

Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism

Squint, and you can see the boat, photographed in the Netherlands in 2002, as sculpture (see fig. 1). With a little imaginative effort, the workaday tugboat becomes a kind of base, to which a single shipping container—of the kind usually found stacked on far larger vessels—is conjoined. Contrast is the formal principle of this large-scale assemblage. The boat has a slightly dented hull; it bristles with utilitarian antennae and railings. But the box perched on its deck—a striated block in a very pale blue—has the stripped-down gleam of contemporary high design. It also has design’s communicative savvy. Its side is emblazoned with a purple spot on which, in turn, floats an orange shape outlined in pink: a squared cross, one quickly realizes, of the kind that symbolizes humanitarian and medical aid. But here it is turned into a boat and sent to sea.¹

Of course, as the emblem already suggests, this hybrid object is no sculpture. What it is, in fact, is the vessel of one of the most audacious instances of feminist activism in recent memory. In 1999, a Dutch physician named Rebecca Gomperts formed a nongovernmental organization called Women on Waves. Its first action was to turn a shipping container into a fully functional, mobile gynecological clinic (see fig. 2). Then, in 2001, Gomperts and her group began strapping the unit to rented ships and sailing to countries that criminalize abortion. Their plan: to dock, take aboard local women, and sail them twelve miles out to sea. Twelve miles is, in most cases, the limit of a nation’s territorial waters. Beyond

This article was presented as a talk in the Feminist Futures symposium at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 25, 2007. I would like to thank the conference organizers. I would also like to thank Dr. Rebecca Gomperts for her willingness to discuss her project, Thomas Y. Levin for introducing me to Women on Waves and for sharing information and documentation, and Colin Beatty and Jennifer Roberts, rigorous and compassionate reader/listeners, both of whom made time for me when there was none. I am especially indebted to the participants in my seminar, “Art and Activism since 1989: Culture Jam,” at Harvard University in the fall of 2006. The political and intellectual commitment as well as the hope, energy, and enthusiasm of this group of artists/critics/activists will be an inspiration for me for a long time to come.

¹ The logo was designed by Kees Ryter in 2001.



Figure 1 The *Langenort*, a ship rented for use by Women on Waves, with the mobile clinic aboard. In the Netherlands just before embarking to Poland. Photo: Willem Velthoven. © Women on Waves Foundation. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

that line, Gomperts had realized, the ship's doctors could offer all the advice and treatment available in a liberal nation like the Netherlands, including abortion. For it is Dutch law that governs a ship registered in the Netherlands afloat in international waters. So far, boats bearing the clinic have embarked for Ireland (2001), Poland (2003), and Portugal (2004), bringing the Netherlands to the shores—or at least to twelve miles from the shores—of countries where abortion, information on abortion, and even contraception are difficult to access.²

For Gomperts and Women on Waves, abortion is a human rights issue, and their project is powered by its urgency. United Nations studies make it clear that criminalizing abortion does not eliminate or even radically

² Along with Malta, these were at the time the only European nations in which abortion was illegal. Portugal was among the most restrictive countries—one of the few to actually prosecute women for having abortions—but under a new government 59 percent of voters in February 2007 supported a referendum legalizing abortion if performed during the first ten weeks of pregnancy (the cutoff in other European countries ranges from twelve to twenty-four weeks). Although low voter turnout was considered to invalidate the referendum, in March 2007 parliament voted to enact the new, more liberal abortion regulation.

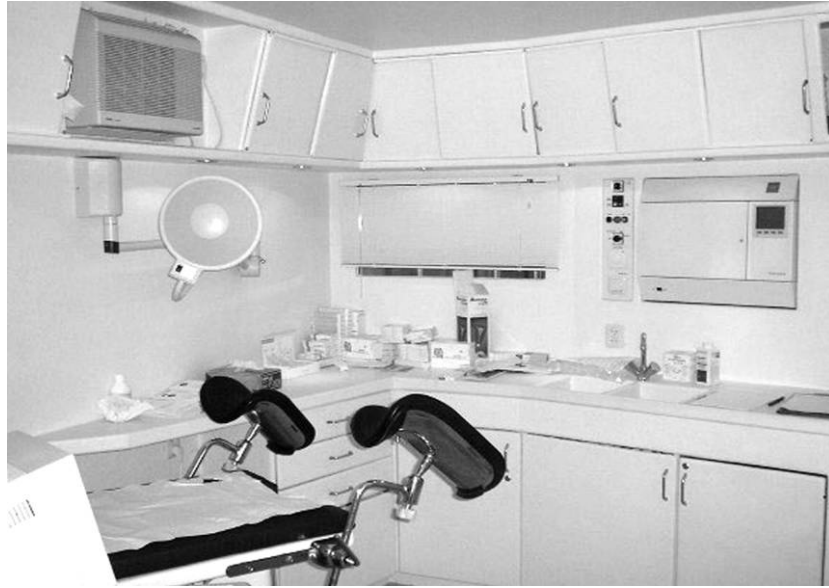


Figure 2 The interior of *A-Portable*, the mobile clinic designed and built by Joep van Lieshout for Women on Waves (2000). Photo: Rebecca Gomperts. © Women on Waves Foundation. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

reduce its rates; what it does accomplish is an increase in unsafe abortion.³ In what writers in the medical journal the *Lancet* recently dubbed “the preventable pandemic,” every year more than 68,000 women die after submitting to dangerous procedures—the majority of them poor women in developing nations who can afford neither quality illegal care at home nor so-called abortion tourism to more liberal countries (Grimes et al. 2006, see also Cohen 2003; WHO 2004). This number is horrifying. But no statistic gives a better sense of what is at stake for Women on Waves than the stories told by the women who called its hotline during each of its voyages, such as the Polish woman who could not afford the next day’s meals for the two children she had already, and who had been jumping

³ According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), comparative statistics show that criminalizing abortion has little effect on the prevalence of the practice: “More than one quarter of pregnancies worldwide, about 52 million annually, end in abortion. This is the proportion in Latin America, where abortion is generally illegal, as well as in the United States and China, where the procedure is legally available” (UNFPA, n.d.). See also Cohen (2003), WHO (2004), and Grimes et al. (2006). The Netherlands, meanwhile, with free access to contraception and abortion on request, has one of the lowest abortion rates in the world (Henshaw, Singh, and Haas 1999).

off furniture in hopes of miscarrying, or the woman, still bleeding as she talked on the phone, who had taken an unknown drug in an attempt to self-abort—and whose doctor only offered to sew shut her cervix to stop the miscarriage. And then there are the many women who simply left messages like this one: “You are my last chance to live as I’ve planned. . . . I’m still counting on you. Help me please, I’m desperate” (Women on Waves, n.d.a; see also Women on Waves 2003a, 2003b).⁴

Women on Waves responds to such calls with a fully functional medical clinic, two physicians and a nurse, an almost entirely female crew, and networks of local volunteers, all backed by years of planning and research. In port it offers legal and medical workshops, sex education, and contraception; on the way out to sea it gives sonograms and counseling; and in international waters it provides the abortion pill to women who want it. Its missions have been controversial enough to earn its doctors and volunteers not only bombardment with eggs and paint but also court cases and even death threats; it was radical enough in its challenge to national sovereignty to move the Portuguese government to launch warships to protect its populace from the feminist invasion. As a result, Women on Waves has spurred debate on abortion law where such debates had not occurred for years. Its visits galvanized the local groups of activists that invited the abortion boat to each country, and more such pro-choice groups were formed in its wake.⁵ A Polish government survey in 2003 found that popular support for liberalizing abortion law had gone up 12 percent in a year and cited the Women on Waves visit that summer as a source of the change.⁶ Meanwhile, the media has swarmed to a project that is as photogenic as it is controversial, allowing Women on Waves to raise awareness and spark debate worldwide.

This project demands serious study as an innovative and deeply contro-

⁴ Many of the women who tried to make use of Women on Waves’ services were poor. Though the majority of deaths from unsafe abortions occur in the global South, the lack of options for poor women even in countries like Ireland, where middle-class and wealthy women can access abortion relatively easily by traveling outside their national borders, is one of the crucial facts Women on Waves was able to publicize through its campaigns. There are more quotations from the hotline on the Women on Waves Web site (<http://www.womenonwaves.org>) and in Gomperts (2002).

⁵ Doctors for Choice and Lawyers for Choice were formed in Ireland in 2001.

⁶ The percentage of the population in favor of liberalizing abortion law was 44 percent in fall 2002 and 56 percent in fall 2003, according to polling from the Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej (report number BS /139/2003, “Opinions on Abortion Laws,” available in Polish at <http://www.cbos.pl/EN/Reports/r2003.shtml>), as cited in Women on Waves (n.d.b).

versial instance of feminist activism. And yet the focus on feminist art practices in the current issue of *Signs* offers an opportunity to mark something about Women on Waves that very few reports on the project have noted: that it is also a remarkable case of the intersection of activism and art.

Poetics and politics

Women on Waves is moored to the artistic in a surprising number of ways. Start with the act of radical imagination at the core of the project: the idea that the dominion of one nation-state over the bodies of its women could be evaded by a short trip on a boat registered in another. Outrageous in its simplicity as well as its implications (what's next, one wonders: cannabis cruises? euthanasia yachts?), using international waters as a refuge for women's rights, in particular, unfurls into a poetic series of associations. It literalizes the metaphor of waves that we use to describe generations of feminism and links it to old images that associate dangerous female power and the sea—from sirens and mermaids to the female pirates Ann Bonny and Mary Read. Meanwhile it takes on the traditional associations of women and ships, invariably referred to as “she.” In the eighteenth century, shipwrecks were even called miscarriages (Ditz 1994).⁷

But you need not take such interpretive journeys to discover what Women on Waves calls “the art part of activism” (Women on Waves 2004). You need only know that the shipping container/clinic was designed by the well-known Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout, who dubbed it the *A-Portable*, and that his design was made public in a show at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam.⁸ It might help to realize that while in port Women on Waves held workshops on its ships not only for lawyers and doctors but also for artists and writers, or that it has been featured in exhibitions like Ute Meta Bauer's Women Building in Portugal and in a dedicated show at the Mediamatic art space in Amsterdam. It has also appeared in *Artforum* and was counted by art critic Claire Bishop among examples of new political art (Bishop 2006; see also Allen 2001b). If you were in Venice in the summer of 2001 and noticed a strange blue box afloat on a raft at the Arsenale, you also know that the portable abortion clinic was represented in that year's Venice Biennale.

From the alternative and local to the established and eminent, then, art institutions have been remarkably willing to accept and support this

⁷ Thanks to Jennifer Roberts for providing this reference.

⁸ The exhibition was Play-use, shown at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art Rotterdam, the Netherlands, July 9–September 24, 2000.



Figure 3 *I Had an Abortion* (2003). Installation designed by Willem Velthoven, at the Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, Greece. Photo: Willem Velthoven. © Women on Waves Foundation. Reprinted with permission. Color version available as an online enhancement.

particular activist project. And this activist project has been remarkably interested in using art to enable and extend its mission. In 2003 Gomperts and the Dutch artist and critic Willem Velthoven began exhibiting a series of installations that, in part, documented the abortion boat trips.⁹ In a video projection called *Sea*, for instance, the voices of women who called the boat's hotline in 2001 play over images of the open ocean. But the installations went beyond documentation, using the language and spaces of contemporary art to promote the project's vision of a normalized and safe abortion policy for all women (see fig. 3). For instance, a display of specially designed minidresses on hangers, each bearing on one side a red

⁹ These installations have been shown at the Macedonian Museum of Art in Thessaloniki, Greece; at Mediamatic in Amsterdam; and at the gallery Modelarnia in Gdańsk, Poland. The exhibition in Thessaloniki was © Europe Exists, curated by Rosa Martinez and Harald Szeemann (Szeemann was also the curator of the 2001 Biennale that included the van Lieshout/Women on Waves project). An additional intersection with visual art is the multimedia documentation project, titled *Waves*, commissioned by Gomperts from Sascha Pohflepp and Jakob Schillinger, based on footage shot during the Poland campaign, exhibited at Mediamatic, Amsterdam, in 2003, and selected for the new media competition at the Stuttgarter Filmpreis, January 2004. See <http://www.pohflepp.com>.

circle and on the other the text “I had an abortion” in one of the languages spoken in Europe, links the dangers of unsafe abortion to the need to destigmatize the procedure. This display nods to Man Ray, who made and photographed a modernist mobile of coat hangers in 1920–21; to pro-choice agitprop in which the hanger symbolizes illegal, back-alley abortions; and to the history of open letters like the famous 1971 French “Manifesto of the 343” (*Nouvel Observateur* 1971), in which prominent women fought stigmatization by publicly proclaiming “I had an abortion.”¹⁰

The intersection with the modes, traditions, and institutions of art is neither coincidental nor incidental to Women on Waves. While she was in medical school, and before the stint as a ship’s doctor for Greenpeace during which she came up with the idea for Women on Waves, the remarkable polymath Gomperts (also a published novelist) completed a four-year art degree at Amsterdam’s Reitsveld Academy, studying conceptual art.¹¹ And while she no longer identifies as an artist, it was, in a very literal way, art that allowed her to put her idea into practice. The grant that provided the bulk of the money to construct Women on Waves’ portable clinic did not come from the Dutch health ministry nor the World Health Organization, not from the International Planned Parenthood Federation nor Ipas nor the Feminist Majority Foundation. It came from the Mondriaan Foundation.¹²

Given all this, it is not difficult to imagine making an argument for Women on Waves as art—specifically, to imagine slipping it into the category of activist art that has been used, since it began to be theorized by critics like Lucy Lippard in the 1980s (see Lippard 1984), to hold open a space for the fusion of work that is symbolic with work that is social.

¹⁰ Following the example of the “Manifesto of the 343,” the first issue of *Ms.* magazine in 1972 included a list of fifty-three prominent U.S. women willing to proclaim that they had had an abortion (*Ms.* 1972). The strategy has been picked up again recently, with a new petition from *Ms.*, this one specifically intended to address the problem of unsafe abortion in developing nations and the United States’ contribution to the problem through the global gag rule and its restriction of sex-education funding to abstinence-only programs (see *Ms.* 2006). The *I Had an Abortion* installation in particular, with its specific use of all European languages, signals an aspect of the meaning of Women on Waves that needs to be further explored: the way it is both based in and addressed to post-European Union debates about the possibility of a specifically European identity and set of values.

¹¹ Telephone interview by the author with Rebecca Gomperts, December 19, 2006; Rebecca Gomperts, e-mail to the author, December 21, 2006.

¹² The Feminist Majority did contribute to the project later by sending experts to provide security during the Poland trip. The Mondriaan Foundation (named for the Netherlands’ most famous modern painter) is a national funding agency dedicated to the visual arts and design.

It is likely the viability of this category that has allowed so many arts organizations and institutions to support Women on Waves—and indeed activist art was explicitly the topic of the workshop for artists held aboard the Women on Waves ship in Ireland in 2001.¹³ Yet I am not interested in arguing that Women on Waves *is* art of even this special kind. In fact, I fear that the activist art category, as important as it has been for legitimating, theorizing, and promoting politically engaged practice, now somewhat obscures the nature of many of the most productive and provocative practices at the crossing of its terms. These projects do not hybridize art and activism so much they as they tactically play on their ambiguous separation—to which the apparent mismatch of Women on Waves’ boat and the container atop it might be said to give visual form. Women on Waves is not art, nor is it not-art: rather it tacks between art and politics in much the same way it moves between actual human rights mission and media-political campaign, legality and piracy, fact and myth.

The art of the plausible

To me there is still no more moving statement of faith in the revolutionary force of imagination than the one on the streets of Paris during the uprisings of 1968: “Under the cobblestones, the beach.” But “twelve miles from the beach, the Netherlands,” Women on Waves might respond, for the project is driven by a similar determination to replace what is with what could be. Instead of the 1960s vision of liberation, however, it imagines something concrete: a world in which women have access to safe and legal abortion no matter where they live. And instead of symbolically promoting change, the project’s method is to make it so: to use maritime law and the concept of international waters to actually create—however temporarily and provisionally—the dreamed-of situation. This, the performative quality of Women on Waves, was captured in 2001 by critic Jennifer Allen. The project “does not thematise, represent, nor illustrate the problem of abortion,” she wrote, “it imposes a new geo-political reality that challenges [the] status quo in ways that cannot be fathomed, let alone controlled” (Allen 2001a, 158).¹⁴

¹³ Telephone interview with Rebecca Gomperts by the author, December 19, 2006. Artists involved in the workshop included Louise Walsh, Mick O’Kelly, and Pauline Cummins (see Connor 2001).

¹⁴ Theorist of tactical media David Garcia (2006) privileges Women on Waves as an exemplar of a second wave of tactical media, one that has the creativity and communicational savvy of earlier 1990s culture jamming and the goal of promoting discourse rather than simply agitating for a belief but that forgoes the fleetingness of earlier work, demonstrating

Women on Waves thus makes an interesting comparison with another, perhaps better-known group at the crossing of art and activism. The quasi-anonymous group the Yes Men creates brilliantly but sometimes very subtly parodic Web sites and press releases to expose the politics of entities like the World Trade Organization, George Bush, or McDonald's (see *Yes Men* 2003; Yes Men 2004).¹⁵ So subtle are the parodies, in fact, that unsuspecting event planners sometimes use the information provided in them to contact the organizations in question, and in this way members of the Yes Men have scored official invitations to participate in industry and government events. Staying completely in character, they then strive to illustrate the real values of the organizations they pretend to represent, usually by unveiling an innovative prototype, such as the SurvivaBall debuted by "Halliburton" at the Catastrophic Loss Conference held in 2006 in Amelia Island, Florida (see fig. 4). A watertight, inflatable, multimedia-equipped suit, the SurvivaBall was designed to outfit the prescient executive ready to turn catastrophic climate change into business opportunity.

But the Yes Men also use their strategies to more serious effect, most notoriously in 2004 when they convinced BBC News that Dow Chemical, in a change of corporate heart, was offering compensation to the victims of the ongoing disaster caused by its subsidiary Union Carbide, whose poorly maintained facility leaked poison gas into the city of Bhopal, India, in 1984 (see fig. 5; see also Cowell 2004; Yes Men, n.d.). The news that Dow had finally decided to take the ethical high ground, stockholders be damned—news that was completely untrue but convincingly presented—left Dow in the position of having to explain anew that it was not giving aid and brought a deluge of media attention both to the anniversary of the disaster and the company's unwillingness to take responsibility for it.

From one perspective, the opposition between the legalistic, earnest Women on Waves and the mischievous, hoaxing Yes Men is as complete as that between the genders in their names: as clear as the difference between real and virtual, between what one group calls campaigns and

longer-term commitment and deeper engagement. He cites in particular the way it actively assists women and describes its use of art and design in the campaign as a reminder that the very idea of cultural politics in its contemporary sense came from the women's movement.

¹⁵ See also the Yes Men Web site (<http://www.theyesmen.org>). The Yes Men generally function as an anonymous collective, whose membership is open and varies according to project. However, it is widely known that it was created by and its best-known pranks have been enacted by two artists, Igor Vamos and Jacques Servin. Vamos is a media artist who teaches electronic arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. Servin is a digital artist and writer of experimental fiction. Their projects may best be understood as a radically interventionist performance art, though of course questions as to whether and how such exploits should be understood as art are precisely to the point.



Figure 4 The Yes Men, *Halliburton Solves Global Warming* (2006). Catastrophic Loss Conference, Amelia Island, Florida. Photo © The Yes Men (available under Creative Commons noncommercial 1.0 license). Color version available as an online enhancement.

the other hijinks. For while Gomperts insists on actually producing the condition of legal abortion that her project conjures in imagination, the Yes Men’s strategy of impersonation means that they always operate in what J. L. Austin calls the “unhappy performative” (1976, 14). A statement like “Dow accepts responsibility” is similar to one like “I christen this ship.” Both do something rather than represent something. Such speech acts are not judged true or untrue, but successful or unsuccessful, felicitous or infelicitous.

And yet, while they do not have the power to make real the changes they announce, the Yes Men nevertheless have real effects—on Dow’s stock price that day in 2004, for example. And for its part, Women on Waves lists toward the unhappy performative more than one might think. For the fact is that two of the group’s three campaigns to provide legal



Figure 5 The Yes Men, *Dow Bhopal* (2004). Photo © The Yes Men (available under Creative Commons noncommercial 1.0 license). Color version available as an online enhancement.

abortions were thoroughly thwarted. Licensing and other technicalities kept them from giving any abortion-related treatments during the pilot program to Ireland (see Corbett 2001, 26; Gomperts 2002, n.p.). Later, with its claim that the ship posed a threat to national security worthy of deploying its navy, the government of Portugal was able to prevent Women on Waves from coming ashore at all, even for supplies and fuel.¹⁶

In neither of these cases was Women on Waves' vision of safe, legal abortion actually achieved. And yet this does not mean the project failed—far from it. For while Gomperts is nothing if not sincere, and while saving even one woman from an unsafe abortion is authentically heroic, it is clear

¹⁶ The project first became known internationally through a rumor-based report that it was going to Malta, published by an antiabortion group in 2000. The portable clinic is equipped for surgical abortions, but except perhaps in the very earliest moments of the project's imagining there was no intent to perform invasive procedures at sea. Where the project has been stymied has to do with the point at which it is authorized to perform medical abortions (i.e., to offer abortifacient medication). Because the Dutch government has approved its medical facility but has not granted it an abortion clinic's license, Women on Waves is limited to providing the abortion pill in very early pregnancy—before forty-five days—because this use of the medication does not require a special clinic license.

that the project has always been meant to do media politics as well as—and perhaps by means of—medical service.¹⁷ Indeed, its brilliance is in recognizing the special power of doing both at once: of using bodily care to do representational work. The Yes Men pretend to be something they are not in order to raise awareness and, however humorously, to inspire outrage. Likewise it could be said that Women on Waves' claim to be an actual service provider is the Trojan horse (or faux Web site) by means of which they do their remarkably successful media political work.

The two groups differ, clearly, in the sincerity of the claims they make. The Yes Men go into their hijinks knowing that they are not, and that the situation is not, what they say it is. Women on Waves, by contrast, genuinely tries to provide abortion services in each campaign, while fighting and negotiating the constraints that circumstances and opponents impose. Nevertheless, the two groups' tactics have more in common than it would initially seem—and in this commonality there is a powerful model for contemporary political art. It is often said that politics is the “art of the possible.”¹⁸ Where the Yes Men and Women on Waves meet is in developing what might be called an art of the plausible. It is always possible that Dow will have a change of heart; what the Yes Men did was to make us, for a moment, believe that it had happened. And this politics or aesthetics of plausibility is also the function of the handful of abortion pills that Women on Waves has actually managed to dispense. By providing opportunities for belief—however fleeting, and no matter how stymied—such tactics of plausibility provide especially rich, emotional experiences

¹⁷ The question of whether Women on Waves should be considered a media intervention or an actual service mission is ultimately undecidable. Gomperts insists that the actual consultations and treatment are central to the project's functioning. But this itself is two-sided: on the one hand, there is the genuine desire to assist as many women as possible, and on the other, there is the increased symbolic and media power gained by the project because of the credibility of its intent to provide actual abortions. Although at the very early stage of developing Women on Waves Gomperts imagined that boats could actually provide a long-term option to women in countries with strict abortion laws, she quickly realized this would be financially and practically impossible (Gomperts, e-mail to the author, January 12, 2007). Since that point, the media-political side of the project seems to have had weight equal to that of the actual provision of service, and my point is that an either-or analysis will not do justice to the project. Thanks to Thomas Y. Levin for a helpful discussion early on about these questions.

¹⁸ This phrase generally is attributed to Otto van Bismarck in conversation in 1867. See *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. Elizabeth Knowles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). In the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign John Kerry contrasted the art of the possible with the art of the probable, where for him the latter signaled a lack of imagination and courage. The plausible, as I use it here, is a third mode, or, rather, operation.

of “what-if.” The art of the plausible works to edge an imagined state of affairs from the merely possible to the brink, at least, of the probable.

It seems fitting in this regard that the mobile abortion clinic exhibited at the Venice Biennale was, to put it bluntly, fake. Because the actual clinic was shipping out to Ireland at the time, the vessel that floated at the Arsenale was an empty replica. No one could actually go out to the raft to verify what was in the blue container, and perhaps because of this it seems to have functioned as a screen for projection, with a rumor developing that the clinic could be visited, but only by women seeking gynecological care (Blazwick 2001). Like reports that have Women on Waves preparing journeys to Africa and Latin America and performing surgical procedures on the high seas, such stories are fictions—but of course the lesson of the activism of both the Yes Men and Women on Waves is that fictions can be facts of another order. The imagined interventions in the global South suggest an important question about Women on Waves’ politics, as we will see in a moment. But so, too, the apparent believability of the really rather stunning idea that there might be abortion consults on offer at the Venice Biennale highlights a truth: that a model of art as literal, functional service had been legitimated by the most august of artistic institutions.

Art, activism, and autonomy

The category of activist art starts from such a belief: that the aesthetic is not a retreat from the real but is in and of it.¹⁹ It is peculiar, then, that in many recent crossings of art and activism, the idea of art’s imbrication in the world meets a precisely opposing model: that of art’s autonomy.²⁰

Consider the case of the Austrian collective WochenKlausur, which uses art exhibitions as opportunities to develop creative forms of civic service.

¹⁹ More than twenty years ago, Lippard distinguished political art from activist art. Both have political intent and may deal with the same topics or issues, but while political art represents political subject matter, activist art does politics. “Although ‘political’ and ‘activist’ artists are often the same people,” she wrote, “‘political’ art tends to be socially *concerned* and ‘activist’ art tends to be socially *involved*. . . . The former’s work is a commentary or analysis, while the latter’s art works *within* its context, *with* its audience” (Lippard 1984, 349).

²⁰ In theoretical terms this partially corresponds to what Sarah Kanouse calls the tactical irrelevance of art. Kanouse writes that “the blithe irrelevance of art through most of Euro-American history ends up serving a tactical purpose: art can become a relatively safe and ‘conveniently sequestered’ space not for obscuring or aestheticizing capitalism but within which people might play with new forms of agency and enhance their expectations for participation in the politics routinely encountered in everyday life” (Kanouse 2006, 9).

In 1995, the group took on the problem of Austria's strict and quota-driven immigration law and managed to provide seven refugees legal residency in the country by getting them new professional identities as artists—an employment category for which there was no quota.²¹ This project recalls the attitude of van Lieshout, the Dutch artist who designed the Women on Waves clinic, and whose own practice has culminated in the founding of his own city, complete with sex chamber, drug-making facility, and munitions plant—that is, in reworking the idea of art's autonomy in the register of separatism, or even survivalism. Allen paraphrases him this way: “Since the state usually respects the autonomy of aesthetics, why not use art to take over the world?” (Allen 2001b, 105). WochenKlausur might not use the same kind of language, but its members too trade on the fact that art's special status leaves it less regulated than other forms of employment or production.

Less regulated than seafaring for example—as occurred to Gomperts and her crew in a moment of crisis during the abortion boat's pilot mission. Almost immediately upon setting sail for Ireland in 2001, the crew were radioed from their Dutch port to stop and unload the shipping container because adding a medical clinic to the ship had voided its inspection certificate. Thinking quickly, Women on Waves explained to the officials that the container was not a medical facility but a work of art. Calls were made and documents faxed to confirm the artistic pedigree, and the boat was allowed to continue to Ireland (Gomperts 2002, n.p.). If I started this article considering the abortion boat (rather tendentiously) as a kind of sculpture, Women on Waves here does the same. As opposed to the activist art model of expanding art's reach to include action in the world, here art is tactically configured as a space apart: a not quite real and thus somewhat extralegal sphere that provides activism a safe harbor.

We want to eat our cake and have it, too, those of us who believe in a political and activist art. We do not accept that art is an apolitical space apart from worldly pressures, and yet we want it to be a zone of special freedom. This is either an embarrassing lapse or, as Jacques Rancière would suggest, a structuring paradox for political art today. According to Rancière, there is a constant tension in modernity “between the logic of art that becomes life at the price of abolishing itself as art, and the logic of art that does politics on the explicit condition of not doing it at all”

²¹ Grant H. Kester treats WochenKlausur in depth in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004). On this project in particular, see Pascale Jeannée (2003) and the description of the project at http://www.wochenklausur.at/projekte/04p_lang_en.htm.

(2006, 83). But consider a corollary: the possibility that the category of activist art is not just defined against but actively requires its nonactivist counterpart—it needs borders around art so that it might sail through them; or, so that, as Rancière puts it, “the border be always there yet already crossed” (2006, 85).²² *WochenKlausur* and *Women on Waves* are fascinating because they embody both sides of the paradox, opening art to real action in the world but doing so precisely by using art, and thus constructing it, as a space apart.²³ Indeed, one of the striking things about *Women on Waves* is the parallel between the boat that provides temporary escape from a nation’s law and the art world as a place where normal regulations do not quite apply.

Free floating

This suggests one final aspect of the art and politics of *Women on Waves*.²⁴ Critics have been quick to identify colonialist undertones in the project’s central image: a Dutch ship sailing to foreign lands to promote social and cultural change. It took an antiabortion Dutch health minister to accuse *Women on Waves* of treating Poland like a “banana republic,” but even the staunchest pro-choice partisan may find disturbing symbolism in its mission (quoted in *Women on Waves 2003c*).²⁵ It can, and should, be

²² Such a formulation might also help address a tension in the discourse on activist art between its theoretical dimension, in which arguments are put forward regarding the inherent nonseparation of the artistic and the political, and the curatorial and art-historical dimension, in which activist art is distinguished from other forms of cultural production. The tension between these—between the urge to identify and defend a specifically artistic kind of activism, on the one hand, and to argue for the inherent interrelation of the artistic and the political, on the other—is not often remarked but surfaces in the tactical use of the conventional separation of art and real-world politics in projects like those of *WochenKlausur* and *Women on Waves*. As I see it, there are two ways of viewing these tactical uses of art’s autonomy: a negative way of looking at them as cynical use and a positive way of looking at them as protecting—by deploying—art as a relatively unregulated sphere for imagination.

²³ Though I think that they have a great deal of complexity and interest, the relatively conventional form of multimedia installations by means of which *Women on Waves* is usually represented in art museums and galleries fits a conventional understanding of the value of the art world—as a space for representation rather than action.

²⁴ In a recent essay Jennifer González and Adrienne Posner remind us that, in addition to doing politics, any given activist art project also has a politics: its own “political character which produces and is produced by its historical moment and subsequent reception” (2006, 213). It is this dimension of *Women on Waves*’ politics that may be most problematic, at least for those of us who start from a position of support of its pro-choice mission.

²⁵ Around the same time, a U.S. antiabortion writer described the campaign as an invasion and also interpreted the project in terms of colonial imposition of culture (Rose 2003).

countered that *Women on Waves* comes to a country at the invitation of local pro-choice groups and that to provide an option is not the same as to enforce an ideology or take possession of a territory.²⁶ But the real weakness of the colonialist critique, it seems to me, is that it misidentifies the ideological implications of a basic assumption underlying the project: that violent invasion, occupation, and enforcement are not necessary when invitation, transportation, and provision of options will do instead.

For if the project has a political unconscious it may well be not colonialist but neoliberal. However imprecise the correlation, isn't there an uncomfortable rhyme between the strategic retreat to international waters to escape local laws and the off-shoring by which corporations evade taxes and national laws? Aren't the hallmarks of our current form of economic organization precisely the weakening of national sovereignty and the ability to shake off regulation, as in the concept of the Free Trade Zone, where bits of land are freed from the law of the countries to which they belong, as if themselves set afloat? And isn't there something very much of our time about the realization that for maximum flexibility and efficiency an abortion clinic could be housed in a shipping container, that steel box so indispensable to the post-World War II reorientation of trade we call globalization that Allan Sekula has dubbed it "the very coffin of remote labor power" (2003, 279)?²⁷

It might be said, then, that Gomperts's project makes use of old maritime law while partaking of a new model of sovereignty. But let me be clear: to recognize such parallels is not to call the women who have risked their safety and freedom in this attempt to better the lives of their sisters neoimperialists, by any means. If anything, they might be said to wear the forms of economic globalization—from container shipping to legal loopholes—the way pranksters wear corporate suits, using the dominant system to their own progressive ends. Nevertheless, it seems to me that while *Women on Waves* works *on* the politics of reproductive rights, it works *in* the politics of globalization.

Now, the very need for a project like *Women on Waves* gives the lie

²⁶ Telephone interview by the author with Rebecca Gomperts, December 19, 2006.

²⁷ Sekula argues that the traditional relation of land and sea has been reversed under conditions of neoliberal trade and globalization of capital: "Sites of production become mobile, while paths of distribution become fixed and routine." The containerization of cargo—a process invented in the United States in the 1950s—is the very condition for globalized manufacturing, and as such, to Sekula, the boxes bear "the hidden evidence of exploitation in the far reaches of the world" (2003, 279). It should be noted that shipping containers have become quite ubiquitous in contemporary art and design, but this interest in rehabilitating and exploring the modular, transport-ready structure is also itself symptomatic.

to the image of free-flowing information and fluid borders that characterizes globalization ideology: when you cannot tell a woman how to get an abortion without fear of imprisonment because of the side of the border on which you sit, or when you cannot afford a trip from Ireland to Britain or from Poland to Germany to avail yourself of more liberal abortion laws, the idea that national sovereignty and geographic boundaries are no longer primary determinants of power seems a ludicrous abstraction. What interests me, however, is the way that globalization's modes and rhetoric themselves might be a condition for the project's central innovation, in which a way around national sovereignty aboard a free-floating piece of territory was imagined—and mobilized—as a solution. In the end, this may be neither here nor there when it comes to assessing *Women on Waves* as an activist project. But as a para-aesthetic practice it seems crucial to note, for the underlying logic of the otherwise-regulated space links not only free-trade zone and abortion boat but the sphere of art as well.

*Departments of History of Art and Architecture and
Visual and Environmental Studies
Harvard University*

References

- Allen, Jennifer. 2001a. "AVL/ Joep van Lieshout 1963." In *Biennale di Venezia: 49. Esposizione internazionale d'arte; Platea dell'umanità* [Venice Biennale 49: International art exposition; Universal audience], 2 vols., ed. Harald Szeemann, Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli, and Lara Facco, 1:158–59. Milan: Electa.
- . 2001b. "Up the Organization" (interview with Joep van Lieshout). *Artforum International* 39(8):104–11.
- Austin, J. L. 1976. *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Ed. J. O. Urmson and Maria Sbisà. 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bishop, Claire. 2006. "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents." *Artforum International* 44(6):178–83.
- Blazwick, Iwona. 2001. "Psychic Spaces: Enter at Your Own Risk." *Art Monthly* 248 (July–August): 30–33.
- Cohen, Susan A. 2003. "Envisioning Life without Roe: Lessons without Borders." *Guttmacher Report on Public Policy* 6(2):3–5.
- Connor, Valerie. 2001. "C97 Review: Dublin." *Circa 97* (Autumn): 5–53.
- Corbett, Sara. 2001. "The Pro-Choice Extremist." *New York Times Magazine*, August 26, 22–27.
- Cowell, Alan. 2004. "BBC Falls Prey to Hoax on Anniversary of Bhopal Disaster." *New York Times*, December 4, A6.
- Ditz, Toby L. 1994. "Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Rep-

- representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia." *Journal of American History* 81(1):51–80.
- Garcia, David. 2006. "Learning the Right Lessons." *Mute*, January 25. <http://www.metamute.org/en/Learning-the-Right-Lessons>.
- Gomperts, Rebecca. 2002. *Women on Waves*. Amsterdam: Women on Waves.
- González, Jennifer, and Adrienne Posner. 2006. "Fracture for Change: US Activist Art since 1960." In *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones, 212–29. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Grimes, David A., Janie Benson, Susheela Singh, Mariana Romero, Bela Ganatra, Friday E. Okonofua, and Iqbal H. Shah. 2006. "Unsafe Abortion: The Preventable Pandemic." *Lancet* 368(9550):1908–19.
- Henshaw, Stanley K., Susheela Singh, and Taylor Haas. 1999. "The Incidence of Abortion Worldwide." *International Family Planning Perspectives* 25, suppl.: S30–S38.
- Jeannée, Pascale. 2003. "WochenKlausur: Art and Sociopolitical Intervention." In *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site*, ed. Ken Ehrlich and Brandon LaBelle, 255–64. Los Angeles: Errant Bodies.
- Kanouse, Sarah E. 2006. "Tactical Irrelevance: Art and Politics at Play." Paper presented at the Conference of the Union for Democratic Communication, Boca Raton, FL, May 20. http://www.readysubjects.org/writing/kanouse_artpolitics.pdf.
- Kester, Grant H. 2004. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lippard, Lucy. 1984. "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power." In *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis, 341–58. New York: New Museum.
- Ms. 1972. "We Have Had Abortions." *Ms.* (Spring): 34–35.
- . 2006. "We Had Abortions." *Ms.* (Fall): 38.
- Nouvel Observateur*. 1971. "Un appel de 343 femmes" [Manifesto of the 343]. *Le Nouvel Observateur* 334 (April 5–11): 5.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2006. "Problems and Transformations in Critical Art." In *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop, 83–93. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rose, Michael S. 2003. "Mission Aborted: The Failed Dutch Invasion of Poland." *American Conservative*, September 8. http://www.amconmag.com/2003/09_08_03/article1.html.
- Sekula, Allan. 2003. *Performance under Working Conditions*. Exhibition catalog. Vienna: Generali Foundation.
- UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund). n.d. "Reducing Risks by Offering Contraceptive Services." United Nations Population Fund. <http://www.unfpa.org/mothers/contraceptive.htm>.
- Women on Waves. 2003a. "Calling: What the Locals Say on the Phone." Women on Waves, June 21. <http://www.womenonwaves.org/article-1020.134-en.html>.
- . 2003b. "Kremlin, Acropolis, Eiffel Tower, Langenort! Abortion Boat Latest Tourist Attraction." Women on Waves, July 2. <http://www.womenonwaves.org/article-1020.442-en.html>.

- . 2003c. “Open Ship: For More Information.” *Women on Waves*, July 1. <http://www.womenonwaves.org/article-1020.440-en.html>.
- . 2004. “Fame! Glory! Compulsory EU Leader Tours! The Art Part of Activism.” *Women on Waves*, July 1. <http://www.womenonwaves.org/article-1020.101-en.html>.
- . n.d.a. “Quotes and Emails.” *Women on Waves*. <http://www.womenonwaves.org/article-1020.284-en.html>.
- . n.d.b. “What Was the Effect?” *Women on Waves*. <http://www.womenonwaves.org/article-1020.359-en.html>.
- WHO (World Health Organization). 2004. *Unsafe Abortion: Global and Regional Estimates of the Incidence of Unsafe Abortion and Associated Mortality in 2000*. 4th ed. Geneva: World Health Organization. http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/unsafe_abortion_estimates_04/estimates.pdf.
- Yes Men*. 2003. Directed by Chris Smith, Dan Ollman, and Sarah Price. Milwaukee: Free Speech, LLC.
- Yes Men. 2004. *The Yes Men: The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization*. New York: Disinformation.
- . n.d. “Dow.” <http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/dow/>.