



Figure 1. Video still from *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong*, single-channel color video; color, sound, 6 mins., 35 secs., 1999. © Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

# Unfinished Business

*Notes toward an Artist Statement*

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**Carey Young**

As an artist I aim to operate in the gap between art and a life controlled to an unprecedented degree by corporate power. A number of my works feature myself in the guise of a businessperson, a “character” that I use as a device to discuss complicity and to question clichéd ideas of artistic withdrawal as a critical strategy.

## ***Everything You've Heard Is Wrong***

In the video *Everything You've Heard Is Wrong* (1999), I give a brief workshop on business-style presentation skills. Dressed in a smart business suit and standing atop a ladder, I appear as a lone speaker surrounded by the milling crowds of Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park. We see a radical disconnect between speaker and audience, who were perhaps expecting the political or religious rhetoric historically associated with the “free speech” of Speakers' Corner. And yet, we cannot castigate the speaker as merely a complicit figure, attempting to corporate-clone herself through the viral spreading of her skills. In offering her expensively gained training for free, the speaker's actions could be seen as altruistic, and the piece, with its self-referential core (a speech about giving a speech), seems to collapse in on itself. Yet if the public sphere (symbolized by Speakers' Corner) might seem in the process of being overthrown by corporate business (symbolized by the speaker), nonetheless the speaker's performance, with her inability to draw much of an audience, has a comic vulnerability, while the more overtly “political” speakers around her have no problem gaining a crowd (see fig. 1).



Figure 2. Production still from *Product Recall*, single-channel color video; color, sound, 4 mins., 27 secs., 2007. © Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Christine Sullivan

### ***Product Recall***

*Product Recall* (2007) is a short video set in a psychoanalyst's consulting room, in which I again appear as the besuited artist. The analyst gently tests my ability to recall the company names associated with a number of corporate catchphrases that center on innovation and creativity, such as *Think Different. Invent. Imagination at work. Where imagination begins.* All of the slogans are from real ad campaigns of globally recognized brands, most of which are active as sponsors of art institutions, fairs, and exhibitions. During the analysis session, it proves impossible for me to recall many of the slogans. They all sound the same and simply slide into each other like some accidental business merger. While the piece remains ambiguous in its intent, if we are looking for ways to resist corporate influence, one small method may simply be not to remember their advertising messages (see fig. 2).



Figure 3. *Body Techniques* (after *Parallel Stress*, Dennis Oppenheim, 1970), lightjet print, 48 x 55 7/8 in., 2007. © Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

### **Body Techniques**

Instead of the specificities of particular companies, art museums, or other institutional sites, I am more interested in the sitelessness and generic aesthetic character of neoliberal globalization. In *Body Techniques* (after *Parallel Stress*, Dennis Oppenheim, 1970), a photographic work from 2007 that forms part of a larger series, I appear in an office suit and heels, face down on a curved mound of powdered concrete aggregate.<sup>1</sup> The location is one of Dubai's many construction sites, but this could be any place where the corporate imagination seems to have taken hold. In the distance, we see an endless desert vista out of which manifold cloned buildings rise like some transnational *grand projet*. Whilst my physical position echoes (and is a homage to) an earlier work by the seminal conceptual artist Dennis Oppenheim, it is not a posture symbolizing rest or even passivity. Instead it is enigmatic, a symbolic "death of the artist" while also a pose too fake, too comfortable to be a real death. A close-up view of the piece, as a large-scale print, reveals tiny fossil-like shells suspended within the concrete powder, giving a timeless quality. The piece is intended as a meditation on the agency of the artist: the body depicted in the work is represented as both artist and businessperson, and it is as a businessperson that she has "collapsed" (see fig. 3).

## ***Inventory***

*Inventory* (2007) is based on an idea from Georges Bataille's journal *Documents*, in which a physician outlines the financial value of a (male) human body in terms of its constituent chemical elements. I discovered that since the creation of the original in 1929, there had been so many scientific discoveries about the human body that the original research was invalid. Working with scientists at Imperial College London and Cambridge University, I created a self-portrait by assessing the value of my body according to its chemical elements and their current value on the international chemicals markets. The elements range from relatively large amounts of oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen to infinitesimal amounts of elements such as tungsten, uranium, and gold. The work is manifested as a large black graphic on the wall (indicating my current value, in pounds sterling) and next to it, a framed printout of the calculation data (the market price and weight of all the chemical elements in my body). Each time the work is shown, I weigh myself on the date of the invitation to exhibit and then recalculate the value, which is also the sale price of the work. The value has accordingly gone up and down depending on the state of my physique (see fig. 4).



Figure 4. Installation view of *Inventory*, vinyl text and ink on paper, 2007. © Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

## **Declared Void**

Law and legal structures have become increasingly important subject matter to me, and I aim to use law as an artistic medium. Working closely with a legal team, I have developed artworks featuring legal instruments such as disclaimers, forward-looking statements, and contracts. *Declared Void* (2005) comprises a contract and a wall drawing composed of thick black lines that delineate a sizeable corner of the gallery. The contract, which appears on the wall in large black type, states: “BY ENTERING THE ZONE CREATED BY THIS DRAWING, AND FOR THE PERIOD YOU REMAIN THERE, YOU DECLARE AND AGREE THAT THE US CONSTITUTION WILL NOT APPLY TO YOU.” The contract employs a sleight of hand: the space, technically speaking, cannot lie outside American constitutional powers without the consent of the US Congress. The viewer, however, is invited to enter a legal space that could also be seen as the artist’s “hallucination.” The legal logic of this work echoes those inherent to extralegal zones, familiar to us today through sites such as Guantánamo Bay.<sup>2</sup> Central to my artistic concept is a legally credible contractual structure created with the input of a named lawyer,<sup>3</sup> rather than a mere “illustration” of the law created by an artist. As such, the piece can only be exhibited on US soil, since it is essential that the piece has legal force (see fig. 5).

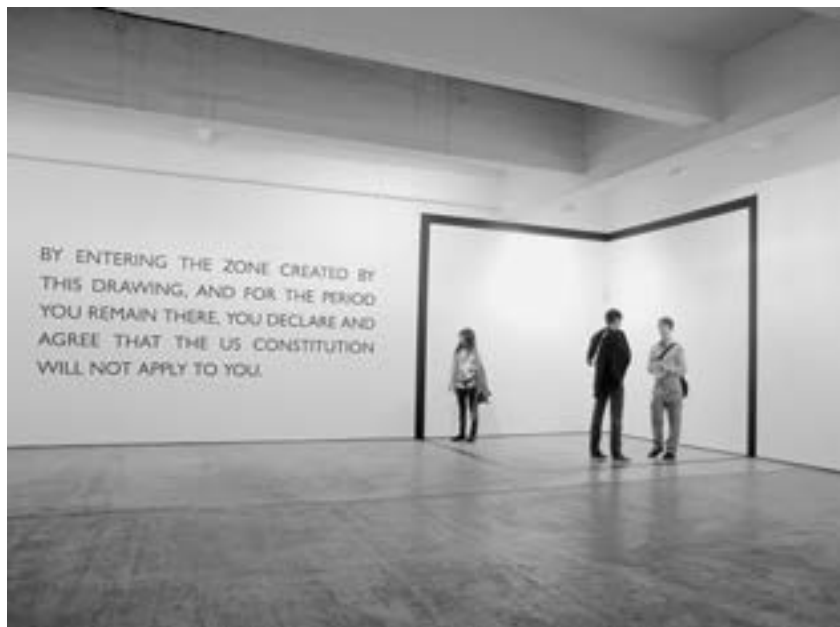


Figure 5. Installation view, *Declared Void*, 2005. © Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

## Cautionary Statement

*Cautionary Statement* (2007) is a text piece based on “forward-looking statements,” a type of corporate disclaimer published in American annual reports and particularly associated with the financial services industry. Forward-looking statements allow companies to discuss the future while not being accountable if such statements do not come to pass. The language of this disclaimer seems to ask the viewer not to “rely on” any future-oriented words used by the gallery, although it remains unclear to whom the collective term “we” mentioned in the disclaimer actually refers to. The piece is installed in a gallery in an area for spoken conversations by staff, such as above a reception desk (see fig. 6).

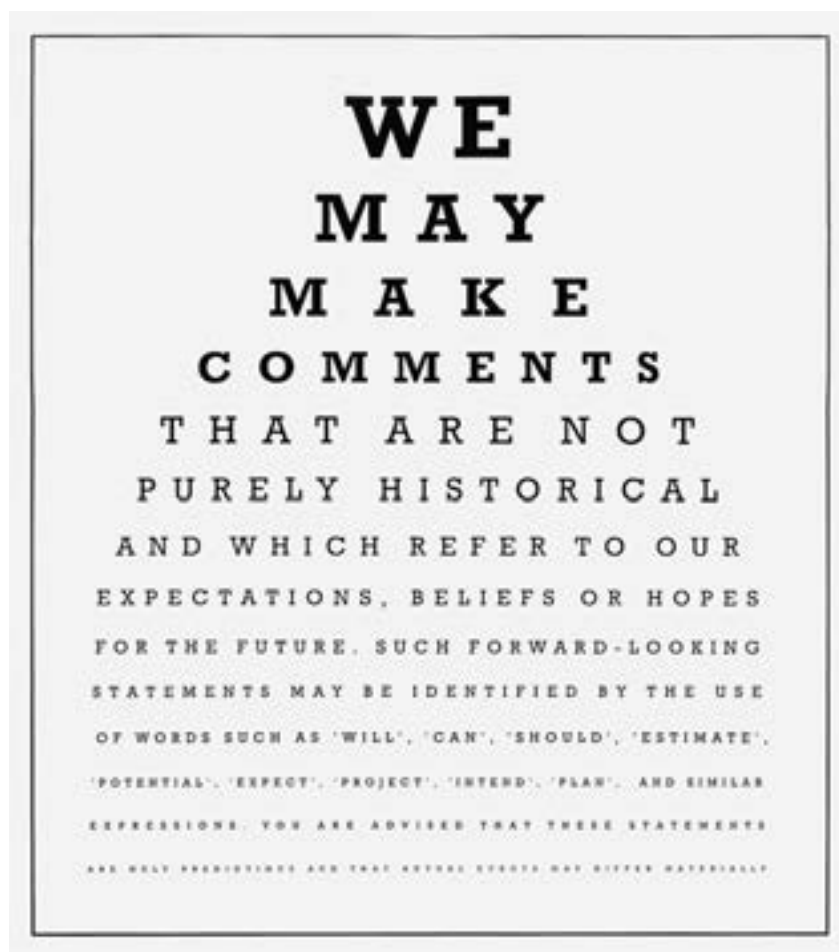


Figure 6. *Cautionary Statement*, vinyl text, 66 x 57 1/2 in., 2007. © Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

## ***Uncertain Contract***

In the video *Uncertain Contract* (2008) we see an actor dressed as a lawyer, standing in a vast white space. He interprets a script composed of legal terms from a commercial contract. The details of the contract have been omitted, leaving a list of words such as “contract,” “parties,” “tender,” and “service.” The actor delivers the words one by one, starting “in character” as a lawyer, before creating multiple interpretations through gesture, style, and characterization. The piece questions whether the lawyer’s legal identity, and that of the law itself, can be seen as a mere surface to be changed or dissolved at will. The performativity inherent to the courtroom is used as a way to question the assumed objectivity of the law, with the actor’s multiple interpretations instead suggesting an inherent subjectivity. The piece, which inhabits the form of a contract, explores law as a conceptual space, with the actor’s moving body suggesting a typographic form against the abstract whiteness of the backdrop. My chief interest with this piece is to explore the idea of the law as subjective, as something that can dissipate. The legal terms, we see, only need a mere shift of emphasis to lose their legal identity and force (see fig. 7).



Figure 7. Video stills from *Uncertain Contract*, high-definition video, 14 mins., 57 secs., looped, 2008. © Carey Young. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



## Notes

1. This piece is part of *Body Techniques*, a series of eight photographs that can be seen at [www.careyyoung.com/past/bodytechniques.html](http://www.careyyoung.com/past/bodytechniques.html).

2. Giorgio Agamben discusses the history of extralegal zones, tracing their history back to the *iustitium* of Roman times, in Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. K. Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

3. Robert Lands of Finers Stephens Innocent, LLP, supplied his legal expertise, with further legal advice from Dr. Jaime Stapleton.