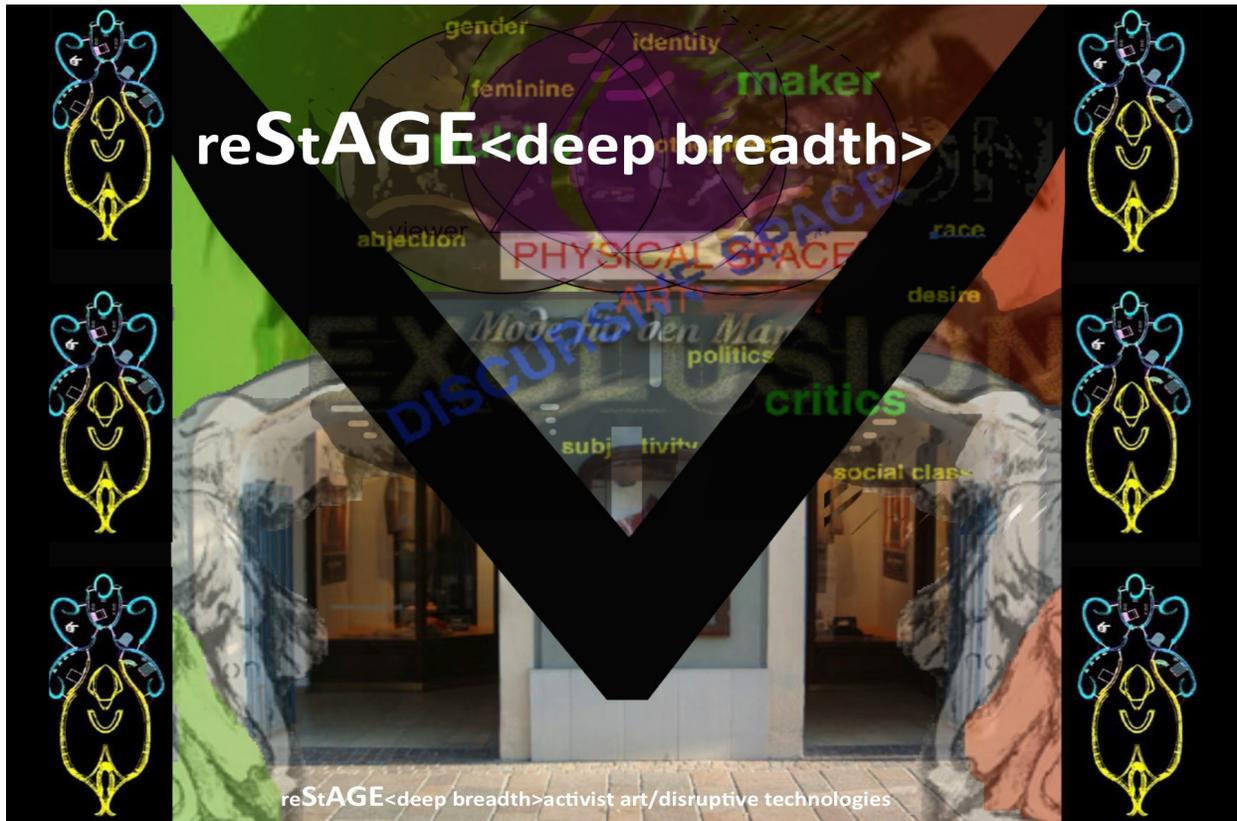
Figure 1. reStAGE<deep breadth>

SAGE: refers to being wise, and is also a green color that suggests thriving beyond survival even in harsh [desert] conditions. It is a color denoting environmental consciousness.

STAGE: to set-up and restage; no original, only actions materializing invisible systems. *Stage* with the curtain shaped like an M creates a space like an envelope to be unfolded, opened, and entered.

REST: as in taking a deep breath, a pause for time to reflect, refresh self, re-invent self and society.

AGE: as in growing older, reflection, sage or elders' wisdom, and is a reference to the reality that there is only a finite time to take action, to enact change.

BREADTH (according to dictionary.com)[1] is "freedom from narrowness or restraint; liberality: a person with great breadth of view," going beneath surface appearances, and this is also a reference (with creative spelling) to taking a deep breath to see broadly and deeply as symbolized by the letter M.

---

[1] http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/breadth

activist art/disruptive technologies

In this article, I explore, with you, artists' socio-political disruptions with communication technologies to inspire political action and social change, and how such art can be environmentally and socially useful. How does art function politically? What is activist art? What non-violent forms of dissent or disruptions to harmful practices are possible today with digital technologies, and how do artists manifest political perspectives in their practice?

Art activism in the 21st century uses Net global reach for mobilizations that extend the activist art practices in the last quarter of the 20th century conveyed in Martha Rosler's (2004) 1975 to 2001 essays collected in *Decoys and Disruptions*; and in Annemarie Chandler and Nori Neumark's (2005) anthology, *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet,* which documents activist art in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. There are several other texts documenting art activism, such as *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Thompson & Sholette, 2004). In order to respond to the questions I pose above, I draw from my participation in activist art using disruptive technologies, and from what I have learned from many other activist art/disruptive technologies projects. From this research, four predominant strategies emerge in the use of disruptive technologies for activist art. Activist art:

> **LISTENS** to disenfranchised voices and entangled histories
> **BARES** witness to power structures that control people, cultural narratives, and worldviews of a society
> **STOPS** traffic of harmful activities and products
> **ENVISIONS** global ecological well-being

This article offers art education curricular content by discussing each of these activist strategies that contemporary artists, often under collective names, use with communication technologies to disrupt or stop injustice, and to envision global ecological well-being.

LISTENS to Disenfranchised Voices and Entangled Histories

Shalini Randeria, a social anthropologist, argues that societal change involves the particularities of historical entanglements as interrelationships of systems. In her critique of Eisenstadt's (2003) scholarship on multiple modernities, which concerns analysis of social change from overlapped units of cultures, belief systems, and political institutions, Randeria (2006) posits that rather than analysis of units, understanding societal change requires the study of uneven entanglements of

interrelationships, irrespective of how one has compartmentalized these units, (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, nationality). In her 2006 Holberg Prize laureate presentation, she shows William Blake's 1796 sketch of the entanglement of Europe with Africa and the Americas as a visual portrayal of the uneven power entanglements of people in the production of society as a claim-making enterprise (Randeria, 2006).

The nature of what is considered knowledge depends on the system used to present the knowledge. Nonlinear narratives can present entangled histories from disparate cultural, political, and economic systems for depth of understanding of power dynamics and complexities of an issue. Picture Projects was launched in 1995 to create online spaces for voices traditionally overlooked by mainstream media. Picture Projects is renowned for blurring the lines between art and documentary with technologically savvy websites and installations that are immersive, nonlinear narratives. For example, akaKurdistan, is an online archive of images and stories by and about Kurdish people. RE: Vietnam — Stories Since the War, is another of their interactive digital projects. Picture Projects' mission is a "commitment to creating innovative web-based tools for social and political reform" (Cornyn, 2009, ¶ 6). Alison Cornyn and Sue Johnson are founding partners of Picture Projects. "The team has experimented with the Web as a space for presenting alternative points of view and complex and in-depth perspectives. Participatory storytelling is at the heart of much of the studio's work" (Cornyn & Johnson, 1995-2009, ¶ 7 history).

Another interactive artwork by Picture Projects, *360degrees: Perspectives on the U.S. Criminal Justice System*, is an outstanding example of an activist strategy of listening to disenfranchised voices and entangled histories. Considering the increase in the number of U.S. prisons, operated by corporate enterprises, there is a need to examine critically the criminal justice system (Schmalleger & Smykla, 2007). Picture Projects define the mission of their 360degrees project, an interactive and dynamic website, and call for involvement by communities, schools, and educators.

> It is our hope that this site will challenge your perceptions about who is in prison today and why. We also hope that it will generate ideas, big and small, about how we can reduce crime and strengthen our communities without continuing this unprecedented rate of incarceration. Over the next two years, we are continuing to work with educators and students to develop local dialogues in schools and communities. We will be partnering with radio producers and journalists across the country to tell stories about how crime and incarceration affects not just the people who are directly involved, but whole families and communities. Let us know if you would like to be notified when we add new stories and updates. (Cornyn & Johnson, 2009, "about" section)

There are many other Internet activist artworks concerning different issues that provide multiple perspectives including perspectives from disenfranchised individuals who have not been able to present their stories to news media without ideological and political editing.[2]

Sometimes, providing diverse perspectives in interactive and dynamic art takes the form of

---

[2] For example, see several at *CultureWork: A Periodical Broadside for Culture Work* (Institute for

360degrees, which presents views from victims of a crime, the person incarcerated for committing the crime, family members of both, prison workers, community members who knew people involved or witnessed the crime, and others. Other times, artists as researchers, or working collaboratively with researchers, seek to communicate perspectives on a series of events that have been missed by mainstream news media. For example, Lynn Stephen's (2009) *Making Rights a Reality: Oaxaca Social Movement 2006-present* is a digital ethnography that gives voice to teachers on strike in Oaxaca in 2006, who were tortured and imprisoned by Mexico's police and paramilitary. The interlinked testimonies of the teachers are contextualized with other witnesses who give testimony, and with descriptions and analysis of events (i.e., three decades of different social movements in Oaxaca) that led to the teacher strike in 2006 and their brutal imprisonment from those who experienced and witnessed these events.

BARES Witness to Power Structures that Control

Alfredo Jaar's artwork bears witness to military conflicts, political corruption, and imbalances of power between industrialized and developing nations. His community-based art involves installations in physical and Internet public spaces. He informs us in his 2007 digital animation, EMERGENCIA, that 22 million people are infected with HIV in Africa as of 2007, and each day the spread of AIDS grows in the world's poorest places. A chart that compares the death toll from AIDS on different continents shows 22.7 million deaths in Sub-Saharan Africa. The textual imagery conveys staggering statistics of AIDS orphans and infants infected with AIDS at birth. A note states that statistics for 2008-2009 will be released in 2010, thus the intention is to keep the site updated and to include resources and strategies to change the AIDS epidemic trajectory of suffering and death.

Witness and revealing injustice and power imbalances of resources has laid the foundation for mobilizing large numbers of people to take action. However, to be effective, protests must stop traffic.

STOPS Traffic of Harmful Activities and Products

Activist journalist, Naomi Wolf (2009, 2008, 2007), looks at histories of social change and concludes that for activism to be effective mass protests must stop traffic in non-violent ways. By stopping traffic she is referring to dissent that disrupts business-as-usual. Virtual sit-ins, using computer programs such as FloodNet, are *stop traffic* strategies involved in activist art of some artist collectives (e.g., Critical Art Ensemble, Coco Fusco in Operación Digna, and Electronic Disturbance

Community Arts Studies, 2002).

Theatre). FloodNet effectively stops traffic to a targeted website due to the congestion when masses of people access the site simultaneously. The website freezes and is no longer accessible because the FloodNet application requires a reload each time a person tries to access the site. Postings of upcoming virtual sit-ins and an archive of the purpose and impact of previous ones are listed at the Electronic Civil Disobedience (2007) website.

Today, one of the most impactful activist strategies involve computer hacking, code scrambling, *logic bombs* that halt computers or damage circuitry at crucial moments, *botnets* that disable websites, or website duplication and parody (e.g., The Yes Men, 1999; Organization of Corporations Against Coöperation, 2002) to stop, question, or redirect Internet traffic from government and large corporate powers. According to a December 12, 2009 article in *The New York Times*:

> In the last two years, Internet-based attacks on government and corporate computer systems have multiplied to thousands a day. Hackers, usually never identified, have compromised Pentagon computers, stolen industrial secrets and temporarily jammed government and corporate Web sites. (Markoff & Kramer, ¶ 1)

While terrorists use these *stop-traffic* strategies to gain power of particular ideologies and control of resources, art activists use disruptive technologies and cyber strategies to stop such ideological and resource controls and other harmful environmental, political, social, and economic policies and practices by governments and corporate conglomerates.

Activist artists in collaboration with social science researchers, and others, can use communication technologies to build accessible databases to address "the global in our everyday lives, our everyday realities, and [when many take action, this] creates changes globally by making changes locally" (Shiva, 2005, p. 4). GoodGuide is a disruption to consumption in which a product typed into the interface will reveal its health, environment, and social performance. The website GoodGuide (O'Rourke, 2008) states that it has ratings for over 65,000 food, personal care, toy, and household products; and if the product is not included to let GoodGuide know so they can research and include that product's ratings in the interactive database. Similarly, the Environmental Working Group (2007-2009) has created SkinDeep in which products for skincare entered into the search engine are rated for their environmental footprint.

When art students learn about the products they use with GoodGuide and SkinDeep performance data, and compare the performance ratings of the products to the marketing strategies for those products, they will have an awareness that provides content from which to create activist art. For example, they can make public service announcements (PSA) that are parodies of the social motives elicited by the marketed product image. The student-created PSAs can be posted in FlickR, or other Internet public spaces, and tagged so that when people shop with browser searches the students' activist artworks are discovered.

Disruption—Changing Narratives

Virtual world interactions can fuel self-hatred, and hatred of others[3] (consider the recent news on heavy traffic to religious extremist Internet sites).[4] These same tools, strategies, and online spaces can be used to circumvent, intervene, or provide alternatives to self-hate and hatred of (and violence toward) others different from oneself. HOW to do this is the focus of virtual world activism toward social, environmental, political, and economic justice (see e.g., Sholette, 1999).

Two artists who use the Internet as their art medium, Joan Heemskerk from the Netherlands and Dirk Paesmans from Belgium, collectively formed Jodi. Their early work looks like scrambled code or computer malfunctions, in that they modified old games to create games as art. Their intention is to create a spoof of the original game. This is one example of *culture jamming*, which is a disruption to prevalent hegemonic cultural narratives, often through montaging or appropriating from the visual manifestations of the cultural narrative. Video montages of news broadcast clips to show absurdity of the news story, and biases of news reporting, is an example of culture jamming common on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart. Culture jamming art activism attacks cultural narratives of this-is-the way-things-are, i.e., ideas of normalcy, or a seemingly powerless feeling of not being able to change the future trajectory of war, poverty, consumerism, pollution, violence, and hate.[5]

The Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO) operations, begun in 1989, involve circuit board surgery and re-engineering of Barbie dolls and G.I. Joe action figures so that Barbie yells "Vengeance is mine!" and G.I. Joes fantasizes "Let's plan our dream wedding!" The altered dolls returned to toy store shelves, when purchased a second time for child play-acting with dolls, had stickers on each to "call your local TV news," which brought the attention of the news media.

Lowtech is an arts education project, based since 1997 in Sheffield in the U.K, by the arts group Redundant Technology Initiative. This group creates art with discarded technology and provides a lab for others to use and learn how to be creative with discarded computers. Their workshops and exhibitions drew attention to rapid consumption of technology, and growing waste hazards of discarded technology. They set up Access Space, as a freely accessible online creative media lab, and they teach others how to create community-based technology reuse projects. Art educators can change the cultural narrative of new is better, and educate future generations to re-envision technology sustainability.

---

[3] For example, Stormfront, a hate organization with the slogan "White Pride World Wide," was launched in 1995 by former Ku Klux Klan leader Don Black. It is currently available in 13 languages on the Internet with content aimed at children and with links to other racist organizations.

[4] For example see the archive of Rachel Maddow (2009) shows.

[5] Sniggler.net provides an encyclopedia of culture jammer's activism.

ENVISIONS Global Ecological Well-being

FORA.tv is an ever-growing database of videos on "people, issues, and ideas changing the planet."[6] For example, on October 20, 2009, I searched FORA.tv with the terms "art & environment," and 92 videos were listed, each linked for full-viewing. A search of "visual artists & environment" resulted in eight videos. FORA.tv is a dynamic resource for art teachers to guide students to envision global ecological well-being. Films range in length from 20 minutes to 1.5 hours. Art teachers can set up a profile and save short segments to show. They can also download the videos, if Internet access in unavailable.

EcoArtTech works with digital, networked, and sustainable technologies and contemporary environments to create art that assesses and makes visible environmental conditions. Cary Peppermint and Leila Christine Nadir (2005) founded EcoArtTech as their collaborative platform for digital environmental art. Their 2009 project, Eclipse, an Internet-based work commissioned by Turbulence of New Radio and Performing Arts, is a participatory-driven, artwork-application that alters and corrupts photos of United States parks posted on a photo-sharing website FlickR. The alterations in the photos are based on real-time particle pollution data. To activate the artmaking process, you make a selection from the list of U.S. national parks, forests, monuments, or state parks. The program then searches for a recent photo posted in FlickR that has been tagged with the park's name by nature enthusiasts who share on the Internet their travel, sight-seeing photographs. The artwork is programmed to obtain real-time pollution data from the nearest city via an application developed by the U.S. government (airnow.gov). An image is then produced that corrupts the original photograph "through a set of programmed algorithms that affect color, saturation, and contrast and that impose intermittent mirroring, deletion, or cropping of the file's data" indicating the level of pollution (Peppermint & Nadir, 2009, ¶ 2).

Human Futures, directed by Mike Stubbs (2008), is a resource of innovative works by internationally renowned artists whose artworks transcend the borders between the physical, virtual, biological, and digital in response to three questions: "What does the future have in store for our children's children? What choices could we make? What futures do we want to create?" (Stubbs, 2008, ¶ 1).

To envision the global, ecological well-being in the future, art teachers can facilitate critiques of the prevalent cultural stories in visual culture. Diigo, is a free application that individuals or groups can utilize as a way to critique content on any website. Diigo enables the layering of virtual post-it or sticky notes on a website, in which, similar to a blog, many can comment on each others' comments. The "floating sticky notes" when closed look like a cartoon speech-bubble with a number inside, which indicates how many people have commented on that particular post-it note. Diigo also enables annotations by highlighting text on another's website to draw attention to a particular passage for discussion, and like Delicious, a community of learners can share bookmarked sites.

For example, since most people learn about feminism from patriarchal mass media, I have asked

---

[6] This is the mission stated on the FORA.tv banner.

students to search the Internet for art that embodies feminist theories and practices. Bookmark it. Add a Diigo post-it note to the group regarding why this artwork embodies feminist theory or feminist principles in practice. Visit each of the sites the others have bookmarked and comment in what ways this artwork does or does not embody feminist principles. The responses are then used to inform their own artworks as speculative visual trajectories into the future from asking similar questions as posed in the art by Human Futures concerning making choices today to create the future.

For another example, in art teachers working with students in Uganda and the United States, student bookmarked sites are set-up to feed into a blog. Students are asked to bookmark visual culture that conveys how they perceive those in the other country, and to comment on a Diigo sticky note why they selected the particular representation that is bookmarked. Each student is also asked to look at what is bookmarked regarding their own country, to read the rationales for why the representations were selected, and comment in response on the same sticky note regarding if and how the representation relates to their life. This content becomes the source for collaborative artworks using *Dabbleboard* combined with non-digital art making process, in which images are uploaded and collaboratively developed in Dabbleboard. Collaboratively created artworks in various configurations of cross-cultural groups, can then be uploaded into VoiceThread,[7] with questions[8] as prompts for voice commentary surrounding the artwork. This particular example is intended for transcultural critical dialogue about visual culture with emphasis on cultural identity and local and global injustices.

Activist artists in the 21st century use communication technologies to listen (360degrees, Making Rights a Reality), witness (EMERGENCIA), and stop harmful practices (Operación Digna, GoodGuide, SkinDeep, LowTech), as well as to envision (EcoArtTech, Human Futures) new social, political, and environmental practices in artwork that is openly participatory, globally performative, and collaboratively created. Many contemporary artists create participatory platforms for mobilization of actions that make visible entangled histories and ideas. Such artwork and artmaking processes are relevant content and skills in teaching art in schools and societies that promote informed engagement in social, political, environmental, and economic change for a just world for all.

---

[7] Diigo, Flickr, Dabbleboard, and VoiceThread are computer programs that are freely accessed without purchase.

[8] Some suggestions for questions include: How is subjectivity constructed in the image, and whose subjectivity is constructed? What prior knowledge is assumed?

Keifer-Boyd, K. (2010) reStAGE <deep breadth> activist art/disruptive technologies. The Journal of Social Theory In Art Education (30) (R. Sweeny, Ed.). 38-48.

References

Chandler, A., & Neumark, N. (Eds.). (2005). *At a distance: Precursors to art and activism on the Internet.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Cole, J. S. (2007). Art, activism, and feminisms: Sites of confrontation and change. *NWSA Journal, 19*(1), 175-180.

Cornyn, A. (2009). *Picture Projects presents the web's first interactive documentary on the U.S. Criminal Justice System*. Retrieved from http://www.360degrees.org/about/pressroom/release1.html

Cornyn, A., & Johnson, S. (2005-2009). *Picture Projects*. Retrieved from http://www.picture-projects.com/information2.html

Cornyn, A., & Johnson, S. (2001-2009). *360degrees: Perspectives on the U.S. criminal justice system.* Retrieved from http://www.360degrees.org/

Cornyn, A., Johnson, S., & Meiselas, S. (1997). *akaKurdistan*. Retrieved from http://www.akakurdistan.com/

Cornyn, A., Johnson, S., Vail, C. (n.d.). *RE: Vietnam — Stories Since the War*. http://www.pbs.org/pov/stories/

Critical Art Ensemble. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.critical-art.net/

Eisenstadt, S. N. (2003). *Comparative civilizations and modern modernities* (v. 1). Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV.

Electronic Civil Disobedience. (2007). Archive of e-actions. Retrieved from http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html

Electronic Disturbance Theater. (n.d.). *Unesco digital arts portal*. Retrieved from http://digitalarts.lcc.gatech.edu/unesco/internet/artists/int_a_edtheater.html

Environmental Working Group. (2007-2009). *SkinDeep: Cosmetic safety database*. Retrieved from http://www.cosmeticsdatabase.com/

Fusco, C. (2003). *Operación Digna*. Retrieved from http://www.thing.net/~cocofusco/dignaeng1.html

Institute for Community Arts Studies. (2002). *CultureWork: A periodical broadside for culture work, 6*(3). Retrieved from http://aad.uoregon.edu/culturework/www/video.html

Jaar, A. (2007). EMERGENCIA. Retrieved from http://www.projectemergencia.net/

Maddow, R. (2009). U.S. ties to Ugandan anti-gay bill. *The Rachel Maddow Show*. Retrieved from http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/26315908/ns/msnbc_tv-rachel_maddow_show#34214774

Markoff, J., & Kramer, A. E. (2009, December 12). In shift, U.S. talks to Russia on Internet security. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/13/science/13cyber.html?_r=1&th&emc=th

Organization of Corporations Against Coöperation. (2002). Retrieved from http://aad.uoregon.edu/culturework/www/video/ocac.mov

O'Rourke, D. (2008). *GoodGuide*. Retrieved from http://www.goodguide.com/

Peppermint, C., & Nadir, C. (2009). *Eclipse*. Retrieved from http://turbulence.org/Works/eclipse/

Peppermint, C., & Nadir, C. (2005). *EcoArtTech*. Retrieved from http://www.ecoarttech.net/

Randeria, S. (2009). *2006 Holberg Prize laureate presentation*. Retrieved from http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=5683625523423597380#

Rosler, M. (2004). *Decoys and disruptions: Selected writings, 1975-2001*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Schmalleger, F., & Smykla, J. (2007). *Corrections in the 21st century* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Shiva, V. (2005). *Earth democracy: Justice, sustainability, and peace.* Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Sholette, G. G. (1999). Counting on your collective silence: Notes on activist art as collaborative practice. *Afterimage: The Journal of Media and Cultural Criticism, 27*, 18-20.

Stephen, L. (2006). *Making rights a reality: Oaxaca Social Movement 2006-present.* Retrieved from http://www.mraroaxaca.uoregon.edu/

Stubbs, M. (2008). *Human Futures*. Retrieved from http://humanfutures.fact.co.uk/

Thompson, N., & Sholette, G. (Eds.). (2004). *The Interventionists: Users' manual for the creative disruption of everyday life.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Wolf, N. (2009, January 16). *Naomi Wolf at the Hudson Union Society*. Retrieved from http://fora.tv/2009/01/16/Naomi_Wolf_at_the_Hudson_Union_Society

Wolf, N. (2008). *Give me liberty*: *A handbook for American Revolutionaries*. New York: Simon & Schuster. [Film. Retrieved from http://www.endofamericamovie.com/about.php]

Wolf, N. (2007). *The end of America: A letter of warning to a young patriot*, Chelsea Green, White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company. [Video. Retrieved, from http://www.snagfilms.com/films/title/the_end_of_america/]

Yes Men. (1999). *The Yes Men*. Retrieved from http://theyesmen.org/

Keifer-Boyd, K. (2010) reStAGE <deep breadth> activist art/disruptive technologies. The Journal of Social Theory In Art Education (30) (R. Sweeny, Ed.). 38-48.