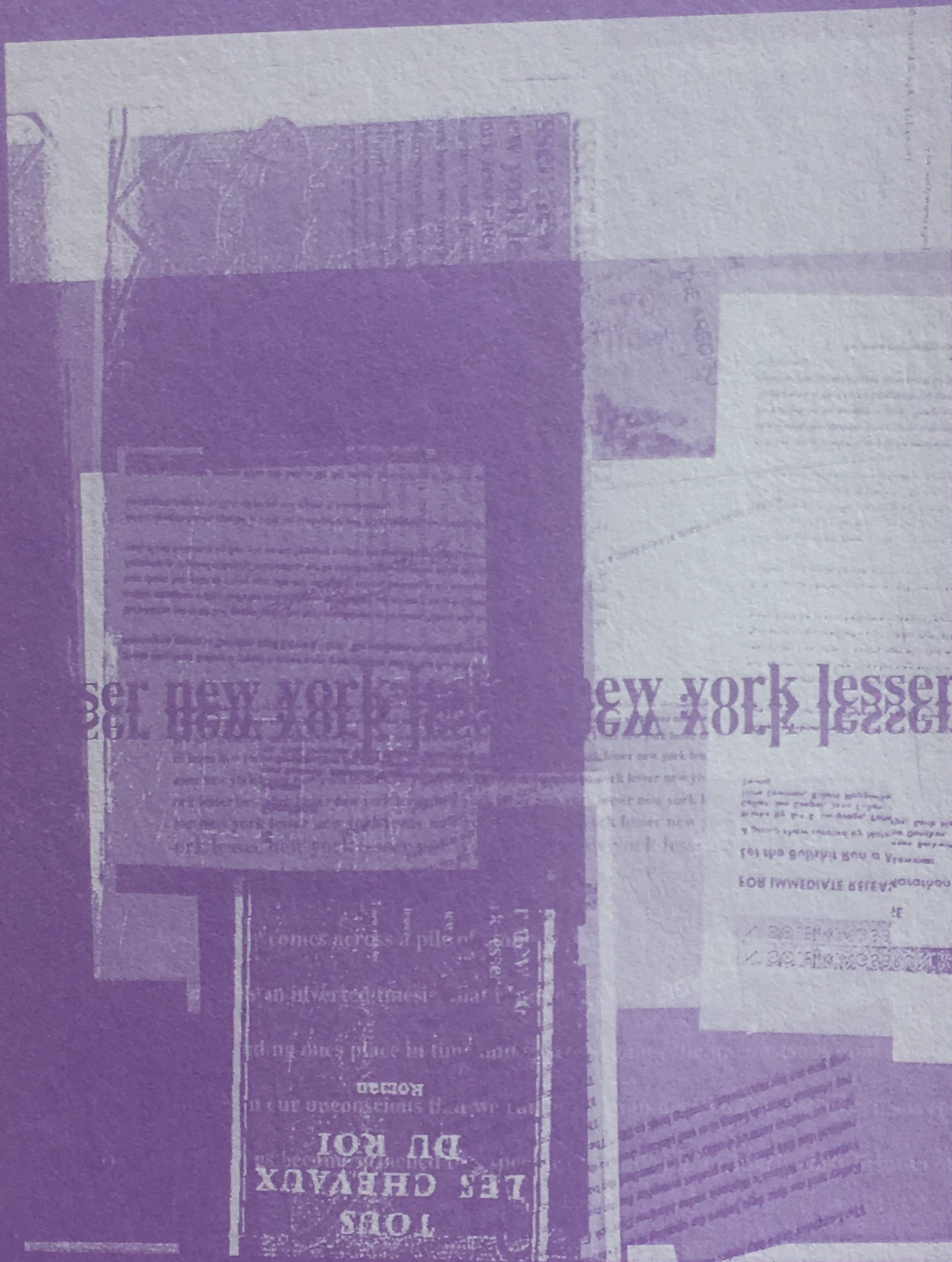


# lesser new york



# Fia Backström

GREATER NEW YORK

BETTINA  
FUNCKE:

How did it come about that *lesser new york*, 2005 is included in *Greater New York*, 2015? Originally Bob Nickas invited you to propose something for *Greater New York* in 2005, which they couldn't, or wouldn't do. So you decided, OK, I'll just do my own *lesser new york* then. How did it happen that you were re-invited to represent the formerly excluded?

FIA  
BACKSTRÖM:

To be clear, PS1 did not reject *lesser new york*, they rejected a proposal of a show as a work within the show, which set off my thinking for it. *lesser new york* is not necessarily a critique of PS1's *Greater New York*, it is a parallel, or a broadening, rather than a gesture against. It was trying to put another layer on top of how we look at art production. One could see it as if *lesser new york* has become co-opted into *Greater New York* in the way institutions do with material claiming radicality. One can of course withdraw and withhold from exposure in response, as a strategy of resistance to a system. But that becomes an act of erasure, which seems little risk with those who are part of *lesser new york*. But there are also questions about the "lesser" relationship of ephemera to art objects, so holding back this material would be to affirm that lesser position. Jenny Jaskey from the Artist's Institute proposed it to PS1, in conjunction with my season there. PS1 is celebrating its 40th anniversary, and this *Greater New*

*York* deals with a historical trajectory, mapping how artists have produced in the city over the last 40 years, so *lesser new york* fits in well as a registration of how we were working then.

BF:

When I revisited our conversation from 2004, which is included in your restaged *lesser new york* (2005/2015) at PS1, I was struck by how collaborative working formats, creating social spaces and acting as an artist-curator, exist throughout your work. Was *lesser new york* an early manifestation of these formats?

FB:

Yes, it was originally done in my old loft. I authored these early projects as "a fia backstrom production," and those—what should I call them?—shows, events, and productions were part of forming my practice that then came to be worked out within the "official" art system. Maybe that's a good word. Questions around reading and how text occurs in relationship to the body, as well as formation of collectivity, are all themes that recur. However, I don't see *lesser new york* as collaborative. I did have conversations with everyone about what was going to be in this object that became *lesser new york*, but that's where the interaction ended.

BF:

And everyone gave you paper, more or less?

FIA  
BACKSTRÖM

FB:

Yes, most contributions had operated as ephemera alongside art exhibitions in New York over the four years prior to *lesser new york*, according to the same survey logic of PS1's *Greater New York*.

BF:

Before we talk more about the ephemera and the Xerox, I want to address your working formats. You once disagreed with me about the meaning or role of "structure" in your work, when you said the structure may actually be the content in regards to authorship... and maybe I had too slight an opinion about structure. It feels strong today to say that the structure is the content.

FB:

This is an early interrogation into the displacement of a layered content, offering up a display mechanism in its place. The ephemera have their own content and ways of signifying, while the organizing structure for the ephemera, and the ways reading and interacting with the material that was proposed through this structure, was another part of *lesser new york*.

BF:

Then it's really your production, even though there are many participants and dialogues within it. The material became yours from the moment everyone passed something on to you, right? You decided the hanging, the patterns, and the whole layout.

FB:

Everyone gave me free hands to organize the material. But I remember clearly during the opening that some were stunned by how different the organization was compared to how they would have presented it. That was exciting. The material had been turned into a pattern to activate the wall, and connect it to the body.

BF:

Yeah, you compared it to a Communist wallpaper. Using repetition or variations of ephemera to make patterns was probably the biggest surprise. The equalizing effect was fascinating.

FB:

It had this decorative, formalist dimension, really a window shopping logic to seduce the eye, so that you would want to explore the walls. Once you moved forward to read, you were already caught with your body in relationship to the wall.

BF:

And the ephemera were people's posters, records, press releases, invitation cards, mock zines, ads, novel excerpts, and even printed out webpages. There was a lot of content. Ephemera are either notes that lead to a more solid manifestation of an idea or material announcing or commenting on what one is doing. Ideally a lot of the important thoughts are in these. The poster is a visualization of an

idea that you manifest elsewhere. The packaging of a record is supposed to look like the content of the record, etc. I imagine everyone was attached to their material, which is why it was surprising and almost uncomfortable to turn it into a pattern. You have material from 18 people, which looks like it was authored by one person. In our earlier conversation, I suggested that that might be a critique, that the pattern hides the content... and again you disagreed.

FB:

[Laughs.] We spoke of different kinds of curation. You brought up a 'stylist' kind of curator who pairs elements that look good together, which would be a purely visual engagement without consequence, more like entertainment. *lesser new york* raises an underlying tension between the decorative pattern, derived from commercial display strategies, used as a tool to seduce a viewer to engage with the material, and a lounge, where some zines would be strewn over a tabletop. We would stand together, and collectively read across the wall, much like with the Chinese newspapers pasted on walls. It's interesting to think about visual, entertainment, and social networks, because *lesser new york* happened in 2005, right before Facebook took off. Our ideas of a social network were very rudimentary compared to how we understand it now. One could think of *lesser new york* as a proto-social media display, with lots of content, lists of people, connections, and cross-references, that any social media tool is very good at mapping.

FIA  
BACKSTRÖM

BF:

It feels almost naively analog and haptic, because of the physicality of this kind of social space. You actually had to go into everyone's studio to have these discussions and figure out good material for what you had in mind, and then you gathered it all in another space. So when we're all there, physically reading it together, it makes it seem really old. Facebook is much more expansive, and the algorithm has a different level of intelligence and capacity, but at the same time it's so broad that the feeling of community thins out. It's more abstract because it's a computer doing it, rather than actual people's relations in actual spaces. I quit Facebook in 2012, I was never on it much, so I decided to not actively participate in social media.

FB:

Exactly, the curation of what those connections are is generalized and templated into an interface, and not deeply cared for. They come up computationally rather than through somebody making active choices of how these things relate. For *lesser new york*, the organization of the material was in response to the qualities of it.

BF:

It was a circle of friends—people were in touch about ideas over years. This brings to mind Warren Niesluchowski's comment on the etymology of the term curator, from *curare*, or 'taking care of,' like herding sheep. It's like farming, taking care of

the earth, making something grow and bringing something together over a longer period of time.

FB:

I think archives, our vehicles for care, are relevant here, and the question of the status of ephemera as artworks. There is the Downtown Collection of The Fales Library that documents downtown activities in which, for example, the Group Material archive is housed. There is a relationship between ephemera and an art object that is bought and displayed in museums. Now museums are showing more ephemera to trace the making, but it has always had a status of being “lesser.” This was important to me in the conception of *lesser new york* and its relationship to *Greater New York*, where the focus was on discrete art objects. Art objects are usually signed by one person, but are always preceded by various collective exchanges, whereas with ephemera, the collective dimension is brought forward in the lists of participants. How do you see the status of ephemera versus art objects, and do you see that there has been a shift over the last fifteen years?

BF:

Ephemera are precarious, because they're much less likely to be kept. Usually they're about taking note of a process. People don't think about longevity when they make ephemera; they are a side product or an afterthought. I was intrigued that you brought up the Group Material archive and The Fales Library to go into

both directions, to not just consider Facebook and social media now, but to also go back to the '80s when artists started to work with social structures for the first time. It's interesting to look at these three moments—Group Material, *lesser new york*, and then social media as all based on ephemera, or what's kept of these activities. There was a moment in 2004 or 2005 when you were thinking about *lesser new york*, and we were doing Continuous Project with Xeroxing. I haven't fully understood historically why, because it's so recent, but there was an interest and maybe even a fetishization of ephemera and the Xerox. There was urgency around the precarious materiality of the photocopy, even though it's endlessly reproducible. But still, it felt precious somehow. It has something to do with the rise of the digital. Actually, when Wolfgang Tillmans showed his early videos at The Kitchen, he mentioned that around the mid-2000's he stopped using the analog Xerox machine as one of the formats with which he would “print” his photographs because it began to feel quaint or nostalgic. He still prints copies of his photos digitally, but that has a different feel. *lesser new york* captures a moment with an interest in paper, ephemera, the archive, and the precariousness of it. We really wanted to see this materiality at that moment when the digital or immaterial becomes the entirely dominant format.

FB:

Some of the pieces for *lesser new york* were originally photocopied, like Bob Nickas's letter on being an independent

and your text for the show that Kelley Walker curated at Paula Cooper. As I re-printed everything for PS1, I used this printer that's also a photocopier and a scanner.

BF:

That's the end of the analog Xerox machine right there.

FB:

Yes, this already became apparent in earlier iterations. It was for example important how I copied your piece with Josh Smith's on the back, so that the gradation would be retained as in "the original." With copy generations it would disappear and depending on the copy machine would get muddy and darker, so it is quite some work to restage this precarious material.

BF:

So the "original" ephemera—they're all gone?

FB:

No, but they're glued and yellowed, so I scanned everything. Anyhow, these are all production notes, but it's interesting speaking about fetishization in relation to what the copy machine can do. Certain blacks or paper edge traces that we were all obsessed with then also came up in *lesser new york* through the copying of these materials. When I look back at the material, it is hard to say if it looks dated. You know, like your parents wearing some clothes that they have always worn? For us it looks

very old, but for them it's just what they always wore. It's hard to understand something being dated when you lived closely to it. This keen interest in analog reproduction technologies was definitely of that moment.

BF:

Talking to you about it now, it seems clear because this technology of the analog Xerox was about to disappear. It's hard to find an analog Xerox machine today, so it was probably somewhere in the air, that this is about to be gone. We wanted to really look at it and do something with it before it became too late.

FB:

We always think of avant-garde art as being on the forefront, but art can also be a mourning practice, in looking at things that are vanishing in society.

BF:

In your fabric as a person, you're somehow aware that the surface of the world is about to change. It's funny, you would think you might mourn this moment, that you know something is about to end, but it's more like you can sense a shift, and it's exciting.

FB:

Yes, it was a very exuberant moment—we were all high on something and we didn't know what it was; we were trying to figure out how to work with these new possibilities. But I don't think it was nostalgic.

BF:

With the Xerox machines, we can look at things as a thought process that leads to or accompanies an exhibition or an artwork. It's more the excitement that you could look behind the scenes, into the process.

FB:

To connect to past forms of engaging social structures as artwork at a time when society and technology were radically changing, what about the early avant-gardes, such as the Russian avant-garde or Dada. One piece that was important for me was Rodchenko's *Workers Club* (1925), that included a common reading and discussion structure. The reading structured a form of togetherness. The reading that was offered in *lesser new york* was closer to screen reading or browsing, only here not only your eye, but your entire body would scan across the wall, and not in a linear way from beginning to end because of the mass of information, the mirroring and the repeatability.

BF:

Yeah just picking up some words here and there, or shapes. I like the reference to Russian Constructivism and Dada. Hal Foster came to my class the other week and he was arguing how Hugo Ball's diaries, *Flight of Time*, are an amazing reference point right now. There Ball articulates the first shock of the new technology of the war and the early state of mass-produced society. They are his gut responses. Today we search for words again to respond to

another level of technology, war, and reproducibility that is everywhere. So it's interesting that for you, these are the same reference points.

FB:

Apropos technology, someone suggested that I update *lesser new york* and use a display designer, but I decided to keep it intact as an object. You would never update a painting by adding more glossy paint to make it look more commercially valid. It works like a time capsule, but I'm wondering what it means to restage something from 2005 into now.

BF:

*lesser new york* is a room, a spatial object, an installation. Are you planning to host a similarly shaped space and to use all the materials you used in 2005?

FB:

The space is smaller at PS1, one room instead of two. I am using everything so it'll be denser, but replicating formal decisions like color and shape connections.

BF:

I'd be interested to hear about how *lesser new york* led to later projects and events you organized.

PREVIOUS PAGES:  
*lesser new york* publication, 2005.

FB:

Reading in public, organizing texts and using it as decoration, on wallpaper became important. I did a show at White Columns a few years after—*That Social Space between Speaking and Meaning*—which consisted solely of text and different modes of reading: wall reading and reading on display in furniture in the shape of a question mark and an exclamation mark. I was always interested in collective forms. I often lift other people's works into structures or installations to think about the status of these objects, materially, and collectively in terms of how we author.

BF:

It's an interesting use of the term "collective work." You speak about lifting things, putting them elsewhere, finding agreement in dialogues where people give you things, but then they're not really theirs anymore, or at least they lose control of how they're used. You also talked about the erasure of authorship in collective art production. These are two terms that appear early on in your notes. Who is the author that's erased, or what kind of erasure is it? Is it full, is it partial? And then also collective in which sense? Where does collectivity end, and where is it a really productive part of your work?

FB:

In contrast to an eighties generation of appropriation, where it was literal stealing, I always ask for permission to include the work in specific display structures. I tried to never breach the trust that I had been given. I thought about these lifted works as signification machines. If you use oak versus pine, those signify differently. Artwork as a material carries history, affect, and many other dimensions of signification. It wasn't collaborative in the sense that we would sit down and have an equal say in decisions, but there were certainly many negotiations. I have become more interested in melting decision-making and really shifting the stakes for authorship. With *lesser new york* and other works that I did around this time, I was acting as a meta-author who would sign off on the structure as a whole. I would never commission a work, I would ask for things that already existed. For *lesser new york*, no one made new ephemera. Lately, I've been involved in a few different collaborations where we are many who sign off, in different capacities, in a more open approach to authoring. Our first conversation started with how Josh Smith put your dissertation into a show at Champion that he curated. Champion only invited artists to curate shows. We were playfully discussing whether you were now an artist because of this. How do you see your participation in the art world?

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BF:

Well, I think around that time maybe I could have still decided I would like to work as an artist. However, editing, writing, and teaching became creative and challenging forms for me. I'm not considering to define it as an artist's activity, but I'm deeply inspired by artists, making things together, and their way of working has definitely shaped me and made me an unusual sort of art historian or writer, and editor. That intuitive relationship to people and the material was what I wanted to cultivate and protect, to stay in touch with this vulnerable and open place.

FB:

When Reena Spaulings was created, it felt radical: taking on a fictive gallerist to operate like a gallery. Now former students open up spaces in Bushwick with professional websites and business cards...

BF:

Trend forecasting agencies...

FB:

There's a professionalization that happens fast, whereas we were playing with those forms perversely, against the function of the role. We also weren't under the spell of the big money that's there now.

BF:

We were fortunate to be protected from it, to have these years to work in private, primarily with friends. We didn't immediately have to live up to financial speculation or visibility that doesn't relate to where you are with your work. The speeding up of time is probably one of the biggest challenges for younger artists in the city, especially since life here is expensive.

FB:

Many of the activities that were part of *lesser new york*, happened in small circles where rumors were an important part as opposed to the promotional activities on social media. The difference between the roles of being a curator, artist, writer or teacher were very fluid. I don't know if it's less or more fluid now.

BF:

It seems pretty fluid to me.

FB:

That was very exciting. One great work in *lesser new york* was by Jay Sanders, who had been invited to curate a show for a downtown art festival. With a couple of friends, he concocted a bunch of artists and produced their work. A bunch of writers, artists, and someone who is now a Whitney curator together produced fictive artwork by invented artists.

From scratch?

BF:

I think so. It could never happen today when every activity leaves a trace online.

BF:

Yeah, it would be harder. You have to invent an identity digitally, which I guess people do. But it feels different than to just claim it. And there's this question: is it real? It felt more clunky, less elaborate; you're just posing.

FB:

We were more one-dimensional in respect to how these new entities operate.

BF:

Primarily I feel like I don't know. I'm looking at the younger generation asking: how do you guys do it? Within this socially networked, digital culture and the attention and financial speculation given to young artists like never before, as confusing and as distracting as it may be... a space has been opened up for all kinds of conversations that might have less to do with making art and more with the scene around art. But within that, there are still groups of people who are hanging out, and talking and seeing each other's shows. That hasn't changed much, it's just taking place

within more noise, making it harder to see from the outside. Maybe it was the same when we were young, and an older generation of artists, writers or curators were looking and thinking there was a lot of noise. Maybe it's just us getting old. It's always hard to separate the aging of a generation from significant historical change.

FB:

Do you think that the many examples in *lesser new york* of these slippages between who is a writer, artist, or educator might also have been an effect of youth, in the sense that we were actually not yet clear about where we were going?

BF:

Yes, it has more to do with youth than a historical moment, even if things have become more fluid and liquid. Jay (Sanders) is a curator, and he's a very special curator for the reasons that he once did make a show for which he invented works and the artists. John Kelsey is rare in that he works as an artist, writer and a gallerist, and it's the same with Emily (Sundblad) who is a performer and a gallerist and a visual artist. That's probably always going to be rare, and always going to be present.

FB:

When I put together *lesser new york*, it was a time when we were all moving through each other's lives fairly intensively. It was never a self-defined community, it was more loose. This

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moment has passed. Some people are still working together, while others dispersed into other circles. In retrospect as we have the key to our respective practices, we see how telling many of these early projects were for what was to come. Matt Keegan, for example, has continued to make publications after North Drive Press, in which our conversation from 2004 was published.

BF:

It's maybe the downside of finding your voice and finding some way to manifest it. You become so busy with your individual work and its reception; the more work you make, the more it takes space away from the production of new work or new thoughts, especially collaborative ones. I think that's the main reason why a more fluid collective period can't be sustained.

FB:

Art objects operate well on the trajectory of the individual thinker or practice, whereas ephemera have a real powerful suggestive quality to reengage us with history, the atmosphere and collective spirit.

BF:

They're markers of how everything is always in process, while the object pretends that something is finished. It has the burden of having to be a finite, frozen form, which usually doesn't change. It's a final statement or a result.

FB:

I read somewhere that there is a huge need for more paper restorers to restore all the deteriorating paper in the world.

BF:

Tell your students.

FB:

I prefer to see ephemera as a form of objects in themselves.

BF:

Objects in need of continuous restoration.