

SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING.

By Courtney Dailey, December 2004

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Heading to Boston, Fereshteh Toosi and Carolyn Lambert anticipated making a project at the Berwick involving parking lots, investigating petroleum and our reliance on fossil fuels. But even before arriving, they had anxiety about their proposed project and its environment. As they learned more about Roxbury and the neighborhood where the Berwick was located, Lambert considers, "Although I had never been to Dudley Square, I knew enough about Roxbury to know that it was a low-income, historically black neighborhood. I knew the Berwick Institute was an anomaly there. But in writing the proposal, I neglected to think how that would impact our performance." After they visited and talked with Meg Rotzel, director of the Berwick, they decided to involve transportation in other ways, and became interested in understanding gentrification in the neighborhood. Considering the root of gentrification, they imagined the word "gentry" and thought of Victorian tea parties...the beginning of the thrust of the project. Stringing together ideas about empire, oil, and gentry provided the foundation for the first month of working at the Berwick. As the focus transferred from parking lots to environmentally-sound vehicles and mass transportation, as tea evolved into running for president, and empire turned toward discussions of security, the Tea Party began.

SITE SPECIFIC.

On July 12, 2004, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) announced: "From now on: All MBTA customers will be subject to security inspections of any carry-on item. Your commute may be briefly delayed. Please allow a little extra time for a potential security inspection of your handbags, briefcases and/or other carry-on items and for other security measures. Your patience is appreciated."

Both before and during the Democratic National Convention, July 25-29, 2004, the MBTA announced these greater security measures in light of bombings in Madrid, and information from the CIA, FBI, and the Department of Homeland Security. The random bag checks on the trains (called the T) are still possible, according to an MBTA official, "if circumstances warrant," though none have been performed since the end of the DNC.

Toosi and Lambert dressed in identical black pants, t-shirts and flip-flops, accented with grey "colonial" wigs and three-pointed hats. Their uniform/costumes weren't quite up to snuff compared to Boston's historical re-enactors, but distinguished them nonetheless. They proposed that they were Presidential candidates, running for the Tea Party. As Toosi recently asserted:

"We were two candidates who came from the past and had a lot of ideas about the present. Not in a Luddite, retrograde way, but more in a utopic, fantastical, and simultaneously common sense way: 'doesn't it seem illogical to use a car to drive 1.5 miles when you could ride a blue inflatable horse instead? Why don't we wave orange flags during a group visualization session that could help us to find more positive solutions? Maybe with our combined willpower, we can find a new vision for the future that does not necessitate fighting bloody wars for the sake of money and oil and empire-building."

DRESS UP.

Toosi remarked, "the period of the DNC was so interesting in Boston because there was so much talk about needing to control the protestors, to control dissent. Although the original Boston tea party's use of costume to impersonate Native Americans was problematic, using the image of the colonist/tea partier to talk about the fact that freedom of dissent is slowly being eroded...that was important to us. Even if not everyone made the direct connection."

The use of costumes in the Tea Party has many outcomes: it is a way for the public to enter the work and have a visual reference for the project, it is a way to market the Tea Party to media and passersby, it allows Toosi and Lambert to settle in beside the more "authentic impersonators" and call attention to the absurdity and humor of costumes in general. As subtle as they are (an all-black outfit is not that unusual), the costumes mark Toosi and Lambert as different, perhaps a bit clownish, and intriguing.

PLATFORMS.

Responding to the climate of the city, Toosi and Lambert crafted a set of activities and an itinerary that explored the four aspects of the Tea Party's platform: Tea, SecuriTea, CommuniTea, and MobiliTea.

Tea: Encouraging tea drinking as a relaxing and social event, over the anxiety-producing feelings gained from coffee drinking.

SecuriTea: Asking the question "is it worth giving up our civil rights for security?", Toosi and Lambert handed out custom-made tea bags imprinted with instructions:

"Drink this tea when you feel any unwanted symptoms resulting from the 'war on terror'. These include anxiety, agoraphobia, paranoia, and overwhelming feelings of suspicion".

In addition to their distribution campaign, the artists engaged in conversations with participants regarding the new MBTA searches and the general 'security' fever sweeping the country.

CommuniTea: Hosting tea parties in public and private locations, the artists enjoyed activities such as reading tea leaves to discern peoples' ideal modes of fossil-fuel-free transportation, having a conversation about artists' roles in gentrification, and provoking a group effort to place orange flags around Boston asking the question: "Orange you glad you didn't ___?", along with asking participants to photograph suspicious activities with disposable cameras provided by the artists.

MobiliTea: Toosi and Lambert conducted workshops for participants from local schools and the general public to draw their fantastic ideas about what a petroleum-free, environmentally-safe utopian vehicle could look like.

Sometimes the activities bridged more than two of their concerns (ie. a conversation about gentrification with artists at the Berwick involved all four), and other times they were more specific, like the tea parties on Boston Common and at the Esplanade (Tea, SecuriTea, MobiliTea) or making "KARMAgick" buttons with parking tickets that people donated to them (MobiliTea).

HYBRID.

"The practice is a passage through unknowns. What is sought cannot be grasped in advance of the activity. A series of possibilities has to be drafted, explored, aired, tested out. At the end, rather than at the beginning, something like a problem comes to be defined only to trigger further exploration."

From "Dislocations" by Sarat Maharaj in *Reverberations: Tactics of Resistance, Forms of Agency in Trans/cultural practices*, ed. Jean Fisher, Jan van Eyck, Amsterdam, 2000, p.40

Through the traditions of process-art, life-art, non-narrative performance, and political activism, Toosi and Lambert encourage a HYBRID where the actions, intentions and results are an exploration with only the unknown as constant. In this hybridity, the action can be a position of resistance to the familiar, making categorization difficult.

What I like about this aspect of the project is that it *is* at once familiar: people in costume, political candidates telling you their platforms, conversations with people on the street, and *strange*: shoddy wigs (in a sea of "authentic impersonators"), fake political parties, giving away tea (without a plea to buy a product). This stress between strange and familiar seems to be one of the keys to the project, one that Toosi and Lambert are acutely attentive to in both their collaborative and individual works: the "small, ambiguous dissonance" that they told me about. Perhaps it is this FEELING of wonder that can be carried away from all of their platforms, experiences and ideas. Something isn't quite right with their costumes and wigs, why would someone go to the trouble of making new packages for tea, how efficient can you be to make a buggy that is powered by koala spit!

TACTICAL PLANNING.

Sometimes the making of art gets lost when viewed, or acted, I think. There is a back-end to this process, this project, that is often obscured. Toosi and Lambert were thinking on their toes, but only after a significant amount of planning, researching, blogging their experiences, finding matching black flip-flops (harder than you think), creating tea bags. No matter what level of engagement those that encounter the project choose, the artists still have time invested, a gesture and a trajectory that has begun long before the conversation. There is an audience-participant strain in the work of Toosi and Lambert, where the people involved are assumed to be equally important to the dynamic of the conversation, but when considering the actions of the Tea Party, it is important to remember that Toosi and Lambert are facilitating these interactions, that they have made the situation arise where a dialogue can happen. The way you do a project is just as important as the project itself, right?

EMERGENT DESIGN.

In the land of computers, where I sit right now in front of this flickering screen, there is a way of coding called Emergent Design. It is a term that has been used in other places: architecture, training/teaching, general problem solving, but it is its computer definition that I am interested in here, and how it applies to Toosi and Lambert's collaboration.

Basically, emergent design relies on the agility and improvisational skills of its users/programmers. As a process for developing software, it allows the coding to evolve while following a very disciplined approach including testing, using good coding practices, and re-factoring as design improvements become apparent and requirements dictate those changes. Critics say that emergent design does not consider the whole, doesn't conceive of an overall scheme; this can be detrimental in that it is costly, and inefficient. Proponents suggest that truly usable, good design comes from testing and experimenting with real-life situations.

Toosi and Lambert adapted and changed their strategy for interacting with their targeted participants as they gathered experiences. When they arrived in Boston, they hung out at the site of the Boston Tea Party Museum (which was closed, but still...) in order to learn about the story of the famous tea-in-the-harbor fiasco from passers-by. They quickly learned that if they offered more interesting stories (i.e. they were running for president of the U.S. with the Tea Party) that they would have more interesting interactions with visitors as they tried to learn about the history of the place.

In keeping with their focus on dialogue, they listened to participants and responded, maintaining their platform but changing their tactics or strategies as needed. They propose an idea and invite participants to engage with them. The key, says Toosi, is that "there is an ambiguity to what we MIGHT be...(people) want to talk to us, they don't expect a political message, and I tend to respect

that, and I don't want to overstep the trust that they have given me, to talk to me...we want to engage with people in a two-way dialogue, in which we are honest about our stance but still leave room to listen to people who disagree with us."

And many did disagree, believed that civil rights were a fine sacrifice in the face of terrorism and for the goal of security, but still took the tea bags. "I felt that the people we talked to were very thoughtful-- they often said they could see our point, but they were afraid...they had considered that they were giving up their civil rights, and they were okay with that", says Lambert. Who can say what happened later as they drank the tea...Perhaps we can decide that we have SHARED DIFFERENCES, that we can respect and recognize differences when we find ourselves in the right conditions.

The work that exists as a result of these interactions is ephemeral, fleeting, and perhaps in its best manifests as a "small, ambiguous dissonance" with participants. By not showing a finished product but engaging with people in conversation, the work exists differently than a finished piece, a painting on a wall or a song on the radio. The method of working that encourages collaboration may mimic more closely the way some music is composed, not in the studio-marketing-pop-star way, but a more organic, old-timey evolution of song by many singers and performers. If it resonates, it sticks, and becomes something beyond what the composers could have imagined.

FRAGMENT.

Toosi and Lambert relied on many different strategies to explore their residency at the Berwick, some more cohesive than others. They talk about the strength or weakness of this multiplicity in their conversation, and it reminds me of a story that I just read.

Maybe it is an urban legend.

There was a conference about art and theory where a panel was discussing whether the fragment could be as strong as the whole. All day they discussed, but one of the panelists returned the next day with an illustration: he stood on the stage and held a plate as high as his shoulder. He dropped the plate, and it broke, sending shards of it all over the floor. He bent down and picked up a piece of the plate, held it high as his shoulder and dropped it. The piece bounced, of course, but did not break.

Does it matter if all of the aspects of their residency clearly 'go together'? I don't think so; I like the idea very much that some aspects of the project existed only in the interaction, that there was little documentation or discussion of them in this text or on their website. It makes me imagine what they could be, what those experiences could have been like, how many inflatable blue horses could stampede down the road...