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Lorna Brown and Anne Pasternak *Agility in Public*

Founded in 1974, Creative Time is a New York-based organization that approaches art in public spaces as an expression of free speech and democratic participation by artists—as distinct from a commissioning model that predetermines a location or theme to which artists respond. From an activist history within New York City, Creative Time has in recent years expanded its scope to include projects taking place across the US—engaging with the 2008 election campaign season, post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, and, in more general terms, the globalization of the art market and its discourses. This interview between Anne Pasternak, Creative Time's Director, and Lorna Brown took place in March 2010, just prior to the launch of the Global Residency Program, an initiative that offers six artists—Maya Lin, Walid Raad, Emily Jacir, Judi Werthein, Sanford Biggers, and K8 Hardy—the opportunity to travel to specific regions in the world and investigate social issues by immersing themselves in communities abroad. As part of The Initiative for Global Inquiry, the residency program responds to the desire of artists to investigate the implications of their own mobility in ways that combine art and social action.

Lorna Brown: In addressing Creative Time's remarkable history you have spoken about its early focus on politically specific works such as Gran Fury's *Kissing Doesn't Kill* project (1989), and then a movement toward visual spectacles such as Cai Guo-Qiang's *Light Cycle* (2003), and a recent return to directly political work such as *Democracy in America: The National Campaign* (2008). These distinct approaches in programming suggest different ways of thinking about the public—of creating different publics. Gran Fury's public experienced the work incidentally over a longer timeframe, as individuals, whereas for *Light Cycle*, an anticipatory public was assembled together, all looking in the same direction. Mark Tribe's *We Are Also Responsible* and Sharon Hayes's performances for

Democracy in America create a more "proximate" public. Could you comment about these publics in the arc of the organization?

Anne Pasternak: Sure.... First we have to look at Creative Time's mission, and I am very blessed to have been given a mission that is so relevant and exciting. Sometimes it seems that every arts organization's mission reads exactly the same, but I really *believe* in ours. I really own it. When you take a look at the mission of presenting timely, groundbreaking art in the public realm, we are guided by three main values. Number one is that artistic experimentation matters; number two is that public spaces are spaces for creativity and freedom of expression, and should be insisted upon as such; and number three is that artists matter in society and should be contributing to the issues that are shaping our times. So we have this very great mission, and it allows us to undertake a lot of issue-based work without apology.

In terms of your question about publics—the truth of the matter is that every single project that we work on has different publics. In fact, there is no such thing as audience; rather, there are people who comprise this thing called "audience," but it is really unknowable or indefinable. While we hope that there is some consistency and a core of people that really care about Creative Time's work, each project demands its own engagement process and gives us the opportunity to connect with new audiences. For example, when we worked in Coney Island, we needed to work with arcade owners who may have ties to the Italian and Russian Mobs, as well as the self-acclaimed freak community in addition to the general public that uses Coney Island for weekend vacations. These communities demand different types of engagement and marketing. So for every project that we do, we try and think about who the various audiences may be—it's an impossible project to succeed with, really, especially for a staff of ten with very limited marketing resources, but we try to channel our energies in the most effective and ethical ways we can. Some projects require very specific outreach. Paul Chan's *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* (2007) required a grassroots, hands-on approach—showing up day-to-day, knocking on doors, being there, and being helpful to

residents of the community. On other occasions, the artwork is thrust upon people without apology. It depends all on the nature of the project and the artist's intent.

— I think what has happened over the arc of the organization—because Creative Time is so artist-oriented—is that you've been able to challenge more conventional or more mediated approaches to works in public space and create a level of anticipation and curiosity within the public about what public art might be.

— I'm glad you see that, because that's very important to us. As I said, we think that public spaces are places for creativity and for artists to express themselves freely; in the process, we try to do things that get people to pause and think about things differently and to get one another talking. I'm not particularly interested in working on projects that people pass by and ignore.

— In many ways, Creative Time uses the same strategies as other kinds of interventions into public space that the public is quite familiar with, such as advertising, guerrilla marketing....

— Sometimes, I've learned you can never predict what the response is going to be with these guerrilla-type tactics. When we were working with Jenny Holzer's projection project *For the City* (2005), the projections on the New York Public Library created quite a commotion.

Ambulances, fire trucks, and police cars raced to the location. We were told that 911 got a call from a woman who thought terrorists were communicating by projecting words on the façade of the library. It was an absurd proposition. We also worked with a terrific Danish artist, Jens Haaning, just after the Danish political cartoon controversy. He printed a popular Arabic joke in Islamic script that was installed all over the City. We thought people would really freak out. But nothing happened. Nothing at all.

— It seems like another key strategy is Creative Time's commitment to the temporary. You have mentioned that there are a lot more limitations and restrictions in the creation of permanent works, and that it is truly harder to create an effective work of art if it has to be permanent. You've really resisted, even as the organization has grown, a move toward permanent commissions or

a stable, locatable series of programs. At the same time, people are starting to expect public art much more. And the other part of these shifting conditions in public space is the increase in monitoring and surveillance activities. I am curious about your techniques for remaining nimble in terms of the increased regulation of public space and increased public expectation.

— We bump up against any number of hurdles—it's inevitable. They require us to be creative, strategic, and fast. Though our public spaces are increasingly surveilled, it has been quite some time since we have had to deal with security concerns, such as "Could this sculpture hide a terrorist's bomb?"

The real necessity in being nimble is that as an organization we need to remain relevant to artists and publics, and because culture is moving so fast, we are always working to make sure the opportunities we are offering artists are relevant. We always ask: What are we doing that isn't being provided elsewhere in the marketplace? We are constantly re-looking at our mission, re-looking at what artists are doing, where they are making work, and re-thinking how we can be responsive to them. Where we really struggle is in being progressive and thorough with our "outreach." It's absurd for us to think that we could have a campaign that could compete with The Gap.

— Creative Time is able to respond so quickly and allocate resources on the fly. I'm thinking about Paul Chan's work in New Orleans—it was just a year following Hurricane Katrina....

— True. It was the first major national project we had undertaken. And in many ways it was an absurd idea to start with this one. Quite honestly, when you tell people Creative Time, an organization wholly unknown to the good people of New Orleans, wanted to present Samuel Beckett's incredibly complex play *Waiting for Godot* in the middle of the obliterated Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, it's an absurd proposition. And can you imagine presenting a play in a tragic site by a visual artist who had never produced a play? Thank goodness for a very brilliant artist, a community that was willing to share their advice and welcome us into their lives, and a few visionary patrons who had open minds, could use their

imagination and see the potential, and who trusted us. I don't know what I'd do without my board, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, or the NEA. The point being—it takes a good measure of trust.

— The relationships with artists are really at the core of what you are doing, and that level of trust must bring an extraordinary willingness to work with you on the part of the artistic community. It's fascinating to see the ongoing impact of that piece—as represented on the Internet. It's generally understood that the impact of a work is quite immediate, but with that work it seemed to grow in significance over time.

— Paul is such a brilliant and ethical person. It's very hard for artists to know how to engage with communities of tragedy. The questions are so big and the risks are huge. At one point early in our process, Paul called me at home and shared that he just didn't think we should undertake his vision; he thought the risk of failing people was too great. I said to him "If we don't do this project,

then we are doing whatever everyone else is doing. Nothing." He knew it wouldn't be easy, but doing nothing wasn't an option. Artists have to calculate the risks and make sure they are asking the right questions, listen to answers very carefully, and then employ the most ethical process that they can. I have to say Paul was completely committed to listening and to a sensitive and ethical process. He inspired all of us, and I'm so glad that in the process he has also inspired a lot of artists to think of ways that they could work with communities. Everybody was talking about relational aesthetics in the so-called "art-world," but Paul is one of the unusual artists to bridge the discussion into real life.

— You were able to invest a lot of resources in writing and archiving Creative Time's history online and in print. I'm curious about how you see them operating in the "public space" of art history?

— We are about to launch the first phase of our new Web site, so it will be even easier to access and navigate our history.

— My question stems from being involved in carrying forward the history of the artist-run centre movement in Canada, which was very much

based on giving artists the opportunity to historicize their own work. I recognize a sympathetic approach within *Creative Time: The Book*. You decided to include interviews and brought in authoritative voices but did not lean too heavily on that authority to create one storyline or through-line....

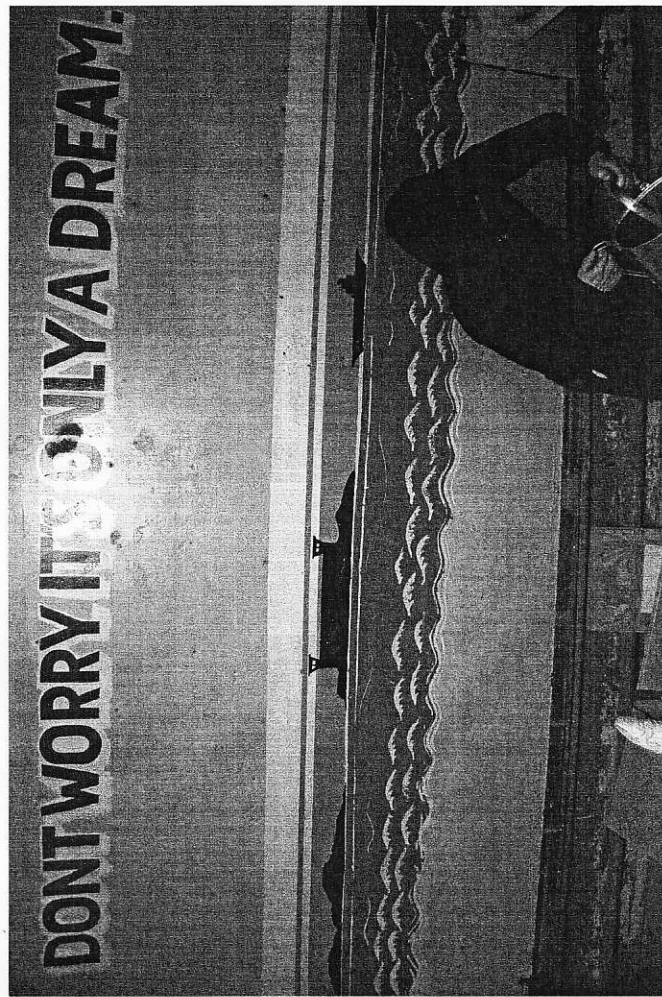
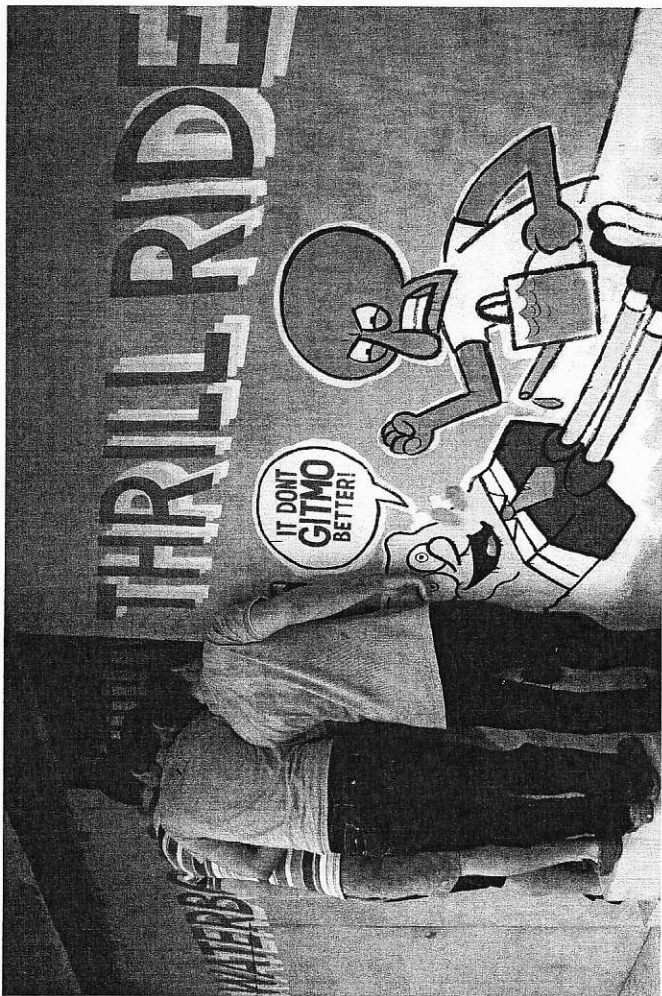
— I wanted our first book to embrace diverse points of view, even debate. In fact, the conversation between curators Tom Eccles and Tom Finklepearl was very important to me because I knew they represented two fundamentally different points of view in public arts practice.

— And you included written contributions from artists reflecting on their process. So—do you see the book as a different kind of contribution to national or international documents of how the New York art world might be seen?

— The book is diverse, contradictory, and energetic in the way that Creative Time is diverse, contradictory, and energetic. Creative Time's programs mirror the various social, artistic, cultural, and political pressures of their day. There were so many stories to tell, so I didn't want our book to be an authoritative historical work with one point of view. Most of all, I wanted to create a book that broadens the historical narrative of "public art" in the last half of the twentieth century. I wanted it to contribute to art history.

In fact, I've always wanted to challenge notions of public art. When I came to Creative Time, I could barely raise a penny for the organization. Everybody equated public art with heroes on horseback, big sculptures plopped onto plazas, "percent for art" programs, and nationalistic monuments. But those artistic practices had nothing to do with how Creative Time came to be. Instead, Creative Time emerged from the alternative arts movement, which was very politicized, experimental, and challenging.

— It was a great choice to include the complete chronology of mission statements over your history. It certainly seems to relate to particular threats to public space during the organization's growth—for instance the year that "freedom" makes its way into the mission. It must have been interesting to track how the organization managed to effectively and strategically shift. So often the



authorship of the organization itself is missing, so I was delighted to see it.

—Thanks. I'm pleased it didn't get edited out, as I think it tells a story about how we struggled to be relevant to artists and culture. There were a lot of things that didn't make it into the final publication. For instance, we spent a year on a timeline that placed Creative Time projects in relation to other cultural, political, and social events.

—Peter Eleey's essay "A Framework for Speculation" addresses risk, experimentation, and "getting art messy with the world." He maintains that "The greatest risk an artist runs is not disappearing, or being unsuccessful, or marginalized, or ignored, but rather losing the support that allows him or her to continue taking risks." Could you talk a bit about your role in "risk management" as it pertains to keeping your relationships with funding partners healthy, yet continuing to allow for the needs and vision of artists?

—Honesty is always the best policy. We always go into a project trying to imagine all the possible issues and points of resistance. If there's physical risk, how do you make sure the spaces the artist and public are entering are as safe as possible? But that's the simple stuff. The risk that excites us is when an artist does something that they haven't done before. Paul Chan, for example, had been making these incredibly elegant, astute video projections, and he had a whole other life of political activism. The two hadn't come together until the work in New Orleans. That was a personal, creative risk, as well as a practical and emotional one. We do our best to provide artists the support they need to take leaps; we're going to listen, share, and help navigate all the hurdles.

There are also organizational risks, from alienating audiences to losing public support. Artist Steve Powers, for example, wanted to take over an arcade in Coney Island in which animatronics would water-board each other. He also wanted to launch the project with a live water-boarding event. Can you imagine doing a live water-boarding event, where it's possible for people to be emotionally and physically injured or die? But the biggest risk we face organizationally is to stop taking risks. Instead, we have to take them. We take risks like this with as much preparation as we

can. We hired professional military interrogators to perform the water boarding. We pre-screened and pre-selected participants. And we were thoroughly prepared legally. Fortunately we were working with an artist who is absolutely brilliant, and he's incredible speaking with the media. So when Fox News came rolling along, we were prepared to respond to their questions intended to incite ridicule and ignorance. When they asked, "Why would an artist undertake water-boarding as a theme in his art?" we responded "Why wouldn't the creative, expressive side of humankind contribute to our understanding of contemporary culture?" Or when people said "It's offensive to call water boarding a thrill ride," we questioned "Is it more offensive that we are calling it a thrill ride or that our elected leaders say that water boarding isn't torture?" We didn't shy away from the controversy; instead we used it to fuel the discussion. As it turned out, that project made it into all sorts of international media. In fact, the artist was interviewed twice on Al Jazeera.

We go into these projects with our eyes wide open. We are aware of the risks. No matter how prepared we try to be, there are always things that surprise us.

—I'm trying to imagine the first meeting where you presented this project....

—It was really funny when Steve and I presented the project plans to my Board, because the lawyers were actually excited about this challenging legal territory we were entering. Believe it or not, they were worried about Steve's desire to play music that might entice lawsuits—ranging from the Sesame Street and Barney's theme songs to heavy metal thrasher music.

—That was part of the national project *Democracy in America*—are more national projects in your plans?

—Yes, we will continue to work nationally. At the same time, we are expanding beyond the US. Two years ago we convened a series of dinners with artists and colleagues to discuss artists' needs and the nature of the globalized art world. Artists are global citizens showing all over the world, from Papua New Guinea to Abu Dhabi. It's quite a privileged situation. I wondered if they are having real connections with people outside the art world

in these places, and again and again the artists said they weren't. They clearly expressed they were frustrated by the demands of galleries, fairs, biennials, etcetera. And they wanted to get off this racetrack to explore their own ideas and not those of curators and dealers. They needed to fuel their own practice; at the same time, they wanted to have meaningful connections with local residents in the places they work.

I wondered what it means to think of ourselves as a global organization, and how might we support artists who are global citizens? You'll notice in our mission statement there is nothing that says we couldn't work nationally or internationally. We are free to emphasize their practice, their ideas, wherever they take them. So we recently started a few experiments to help artists in other parts of the world, primarily in places where there may not be much infrastructure to produce contemporary, groundbreaking art. For example, thanks to the Rockefeller Foundation's Cultural Innovation Fund, we have six artists travelling the world right now researching ideas that are really important to them in our pilot Global Residency initiative. It reinvents the traditional residency model by sending artists to places where they want to go to research, think, and develop new ideas.

The artist Jakob Boeskov just returned to New York from Lagos, Nigeria. He was interested in the difference between a western model of film production, which involves huge financing and years to make a movie, as compared to the Nigerian model. Nollywood is the third largest movie industry in the world—they can make a movie in one week. They go straight to DVD and are screened and distributed by everyday citizens. So we helped him find a Nigerian director/producer, and in five days they made a film that was written by Jakob, a strange and wonderful little film on globalization.

We're also about to announce a partnership this spring with a major human rights organization that will involve working with artists in refugee camps, to create public projects and raise awareness about these sites of incredible tragedy. This is very exciting, but also incredibly complex and deeply risky. Not only are refugee camps fraught with despair and danger, artists have to be careful

and deeply ethical in their process. I don't think many would dare to work in this way. But we believe in artists' power to raise consciousness and feel this is a deeply exciting albeit challenging initiative.

Truth be told, I have just about zero interest in producing public art projects in London, Paris, or Tokyo. I'm interested in areas where there may not be a contemporary arts infrastructure for artists, places that are sites ripe for social invention, and sites where there is a real possibility for something new to happen, something unexpected.

Ross Bleckner says, "There are many ways for artists to be citizens of the world," and here you have an artist who is a painter in a classical sense, who shows at a major New York gallery, but who also went into a refugee camp last year, which changed his life. He became the first artist good-will ambassador to the United Nations; he's been the chairman of major AIDS organizations and has raised huge amounts of money for services and research for people with HIV. These are all, for him, part of his artistic practice—it's not separate. So last fall we presented our first Creative Time Summit at the New York Public Library, which put the spotlight on a number of established and under-the-radar artists from around the world who are working in the arena of social change. There are fascinating models—some better than others—that we wanted to bring in to the centre of the art world's discussion as they are hugely inspiring but largely ignored.

—I think it's hard for contemporary art systems—whether it's the market or the museum system—to think of artistic practice as anything beyond a studio practice, a raw resource to be processed. A much more realistic notion involves multiple practices, whether that's writing or teaching or activism—as an active citizen. Which brings me to our last question: In *Thinking About the Public in Public Art*,² the exchange between Tom Eccles and Tom Finklepearl reveals important distinctions in how organizations manage the relationship between artist and public. In doing so, they suggest particular definitions of democracy itself.

—Absolutely.

—Eccles foregrounds the individual artist and maintains that presenting an artwork is, *in itself*,

part of the democratic process by allowing for individual expression in public space. Finklepearl counters that there is ample opportunity for individual expression within the gallery-museum and private non-profit arts system and favours a more collective definition of democracy: what he describes as speaking a common language to a broad audience....

— They had a genuine ideological argument that was rather robust and useful. Tom Eccles privileges the artist above the audience, while Tom Finklepearl blazed trails in creating opportunities for the public to be engaged in the creative process with the artist. Tom Finklepearl's approach is a collaborative and more democratic process while Tom Eccles's approach imposes on the public an artist's work and privileges the curator's eye over community desires. Both approaches can be valid depending on the context, and I believe the public realm is much richer for having multiple approaches. Different sites require different approaches. And depending on the artist's idea, one approach may not be better than another. I try to exercise those multiple approaches, depending on the will and interest of the artist. In the process, I do my best to remove as many obstacles and hurdles for artists so they have few, if any, constraints, on their vision. I don't like rules, and I thrive in the gray zone in general where things are a bit messy. I love it when projects raise a lot of questions but don't answer them. I think that promotes a curious life. Art isn't neat or something that can be easily understood, packaged, and digested.

— Clearly, Creative Time thinks of democracy and public space in this more contested, volatile way.

— Absolutely.

— At the same time, you do manage the relationship between artists and the public—summarizing the work in press and media material, in publications and so on. What's your first concern in managing the reception of the work?

— The most important thing is to get across in simple, plain terms—not in art speak—what the artists' goals are. There's the who, what, when, where—but in terms of the "why" it's most important to forefront the artist's ideas. To be

honest, there are times when revealing some of the artists' motivations in advance of the project won't benefit us. An example is *Tribute in Light* (2002), Julian LaVerdiere and Paul Myoda's project after 9/11 that illuminated Lower Manhattan. The artists were keenly aware that they were potentially creating a work that could become a nationalistic symbol used and abused for political purposes.

Though they were, of course, most concerned about the lives lost, honouring the rescue efforts, and reclaiming our skyline, they were also interested in how the work could be used and even abused over time. There was zero reason for me to share this publicly.

We put out information that is going to entice people to want to know something about a project, to encourage them to think about it, to encourage them to discuss it, and develop their own viewpoints and questions. We do a lot of on-site interaction. We always learn so much from the public, and it's one of the most fulfilling parts of this job. It's always astonishing to me when I work with a museum and I ask the curators, "How do people use this gallery? Which directions do they walk, how long do they tend to stay?" and the curators don't know. They're never watching people, let alone talking to them. But people always have interesting interpretations, and I learn a lot from their responses.

It's a shame arts professionals don't spend more time listening to the public. I ignored "public art" my whole life because it was heroes on horseback or big sculptures plopped down in plazas. I didn't care. And then came Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981). It was so interesting to see the art world completely dismiss the public's viewpoint. In my opinion, the public really understood Richard Serra's intention. This piece was meant to obstruct. It was meant to change over time, just like we do. It was a statement of power. And rather than acknowledging their point of view and addressing why this may have been a valid, even profound act of the artist, the art intelligentsia dismissed their views and screamed "You can't remove an art work!" or spoke only about its formal beauty. So the public just dug in their heels more. I'm no expert on this, and I haven't read all the many books that have come out about the *Tilted*

Arc controversy, but I do know the public wasn't heard. The art world has something to learn from what was being said, and the public certainly deserved an honest, open, and engaged conversation. But for the large part, we haven't changed, nor learned from our mistakes. Museum curators still approach their engagements with audiences as "I'll be the expert and lecture to you while you listen." It seems to me audiences are more and more visually sophisticated, and we could attract more people to the arts if only we weren't so territorial in our intellectual views and afraid of debate. An authentic engagement is so much more enriching; it's really a shame that we're not seizing those opportunities. People in the arts tend to be afraid of the public.

About the Authors

Lorna Brown works between studio practice, curation, and writing to explore interests in social phenomena such as boredom, administrative structures and systems, and the dynamics of public spaces. Recent exhibitions include *The Chatter of Culture*, Artspeak, Vancouver; *Threshold (cont.)* at the Koerner Library at UBC; and *AdminIndex*, commissioned by the Audain Gallery at SFU Woodward. Recent independent curatorial and editorial projects include *Group Search: art in the library* and *Ruins in Process: Vancouver Art in the Sixties*, an online digital archive. Brown was the Director/Curator of Artspeak Gallery from 1999 to 2004.

Anne Pasternak is President and Artistic Director of Creative Time, a cultural production agency dedicated to introducing contemporary art to new audiences and preserving public space as a place of creative expression.

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