



JOHN GREYSON, *ADS EPIDEMIC*

# STAGING POLITICS IN THE CORPORATE SPHERE

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- *being a Primer for Artist's Collectives experimenting with public technologies*  
- *(with examples from The Lunatic of One Idea, a Public Access project)*

## 1. CHOOSE A YOUNG CORPORATION; RISKS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE TAKEN.

The Wall Network Inc., a new Toronto-based company, was engaged in developing videowalls as venues for advertisers in major shopping malls in the Toronto area. The company had one 36 monitor colour videowall facility at 'Square One' Shopping Centre in Mississauga, Ontario - with hopes for other locations.

Public Access approached the company with a proposal to run short artists' videos in conjunction with regular advertising to be developed and programmed specifically to the videowall's formal capacities. The Wall Network agreed to donate videowall access, programming facilities, and transferral of artists' videotapes to videodisc — services which would otherwise be prohibitively expensive — while artist fees and production costs came from other government funded arts councils.

## 2. THE PROJECT MUST APPEAR TO BENEFIT BOTH PARTIES; CORPORATIONS SHOULD NOT ALWAYS UNDERSTAND PROJECT'S ACTUAL INTENT.

Public Access was able to capitalize upon the current corporate views of art: The Wall Network's belief that participating artists would produce works that both experimented with and complemented the videowall's formal capabilities. Descriptions of intended works provided to The Wall Network were, in some cases, intentionally vague.

*The Lunatic of One Idea* was possible only because of the Wall Network's belief that its aims and Public Access' mandates could intersect to mutual advantage. However, corporate aims and collective mandates were soon clearly at odds — a situation which gave rise to duplicity on both sides.

## 3. GET A CONTRACT; BUT BEWARE OF VAGUE TERMINOLOGY

At Public Access' request, The Wall Network provided artists with an outline of the criteria by which artists' projects might be found 'unacceptable' for the videowall site. The general guidelines prohibited extreme violence, sex and offensive language; while underlining the subjective nature of such guidelines, The Wall Network expressed a belief in the artists' "common sense" and "sense of responsibility to the mall's family audience" which would ensure "good taste."

In late September, The Wall Network refused to programme Krzysztof Wodiczko and Leslie Sharpe's video which outlined the ten warning signs of shopaholism (as taken directly from a popular consumer's magazine) and depicted a female shopaholic eating a 'shoe soup'. The Wall Network found the content to be "disrespectful" and its form to be aesthetically unsuitable.

**4. MAKE SURE BOTH PARTIES HAVE REACHED A CONSENSUS AS TO THE TERMS OF THE CONTRACT; PARTIES MAY HARBOUR MISTAKEN BELIEFS.**

The Wall Network had, just prior to the commencement of *The Lunatic*, asked for and received a short synopsis of each artist's video — this, in their eyes, comprised a contract. The Wall Network attacked the Wodiczko/Sharpe video on the basis that it did not conform to the original proposal and thereby, according to them, did not fulfill contractual obligations. Public Access had never regarded the project descriptions as contractual in nature.

**5. WHEN THE CONTRACT FAILS YOU, TRY A PLEA FOR ABSOLUTE CURATORIAL RIGHTS; BUT BEWARE OF COMPROMISING THE PROJECT THROUGH COMMODIFICATION.**

In ensuing negotiations, Public Access argued for the overall curatorial integrity of *The Lunatic* as a *body of works* — no one work could be excluded or altered without compromising the project as whole. Public Access stressed that censorship of any one work would mean the immediate termination of *The Lunatic*.

The Wall Network accepted these conditions with the proviso that Public Access develop a higher profile *vis a vis* Square One management (vague mention was made of complaints about the project from mall management and shopkeepers). To this end, a written explanation of Public Access' curatorial role was to be passed along to Square One management, and *The Lunatic Of One Idea* brochures were to be handed out to the public at the mall site. The projects which had previously appeared intermittently amidst advertising and other material were now to appear *en bloc*, underlining their unity as curated artists' projects. Public Access agreed to all of these concessions — despite the fact that they may have undercut the project's desired 'seamlessness'.

**6. KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN AND SUSPECT THE WORST; SHIT CAN DISAPPEAR.**

Towards the end of the project, a stressed Wall Network employee inadvertently informed Public Access that the term "shit" in John Greyson's *The AIDS Epidemic* had been excised during its September run without Public Access' knowledge or the artist's consent. A potential Wall Network client had apparently expressed his outrage at the offensive language.

“Shit” was immediately edited from the work. (Ironically “shit” could have been removed without resorting to sneak tactics since the artist had contractually agreed to The Wall Network’s “offensive language” clause.)

#### **7. BEWARE OF THE YOUNG CORPORATION; BUSINESS MAY BE UNSTABLE.**

The Wall Network subsidized *The Lunatic* videos as part of the entertainment “filler” which appeared on the videowall in conjunction with paid advertising. The Wall Network, however, was unable to attract advertisers to the new, expensive technology of the videowall at the SQUARE ONE location. On average, one or two advertisements ran daily in a continuous cycle. As a result, contrary to Public Access’ original expectations, artists’ videos generally ran back to back with other “filler” rather than with paid advertising.

#### **8. REMEMBER THAT THE TERM “CORPORATION” IS DEFINED AS “AN ASSOCIATION OF INDIVIDUALS”; THEORETICAL INTERVENTION AIMED AT “THE CORPORATION” RAISES COMPLEX MORAL DILEMMAS IN ITS APPLICATION WITH INDIVIDUALS.**

It became increasingly evident in the course of Public Access’ dealings with the Wall Network’s representative that this particular employee was experiencing a great deal of friction with her supervisor with regards to *The Lunatic*. The ‘subversive’ content of some of the videos was placing the young financially stressed company at risk of alienating clients, a risk they simply could not afford. The Wall Network employee in charge of overseeing the project continued to support *The Lunatic* as a whole but to some degree found her position increasingly untenable.

Public Access’ position as well became problematic as the attempts at compromise necessitated negotiating between the interests of the company and the artists — in particular, trying maintain a sense of responsibility to the latter. The whole process of negotiation between individuals involved another sort of negotiation for Public Access — between larger theoretical aims and the intricacies and contradictions of practical experience.

In the end, the largest group of individuals and arguably the most important, could not be negotiated with or addressed directly. The impact of *The Lunatic* on the public, the project’s audience, remains for the most part, a large question mark.

**REALIZE THAT ANY INTERVENTION OF THIS SORT WILL FACE CONTRADICTIONS INHERENT TO THE PROJECT; KEEP IN MIND FROM THE OUTSET THAT THESE CONTRADICTIONS WILL AFFECT AND QUESTION THE VERY STANDARDS BY WHICH THE RELATIVE SUCCESS OF THE PROJECT CAN BE MEASURED.**