

## From “social movement” to “Ecstatic Resistance”

*Emily Roysdon*



Emily Roysdon, untitled (David Wojnarowicz project), 2001-2008, twelve b/w photographs, 11 x 14 inches each. Courtesy of the Artist.

As an artist with work in the exhibition “If We Can’t Get it Together,” and as someone who has worked collectively for six years in LTTR, I am here to present a new idea: Ecstatic Resistance. I have been developing this concept for the last few years, and it is inspired by the experiences of the years prior to that. When presenting LTTR I find it difficult to adequately represent the group, to convey the energy that is integral to the collaboration. I want you to realize how many people are involved in the project. LTTR is not the three of us who started the collective, or the five of us who edited the journal, but an entire constituency of contributors, performers, revellers, and volunteers who worked on the project for so many years. In this text, I am going to chronologically weave together my individual practice with the work of LTTR to demonstrate how they are mutually affected, with themes from each developing alongside the other. Ecstatic resistance is informed by strategies I witnessed and participated in that further developed into a consideration of the impossible and the imaginary in contemporary aesthetics and politics.

I would like to begin with *untitled (David Wojnarowicz project)* that I started in 2001 and finally completed in 2007. This was the first project I made as an artist after an education in international politics, social theory and psychoanalysis and the only project I made before I began working in LTTR. The project is based on Wojnarowicz’s Rimbaud series (1978–79), and I consider it a collaboration, much in the same way David conjured Rimbaud for his work. I made a mask of David’s face and re-conceptualized the project by teasing out connections and tensions from the original series. For example, in his series David had an image of someone shooting heroin, and in my series the person is injecting testosterone. Only one image from my series is an exact reproduction of one of David’s. The photograph is of a person laying on their back on a single bed, cock in hand, but in my photo the cock is now a dildo. This is the image on the cover of the first LTTR.

LTTR was founded by myself, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, and K8 Hardy in 2001. Ulrike Müller joined for the fourth and fifth issue and Lanka Tattersall for the fourth. Every issue of LTTR was initiated with an open call—we would write an invitation, circulate it, and curate the journal from the submissions that we received. They were all hand-collated with a series of artists’ multiples in an edition of one thousand. We sold LTTR for ten dollars for four years, which you will recognize as a bargain, because we wanted the people contributing to the conversation to be able to afford it. That was crucial. It later became more of a collector’s item and in response we made all the material available for free on our website. Our priorities in starting LTTR were to organize and present the work of our peers through thoughtful, formal public discourse. We saw the conversation happening all around us in different cities, and we wanted to show this work respect and attention and put it into dialogue.

The work of these young, queer feminists wasn’t in galleries or magazines at the time, and our contributions to feminism had limited outlets. We were in New York City, had a lot of energy, and were aware of the histories that were influencing us—everything from Gran Fury to Heresies to Act Up to Group Material. We were cognizant of this lineage and placed ourselves directly within this intergenerational dialogue. But we were also aware of the dramas, difficulties and the confrontations that working in a collective brings along the way and the decisions you have to make. For me, working in LTTR was about the pleasure of thinking with other people. It’s not that we just worked together—we thought together.

This was an intense pleasure and continues to be a decisive influence over my life. Also important to me is that it was never a protest group. What we were doing was trying to build the context and trying to build the spaces that we wished existed. It is a different emphasis, a different kind of pleasure, to create what you want instead of just naming what you don't want. And then also for me it was about labour—investing my time and energy in my peers' work as much as I invested in my own and being honest in how much we are reliant on each other. This is a quote from the introduction I wrote to the first issue:

Sprinkled in this text we find many opportunities to imagine ourselves, many moments to perform our symptoms for each other and create the space to question our development as artists, workers, and thinkers. We're here to reconstitute a new team under an old threat, to embrace our historical birth into feminist sexes and to move with the brilliant bodies, languages, identities and arts this long walk has produced.

Interestingly this issue was the first time I ever wrote a text for publication. It was called "Democracy, Invisibility and the Dramatic Arts," and was about moving through visibility and invisibility strategically.

Corresponding to these ideas, in 2004 I made a video called *social movement*. Retroactively, I am declaring it the first in a series, the second of which, *Work, Why, Why not*, I did last summer in Stockholm. The series is invested in an expanded field of choreography that speaks as much about the movements and gestures of political organizing and collectivity as it does about "dance" per say. I really like exploding the concept of choreography to deal with publicly traded political gestures, the organization and formalities of consciousness raising groups, and the interrelationships in collaborations. This video is called *social movement*. It is interested in archiving the processes of history and memory—what we remember, why we remember it—and it also gestures toward the history of the Judson Church dance scene and Yvonne Rainer, from which I take much inspiration.

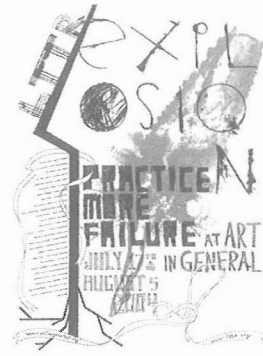
The second LTTR, entitled *Listen Translate Translate Record*, came in a big LP sleeve. It included a CD—everything from pop songs to oral histories—and the text is on a poster that folds out. We were interested in experimenting formally with text, as if it were an image—your eyes can always go to the same spot in an image—and you could read the same sentence in your kitchen a hundred times but never read the whole text. For the third issue, *Practice More Failure*, we had big release parties that incorporated a lot of performance and things that couldn't fit on the printed page. In 2004, we were invited by Sofia Hernández to work in the ground floor space of Art in General. Her invitation became the "LTTR Explosion" with three events a week for three weeks. I think we had a budget of \$200 for everything. So much fun. People flew themselves in from all over North America. It was a really, really wonderful time. There is a poster for the exhibition made by Aisha Burns. There are some beautiful remnants of these posters in New York City, one in particular on 10th Avenue at 18th that has been deteriorating for many years. I check it out each time I walk by and see what remains. Megan Palaima performed on the street in front of the gallery, Luis Jacob and Leidy Churchman did the *Make Out Make Out Make Out Couch*, Klara Liden made monochrome white copies of everything inside and installed them on the

street and Gregg Bordowitz gave a talk about sex and war to an enraptured crowd. Virginia Puff-Paint, Will Munro and Jeremy Laing, Allison Smith, Xylor Jane, Matt Keegan, G.B. Jones ... lots of people were involved. In the street level gallery LTTR invited two artists to meet in the space and collaborate for several days. The artists didn't know each other but we thought they could make something interesting together. Whatever was made in the space remained and became this giant palimpsest.

Issue 4, *Do You Wish to Direct Me?*, was published in 2005. The title is taken from a Lynda Benglis video. It included a knit glove by Liz Collins that groups your fingers into a V shape, as well as a bookmark, "Lesbians Tend to Read," with a drawing by Onya Hogan Finley. The bookmark was inserted in the issue and we used them for a series of events called Radical Read-Ins. Printed Matter hosted the first event and we invited people to come read in public together and also invited them to bring "a text that had changed their lives." Some people would read out loud, others mark passages with the bookmark and put it back on the shelf to be discovered by others throughout the summer.

In the exhibition "If We Can't Get It Together: Artists rethinking the (mal)function of communities" at The Power Plant I showed *Strategic Form*. Seeing this piece interwoven with the work of LTTR highlights how much my individual practice was influenced by the collective work and the experiences we were going through. *Strategic Form* is a photographic project about the loss that accompanies exposure. I think of this both formally, in terms of photography, but also thinking about sub-cultures and movements coming into visibility and what is lost in this process. The inevitable emergence of a representative speaker or image that has the burden of representing the pleasures and complexities that delivered it into the frame of history. My work seeks to trouble stable representations of events, of past historical moments, and to think about the problems of representation. For the project, each person took two pictures of themselves—one when they felt comfortable and one when they felt like the structure was about to disintegrate. It is about moments of self-recognition and dependence. I was thinking of Agamben when he writes "where I am capable, we are always already many." The pyramid was many; a visualization of both power and cooperation. A portraiture of possibility. I wanted the images—the individuals—to be isolated, fragmentized building blocks.

In 2006 when I made *Strategic Form*, LTTR had already begun to receive a lot of attention and we were confronting the questions that come with that emergence. We were committed to making decisions about our path, not just accepting offers. For the fifth LTTR, titled *Positively Nasty, 2006*, we really wanted to articulate a certain positivity, and talk about direct confrontation—how disturbing and vulgar it can be if you actually name something. We wanted you to say it, we wanted you to mean it and see what happened when these utterances were collected. My editorial to the fifth issue takes time to ask questions of the group, to consider how the context of our work was shifting, and to articulate the experience of producing the project.



Poster designed by AK Burns for LTTR Explosion at Art in General, 17 July-5 August, 2004. COURTESY Emily Roysdon

Welcome to issue 5 of *LTTR*, your scientifically queer collection of Positively Nasty hey gay art. This issue takes aim at our dreadfully dark political times and offers you inspiration with which to direct your action. Each piece in this issue is loud enough to momentarily quiet the bombs and hear the tune of resistance. For example, anal sex and footwear are recommended for you to consider in planning your future.

Prelude: In a city threatened by curfew there is a tide of queer banditry giving space to the night. The transgressions are those of communion, a coming together to articulate and materialize the dissident demands of the denizens.

Opening Scene: A public house, of baths or books we do not know, is open past hours and welcoming guests. An encounter of the ignoble multitudes ensues. (You are one for picking up this Nasty trade.)

*LTTR* is an artists group of 4 feminists who revel in the honor of receiving and considering responses to our open call. My greatest delight is the ferocity of our conversations as we consider the proposition of each work and then later the ramifications of their proximity. In editing the journal we fashion a statement that represents both the intentions of our call and the responses that we received. The process of editing issue 5 is singular in the journal's history. We were aggressive and grabby. We were 'conceptually nasty' in our decision making, ourselves responding to the call to be Positively Nasty. We were hungry for explicit images that did not hide themselves or seek to diffuse judgment, but that which named themselves and asked to be confronted.

## Conceptually Nasty

1. A process by which ideas and principles of a work form a rigorous and aggressive position in regards to their own meaning.
2. A position that challenges the drive to form judgments rather than transform a model.
3. A focus on identity that vindicates imaginative transitions and prefers elaborate schemas over sex.

As well, in the conjunction of terms, the meaning is doubly articulated as Nasty faces the demand and is opened to both material and intellectual concerns. For example the term can evoke the: unknown, judged, transitional, transformational, historical, forgotten, confrontational, imaginative, utopian, progressive, personal, sexual, explicit, forbidden, and abject elements of any form it is applied to.

Used in a sentence: "A conceptually nasty pull from the world's peace pipe."

With the boom of our five years loud all around we began issue V asking the big questions. For me, it's a recurring drive to refurbish the tools of our trade and be diligent and deliberate in our development. Does *LTTR* continue to serve and inspire those who built it, claim it, and have grown with it? Are the terms of our engagement relevant to the contemporary fields of politics, aesthetics, gender and sexuality in a way that justifies our labor and enthusiasm?

Thus far I have articulated *LTTR* as both an artist's project and a site of discourse. I see no grave discrepancy in this formulation. As a site of discourse, this journal should accordingly hold a dimension of risk in its content. And as a collective artists project engaged in a politics it must make demands. *LTTR* thus becomes a site of encounter and our practice is defined by our strategies as we create the arena in which these experiences are staged. We are invested in poetics and language, action in lieu of protest, and the ability of sexuality to unsettle the subject.

The response to all of these questions is our light-footed persistence. Struggling to defeat the drama and institutionalization that plague groups and movements over time, *LTTR* edits this journal bare-breasted. We hope that our commitment and strategies make evident an ecstatic resistance and vision for actions in these times.

The summer we released Issue 5, I made *Living the Sacrifice*, and after reading my editorial to the issue it is easy to see each project was affecting the other. *Living the Sacrifice* is a video about language and an idea I have about the impossibility of articulating the real pleasure of having been a part of something. I push against “the impossible” and experiment with different forms of affective speech. I wanted to make a tribute to the many voices that live in one historical body, and how we animate the histories that we live with. It is a seven minute Super 8 film in which I am lying on a low classically draped table, hinting at a deathbed, speaking. The text is written so as to create a desire in the viewer to be able to understand the message. I want you to want to understand, but I do not know if I can share it, if I have the tools, if the tools fit the situation. I offer no narrative about what I have done that I feel is important to share. Sometimes I just start to sing “No, no ... no, no, no” and then “You, you, you.” I wanted to challenge a certain veracity of interpretation—like this person clearly experienced something significant, but what kind of evidence do we need to relate?



Emily Roysdon  
*Living the Sacrifice*, 2006  
 Super 8 film with sound, 7 mins.  
 COURTESY Emily Roysdon

Another more recent work, *Four Screens as Dialogue (Pioneering Devotional Familiar Invasive)*, 2008, is comprised of four ten by ten foot photographs printed on mesh and built into wooden frames on wheels. Each photograph is a conceptual representation of language. *Four Screens* was used in the performance *Work, Why, Why not*, taking the place of spoken language on stage. The extended project is invested in the relationship between “experience and documentation” and “image and movement,” and it comprises the screens, the performance, the audio recording of the audience, the videos *Story of History* and *A Motion Picture*, and several hundred stills. The performance, by Klara Liden, Malin Arnell, Dean Spade, Emma Hedditch and Chris Riddselius, was a great experiment for me. It was the first time I ever completely choreographed anything, the first time I worked in a proper theatre, had a lighting



Four Screens as Dialogue (Pioneering Devotional Familiar Invasive), 2008.

COURTESY Emily Roysdon

designer, etc. Along with the questions developed from the “experience/documentation” and “image/movement” dynamics, the work attempts to disrupt conventions of the theatre and produce a “non-event.” The title comes from a recording of the audience, who were given prompts (if this image looks familiar, say “Again;” if someone does something you weren’t expecting, say “Why?”) producing a live record of their reactions. I was also experimenting with styles of direction—trying to tell the performers enough information so that they were comfortable on stage and trusted me, but not enough that they had memorized their role. I wanted them to be working together and to be visibly negotiating and thinking about the performance on stage. Thinking in public.

This review of a history of collaborations and practices brings me to Ecstatic Resistance. I am really excited about this work. I have been using this term for several years now, but this year I decided it was worth figuring out what I meant when I said it. I am curating a project about this concept at Grand Arts in Kansas City November 2009. I am theorizing this idea through the practices of my peers. My own work is invested in these ideas, obviously, but as an artist it is important to me to engage my peers’ practices and organize ideas publicly. I’m trying to do three things at this point. The first is to develop a position of the impossible and to think about all that is unthinkable/unspeakable. The realm of the

impossible is political, never naive, and always shifting. Asking what is “impossible” is about the boundaries of humanness, intelligibility and power. I think about the limits of respectability, to directly confront what is forbidden. Second, I want to explore the possibility of creating, of a new imaginary, through projects that deconstruct historical categories and history itself, through projects that build new systems, structures, perspectives from the ruins. That is, through works that build an opportunity for us to move forward from a new place. With this, I’m also interested in returning to the primal scene of language and sexual difference—to go all the way back! This new imaginary brings me to the place where this critical return becomes possible. And lastly, I want to think about the sets of strategies that create ecstatic resistance—excessive, humorous, loving, confrontational, sublime, grotesque, obsessive. I think the strategies of Ecstatic Resistance develop out of queer and feminist political and aesthetic histories. Form as strategy. Ecstatic Resistance wants to think about all that is unthinkable and unspeakable in the Eurocentric, phallogocentric world order. Within the echo of ecstatic resistance are questions about temporality, the self/subject, universality, sexuality, boundaries, the unconscious, truth, transformation, technology, excess, risk and ethics. The ecstatic is: taking a leap, doing something beyond logic and reason, form that exceeds itself, becoming an other to yourself. It is something that is not accumulating in an orderly or prescribed way. It is the mobilizing force of desire. It is to refuse claims of mastery and wholeness: new ways of being in the world. Speech.

There is a quote from Amy Hollywood, in which she speaks about Bataille: “Don’t avoid the paradox or solve it but embrace it, and force people to think it in all its contradiction.” That to me is also Ecstatic Resistance, the simultaneity of meaning and struggle. What is communication in an ecstatic state? This is a question I am interested in addressing with this project. Also, what is the temporality of the ecstatic? I don’t want to escape history, responsibility, the demands of history, whatever you call it, for the immediacy of experience or pleasure. I’m interested in the possibilities of mobilizing the ecstatic state into an Ecstatic Resistance, into new ways to think about language and the limits of representation, into an ability to think outside restrictive oppositions that affect our understanding of subjectivity, the body and difference; Ecstatic Resistance is able to think what is forbidden. Different than mysticism, the ecstatic is a field of influences operating on the body; it is unauthorized, compared to the mystic’s direct relationship to God. I think about this because the ecstatic and mysticism certainly have a clear relationship, but the differences are fundamental. In his presentation for the symposium “We, Ourselves, and Us,” Simon Critchley talked about the idea of original sin. My focus is more on the primal scene of language. There is more of an emphasis on sexuality than God. The origin story of language and sexual difference—this is where I think we have the opportunity to create a new imaginary, going back to the very beginning in order to find a new way forward.

This text is a partial transcription and adaptation of a talk delivered at the symposium “We, Ourselves and Us” in Toronto, Canada on January 24, 2009, a joint presentation of The Power Plant, *Public*, and The Goethe-Institut.