

Juxtaposed

The personal and the political

BY HOLLY WILLIS

Are we angry? AIDS activist Gregg Bordowitz asked this question last year during a lecture at LACE, and Dont Rhine of the Ultra-red political collective reiterates it now. But he answers it, too, saying that while many people will say they're sad or anxious, few will acknowledge outrage. So how do you mobilize around important issues like AIDS without anger as fuel? You look for other, more pragmatic fuels. "If we wait for people to be angry, we're doomed," says Rhine.

Ultra-red, which started in 1994, initially consisted of four members joined in an effort to use experimental sound toward political ends. Since a restructuring in 2004, Rhine, Elizabeth Blaney, Pablo Garcia and Leonardo Vilchis have welcomed six associate members and numerous artists and activists to collaborate on projects using a variety of tactics and mediums. In the process, they've found that personal and reflective work, which can be the starting point for further discussion, is an effective and powerful alternative to anger.

"We're interested in direct contact," says Rhine, "and that precise point at which an artist and his or her experience comes up against social movements or politics." Rhine also notes that he's inspired by the social activism that derives from Latin America — the educational theories of Paulo Freire, for example — and these ideas help drive collaborations with organizations such as Union de Vecinos in East L.A., which addresses housing issues, and Kanak Attak, an anti-racist network based in Germany. Recent Ultra-red projects

include "SILENT | LISTEN," a series of meetings staged in museums and dedicated to examining the AIDS epidemic.

Ultra-red also recently launched "Public Record," a series of experimental sound and music pieces available free online. "The decision to go with 'Public Record' was largely pragmatic," explains Rhine, and grew out of the downsizing of the electronic-music market. "The smaller labels were going under, and no one wanted the conceptual or socially engaging work, because it didn't sell." Rather than stop producing the work, Ultra-red decided to use the Internet as a way to make it available, and now has a lineup of releases, many of which exemplify the social activism and art that characterize the organization.

"Public Record" has also become the platform for a series of short videos by the L.A.-based group Speculative Archive, the joint project of media artists Julia Meltzer and David Thorne. The pair's previous work includes the experimental video "It's Not My Memory of It": *Three Recollected Documents*, which addresses moments of secrecy and revelation in the CIA. They are doing research for a project titled *Not a Matter of If but When*, based on notions of *pre-emption*, *prevention* and *imminence*, terms used in the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy in regard to the war on terror — and words that provide militarists an opening to act based on predictions of what will happen in the future.

"The genesis of the project came out of some work we did on a previous tape," explains Thorne. "There were some people who were arrested — in Detroit and in Spain — as alleged sleeper-cell members, and some of the materials that were seized in their dwellings were videotapes of Disneyland and

the MGM Grand hotel. We are interested in how those tapes became images of something that's not actually represented in them, namely images of those sites destroyed. It's kind of this Philip K. Dick or *Minority Report* idea of the future as something that we can predict in the present."

Meltzer and Thorne lived in Damascus for the last nine months, conducting interviews and shoots. While they work on *Not a Matter of If but When*, however, the Archive is making a series of short video "dispatches" based on their everyday experiences in Syria and released on the Ultra-red site as QuickTimes. *Record No. 1* pairs voice-over and text written in English and Arabic with a traditional Kurdish song, offering a multitiered rumination on conceptions of the relationship of a leader to his/her people. In *Record No. 5*, a bird flying against the blue sky is revealed to be a bird grasped in someone's hand; the soundtrack consists of an instrumental version of Queen's "We Are the Champions"

(as played by two Russian women at Harry's Bar in the Cham Palace Hotel in Damascus). The dense mesh of references underlines the complexity of cultural identity and the push-and-pull of power and authority. What makes these videos so compelling, though, is the fact that they're brief, ambiguous and complex. Indeed, Meltzer and Thorne achieve a lyricism and complexity much greater than the confines of online video typically dictate.

For both Ultra-red and Speculative Archive, the model of activism and critical artmaking that worked in the '80s and '90s is no longer viable, and so their task includes reinventing a political practice for the present. "The most exciting work I'm seeing is work that isn't about an object," says Rhine, "but is instead a focal point for a collective process of reflection. That's where we need to be." □

To see "Public Record" videos, visit www.ultraled.org/publicrecord/archive/schedule.html.



From Speculative Archive's Record No. 5

