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Acts of Association: Allison Smith's Craft as Civic Practice

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Abstract

This article examines a recent project by artist Allison Smith, which was commissioned by the Indianapolis Museum of Art, created during a residency at the Herron School of Art and Design, and presented as part of a public parade and gallery exhibition. *The Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule* staged associations between public sculpture, socially engaged practice, and performance. Within the project, craft functioned as a means of intersection between disparate disciplines and forms of cultural participation.

Keywords: Allison Smith, Freetown Village, civic culture, craft, Indianapolis, performance, public art

On a Saturday afternoon in Indianapolis, Indiana, three life-size equine forms on wheeled carts moved down the main drag of a residential downtown neighborhood. The wooden bodies were carefully formed and decoratively painted; they were adorned with glass eyes, leather saddles, and horsehair manes and tails. They resembled Victorian children's pull-toys, Mummers' props, or cartoon renditions of public equestrian sculpture. Yet they were not quite horses; rather, they were more stubby and squat, with oversize ears: beasts of burden.

Closely surrounding the carts was a moving crowd of several dozen people, a mix of black and white, youthful

and middle-aged, male and female. Their attire ranged from nineteenth-century styles of dress—full skirts and bonnets for women, and open necked shirts and loose cotton trousers for men—to contemporary sweatshirts, jeans, and sneakers. Several young men in traditional dress and straw hats pulled the carts forward using sturdy hemp ropes. As they moved, members of the crowd held placards on poles and chanted, “Cast that vote!” Their signs were made of wood, hand-painted in black and white with slogans like “What about us?” and “Sojourner Truth for President.” They moved slowly for the length of one mile, an animated rabble, as people lined the street and looked on (Figure 1).

What was this? A political rally? A religious procession turned campaign event? A demonstration of racial harmony? A voting rights protest? A reenactment?

In fact, the sculptural forms, painted placards, and chanting crowd were an art work by Allison Smith entitled *The Donkey*, *The Jackass*, and *The Mule*, and they were

part of a larger procession. This work was the first to step off onto the cleared street at historic Fountain Square and to head westward toward the center of Indianapolis. Other participants included a group of women whose bare bodies were painted to resemble works by Piet Mondrian, Andy Warhol, and Jackson Pollock (Figure 2); a band of musicians playing clarinet, flute, tuba, trumpet, trombone, and glockenspiel atop a flat-bed trailer; a troupe of dancing robots; several men in chambray jumpsuits with microphones, an accordion, and an electrified violin; twelve people carrying a gigantic inflated rainbow worm behind a red cart blasting electronic dance music; a couple in military fatigues with video screens strapped to their chests; a political candidate in a honking convertible sports car; a group of people attired in silky yellow and carrying a Chinese dragon puppet; a papier-mâché-headed honeybee, owl, and bat; a wiry cowboy dragging a saddle made of plaster; a group of white-bearded gnomes with red pointy hats; a wandering, forlorn



Fig 1 *The Donkey*, *The Jackass*, and *The Mule* with reenactors from Freetown Village Living History Museum in Fountain Square on April 26, 2008. Photograph by Lisi Raskin. Courtesy of Allison Smith.



Fig 2 Students from the Herron School of Art and Design participating in the Indianapolis Museum of Art's *On Procession* parade on April 26, 2008. Photograph by Flounder Lee.

sheepskin; a grocery cart festooned with flowers and greenery fashioned from empty soda pop bottles, cardboard, and wire; a blogger pushing his laptop on a desk; a group of men carrying lawn chairs in formation; some mimes surrounding a clown in a cage; an oversize green foam dragon puppet marching to a snare drum beat; and four walking piñatas, colorful, fringed, and armed with baseball bats.¹

Divided into two groups, designated with fabric shirt pins in chartreuse or ochre, cut by hand to resemble tassels or pennants, the procession converged upon itself, marching from the west and the east behind banners in corresponding colors.² Some participants moved briskly or purposefully and others meandered more casually. Many wore

handmade or readymade costumes and hats, and their conveyances were often makeshift.

The event, which took place on April 26, 2008, was a parade organized by the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA) for its exhibition, *On Procession*.³ The parade was sited in two downtown neighborhoods, Fletcher Place and Fountain Square, which are separated by a freeway interchange (Indianapolis is known as the “Crossroads of America,” in part because four interstate highways converge there). Rebecca Uchill, then the IMA’s assistant curator of contemporary art, envisioned the parade as a way to present contemporary art works outside of the museum and to invite open participation from local publics. According to Uchill, “in the parade exhibition format, the audience followed the procession by literally marching alongside artworks, complicating the traditional subject-object and audience-performer relationships that one expects in both galleries and more official grand-scale parades” (Uchill 2009: 13). In addition to the participants who performed in the parade, the route was lined with people, some from the two neighborhoods and some from elsewhere. The east and west parade brigades converged and circled each other on an overpass bridge that spans the highway interchange, creating an absurd spectacle on what is more typically a banal thoroughway for automobile traffic.⁴

While the discourses surrounding relational aesthetics, dialogic art, and site specificity provide ready interpretive frameworks for the activity comprising the *On Procession* parade, I am interested in what *craft* might contribute to our understanding of *The Donkey*, *The Jackass*, and *The Mule*.⁵ Ideas from traditional public sculpture,

socially engaged art, and performance all find expression in Smith's work, but it is craft—an unlikely critical resource—that she situates between these apparently conflicting arenas of creative practice, thereby exposing their limits.

Smith presents *The Donkey*, *The Jackass*, and *The Mule*, three sculptures that bear traces of craft, as civic catalysts. As Uchill writes of Smith's sculptures in the *On Procession* exhibition catalog, "the objects were coaxing activities to occur" (Uchill 2009: 82). They were active and activating, even activist. Smith's use of craft is strategic, in keeping with Glenn Adamson's assertion that "craft is mainly a matter of persuasiveness, a technique for grabbing attention and holding it" (Adamson 2007:

26). She brings modern craft's conceptual hybridity—as an open-ended arena of social and material practice—into association with "civic practices," defined by sociologist Nina Eliasoph as "the fundamentally sociable processes by which citizens create contexts for political conversation in the potential public sphere" (Eliasoph 1996: 263). Smith's wooden equestrian forms are the centerpiece of a work situated in a city street and surrounded by performing figures who articulated political demands. She also sparked dialog among several different constituencies: students at the Herron School of Art and Design, neighborhood residents from Fountain Square and Fletcher Place, and reenactors from Freetown Village Living History Museum (Figure 3). While her forms

Fig 3 The parade took place about 5 miles from the museum in two downtown Indianapolis neighborhoods. Map by Michael Mikulay.



evoked traditional public sculpture, her social gestures resonate with more contemporary trends in the field.

Furthermore, Smith's work is expressive of a dynamic in public art that visual culture scholar W. J. T. Mitchell has theorized using the opposing terms "utopian" and "critical." In Mitchell's formulation, utopian projects imagine idealized, universal, or inclusive publics; critical projects imagine publics as contradictory, contesting, and even violent. Projects can also encompass and engender both utopia and critique. As an example of such a double-duty work, Mitchell cites Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial: "it can be experienced both as an object of national mourning and reconciliation that is absolutely inclusive, embracing, and democratic, and as a critical parody and inversion of the traditional war memorial" (Mitchell 1992: 3). In this synopsis Mitchell captures the sentiments of both the Memorial's advocates and its detractors, positioning "dissensus" as the ultimate value of the work. Lin's work is powerful because it cuts both ways—it is willfully ambivalent and imagines multiple publics whose disagreements are productive.

The Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule also corresponds closely to Mitchell's formulation. Smith imagined and invited broad-based participation, but also positioned an angry political demonstration at the center. This vacillation is evident even in her choice of forms, which she said represent "three similar-but-different not-horses whose identity or relationship to one another is a source of common confusion" (Uchill 2009: 82). Utopian and critical approaches coexist, not always comfortably, within the marrow of this work. Smith calls attention to the unconventional contours of craft by using

it to associate conflicting ideas about civic culture.⁶

For me, craft is a verb, an activity. It is a generative realm, a collaborative realm⁷

I use the term "association" to describe Smith's strategy for using craft. To associate two or more entities is to call attention to their sense of shared purpose, to connect the ideas they hold in common. A certain friendliness underlies the effort. By characterizing the relationships between diverse practices that Smith forges as "associations," I also wish to evoke the form of political relation that Alexis de Tocqueville characterized as the chief contributor to the democratic ideal of the United States. Tocqueville found that, "When some view is represented by an association, it must take clearer and more precise shape. It counts its supporters and involves them in its cause; these supporters get to know one another; and numbers increase zeal. An association unites the energies of divergent minds and vigorously directs them toward a clearly indicated goal" (Tocqueville 2000: 190). In Tocqueville's formulation, association in the United States promotes pluralistic, egalitarian, embodied, and voluntary political participation.

As illustrated by the pull-toy forms, stenciled placards, and attire of the crowd surrounding *The Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule*, Smith's work is deeply engaged with the visual and material culture of early United States nationhood. An interest in this historical period and its traditional craft forms pervades other recent projects by Smith, too: an oversize hobby horse, human-scale porcelain dolls in Civil War



Fig 4 *The Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule*, 2008, laminated wood, paint, horse hair, glass eyes, leather, brass tacks, oak boards, steel, rubber, hemp rope, parade performance, dimensions variable. Photograph by Allison Smith and Michelle Pemberton. Courtesy of Allison Smith.

uniforms, and a “muster” encampment.⁸ She consistently draws from the era’s politics, economics, and aesthetics, and has conducted ethnographic research on Civil War reenactors. According to Smith, “I became fascinated with the material culture of reenactments, the laboriously handmade ‘props’ that conjoin to provide an experience of “time travel” as well as institutionalized forms of history making.”⁹ This interest also underlies Smith’s pursuit of what she calls “lines of conflict” (Carrington and Smith 2005), a phrase that applies with equal force to the divisions between genders, races, and warring factions (even, sometimes, between art and craft). Such lines of conflict are represented in Smith’s use of disparate media, as well as her attempts to put traditional practices to progressive aims. According to Smith, “I want to propose that we can be active agents in healing the wounds of the past by ‘taking history into our own hands’ and shifting our understanding of the past toward the creation of new futures.”¹⁰

Some would view Smith’s references to nineteenth-century American culture as nostalgic or retrograde but this strategy actually opens up productive associations with a vibrant period of political and cultural activity. Historian Mary P. Ryan has positioned this era as foundational to civic culture in the United States. In *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century*, Ryan argues that the nation emerged as a “public democracy of difference” during the nineteenth century, largely as a result of a civic culture that promoted association. According to Ryan, urbanites in the United States associated to negotiate forms of democratic participation in three primary arenas: 1) streets and parks, 2) civic ceremonies and festivals, and 3) elections, demonstrations, and public policies. For Ryan, the era was not “some harmonious, decorous, unified public sphere;” rather, nineteenth-century urban America was populated and animated by a “shrill-voiced, loud-mouthed, rowdy, demanding, contentious citizenry” (Ryan

1997: 311). Smith wants to call attention to this dissensus and diversity; it provides her with abundant subject matter and aesthetic inspiration.

For example, between 2005 and 2007, Smith created *Notion Nanny*, a human-scaled self-portrait doll based on the eponymous Victorian peddler figure. The doll holds a large straw basket that Smith filled with a changing array of wares generated during an ambitious schedule of travel, apprenticeship, and exchange. To produce the material for the basket, Smith traveled throughout England and the United States “in search of traditional skills and revolutionary dialog” (Carrington and Smith 2005). She apprenticed herself with local craftspeople to learn lace-making, pottery, woodturning, basketry, knitting, coppicing, felting, tatting, embroidery, millinery, blacksmithing, charcoal-making, horn-carving, weaving, and other traditional crafts, examples of which were displayed in *Notion Nanny's* basket in various exhibition venues. Her conversations with craftspeople were documented using a blog in a gesture toward engaging a wider contemporary public.¹¹

The Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule similarly mines the civic culture of nineteenth-century America and the participatory ethos associated with craft (Figure 5). As the recent public television documentary *Craft in America* illustrates, craft is esteemed for its capacity to forge community ties and enable equality of access. President Jimmy Carter (himself a woodworker) writes in the preface to the volume accompanying the documentary: “the beauty of craftsmanship is that it has the capacity to engage each of us in activities that nurture our humanity, satisfy our

need to express ourselves, and give us the opportunity to learn with our hands in ways that are not possible with our minds alone” (Lauria and Fenton 2007: 11). In this idealistic view, giving “each of us” access to uplifting experiences makes craft a citizenship or creed open to all. Carter’s sentiment seems just that—sentimental—in the wake of more critical understandings of the exclusions that persist in the civic realm. By foregrounding nineteenth-century notions of associational life, Smith, like Carter, suggests the relevance of these ideas to contemporary political culture; however, Smith recognizes that dissensus and difference—and the messy process of working together—are more important to civic culture than individual expression. Of course, invoking political history is not enough to prompt civic activity among contemporary urban publics; Smith must also rely upon more recent forms of effective address. This is the logic that lies behind Smith’s use of participatory strategies well beyond craft, including social engagement and performance. She associates these forms of creative practice with the spatial and discursive domains of democratic participation, activating her sculptures by making use of the streets of Indianapolis, the IMA’s exhibition and parade, and an upcoming state primary election (Indiana voters went to the polls a week after the parade, on May 6).

According to Smith, “Originally I was thinking about equestrian statuary and the fact of Indianapolis having more war memorials than any other U.S. city outside of Washington, DC” (Uchill 2009: 82). Here, Smith aligns her project with the most ubiquitous form of public art in the United States: commemorative sculpture. According to art



Fig 5 Allison Smith's tool cabinet at the Herron School of Art and Design sculpture studio. Photograph by Allison Smith.

historian Kirk Savage's scholarship on the public art of America's early nationhood: "Public monuments were meant to yield resolution and consensus" (Savage 1997: 4). Gleaming heroes, thrusting obelisks, outsized pediments, and ornate architectural adornments combined in a spectacle of display meant to activate putatively shared civic aspirations and instill a sense of commonality among disparate publics. This ideal is firmly conceptually embedded in one of the most basic premises of public sculpture: that works sited in publicly owned spaces like plazas, parks, civic centers, and streets should be acceptable and accessible to all. But, as Savage argues, such visions of

unity are pure fantasy: "there is no single or unified experience of a commemorative image, and conflict often centers on *whose* experience the image tacitly recognizes and legitimates" (Savage 1999: 3). Nevertheless, standing at a remove from this reality, public sculpture often aimed to offer an escape into an idealized world of freedom, equality, and dignity for all.

Much of today's public sculpture, as critic Arlene Raven succinctly put it, "isn't a hero on a horse anymore" (Raven 1989: 1). Idealizing forms and subjects have declined as public art practitioners and funders have acknowledged their limited reach in increasingly multicultural communities. However, many public art advocates remain optimistic about the field's capacity to contribute to participatory democratic culture. For example, art historian Erika Doss asserts that: "Public art has the unique potential to encourage the public to realize their voice—their power—in the public sphere. And public artists are equally empowered to invent that sphere as a place where ideas about cultural democracy can be debated and refreshed, tested and tried anew" (Doss 1995: 249). Doss emphasizes public art's usefulness for igniting controversy and facilitating dialog. Rapidly proliferating public art programs, funding mechanisms, and projects are proof both of the persuasiveness of the claims made on public art's behalf and of public art's ability to assert value as a provocateur of participation vis-à-vis these claims.

A leading contemporary critic of the claims made for public art's value to civic life is art historian Miwon Kwon. In her book *One Place After Another*, Kwon questions the political agendas that attend many projects

that claim to involve “the community.” According to Kwon, this strain of public art aims for “the creation of a work in which members of a community—as simultaneously viewer/spectator; audience, public, and referential subject—will see and recognize themselves in the work, not so much in the sense of being critically implicated but of being affirmatively pictured or validated” (Kwon 2002: 95–96). The problem, for Kwon, is that communities and identities are not fixed or stable; thus, any claim to represent these elusive subjects must be false.¹² Although invocations of “community” were absent from the conceptual framing of *The Donkey*, *The Jackass*, and *The Mule*, Smith’s work does at times seem to veer towards the position that Kwon critiques, as when, in the *On Procession* catalog, the artist affiliates herself with practices that “attempt to break down the barriers, borders, and distinctions between artists, artworks, viewers, sites, and everyday life, engaging art audiences in participation, collaboration, coauthorship, and co-creation, so that they are producing, manifesting, and, even in some cases, constituting the work of art” (Uchill 2009: 81).

While Kwon’s argument raises a challenge to works like *The Donkey*, *The Jackass*, and *The Mule*, Smith’s use of craft suggests its promise as a resource in navigating the complexities of community, identity, and representation. Smith doesn’t view craft as inherently participatory; it’s not simply an activity that everyone may enjoy as a reflection of personal or cultural history, a repository of community values, or a respite from the dehumanizing features of modern life. Rather, Smith conceptualizes craft as carrying messages that may be variously productive, problematic, and political.¹³

Instances in which craft acts as a vessel for radical ideas defy the notion of craft as decorative and therefore mute. My interest in craft is content-specific and not medium-specific¹⁴

For *The Donkey*, *The Jackass*, and *The Mule*, Smith incorporated craft content, if not traditional craft materials or processes. Smith describes how she made the sculptures at Herron: “I first hand-carved a single donkey out of basswood using traditional wood carving techniques. Then I used computer technology to scan it in three dimensions and to interpret it into hundreds of wooden layers. These were cut out and laminated together in a workshop setting by a team of people to create three different sculptures scaled up to monumental proportions.”¹⁵ Smith worked with sculpture students and faculty in Herron’s sculpture shop and studio throughout the fabrication process (Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9). Smith and her collaborators cut

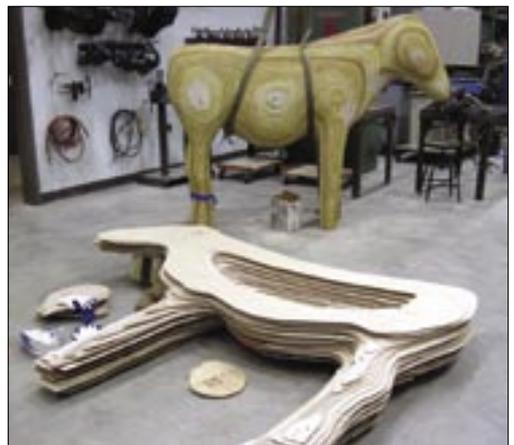


Fig 6 Plywood sheets were cut and laminated to create the equine forms. Photograph by Debbie Reichhard.



Fig 7 Faculty member Eric Nordgulen coordinated Smith's residency at Herron. Photograph by Debbie Reichard.

the wooden pieces from the plywood sheets using a router; layered them with glue and nails, sanded and grinded the resultant three-dimensional forms to smooth their surfaces, and mounted them to wheeled carts. Smith finished the forms herself, refining their facial features, painting and sealing them, and adding their embellishments by hand. According to Smith, "Rather than using



Fig 8 Detail of laminated form prior to sanding. Photograph by Debbie Reichard.

bronze, fiberglass resin, or other durable materials usually employed in the creation of outdoor monumental sculpture, these really are large wooden toys, carved on a grand scale, painted with traditional sponge painting techniques, and fitted with glass eyes, horsehair, and leather detailing."¹⁶ Smith discussed her intentions and techniques with her collaborators throughout the process of fabrication.

The residency at Herron also afforded Smith several opportunities to present her ideas in public forums. Smith created two broadsides to enlist participation and promote her aims. The first, featuring a drawing of a donkey, dense letterpress-style type, and corners adorned with palms, was printed and circulated at the beginning of her residency (Figure 10). It advertised her public lecture and invited community members to become involved with the project. The poster was based on Smith's research into Indiana's Civil War recruitment graphics, including a poster by local luminary Col. Eli Lilly reading, "Arouse, Men of Indiana." The second broadside appeared midway through her residency and offered more details on the content of the work, upcoming opportunities to participate, and her partnership with Freetown Village Living History Museum. Both of the broadsides circulated in print and electronic form, through the IMA, IUPUI, and local arts networks. Smith also maintained her own website with information about the project, and she participated in several student blogs that had commented on the work, some of them critically. Finally, Smith presented a public lecture, participated in several sculpture and museum studies classes, worked in her studio at Herron, and made



Fig 9 Allison Smith sands with Herron students Tré Reising and Thomas Streit. Photograph by Natalie McCabe.

herself accessible to partners at Herron, Freetown Village, the IMA, and elsewhere in Indianapolis.

In craft as social practice, the participants constitute the work in the process of making¹⁷

By enlisting participation in the process of making the work, Smith associated *The*

Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule with the practices of socially engaged art. For her, craft and social practice “come together in their simultaneous desire for an intimate and direct mode of engagement” (Uchill 2009: 82). In *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, art historian Grant H. Kester defines socially engaged creative practice as “an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict” (Kester 2004: 8). Socially engaged practices aim for impact interpersonally and institutionally. Importantly, they involve the interaction of verbal, visual, and physical dimensions—language and objects combine as the basis for embodied, intersubjective experiences that are not strictly aesthetic. Practitioners of socially engaged art, according to Kester, “define themselves as artists through their ability to catalyze understanding, to mediate

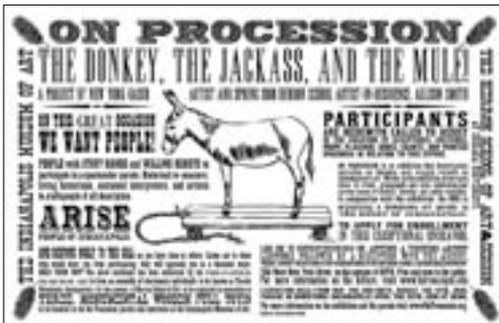


Fig 10 Offset printed handbill created by Allison Smith to promote the parade project. Courtesy of Allison Smith.

exchange, and to sustain an ongoing process of empathetic identification and critical analysis" (Kester 2004: 118). Participants in socially engaged works are emergent collectives "whose coherence as a community is the product of contingent processes of identification" (Kester 2004: 147). The practices of social engagement are collaborative, multimodal, and critically informed.

When socially engaged practitioners employ a process-driven, critical approach, Kester argues, their efforts merit consideration beyond evaluation of the art object that is produced. Shifting attention away from the art work itself, these practices invite a focus on social space and what it means to enact interactions in specific spaces with specific participants. Engagement involves enlisting those constructed elsewhere in art discourse as viewers, audiences, and spectators as agents, participants, and co-creators with a stake in culture.

Social engagement was a primary strategy in the production of *The Donkey*, *The Jackass*, and *The Mule*, and it was closely tied to Smith's ideas about craft. In addition to her collaboration with students and sculpture faculty at Herron, Smith also partnered with Freetown Village to create portraits and a performance with the sculpture as "a pocket of history" within the parade (Smith 2008). Making work with others, and discussing the collaborative production, is central to Smith's conception of social practice. According to Smith:

I like to use the quilting bee metaphor. Something is being made while something is being discussed and ideas are being

exchanged. The object facilitates the occasion; the occasion lends value to the object. The quilt is the witness to and the artifact of the discussion. It is the material trace or manifestation of ideas. It is our responsibility to discover the ideas embedded within it, the occasion or context out of which it was made, and the aspirations of its makers.¹⁸

Smith's reference to the collective approach of the quilting bee differentiates her approach from many of her "craftivist" peers who imagine that dispersed individual acts "could start a revolution—just by making things one stitch at a time" (Greer 2008: 90).

Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson recently moderated a discussion among a small group of artists whom Smith had convened to discuss the "emerging genre" of "critical, socially committed, conceptually oriented, collaborative craft-based work" (Bryan-Wilson 2008: 78). The conversation was subsequently published in the pages of *Modern Painters* magazine.¹⁹ The practice of "craft critique" was a central topic of discussion, with the artists considering how craft could be used to generate political dialog and interaction. As Smith put it, the question was how to make craft "a living, active process" (Bryan-Wilson 2008: 80). Here, she echoed curator Mary Jane Jacob, who coined the term "critical craftsmanship" to describe the practice of "rethinking the materials, techniques, and forms of crafts" (Jacob 1999: 74).²⁰ Jacob formulates critical craftsmanship as a way of making and doing things that raises questions about how we interact and understand culture. According to Jacob, "Contemporary crafts can reflect critically on the questions of

cultural identity in society. Crafts, specifically because they are on the margin of the art world, can be a powerful place from which to change our thinking about social and political relationships" (Jacob 1999: 82). Jacob positions craft as a locus of reflection and critical thought, both implicated and imbricated in social change. This critical use of craft is Smith's primary objective: "I have always wanted to implicate myself, and everyone, in the everyday forms of reenactment in which we participate. How do each of us replay master narratives in our inability to accept difference, otherness, or the complex conditions of the present?"²¹

My work proposes traditional craft as a form of historical reenactment and as the performance of identity and nationalism. Reenactors see themselves as ambassadors of history just as craft tradition bearers engage in a form of oral history conveyed through the hands, traditional craft as an embodied performance²²

Twenty years ago, philosopher Judith Butler argued that performance can "explain the mundane way in which social agents constitute reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" (Butler 1988: 519). More recently, theater scholar Jill Dolan has suggested that we view performance as "as an expressive mode of being heard, seen, encountered, contended with as someone ... who has something to say in our current systems of power and representation" (Dolan 2001: 2). These formulations suggest the power of performance for cultivating participation in culture. Through performance, we assert

visions of identity and agency, negotiating our reality. For Smith, performance was a primary avenue for asserting the value of participation, especially pluralistic and embodied forms.

Early in the process of creating *The Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule*, Smith sought collaborators who could contribute this performative dimension (Figure 11). Drawing upon her past experiences researching living history organizations and with help from IMA education department staff member Carol White, Smith quickly found her way to Freetown Village, a living history organization devoted to presenting a post-Civil War composite portrait of the 3,000 African Americans listed on the Indianapolis census of 1870. According to its founding director, Ophelia Wellington, "We had a brainstorming discussion; we were talking about politics. We talked about the donkey symbolizing the Democratic party."²³ Smith adds that, "the negotiation around what the performance would be was delicate. I tried to create a sense of trust and mutuality, finding out what we both wanted to do."²⁴

According to Smith, "I was moved by the fact that Freetown Village has chosen to reenact a moment of great hope and prosperity, in the years after the abolition of slavery and before the proliferation of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana" (Uchill 2009: 82). The collaboration brought local histories, racial identities and institutional dynamics to the surface of Smith's project. Freetown Village's participation in *On Procession* also helped raise its own institutional profile, and expanded the opportunities for political conversation and representation of counterpublics.²⁵



Fig 11 Freetown Village reenactors and volunteers from Herron accompany *The Donkey, The Jackass, and The Mule* in the parade on April 26, 2008. Photograph by Lisi Raskin. Courtesy of Allison Smith.

Over the course of several conversations, Smith and Wellington decided to use *On Procession* to reenact an earlier reenactment, which Freetown Village had created during Jesse Jackson's 1988 presidential campaign. This vignette dramatized a circa 1870 conflict over the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave black men voting rights but excluded women, despite decades of suffrage activism (women would not get the vote in the U.S. until 1920 and the Nineteenth Amendment). According to Wellington, "People realized, if the law was passed, anybody could run for President. If you're qualified, you could run for office. There was optimism around the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Now the law was on our side."²⁶

During the *On Procession* parade, which was staged just a few days before Indiana's Democratic primary contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, costumed performers from Freetown Village staged a revised version of their 1988 reenactment. The play, whose entire cast is African-American, involves a vegetable peddler's encounter with a group of women who are preparing for a suffrage rally (Figure 12). As the women are gathering, they field the peddler's questions and objections, explaining their cause with appeals to equality, history, and reason. According to Wellington, because of the campaigns by Clinton and Obama, "We revised the script to add the concept of women running and men's perspective on that. The idea that



Fig 12 Portrait of Freetown Village Living History Museum reenactors. Pictured (left to right) are Kevin Johnson as Guinea “Blue” Farnsworth, Cynthia Woods, Ophelia Wellington, Roberta James as Mother Endura, Deanna Emerson as Eliza Freeman, Tina Harris as Matilda Addison, and April Lynem as Sarah Elizabeth Cuffee. Photograph by Allison Smith and Michelle Pemberton. Courtesy of Allison Smith.

women had enough to do at home and that men influence their wives so we don't need to people voting for one candidate—a ridiculous mentality.”²⁷ The play ends with the Freetown Village women setting out for the streets of Indianapolis chanting, “Cast that vote!”

Within the framework of Smith's project, the play was presented twice. First, it was staged at the beginning of the parade, using the open space surrounding Fountain Square to gather a crowd. Later that afternoon, the play was presented in the *On Procession* gallery space at the IMA, lending dynamic content to the otherwise static presentation of the sculptures while also troubling the exhibit's politics and institutional context. According to Smith, “Conceived as fiction based on fact, I wanted to provide a pocket of history within the parade, with the signage connecting the past to the present through references to the Civil War, the Civil Rights movement, and the current presidential election campaigns” (Smith

2008). Evoking the kind of civic culture Ryan's research into nineteenth century U.S. cities presents, Freetown Village's performance suggested the ongoing relevance of gathering, demonstrating, and voting.

Sculptural objects—*The Donkey*, *The Jackass*, and *The Mule* themselves—were integral to the performative actions that surrounded them. Theater scholar Anne Ubersfeld has theorized the power of an object within performance: “Its mobility permits it to become flexible and multifunctional for it ceases to be a single thing and becomes whatever the actor and the dramatic action require it to be on any given moment of the performance” (McAuley 2000: 170). The objects both exposed and expanded the context of the work, calling to mind myriad associations including the Trojan Horse, Biblical narratives, funerary traditions, the end of slavery, Democratic political history, and rural culture in Indiana. Smith acknowledges that “the donkey would not have been a positive

political symbol for African Americans in 1870," but says that, "this project was intended to resonate with our current political climate, the particular ways that race and gender are coming together ... and the tremendous paradigm shift that is possible now" (Smith 2008). The collaboration between Smith and Freetown Village suggests the extended values that material, embodied performances can take on in the presence of art works, and vice versa.

I always find myself looking for this thing I can't find, and then I know I have to make it²⁸

Needing to make a thing that does not exist: this impulse, at once a simple definition of craft and a recipe for permanent interpretive impasse, may be the best explanation for Smith's interest in multidisciplinary practice. According to Kwon, "As the artistic, political, and ethical pitfalls of community-based art become more visible and more theorized, the need to imagine alternative possibilities of togetherness and collective action, indeed of collaboration and community, becomes more pronounced" (Kwon 2002: 153). By associating techniques, debates, traditions, and innovations from several disciplines, Smith traverses lines of conflict to expose the limits and possibilities of making, its capacity to foreground the provisional and performative dimensions of participation in civic culture. For Smith, craft is itself a form of living history.

Notes

- 1 A complete list of parade participants and other details related to the event may be found in the catalog *On Procession*, edited by Rebecca Uchill, and on the project website, <http://www.onprocession.org>. I would like to thank Rebecca for enlisting my engagement with the parade as a faculty member at Herron and a resident of Fountain Square and for her responsive involvement during the development of this article.
- 2 The parade's formation, pins, and banners were part of artist Fritz Haeg's commissioned work, *East Meets West Interchange Overpass Parade*. See <http://www.fritzhaeg.com/studio/projects/indianapolis-parade.html>.
- 3 *On Procession* was curated by Rebecca Uchill and presented in the Indianapolis Museum of Art's McCormack Forefront Galleries from May 2 to August 10, 2008. Artists included in the exhibition were Francis Alÿs, Jeremy Deller, Friends With You, Katie Grinnan, Fritz Haeg, Sharon Hayes, Michèle Magema, Paul McCarthy, Dave McKenzie, Amy O'Neill, Allison Smith, and The Art Parade (coproduced by Deitch Projects, Creative Time, and Paper Magazine). The gallery exhibition also included selected projects from the parade, including work by Arthole, Big Car Collective, Patrick Gillespie, The Johnny Appleseed Color Guard, and Silevy (Artur Silva and Judith G. Levy), and documentation of the parade, including photographs, video, and artifacts.
- 4 The parade was heavily documented with photography and video produced by participants, including artists, neighbors, and IMA staff. Much of this material is available through YouTube, Flickr, and the IMA's website, <http://www.ima-museum.org>.
- 5 For analysis of relational aesthetics, dialogic art, and site specificity, see Bourriaud (1998), Kester (2004), and Kwon (2002), respectively. Curator Rebecca Uchill describes her contextual frameworks in the exhibition catalog (Uchill 2009).
- 6 Craft's malleability is a double-edged sword as "the practices of classification and boundary making are intertwined." See Auther (2002).
- 7 Smith, telephone interview with author, December 8, 2008. I am very grateful to Allison for her generous correspondence and assistance during the development of this article.

- 8** *Hobby Horse* (2006) was exhibited at Artpace San Antonio; *Victory Hall* (2005) was presented at Bellwether Gallery in New York; and *The Muster* (2005) was presented on Governors Island as a Public Art Fund project. See <http://www.allisonsmithstudio.com> for more information.
- 9** Smith, email interview with the author: December 30, 2008.
- 10** (Smith, email interview with the author: December 30, 2008).
- 11** For Smith's *Notion Nanny* blog, see <http://www.notionnanny.net>.
- 12** I am grateful to the anonymous reader from the *Journal of Modern Craft* for encouraging my use of Kwon's scholarship.
- 13** Allison Smith, email interview with the author: December 30, 2008).
- 14** Allison Smith, email interview with author; December 30, 2008.
- 15** Allison Smith, email interview with the author; December 30).
- 16** Allison Smith, email interview with author; December 30, 2008.
- 17** Allison Smith, telephone interview with author; June 30, 2008.
- 18** Allison Smith, email interview with author; December 30, 2008.
- 19** In addition to Smith and Bryan-Wilson, the participants were Liz Collins, Sabrina Gschwandtner, and Cat Mazza.
- 20** Critic Polly Ullrich also advocates a critical dimension in contemporary craft, one that "continues the Postmodern journey toward multiplicity, and reacquaints us all with the historical and aesthetic links between craft and fine art" (Ullrich 1998: 29). This emphasis is not strictly formal; it brings craft into association with social domains. Like Jacob, Ullrich positions craft as potentially political.
- 21** Allison Smith, email interview with author; December 30, 2008.
- 22** Allison Smith, email interview with author; December 30, 2008.
- 23** Ophelia Wellington, interview with author at Walker Theater Building, December 4, 2008.
- 24** Allison Smith, telephone interview with author; December 8, 2008.
- 25** See Squires (2002).
- 26** Ophelia Wellington, interview with author at Walker Theater Building, December 4, 2008.
- 27** Ophelia Wellington, interview with author at Walker Theater Building, December 4, 2008.
- 28** Allison Smith, public lecture at Herron School of Art and Design, January 15, 2008.

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