

Grant Kester
**Response to
E.C. Feiss**

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I want to thank Ellen Feiss for her thoughtful and honest response, and I'm glad my essay was able to solicit some further reflection on her part.¹

I would also note, again, that I myself have been guilty of most of the problems I identify in this essay (the off-loading of critique to a theoretical authority figure, failure to engage with the work in its specificity, and so forth). Many of the questions Feiss raises about the role of the critic and the complexities of research into participation have been central to my own work for many years, and play an important role in the research we're developing at UCSD. They have also been addressed, of course, in the field of anthropology itself, among other places (hence my interest in a cross-disciplinary dialogue). I welcome her own efforts to explore and articulate these questions. A thorough response to her understanding of "rights" critiques would occupy more space than is appropriate in this context, but I do want to address a few of the other points she raises.²

First, we have an unfortunate tendency in our field to think the worst of other disciplines (outside of a narrow spectrum of theory and philosophy, which we tend to consume in a fairly unreflective manner). While the history of imperialism may well be "inseparable from the discipline of anthropology," as Feiss writes, one could easily enough say the same thing about the discipline of art history (it was founded, after all, with the goal of translating "heathen" artifacts into a language that could be understood by "Christian" viewers, in Karl Schnaase's words). It should go without saying that efforts to work across the boundaries between art history and anthropology, for example, will involve a mutual interrogation of both disciplines. I would encourage Feiss to have a look at some of the newer forms of experimental, collaborative, and activist ethnography that are currently being developed in the field, and which represent a productive evolution from the earlier work of figures such as Latour, Taussig, and more proximately, Jean Rouch, among many others. She may be surprised to discover that many anthropologists these days are quite capable of being critically self-reflective about their discipline and methods. This is a quality we would do well to emulate more widely in our own field. I would also note here that anthropology is only one possible disciplinary interlocutor for art historians and critics to consider when exploring new research methods. A thorough account of all the potential opportunities for cross-disciplinary dialogue, along with the proper framing of the internal politics of each of those disciplines, far exceeds the capacity of a short essay in *e-flux journal*.

Ultimately, the critic or historian's obligation

is to the work itself, in all its registers of meaning. My point in the essay I wrote is not that the online statements published in conjunction with *Immigrant Movement International (IMI)* are irrelevant or less “real” (I state clearly that they are part of the project as whole). However, I would encourage critics who wish to write about this area of practice to abandon, just for a moment, the Google search and the JSTOR download, and to remain open to the new forms of criticality that can emerge when one is present with the work at its physical site of production (or at least makes an effort to understand what has occurred there). This can be considerably more challenging than critiquing written statements or branding strategies, but in a way this is precisely the problem. We are quite good in our field at analyzing what Feiss terms the “discursive,” but not very good at being aware of, and intellectually responsive to, the kind of social, somatic, and political encounters that occur in a process-based work. As I noted in my essay, more conventional gallery or biennial-based artworks tend to be propositional in nature, and thus lend themselves to this kind of critical approach. They can be easily enough grasped through documentation, artist’s statements and interviews, and so on. In the case of Feiss’s original essay, however, I found it symptomatic that she could critique a project that has unfolded over a period of five years and has involved hundreds of interlocutors and participants solely on the basis of two written statements, without at least acknowledging that there might be some possible tension between the “embodied” project and its discursive adjuncts. I remain agnostic about the relative quality of *IMI* as an art project, having never seen it, but I’m unlikely to be persuaded by a critique that remains so materially unbalanced.

Second, at no point do I attribute to the critic an “all encompassing power” to “see shifts in power.” In fact, my own experience in witnessing engaged art practices over the years is precisely the opposite – a sense of disorientation as I try to come to terms with an extremely complex configuration of subjectivities, differences in space and temporality, and modes of power. This experience quite often challenges my own *a priori* assumptions about what a given work is supposed to “mean.” For myself, I find this disorientation to be generative. I certainly don’t imagine that I could somehow reconstruct a given project in its totality, but I do think that the forms of insight that are produced at the site of practice are epistemologically valid and essential in understanding the nature of this work. Nor do they preclude acts of critical judgment or rest on the assumption that the

participants in a given project somehow transcend “power relations.” This is a view that can be sustained only by deliberately ignoring existing scholarship in this area. I appreciate that this kind of research is not easy, and that it carries its own liabilities. It’s my hope that intellectual curiosity, as well as the slowly evolving norms of the discipline, will lead more critics and historians to accept the challenge that this work poses to their assumptions about both theory and practice, and to begin developing critical methodologies that are more effective in coming to terms with the rapidly growing field of socially engaged art practice.

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1 See E. C. Feiss, "Response to Grant Kester's 'The Device Laid Bare,'" *e-flux journal* 54 (April 2014) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/response-to-grant-kester%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cthe-device-laid-bare%E2%80%9D/>

2 Regarding the relative novelty of Wendy Brown's critique of rights discourse, I would refer Feiss to Deleuze's impassioned attack on the concept of human rights in Pierre-André Boutang's *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (1996). His stance led to a falling out with Michel Foucault during the 1970s over the violence of the Red Army Faction in Germany, which Didier Eribon discusses in *Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 258–262. Brown offers an updated version of long-standing critiques of the key ideologies of liberalism ("rights," "tolerance," and so forth). There is much to be said on behalf of this critique, but the idea that it's somehow "highly contentious" in the context of an art world that happily devours Žižek's far more incendiary assaults on the evils of "liberal consensus" is puzzling to me. I suspect Feiss and I simply have different perceptions about what constitutes conventional vs. transgressive theoretical insight in contemporary art critical discourse.

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