

# journal of visual culture



## Activism, Visuality, and the Needs of Queer Youth

Carlos Motta

### Abstract

As LGBTI issues become visible within society there is a growing belief that society is ready to confront prejudices around sexuality and gender. But who is represented in these processes of visualization? The LGBTI agenda has focused on the Defense of Marriage, Don't Ask Don't Tell, federal hate crime statutes and the Employment Non-discrimination Act. The political strategy around these issues has been defined by a moderate approach based on demanding inclusion into existing institutions. A look at the normalization of sexual politics reveals that minorities remain at the margins. I approached activists from QUEEROCRACY and immigration activist Felipe Baeza to discuss: What are the social issues young people care about? What forms of activism do young people favor and what motivates them to organize? What forms of visuality do young queer activists use and how do these relate to the strategies of the previous generations?

### Keywords

activism • art • HIV/AIDS • migration • queer • youth

In 1980, artist Martha Rosler made *Secrets from the Street: No Disclosure*, a video in which she examines the intersection of cultures and classes in San Francisco's Mission district. In the videotape, she says:

The secret is that culture is a secret in divided societies. That culture is a secret in class societies. There is a culture on the streets and a culture behind closed doors ... The secret is about the battle over who owns the streets; who writes on the streets ... Who publicizes one's struggles

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in the streets ... The secret is who uses the street as a forum, like a 'Democracy Wall,' because others control the 'legitimate' media of public disclosure ... The secret is that there is more than one public ... the public forced to exhibit its private life in the street and the public that calls the police to clear the streets.

For Rosler, the 'secret' is the entangled and profoundly unspoken domination of power over public space – a space that provides an impression of democratic participation. Markings on street walls, for example, signal the fleeting exposure of public messages since they are always at risk of being erased.

The word *democracy* is often used by anyone looking to represent his or her own personal or collective interests. It comes from the Greek *demokratia*, or 'popular government', from *demos*, or 'common people', and from *kratos*, 'rule, strength'. History, however, has shown how the ruling elite has controlled the exercise of the government and has frequently excluded 'the common people' from decision-making processes – especially the common people who differ from those in power in their racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, or gender backgrounds, or who simply think, feel, or act differently from established religious, social, ideological, or political norms. The common belief in democracy as an inclusive form of government – political but also social and inter-personal – confronted with what people around the world face in relation to the exercise of power, requires a systemic critique that dematerializes democracy's 'potential' from its actual 'implementation', especially where representation and power intersect.

Democratic participation is tightly tied to the visual and to processes of representation. This fact situates visuality at the center of the power struggle. Who is speaking? Who is being addressed? What strategies are being employed to communicate visually?

The 'politics of representation' have been at the center of cultural discourses and visual studies since the early 20th century, but most strongly since the 1970s – coinciding with the feminist and sexual revolutions, the civil rights movement, and other social movements. Visual cultures have questioned power and the perverse ways in which it manifests itself in society, primarily to point to the ways in which power determines, oppresses, and shapes people's lives. Let me return to Rosler's text cited before:

The secret is about the battle over who owns the streets; who writes on the streets ... Who publicizes one's struggles in the streets ... The secret is who uses the street as a forum, like a 'Democracy Wall,' because others control the 'legitimate' media of public disclosure.

How does the rhetoric and visual language of resistance resist 'the secret'? When is civil struggle normalized by society? How do the visual aspects of counter political movements reject or reproduce those very risks?

As gay, lesbian, transgender, and in some cases bisexual and intersex issues become increasingly visible within mainstream society; as LGBTI politics are publicly discussed on national television; as President Obama lobbies for gay rights during his speeches; as celebrities and athletes 'come out'; as gay and lesbian soldiers can be openly gay in the US military; and as HIV-positive visitors can legally enter the United States, there is a growing belief that 'winds of progress' are in the air, that society and culture are ready to confront certain prejudices around sexuality and gender. But who is represented, and by whom, in these processes of visualization? What are the issues that are 'worthy' of representation? Who benefits from these public discussions? Who remains excluded?

The mainstream LGBTI agenda in the United States has focused on four pillar issues: the Defense of Marriage Act; Don't Ask, Don't Tell; federal hate crime statutes; and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. The political strategy around these pillar issues has been defined by a moderate approach based on demanding inclusion into existing institutions: marriage, the military, the prison industrial complex, etc. These battles for inclusion have often reaffirmed rather than challenged power structures, and have conformed to power on its exclusionary terms. A close look at the normalization of sexual politics reveals how economic, racial, or ethnic minorities remain at the margin of the mainstream agenda. Generally, little attention is paid by LGBTI organizations to the pressing concerns of minority communities for whom marriage, for example, is not a viable solution to problems such as confronting the correctional system, the immigration authorities, or the lack of access to health services. The development of LGBTI politics has made evident, consciously or unconsciously, how class determines access to legislative and cultural privileges in society.

In 2012, I completed a long-term web archive, book, and installation project titled *We Who Feel Differently* ([wewhofeeldifferently.info](http://wewhofeeldifferently.info)). The project features in-depth interviews with 50 LGBTI and queer activists, artists, academics, lawyers, social workers, and other professionals in Colombia, Norway, South Korea, and the United States, resulting in an archive of histories of queer activism. The range of contextual, personal, and collective experiences represented in themes addressed in the work are many. However, I would like to expand here beyond the thematic boundaries of the archive, and look closely at the ways in which LGBTI and queer youth are affected by the social struggles I just referred to.

How do young people relate to the sexual and gender movement's ongoing social and political struggles? What are the social issues young people care about after several generations of sexual and gender activism? What forms of activism do young people favor, and what motivates them to organize? Furthermore, what forms of visibility do young queer activists use, and how do these relate to the strategies of the previous generations?

With these questions in mind, I approached three young activists: Cassidy Gardner and Camilo Godoy, co-founders of the New York City-based grassroots organization Queerocracy, and Felipe Baeza, an activist previously

affiliated with the New York State Youth Leadership Council and currently involved with the Brooklyn Immigrant Youth Coalition. I met with them to discuss what being young activists means to them, and their visions for queer activism in the future. This text is based on those encounters and illustrated by documentation of some of their political actions.

Queerocracy is a New York City-based organization founded in 2010 by a group of activists in their late teens and early 20s, brought together by the recognition that social and economic disparities and lack of representation are fundamental aspects of queer social injustice. They conceived of a social and sexual space, in conversation with the form and legacy of groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation, to 'turn things into action' and to engage with the 'politics of fucking'.<sup>1</sup> Because some of the participants were students at the New School, they profited from the university's facilities to meet and organize; all their meetings have been open to the public, and they collectively choose their points of action based on a system of consensus decision-making.

The group is interested in exposing structural injustices from a queer lens and in educating a new generation of leaders to challenge institutional violence. They focus on street demonstration, yet they believe that using visual and artistic strategies is critical as a way to influence the representation of queer issues.

According to Gardner and Godoy, Queerocracy's mission is to end the AIDS crisis and the stigma, discrimination, and criminalization that fuel its existence through the activist tactic of direct action. Their work and actions largely focus on the intersection between the politics of HIV/AIDS, HIV criminalization, and queer migration. For the 'AIDS Cuts Kill' action in House Speaker John Boehner's office in 2013, the group demanded he stop budget cuts that would affect HIV-positive populations' access to drugs and services. For this action, Queerocracy formed a coalition with different groups in which seven activists stripped naked in Boehner's office (Figure 1). Their naked bodies, covered with hand-painted slogans, opposed the proposed budget cuts to lifesaving programs for HIV-positive people and those at risk. All seven activists were arrested, including four from Queerocracy. The action brought worldwide media attention to the issue of budget cuts and to the activists' will to put their bodies on the line in the face of grave injustices. Camilo and Cassidy underlined that their intent is to form coalitions to combat infection, stigma, and criminalization, and to dismantle the politics of disclosure as it pertains to the relationship of HIV/AIDS and law enforcement, as well as deportation in regards to the criminalization of undocumented immigrants.

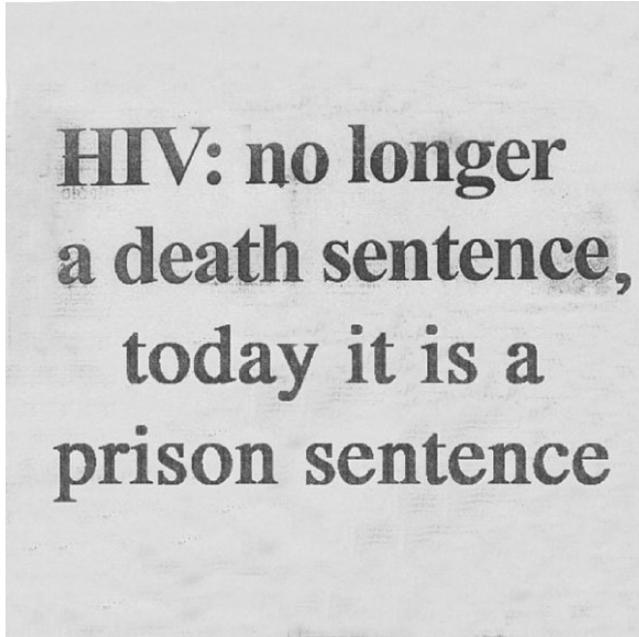
The focus of HIV/AIDS anticriminalization activism is to end institutional discrimination that criminalizes HIV-positive people. Queerocracy has worked on HIV anti-criminalization through the mobilization of a new generation of people, promoting sexual health and empowerment, the eradication of stigma around HIV, and an end to unjust and discriminatory HIV legal statutes.



**Figure 1** On 27 November 2012, members of QUEEROCRACY held a naked action inside the Washington DC office of Speaker of the House, Rep. John Boehner to expose the ‘naked truth’ about what budget cuts would mean for AIDS programs. Cuts to HIV/AIDS funding would strip people living with HIV/AIDS from essential programs and services that many need to survive and 350,000 people with AIDS will be denied live-saving treatments. Reproduced courtesy of Queerocracy.

As queer young folk, Queerocracy feels responsible for promoting sexual health on positive and informed terms rather than on ignorance. While the focus of most HIV/AIDS activism has shifted to providing access to drugs and treatment in developing countries, attention to criminalization in the United States, they believe, is key to tackling legally supported forms of discrimination. These activists consider HIV/AIDS criminalization to be one of the most pressing social issues of their time. They belong to a time that has not known sex separate from the risk of infection, yet they profoundly acknowledge a generation of people who experienced HIV as a continual matter of life and death. Now that death is not as prevalent, Queerocracy is shifting the conversation of HIV/AIDS as it relates to the criminal justice system and the silence over HIV as a pressing issue within the mainstream LGBTI movement.

It is particularly interesting to me, as a gay man who came to understand my sexuality in the shadow of the AIDS crisis and from a generation in which fear and stigma defined our relationship to sex, to see the ways in which young activists are picking up battles that we may have failed to engage, since our attention was on prevention through safe-sex education and in getting access to treatment in case of infection. Confronting the legislation put in place in the ‘90s and the serious effects it has on young



**Figure 2** Camilo Godoy for QUEEROCRACY, 2013, 'HIV: no longer a death sentence, today a prison sentence'. © Camilo Godoy. Reproduced with permission.

queer people demands new forms of civic engagement, both in terms of actions and representational aesthetics. One of the wins from ACT UP's '90s activism was the formation of a visual vocabulary of protest and resistance, the formation of a language against the tyranny of power that manifested in creative public interventions. For Godoy, in particular, aesthetics play a major role in today's activism, he is fixated on finding new words, images, and signs that correspond to the present. Although he recognizes this to be a challenge, he believes that reproducing old slogans and forms of protest is not the most effective way to address today's concerns.

How could Camilo's idea to update the aesthetics of street activism be put into action? A conversation about forms of resistance, as well as their visual expressions, is deeply entwined with theories of participatory democracy and the idea that capturing people's attention is a form of democratic communication. Have the visual tools of protest become predictable? Do the old slogans and signs continue to disrupt? Camilo is trying to produce new content for the visual that would break away from old chants and embrace the new directions of queer struggles. For instance, he came up with the slogan 'HIV: No longer a death sentence, today it is a prison sentence', as he tried to explain the site of his activism (Figure 2); for him, the slogan clearly exemplifies the difference in the perception and urgency of HIV/AIDS activism today. While it is too early to understand the ways in which Camilo

and his peers could influence public perception through new slogans, I find it is crucial that they remain aware of the ways in which aesthetics shape cultural resistance.

Cassidy and Camilo also spoke to me about branding. How does a young organization brand itself to reach people, to motivate them to consider social problems and to get involved? What language to use? What kinds of urban interventions to develop? It is invigorating to see them actualize the terms of engagement in relation to older forms of protest and administrative structures of funding, for example. Queerocracy is conscious of the need to find uncompromising strategies to fund its work and has in the past developed alternative funding and branding campaigns in which it holds events in gay bars and clubs to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS 'in places of encounter' and raises money for its operational costs. The activists are suspicious of bureaucratic funding sources that want to influence the organization's scope of action. Yet sometimes these alternative forms of fund-raising are not enough to make ends meet. Through this particular struggle and a desire to pay its core organizers, Queerocracy acquired non-profit status and convened its first board of advisors.

In a more recent meeting, Gardner and Godoy told me that the economics of sustainability pointed to their momentary inactivity as a group. While they were able to get grant money to sustain the group for some time, they were unable to focus on direct action activism and were instead occupied with administrative duties. They had to decide whether to keep their work radical and do it less often or to run the organization full time with more emphasis on fund-raising and administrative tasks. They have yet to find a balance because they believe that even in the most radical spaces people need to get paid for their work. But why does being paid mean they have to compromise their politics?

Queerocracy considers collaboration with other organizations – forming coalitions of resistance for street protest, urban disruption, and media attention – a key element of its work. It trusts that alliances of solidarity, as well as the collective production of images and scenes, will resonate within popular consciousness. For the 'Robin Hood Tax' action, for example, activists from different organizations working under the name the Robin Hood Tax Movement demanded a small taxation on Wall Street transactions and speculative trades in order to raise money for AIDS and toward universal health care. The groups used Robin Hood-like green caps, masks, signs, and chains to stop traffic on Wall Street, resulting in several arrests. For the 'Broken Promises Kill' action, they staged a die-in in front of the United States Mission to the United Nations (USUN) to demand funding for global AIDS programs (Figure 3). In a similar action at the New School, activists held up signs that listed the number of people waiting at the time for the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) in different states.

I was curious about the activists' choice to use the street as a platform, as opposed to, say, only social networking sites. Cassidy and Camilo were emphatic about this – they are not 'clicktivists', they are not people



Figure 3 QUEEROCRACY members participating in a die-in action titled 'Broken Promises Kill' in April 2011 outside the United States Mission to the United States as part of a rally for funding global AIDS programs. © Queerocracy. Reproduced with permission.

who sign a petition or like a photo on Facebook and consider their civic responsibilities fulfilled. To them, social networks are useful as a means of outreach and communication for organizing, but the weight, gravity, and force of bodies on the street, the volume and echo of their voices, and the potential influence that these disruptions may have are what turns them on. They want to change systemic failures through direct action, and the culture of clicktivism simply is not enough for them.

Queerocracy is hyper-aware of the social realities that affect its constituents. It has chosen to tackle these issues head on to become a local advocate for new queer leadership. Its work is particularly interesting to me in the context of New York, a city that tends to devour people's time and, consequently, their involvement in social change. For Queerocracy, grassroots activism is extremely urgent: it believes that institutionalized LGBTI organizations have prioritized marriage equality over other pressing battles and, therefore, make us believe that *inclusion* should be understood as progress. Queerocracy is, according to its cofounders, 'keeping it real' by recognizing and foregrounding issues that affect the majority of queer people's lives.

Back in October 2011, together with Queerocracy and its allies, we staged a performative intervention in Columbus Circle, around the monument to Christopher Columbus (Figure 4). I had been commissioned to produce a new work by Jake Yuzna at the Museum of Art and Design, which is located across the street from the monument, and I thought it was the right context in which to produce a project that named Columbus as the



**Figure 4** Documentation of *A New Discovery: Queer Immigration in Perspective*, a collaborative project by Carlos Motta and QUEEROCRACY commissioned by Risk + Reward, a program of the Museum of Art and Design in New York. This project was a social intervention-based performance held on Columbus Day, 10 October 2011, at Columbus Circle in New York City. The group collectively read excerpts of a timeline they created titled *A Timeline of Queer Immigration*. © Carlos Motta.

first settler-immigrant to neglect the lives of queer and other indigenous people in the Americas. With Camilo and Cassidy, we compiled *A Timeline of Queer Migration*, a poster that lists some of the most important moments concerning queer migrations internationally. We wanted to create a context for discussion of the perverse ways in which immigration authorities have severely policed queer migrants' lives, and for speaking about how the rights of undocumented migrants are often excluded from conversations surrounding justice for LGBTI people. We borrowed the form of the 'human mic' used by Occupy Wall Street and trusted that the presence and mass of our bodies, and the sound of our voices, would disrupt Columbus Day celebrations by implicating the explorer within a history of violent discrimination.

My second meeting was with artist and immigration activist Felipe Baeza. Baeza is triply 'out': he's queer, he's undocumented, and he's unafraid to speak up about his sexuality or immigration status (Figure 5). Together with a forceful movement of youths who have grown tired of living in fear under a system that penalizes and polices their very existence and opportunities for work, and that constantly threatens them with

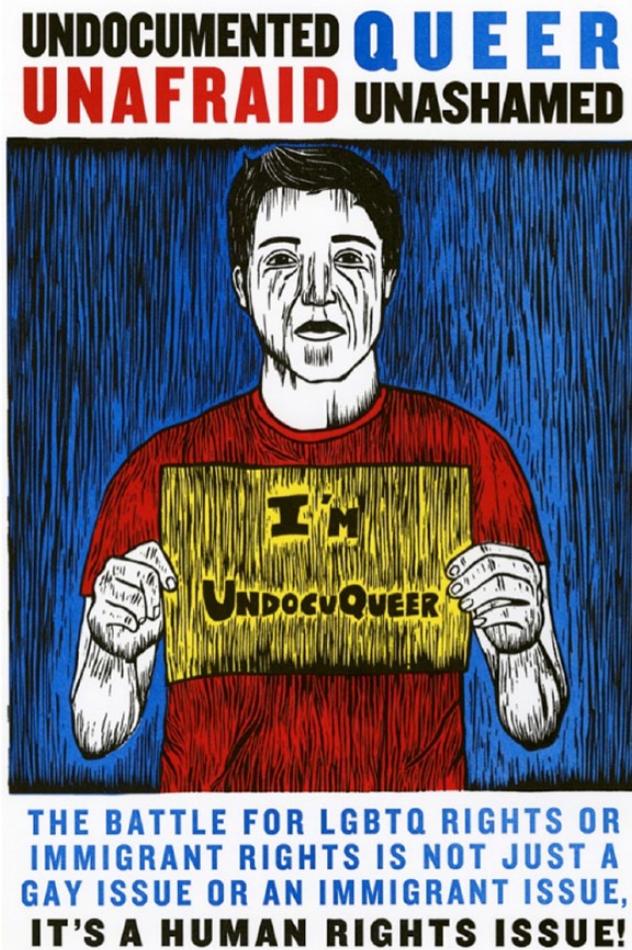


Figure 5 Felipe Baeza (2012), 'Undocumented, Unafraid, Queer, Unashamed', digital image. © Felipe Baeza. Reproduced with permission.

deportation, Baeza and his colleagues at the New York State Youth Leadership Council and the Brooklyn Immigrant Youth Coalition are fighting to achieve comprehensive immigration reform that would grant legal status to thousands of undocumented immigrants.

Not unlike the Queerocracy activists, Baeza calls attention to the classist tendencies of the LGBTI movement that privileges certain people's rights over others. He is interested in a reform that would benefit everyone equally, a reform designed for those people who will not necessarily have access to marriage or would not benefit from marriage rights but who need legality in order to work and have access to health services and other social benefits.

Baeza points out that sexuality had been a taboo subject within immigrant movements until queer immigrants started to ask where they stood in relation to their communities and politics. They found in Harvey Milk's famous 'coming-out' strategy a useful reference for their struggle. The introduction of this language linked sexuality and immigration as issues of visibility and representation and formed a coalition in which silence is no longer the norm. This broad movement is interested in fighting for 'everyone', not just for the stereotypically 'good immigrants', a category that often excludes so-called 'marginal' minorities.

I asked Baeza to speak about the difference between his attitude toward his immigration status and that of his parents. He giggled as he responded that they think he's crazy for putting his body on the line, risking deportation and spoiling his chances of achieving the 'American dream', but he said the dream is nothing but a tale that needs to be contextualized to address his true needs. His parents have understood that the new generation is not ashamed of its status and will confront power to make the public aware of the serious injustices that undocumented people face in the United States.

Undocumented immigrants in this country are the targets of campaigns of fear, which in some cases have been written into law, as in Arizona and Alabama, where police can stop and question people based on 'reasonable suspicion' of their being undocumented immigrants. These bills legitimize racial prejudices as the basis of immigration strategy; they result in 'clean-up' campaigns that fail to address the needs of the immigrants and the nation at large.

In Atlanta, Baeza and his colleagues protested Georgia's ban on the right of undocumented youth to apply to the state's top five schools (Figure 6). Baeza wants to publicize these rigid, restrictive, and deadlocking policies; he wants to 'speak about things that happen, have happened, and will happen' if people remain silent.

For the youth immigrant movement, the question of the visual in its activism is entangled with the question of the visibility of its cause. The activists see their bodies as the most striking visual tool to employ. In a sense, these young activists perform their own identities – being immigrants, being students, being unemployed – and take them onto the street, risking arrest and deportation. This movement has given a face to a decades-long invisible issue.

For Baeza, the intersection of his sexuality and his immigration status fuel his rage, as he has to deal with two layers of marginalization. He wants to underscore that he is uninterested in mainstream LGBTI politics precisely because they reproduce models of exclusion by designing legislative strategies that favor a white middle class and neglect forms of citizenship that defy legality. He wants to make sure the public is aware that immigrant rights and queer rights are not two separate issues, they are one issue that is very much at the heart of undocumented queer people's lives.



**Figure 6** Felipe Baeza and allies organized an action in Atlanta, Georgia with five other undocumented youth. The action was done in response to HB87 and against the ban Georgia has on undocumented youth from applying to the top five public universities in that state. © Felipe Baeza. Reproduced with permission.

‘Undocuqueer’ youth will resist accepting the message, Baeza says:

Growing up, I knew I was undocumented and felt fear and shame. It hasn’t been easy, but I have reconciled with it, embraced it, I’ve learned to love my undocumented queer body. It has taken years for me to come to terms with me being undocumented. But I have realized that I am not alone and that you are not alone, either – there’s a large community of undocumented youth and allies out there. It’s because of them that now I can say that I am ready to come out and I am no longer afraid! We need to step away from the shadows of fear and shame. We can’t hide any longer, we need to come out!

Coming out for undocuqueer and other undocumented immigrants has become synonymous with engaging in acts of civil disobedience. Baeza told me that interrupting public space and calling the attention of the media is the only way to assure forms of empowerment within a system that denies their rights. Getting arrested is a good way to produce striking images in which youth seeking educational and work opportunities are depicted as criminals. Baeza and his peers, not unlike Queerocracy, are conscious of the power of images. College students belong in the classroom, not raising their fists on the streets or detained in a prison; the images generated by their activism may lead to public empathy.

Another significant action was held in Alabama, where a group of activists got arrested as a way of infiltrating the prison in order to find out how detained immigrants were being treated, and anything else the detainees might reveal. Upon the activists' release, they made this information public and called attention to the repressive nature of the system.

In recent years, we have witnessed the formation of a vocal immigration youth movement that responds to and awaits the passing of the Dream Act, a proposed bill that would grant conditional and temporary residency to young immigrants who arrive in the United States before age 16 and are under age 30. The plan shifts attention toward providing educational opportunities for illegal immigrants and giving them access to structures of financial aid.

According to Baeza, for the 'dreamers' and the undocuqueer, action is the only option – action is a form of survival and a way of asserting their presence as citizens of democracy, a democracy that considers them second- and third-class citizens, yet one they want to conquer and inhabit.

### Acknowledgements

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### Note

1. Gardner and Godoy used this expression during our conversation.

**Carlos Motta** is a multidisciplinary artist based in New York City whose work draws upon political history in an attempt to create counter-narratives that recognize the inclusion of suppressed histories, communities, and identities. Motta's work has been presented internationally in venues such as Tate Modern, London; The New Museum, The Guggenheim Museum and MoMA/PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, Bogotá; Museu Serralves, Porto; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson; San Francisco Art Institute; Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin; Witte de With, Rotterdam; Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City; and many other public, private and independent spaces throughout the world.

*Address:* Parsons The New School for Design, 66 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10011, USA. [email: mottacarlos@yahoo.com]