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AMIDST
ART & WRITING

Interview with Eric Heist, director of Momenta Art

by Tal Beery

Dear Marta,

I'm submitting two files from an interview I never finished transcribing with Eric Heist, director of Momenta Art, about NYC alternative art spaces and Momenta's history of curating political art. I was preparing it for publication at Temporary Art Review but I never submitted it in the end. I'd love to publish it with you.

I'm not sure which file would be best, or if you would want me to find some way of combining them. Please let me know if you have any ideas.

Let me know if it works!

Tal

1. About Momenta and political art and the board shake up

Momenta beginnings, censorship (Boiled onions)

1:35

Momenta got started in Philadelphia in 1986. There were five artists. we were doing crit groups together, and then we decided we wanted to start doing some exhibitions. And we found a space in downtown philadelphia in the old city of philadelphia, i think it was a 20,000 sq foot space and we did a group show of 47 artists. I think it was a very energetic show, probably not a very good show. But it was good. A lot of people came to it, and we were hooked, i think, after that. Then we got a more permanent space, also in old city, and we had exhibitions there for three years, just sort of trying to figure out what kind of place this would be. We were there until about 1990. We ended up renting out the top floors and that covered the rent for the space. There were studios upstairs. We had a lot of different types of exhibitions there. We had a show of boiled onions once. We had to censor that show. It was the first show we ever censored. We had a giant table with a jock strap on it and it was filled with boiled onions, by, his name was Brent Kurzweil. after about a week everyone in the building complained about the smell. He went on to become a very successful food stylist.

About Eric's work and momenta and the intersections

1:35

how momenta got started and why momenta?

started in philadelphia in 1986. we were five artists.

we started with a group show of 47 artists. very energetic show, not a very good show.

<eric goes over the brief history of momenta>

origins of political curating (reimagining america)

3:00 -

We did this show called reimagining america. Greg Sholette was in that. .. NAMES. it was the first politically motivated show we ever did. and then i think we started to think about how ideas of some kind of social meaning, justice, could be approached through art, trying to think about how art could have a positive affect in the world, not just as an idea.

we were there until 1990, we moved to New York. I went to graduate school at Hunter, and everyone else stopped being involved in it. Me and my wife Laura Parnes started momenta in spaces in soho, doing temporary exhibitions there.

3:00 -

we had a show of boiled onions. we had to censor that show. That was the first show we censored. After a week everyone complained about how bad the food smelled. He went on to become a very successful food stylist.

That was a memorable one.

We did a show called "reimagining america" - it was the first politically motivated show we did. Was the first time we started thinking about how art could have a positive effect in the world.

5:20

in 1995 we found a space on 10th and berry. we had studio spaces in the back. we were really careful to remain easy to fund. we were in williamsburg until 2011. the first space became condos. We moved to bushwick at 2011...

When does art make a difference in the world?

6:45 ; 8:50

In the initial philadelphia space there was an exhibition with shollette that started to have some social concerns or political concerns in the art work. Was that, from that point on, was just something in the back

ground or did it gradually evolve to include more social or political concerns in what's showing at Momena? I think there were a couple different influences. There were some curators that brought that with them. I was always very hesitant to say that we show political art, and I still think that, because when we would talk to funders, they would say, that's not what a not for profit does, you can't have a political agenda. So I was careful to always have people that had interest in the political power of art but through [...] but it wasn't [...] it is something to struggle with.

what is political art?

I don't know what political art is. We're just looking for art that somehow has something to say about the world. It's not simply aesthetics. We're looking for work that has some sort of importance.

You mean that it isn't decorative? Because aesthetics can be powerful.

Do you imagine that showing political artwork at Momena can make a difference in the world?

We I still I am not comfortable calling it political, really. Any type of work that has meaning for the world is enough for me.

Do you think it will have broader effect after having been shown at Momena?

Yeah, but that's what we're hoping for. It's hard to measure the effects of that. I think that where we see that it has meaning is when we start putting people in this room together with the work and when people start to discuss it. And that, in the last couple of years, since we've been in Bushwick, is when we are starting to see that it has some meaning, some potential. If we are doing a political show, or a meaningful show in some way, and then it ends, it seems like it's just over it didn't do anything. So when we actually have people in the space, talking about it, it feels like it's spreading out.

6:45 - after that show, were political concerns just in the background or ... (Arthur's question)

There were a few things. I was very hesitant to say we show political art. Because when we would talk to funders they would say: that's not what a non-profit does. I was careful to use guest curators.

8:00 - What is political art?

I don't know - art that has something to say about the world. It's not simply aesthetics. It has some sort of import.

<great>

8:50 - can art make a difference in the world?

Does work have a broader effect after having been shown at Momena? It's hard to measure the effects of that. We see when the work has meaning when we have people in this room with the work and people start to discuss it. If we are doing a political show, a meaningful show in some way, and it ends, it seems like it's just over. It feels like it's spreading out, like it's having some effect.

Occupy show,

10:30

Anything in particular stand out for you?

Recently the Occupy Installation here had that and it was really hard to show. It was hard for us internally in running the gallery, it was hard for us to have some sort of administration going on and it was difficult for us financially because it questioned funders, you know people who provided funding. We came out of that, I think, stronger, thinking about what's important for us, thinking about what we do and what we don't do.

10:30

Recently the occupy installation had that. it was hard for us internally. It was hard for us to have some administration going on. and it was difficult for us financially because it questioned funders. So we came out of that, I think, stronger in terms of thinking about what's important to us, what we do and don't do.

Maureen on Bloomberg, Eric: we were part of that plan.

26:00

26:00

Maureen on bloomberg

Eric: we were part of that plan.

And its so obvious, just seeing the way it moves up hill

Origins of board shake up

11:30; 24:45;

11:30

What changed?

if we take it back to 2008 when there was such a funding of the arts, it was questionable about whether we could continue, you know, to exist. So we moved towards private funding. There was a wealthy person who came on the board who was helping us a lot, financially. And at that point also, I took a visiting professor job in Pennsylvania. I was losing contact with the gallery, and there were other people who started doing administrative work here and getting more involved in the programming, and they weren't artists, and so it was becoming less of an artist run space. And that process, it was corporatizing, putting in more accountability, more transparency, and it all made perfect sense as far as how we can operate in a better way administratively but i was feeling that we were losing something, you know, we were losing our touch with the artist. That was a really hard process to go through. It came down to conflict, a collision between money and trying to protect content.

<this is great>

11:30

What changed?

After there was major defunding in the arts in 2008... a wealthy person came onto the board. I took a visiting professorship job in PA. I was losing touch. it was becoming less of an artist run space.

... became more a corpratized space.

13:30

Do you think of your artwork as related to thinking...

15:45

we do mostly guest curated shows now. We do an open call.

<good>

24:45

About occupy museums show. There was someone on our board who's wife worked for bloomberg?

How did that go down?

He left the board. And he said: I think you're going to have a lot of trouble getting funding for this space after this. It is hard.

Was he right?

I don't think so.

2. About Eric

Eric and power (up to agape)

38:30; 40:00

<great>

38:30

About non-profits and Eric's position. This is a major problem. A lot of the problem is just being a place where a lot of different ideas are presented. It can't just be me doing the curation. It can't always be my show all the time.

<great>

40:00

<was it because of our show?> No. Agape enterprises. It was a staking out of another place. That brought it to a real battle. It made the break clear. And then we had to talk about it. And so it ended up with a standoff that had to be resolved.

<good>

41:00

What would it mean if you lost momenta? You'd certainly lose a tremendous liability...

Eric and losing momenta

36:30

<great>

36:30

I like to have a space where I have some power. And my work is about negotiating that, because I am also uncomfortable with power. I like to feel like I know I belong here. And not having that is kind of terrifying. In the shake up with the board it felt like a life or death struggle. there were board meetings scheduled without me present and I ended up...

Its a way of directly having a voice

45:00

<good>

45:00 its a way of directly having a voice. I never went to curation school. And really we just try stuff. and a lot of it doesn't work. I think it is important to have spaces like that. If it's all professionalized, then

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46:30

balancing social and individual. As an artist you want to be social. you are imaging the social all the time. negotiating those two things are something I have to do here as well as in the studio. How am I going to be communicating.

Maureen on Eric's work

48:00; 15:00

48:00 discussion of erics work

all of that work relates to a social system that has a power dynamic

15:00

I am drawn to things that are hard to come to a conclusion about. If there is something that plagues me.

3. Conclusion: what have you learned about showing political work?

Branding, Gentrifying bushwick, Momenta as a site for revolutionary organizing

16:50; 27:20; 28:30; 30:35; 42:15

Is there a net or type of everyday museumgoer that you're seeking. who is the average momenta audience person?

The average person. I think that's what made me a bit uncomfortable about the decisions seemed to be made because it would appeal to funding. And I think that was true. We did a show of bolivian artists and there was resistance to that because, how's that going to help momenta. So that seemed like a reversal of what a not for profit should be doing.

- stopped at 17:45

<good>

16:50

is there a type of everyday museumgoer that you're seeking? Is there a specific framing, target audience? Who is the average momenta gallery patron?

An average person. I think that's what made me a bit uncomfortable about some of the conversations that take place

18:10

It would make more sense to follow the market... it makes me look better, but only in terms of what the market would produce.

19:00

Where do you work now?

Things have gotten more austere at Momenta Art.

19:30

How are you making this work?

Cobbled together. A little here, a little there. Kiko Tanaka is the one who keeps things going here. Luckily she is a good administrator and artist.

21:00

What is the selection process?

Kiko and I do some pre-screening. Then we meet with the guest curator. Then we come up with a short list. Then we do studio visits.

<good>

22:30

its complicated working with a bunch of artists. I end up doing a lot of studio visits. some do great work, but some is just not for us.

you can get really cut off - just being with other artists is really helpful.

<ok>

27:20

Do you have concerns about Momenta's role in gentrifying bushwick?

definitely

<good>

28:30

Have any shows at momenta counteracted gentrification?

Yeah - we did a collaboration with el puente, an alternative space in williamsburg. And I think this education program we are working on now, that Kiko is working on, is going to do that. She's working with local high schools.

29:30

It's going to be hard to stay in bushwick. People are inviting us in but its \$40/foot

<good>

30:35

Does momenta function as a site for revolutionary organizing?

We want to have a courtyard area.

sounds exciting. I hope so.

You know Engels would send out pudding to all the high committee members?

<good>

32:35

Is that the future of momenta? Courtyard with pudding?

We looked across the street. But its not, its organized by a big developer. We want to have a community area where we can host more of these conversations.

<good>

42:15

when we moved to williamsburg a lot of people suggested branding. That has been something that momenta has always avoided... naming it too much. It is a place for things to happen as directly as possible within art.

51:00

have you ever had to censor another show?

no - but we probably should have. now that i'm a dad I understand ho

<great>

52:30

what have you learned about showing political work?

when it leads to a conversation. When you put people in a room and its easy to put on a political show where everyone is in agreement

53:00

About board member leaving

all these things that weren't talked about

its great if art can make things visible

same things happened after 9/11

54:00