

Inside Job

Julia Bryan-Wilson on the art of Carey Young

IN AN OFT-QUOTED SPEECH FROM 1969, Fred Hampton, deputy chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party, proclaimed: “When I leave, you can remember I said, with the last words on my lips, that I am a revolutionary, and you are going to have to keep on saying that.” British artist Carey Young appears to take up this charge, but in a very different tenor, in her 2001 video *I Am a Revolutionary*. Here Young has hired a business-skills trainer who patiently coaches her to say the phrase convincingly. Clad in a business suit, the artist begins: “My name is Carey Young. I am a revolutionary.” With the trainer’s interventions and encouragement, she practices the phrase again and again—now softer, now louder, now slower, now faster. At one point in this rehearsal, Young cracks a nervous smile, shrugs, and confesses, “That was weird.”

Hampton’s words had force. Watch the clip on YouTube and hear the crowd

stir to his voice. His claim to being a revolutionary was taken seriously—he was both a blessing to Black Power and a threat to the US government—and the Chicago police, acting in concert with the FBI, killed him in his bed in 1969. No such authenticity—nor the risk attendant to it—attaches to Young’s half-hearted repetitions. How could it? Mouthing another’s words from an utterly dissimilar time and place, she is asked to pretend that she is presenting to a large audience that listens to her with rapt attention, but in fact she is standing in an empty office area, and the windows behind her overlook a warren of workers busy at their desks, unaware even of her presence.

What kind of revolution is imaginable here? It might be feminist, the work obliquely alluding to the “glass ceiling” that prevents women from ascending to positions of power. It might be artistic, an update of Joseph Beuys’s 1971

To experience this work please pick up the phone.



Carey Young, *Follow the Protest*, 2009.
audio recordings, software, telephone-line
emulator, Mac mini, telephone, chair, table,
plant, vinyl text on wall. Installation view,
Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2010.



Carey Young, *I Am a Revolutionary*, 2001, still from a color video, 4 minutes 8 seconds.

declaration “The revolution is us,” now expressed in the first person for our more egocentric era. Young’s repeated yet failed attempts to imbue Hampton’s phrase with significance also imply that a once-meaningful word—*revolutionary* had real purchase for politics as well as for avant-garde art movements—has become a corporate catchphrase, so diluted in import that it is used to describe mascara applicators. It is, of course, a wearying cliché to observe that the lines between art and business have become increasingly blurry, or have even dissolved, citing their shared insistence on “innovation” and their all-consuming focus on buying and selling. Like many second-generation artists indebted to the

Young describes her forays into the corporate arena not as undercover work but as research, and she is especially interested in the way artistic identity functions as a sort of brand.

diverse set of practices now reified under the rubric of institutional critique, Young is less interested in exposing the ways in which “radical” gestures are absorbed within global markets than she is in examining the specific stances—the awkward intonations and the uncomfortable embodiments—related to the management of affect within contemporary capitalism. *I Am a Revolutionary* also keys into the obsession with improvement in self-help culture, with its internal mantras and daily affirmations.

For more than a decade, Young has interrogated the cultural, juridical, personal, and commercial formations of neoliberalism—what Michel Foucault referred to as governmentality. She had visitors to her debut solo show, at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, sign away the copyright to their fingerprints (*Artistic License*, 2005), for example, and in a piece titled *Conflict Management*, first realized in 2003, she offers the public free conflict-resolution services. Working in performance, video, and installation, making text pieces and orchestrating participatory projects, Young has consistently utilized corporate rhetoric, legal contracts, and the machinery of advertising to investigate artistic self-marketing and self-representation. Her wall piece *Positive Buzz*, 2001, lists statements prepared according to the advice of a “creative thinking” consulting firm. HMM, LOOKS LIKE WE COULD PUSH THAT IDEA FURTHER, reads one example, or LET’S TAKE THAT SAME CONCEPT AND USE IT OVER HERE—comments that could just as easily have emerged from the boardroom as from a relatively genial MFA critique.

Young wears her trademark boxy suit with some authority—after graduate school, she worked for an information-technology multinational, and she has held residencies at companies such as Xerox—but she also inhabits this uniform uneasily, donning it as a kind of theatrical costume, even drag. Her mode of dress calls to mind other artists who use seemingly normative clothing to question codes of bodily presentation, such as Chris Burden, who, in *I Became a Secret Hippy*, 1971, slipped into a conventional dark suit to cover the metal stud he had just had nailed into his chest. In contrast to Burden’s effort to conceal that marker of rebellion, Young seems to hide nothing, though her ostensibly transparent outfit is somewhat complicated by signifiers of gender and sexuality: With her short-cropped hair and mannish jacket, Young can look a little butch, though questions of sexuality are virtually never addressed in interviews with the artist or in her own writings.



She describes her forays into the corporate arena not as undercover work but as research, and she is especially interested in the way artistic identity functions as a sort of brand. In *Nothing Ventured*, 2000–, gallerygoers were presented with a telephone linked to a call center where customer-service agents answered questions about the artist as if she were herself a product; callers could request information about her background, previous exhibitions, reviews, influences, and so on, but the responses largely followed prescribed talking points. The piece was at its best when these scripted conversations began to derail, as when viewers took the work’s dynamic of exchange quite literally—wanting, for instance, to buy the phone they were calling on—or began to query the call-center agents themselves. “So do you think our conversation is really a piece of art?” asks one skeptical caller. “I definitely do,” replies the agent. “You are a form of art, my love.” Such departures brought out another layer of meaning, exposing the simultaneous niceties and frictions of communication under the aegis of executive control.

In her site-specific collaborations with venture capitalists (*Incubator*, 2001) and companies such as Virgin (*My Megastore*, 2001), she presents herself as a credible package, an insider to the world of enterprise. In *My Megastore*, she reprogrammed the cash registers at a Virgin store in London to print internal staff-manual slogans on the receipts (“Raise your passion for product”) and interrupted the endless stream of music videos on the in-store screens with

ARTISTIC LICENSE

I AGREE THAT IN ORDER TO GAIN ENTRANCE TO THE EXHIBITION I WILL:

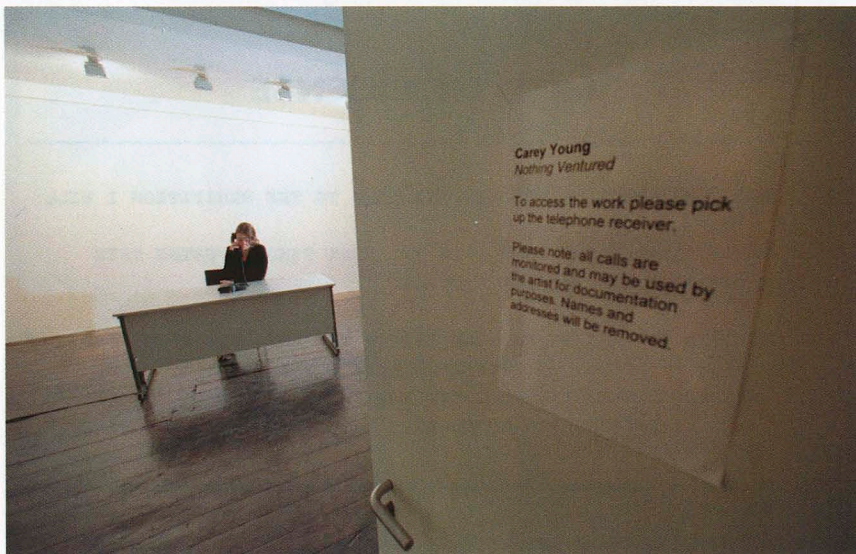
- 1) MARK A FINGERPRINT FROM BOTH MY INDEX FINGERS USING THIS SHEET OF PAPER AND THE INK PROVIDED.
- 2) GRANT TO THE ARTIST AND HER ESTATE THE ABSOLUTE RIGHT AND PERMISSION TO USE MY FINGERPRINTS WITHIN THE RESULTING WORK OF ART, FOR ANY COMMERCIAL PURPOSE, FOR THE DURATION OF COPYRIGHT (PLUS ANY EXTENSIONS AND RENEWALS).

| | |
|---|---|
| THE WORK OF ART ARTISTIC LICENSE | THE EXHIBITION CONSIDERATION, PAULA COOPER GALLERY, 521 WEST 21ST STREET (2ND FLOOR), NEW YORK, NY 10011, USA, NOV 16-19 2005 |
| THE ARTIST CAREY YOUNG | OFFICIAL USE ONLY |
| NAME OF PERSON FINGERPRINTED Hans Haacke | |
| SIGNATURE OF PERSON FINGERPRINTED <i>Hans Haacke</i> | |
| DATE 11/16/05 | |
|  |  |
| 1. L. INDEX | 2. R. INDEX |

Carey Young, *Artistic License* (detail), 2005, signed ink-jet prints with fingerprinting ink, pins, table, chair, invigilator; document shown, 8¼ x 5¾".

Carey Young, *Conflict Management*, 2003, professional arbitrator (dispute-resolution specialist), table, chairs, notice boards, local media advertising, members of the public. Installation view, Budapest. Photo: Thorsten Hallscheidt.





Carey Young, *Nothing Ventured*, 2000–, call center, artist's script, telephone, furniture, cassette recorder, tapes, transcriptions of resulting conversations. Installation view, fig-1 Gallery, London, 2001.



Carey Young, *Buy-In*, 2001, color video, 26 minutes. Installation view, Virgin Megastore, London. From *My Megastore*, 2001.

footage of the store's own product-wrapping conveyor belt. The listening posts were stocked with the artist's playlist, which included hypnotherapy recordings. Before the piece went live, she conducted training sessions for the store's workers to muster their full participation.

For some critics, Young's close partnership with such corporations makes her a kind of traitor, a quisling who smooths over the inherent antagonisms between art and commerce. Businesses, so the argument goes, are all too eager to soak up ideas from the creative sector, and art is increasingly compromised by corporate sponsorship of museums; the last thing in the world an artist should do is to facilitate that encroachment. But the reality is hardly as parasitic or simplistic as that. Rather than bemoaning their commodification, struggling artists have been forced by the recession to look to business as a way to pay their rent. The City of New York even recently sponsored a series of business-savvy seminars meant to help artists negotiate their own finances, navigate the complexities of intellectual-property rights, and write up business plans. All the more reason to take the systematization and aestheticization of corporate logic seriously and to try to mine it, as Young does, for its interpersonal effects and its methods—and misfires—as it shapes desires and subjectivities. Of course, there are other responses to these same circumstances, as in the refusals and negations of art strikes, boycotts, and interruptions of many anticapitalist interventionists. But Young's strategy of mirroring and participating need not be understood as mere capitulation; she is part of a wider trend of artists—Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, for example—who research the vicissitudes of the market precisely because they reject the false binary that posits all art as being either inside it or outside it.

Stemming from her consulting experience, Young presents critical insights into the organizational as well as mental processes of incorporation: In a 2002 statement titled "Gap Analysis," she chillingly conjures the moment she first used the word *we* to refer to her place of employment. Her practice also picks up on a fertile line of inquiry that could be termed occupational realism—a form of performance in which a job becomes the art and the art becomes a job. From Bonnie Sherk's declaration that working as a waitress was an art piece (*The Waitress*, 1973) to Sean Fletcher's extended "performance" *Becoming a Life Insurance Salesman as a Work of Art*, 1996–2002, artists have long questioned the uneven valuation of various forms of labor, artistic and otherwise.

Much of Young's work aligns the legacies of Conceptual art with the specific

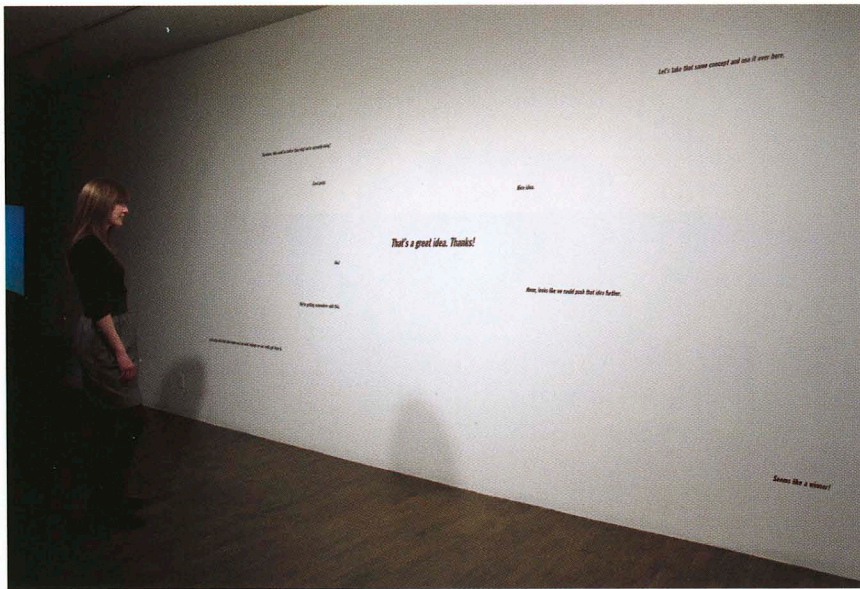
formations of corporate culture: In *Gift Economy*, 2001, she created an edition of one thousand white erasers printed with the word NOTHING (the name of the group exhibition in which they were offered up for the taking), simultaneously recalling the spills of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and convention swag such as logo-emblazoned pens, yo-yos, and tote bags. In *Inventory*, 2007, the artist weighed herself; working closely with two scientists, she calculated the current value of various chemical elements in her body and affixed that price to the wall; fluctuating markets mean that the exact amount of what she is literally materially worth changes every time the piece is installed. These detailed clinical calculations hark back to Martha Rosler's pioneering feminist video *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, 1977; both are absurdist meditations on the entrenched policies of measuring and quantifying a body's value, whether for insurance purposes, employment qualifications, health and fitness routines, or other biopolitical regimes that regulate the governance of the self.

Young's various works with corporate call centers—her solo show at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis ("Speech Acts," 2009) effectively turned the museum into a giant call center and was dependent on the close relationship she and the museum developed with locally based Charter Communications, which also helped fund the show—bear a resemblance to Walter De Maria's telephone piece from 1968. In *Art by Telephone*, De Maria placed a phone in a gallery and instructed viewers to pick up the receiver if the artist called (otherwise they would hear a dial tone). In Young's Saint Louis exhibition, the caller was connected to any of seven pieces, including *The Representative*, 2005, in which operators were instructed to discuss selected aspects of their own personal lives, offering what Young referred to as a "telephonic self-portrait." Reversing the direction of intention and tapping into our consumerist expectation that we will reach something, even if automated, on the other end, Young's phones are at the ready for viewers to initiate a range of mediated but intimate aural encounters,

Young wears her trademark boxy suit with some authority—she onced worked for an information-technology multinational—but she also inhabits this uniform uneasily, donning it as a kind of theatrical costume, even drag.



Carey Young, *Body Techniques (After Encirclement, Valie Export, 1976)*, 2007, color photograph, 48 x 60".



Carey Young, *Positive Buzz*, 2001, vinyl text on wall. Installation view, Moscow-City, Federation Tower, Moscow, 2007. From the 2nd Moscow Biennial.

as with *Follow the Protest*, 2009, in which visitors could hear recordings and interviews from the G20 protests in London.

Young's most sustained dialogue with previous Conceptual work lies in her 2007 series "Body Techniques." Here, the artist photographed herself reenacting various canonical performance pieces (including works by Ulrich Rückriem, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Long) against the backdrop of the global-finance headquarters in Dubai and its neighbor Sharjah. The resultant eight images each showcase a different facet of the landscape: In her homage to Dennis Oppenheim, Young's prone body sags into a shallow sand ditch with a cluster of high-rise buildings aligned behind her on the horizon (*Body Techniques [After Parallel Stress, Dennis Oppenheim, 1970]*). For one of her two homages to Valie Export (*Body Techniques [After Encirclement, Valie Export, 1976]*), the artist molds herself around a curved road, her neutral suit becoming red, to mimic the colored curb in Export's original photograph. Aside from the artist, the "Body Techniques" photographs are devoid of people—they depict the architecture of multinational commerce as depersonalized and dehumanizing, futuristic yet dusty projects of progress perverted. Many take as their backdrops building projects that in 2007 signaled a fantastic, practically maniacal economic spurt but that now stand unfinished. Viewed in retrospect, they seem uncannily prescient of the bust, a reminder of the hubris of unsustainable international development.

In *Body Techniques (After Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 1973)*, Young, still dressed in a tidy suit and heels, incongruously mops the stairs of a construction site. But this repetition rings somewhat hollow; Ukeles was not just washing any stairs—she was washing the stairs of an art institution. In comparison, Young's gesture seems little more than a formal exercise, emptied of its potent critique regarding the unrecognized work of museum support staff and the vital role of unpaid female labor, both

Young's practice picks up on a fertile line of inquiry that could be termed occupational realism—a form of performance in which a job becomes the art and the art becomes a job.

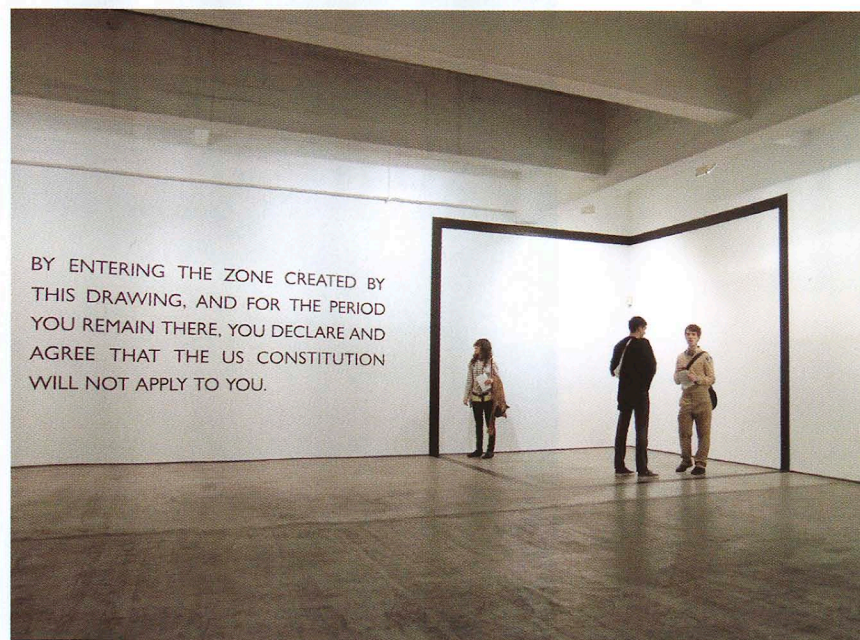
public and domestic. Moreover, Young's upwardly mobile outfit is jarring, especially because in most of her practice—*I Am a Revolutionary* notwithstanding—she doesn't seem interested in considering the vexed and sometimes privileged status of white, Western, middle-class female workers—whether managers, administrative assistants, or white-collar service providers. For these works made in Dubai—where 99 percent of the private labor force is foreign—more careful consideration of the intersections of race, gender, class, migration, and labor would, however, seem crucial.

Overall, Young's tone might be described as gently cynical; such is the case with *Social Sculpture*, 2001, a roll of beige industrial carpeting propped against a wall. It resembles a monochrome André Cadere column and refigures Beuys's utopian vision of social sculpture as a banal feature of office interiors—a fair approach to a contemporary climate clouded by the iconography, rituals, and platitudes of corporate culture. It also reflects Young's skepticism with respect to overheated claims of artistic originality. Her video *Product Recall*, 2007, is set in a fabricated facsimile of an upscale psychoanalyst's office. She lies down on the modernist couch, and her therapist reads her various slogans, asking her to recall which company each represents: "Where Imagination Begins," "Investing in Creative Futures," "Change the Way You See the World," "Ideas for Life," "Invented for Life," "Knowledge Without Boundaries." Her memory of these blandly interchangeable statements is poor. Many of the corporations that tout them are sponsors of art fairs and exhibitions, and the slogans invariably invoke visionary thinking, invention, or inspiration—qualities often affiliated with creative production. Her lack of recall (and ours—the viewer can't help but play along at this guessing game) suggests that corporate culture doesn't necessarily have the psychic grip over us that we might fear. Instead, when confronted with such ads, we lapse into disinterest (if not active hostility) or simply tune out. That we do so implies that there may well exist small spaces that remain relatively unincorporated, as it were, even if they are fleeting, fugitive, and internal.

At the same time, in the wake of the devastating Gulf of Mexico oil spill and the protests at Tate Britain surrounding its celebration of two decades of BP sponsorship, there is, obviously, still an urgent need for old-school institutional critique. It is thus all the more bracing when Young doesn't hedge her bets by presenting an ambivalent position with regard to social justice, cozy corporate funding, and institutions. *Declared Void*, 2005, is perhaps the most striking—and effective—example of her linking of contractual procedure, political critique, and art-historical reference. For this piece, she demarcates an implied cubic space, affixing thick black vinyl lines directly to the gallery's floor and walls, Sol LeWitt-like, with the following text presented alongside: 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. Young worked with a pair of lawyers who advised her as she finessed this language, and although it does not create a legally binding site of potential freedom (or harm), it does offer possibilities for projection. The wording also aligns the piece with that black hole of rights and protections instantiated in the detention camp at Guantánamo Bay.

Contracts are almost mystical documents—they work among and between the state, the individual, and the corporation to make guarantees, solidify properties, extract payments, and mediate relationships. Contracts grant wishes, they coerce, they promise, they bind, and they have the ability to time-travel, as they often address some later date in order to freeze or amend current conditions. In other words, they powerfully shape the future. With *Declared Void*, Young's obsession with such contractual obligations is extended into a more pointed speculation about both Conceptual art and politics as arenas for the imagination. □

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON IS THE AUTHOR OF *ART WORKERS: RADICAL PRACTICE IN THE VIETNAM WAR ERA* (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 2009). SHE IS CURRENTLY A VISITING SCHOLAR AT THE CALIFORNIA COLLEGE OF THE ARTS IN SAN FRANCISCO AND OAKLAND. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)



Top: Carey Young, *Product Recall*, 2007, color video, 4 minutes 27 seconds. Production still.
Bottom: Carey Young, *Declared Void*, 2005, vinyl drawing and text. Installation view, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. From *Performa 05*. Photo: Christine Sullivan.