

**GIFT**

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## *Personal Touch*

Tracey Baran

Meg Belichick

Devon Dikeou

Thomas Eller

Sora Kim

Josiah McElheny

Józef Robakowski

Amy Sillman

Pascale Marthine Tayou

Ryszard Wasko

**Curated by Sabine Russ and Gregory Volk**

September 11–November 7, 1998

### **Art in General**

79 Walker Street, New York, New York

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## Acknowledgments



Conceived by curators Sabine Russ and Gregory Volk for Art in General's 6th Floor Gallery, *Personal Touch* includes the work of ten artists—seven were commissioned specifically for this exhibition that brought together artists from South Korea, Poland, Cameroon via Paris, and Germany, as well as from New York.

Art in General and the curators are equally interested in the art-making process, and together they sought to expand the notion of curatorial practice by establishing a dialogue with the artists that became the foundation for many of the concepts behind this exhibition. The two-way communication was achieved through meetings between Sabine and Gregory and the staff at Art in General, meetings with the artists in person, and contact by fax, telephone, and/or email, hence taking the creative process beyond the gallery walls. This methodology was also aided by the artists' presence at the exhibition space for the installation of their work, informal get-togethers, such as a lobster dinner for thirty, exchanges of recipes for borscht, and lunches on the gallery floor. As the exhibition drew near, there were more informal exchanges such as: a preview dinner, an opening reception featuring Brooklyn Brewery's Brown Ale and Dr. Brown's Cream Soda and Root Beer, a postopening celebration, a night of video and film co-hosted with Four Walls of Williamsburg, and a panel discussion with critics. Diverse as they were, all of these activities relate to the exhibition and as part of the curatorial vision behind the show.

The outcome, the exhibition entitled *Personal Touch*, has, like its formulation and shaping, been a shared experience for the artists, curators, staff of Art in General, friends, and the public. Moreover, it demonstrates Art in General's expanding definition of the presentation of contemporary art.

Many were those who made contributions to *Personal Touch*. I would like to thank especially the curators Sabine Russ and Gregory Volk who brought their exhibition concept to our attention; the participating artists Tracey Baran, Meg Belichick, Devon Dikeou, Thomas Eiler, Sora Kim, Josiah McElheny, Józef Robakowski, Amy Sillman, Pascale Marthine Tayou, and Ryszard Wasko; Art in General's Board of Directors and Staff; Catherine Ruello, Assistant Director for the coordination of the exhibition and public programs; Andrea Pedersen, Development Associate for the writing of grants; and Athena Robles, Communications Coordinator for overseeing the publication and publicity. I would also like to thank other members of our staff: Anthony D. Meyers, Office Manager; Liz Tenenbaum, Executive Assistant; Antonia Perez, Education Coordinator; as well as the interns and volunteers who participated in this project. Additional contributors include Maria Miller, who designed the publication; Michael Goodman, who edited it; and Bill Orcutt of ORCUTT & VAN DER PUTTEN, who was responsible for its photographic installation views.

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Holly Block  
Executive Director



## Personal Touch

### Gregory Volk

This exhibition *Personal Touch* intends to be a fresh approach to the question of how "the personal" enters into and informs the work of contemporary artists. In dealing with this theme, we consciously sought to avoid some of the more obvious, and well-worn, connotations of the personal such as identity, autobiography, and either private or familial psychology. We also avoided focusing on this or that technique; for instance, *Personal Touch* is not at all about an artist's intimate and sensitive "touch" when it comes to materials, although that too can enter in. Still, all of the artists in this exhibition directly bring the personal into their work, but in surprisingly innovative and quirky ways that nevertheless yield a real visual power.

We are not ones to harp on our own curatorial methodology, but in this case it is important. First is our own collaboration as curators. Everything that happened resulted from this collaboration, which was professional, but which was also intensely personal, including late-night, freewheeling conversations as we developed our themes and tried out ideas on one another. Furthermore, *Personal Touch* very much developed in league with the artists, including our own involvement with them during the installation period, when we tried to be as present and helpful as possible. As curators, we did not select artists, choose their works, and then plunk those works down into the gallery. Instead, we selected artists and then worked with them as they decided (of course with some input on our part) how they wanted to represent themselves in terms of a personal touch. With some of the artists, it was clear right from the beginning which direction this would go, for instance, videos by the acclaimed Polish experimental videomaker Józef Robakowski. With others, we honed things down to a certain tendency or related body of work, while still others were invited carte blanche to make a piece specifically for this show. For both of us as curators, it was important to incorporate a level of risk into the exhibition, as well as a level of surprise and wonderment. There is an anxiety to such a curatorial approach, because it was impossible to know in advance exactly what the exhibition would look like. But then again there is also something deeply engaging about conceiving of an exhibition as a process or trajectory, rather than a compilation (by us) of previously realized works. We like the "live," in-process part of this methodology, with its numerous difficulties and catharses, and have every intention of continuing to work this way in the future.

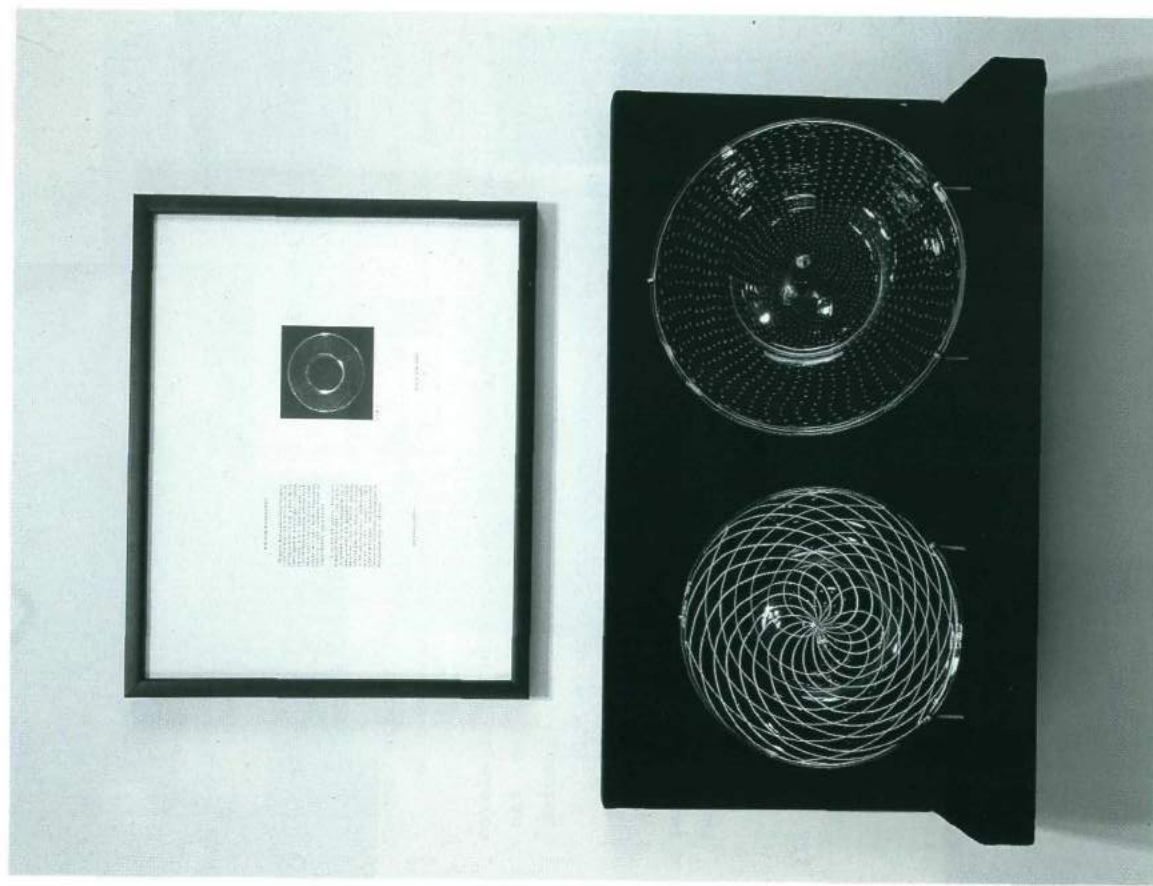
We also wanted to play fast and loose with some of the usual methods for organizing exhibitions, such as exhibitions grouped around a genre (new tendencies in abstract painting, for example) or around a region or ethnicity (young artists from Asia). Instead, the artists here come from different generations and cultures and their work is also considerably

diverse. Indeed at first glance these are not artists that you would normally think of belonging together in one exhibition, and certainly not to yet another art worldish trend, most immediately because their work ranges across many different media, including photography, video, glass, text, painting, and found objects. However, it quickly became clear that important associations and points of connection were assembling between the various works and, indeed, between the artists, some that we were fully aware of, and others that emerged by degrees. For instance, Sora Kim's cleaning project accomplished under the auspices of her own personal company—Unlimited Concept Company, Cleaning Department—and Pascale Marthine Tayou's rendition of the Bank of Cameroon with himself as director both involve the artists insinuating themselves directly into what might otherwise seem an impersonal corporation. Text, albeit of a very different sort, appears in Meg Belichick's wire and rubber construction, Ryszard Wasko's assemblage, and above Josiah McElheny's handblown glass plates. In Belichick's case, it's a scrap of a diary entry having to do with washing dishes when she was a child; with Wasko it's an important samizdat manifesto that he wrote in Poland in 1981; and with McElheny it's a crisp, seemingly art-historical paragraph that conflates his exquisite handblown plates with Renaissance one-point perspective. Amy Sillman cycles people with whom she has substantial contact into her paintings, in the form of vaguely cartoonish figures; Tracey Baran takes photographs of family members (notably her mother, holding a cherry) or others from her hometown of Bath, New York; and Devon Dikeou uses aspects of Americana (antiquated matchbooks and the seemingly old-fashioned design of a new carton of cigarettes) to find her way back to her family's past, in the form of the candy and tobacco business her grandfather owned several decades ago in Denver. Self-portraiture also appears, but once again with a twist. Józef Robakowski's selection of videos amounts to a probing, yet also humorous and absurd, self-investigation over the last twenty-five years or so, while Thomas Eller's five hovering figures, consisting of digitally altered photographs of the artist laminated to aluminum constructions, multiply and flow through the exhibition space. These are just a few of the connections in *Personal Touch*, and many others remain to be discovered.

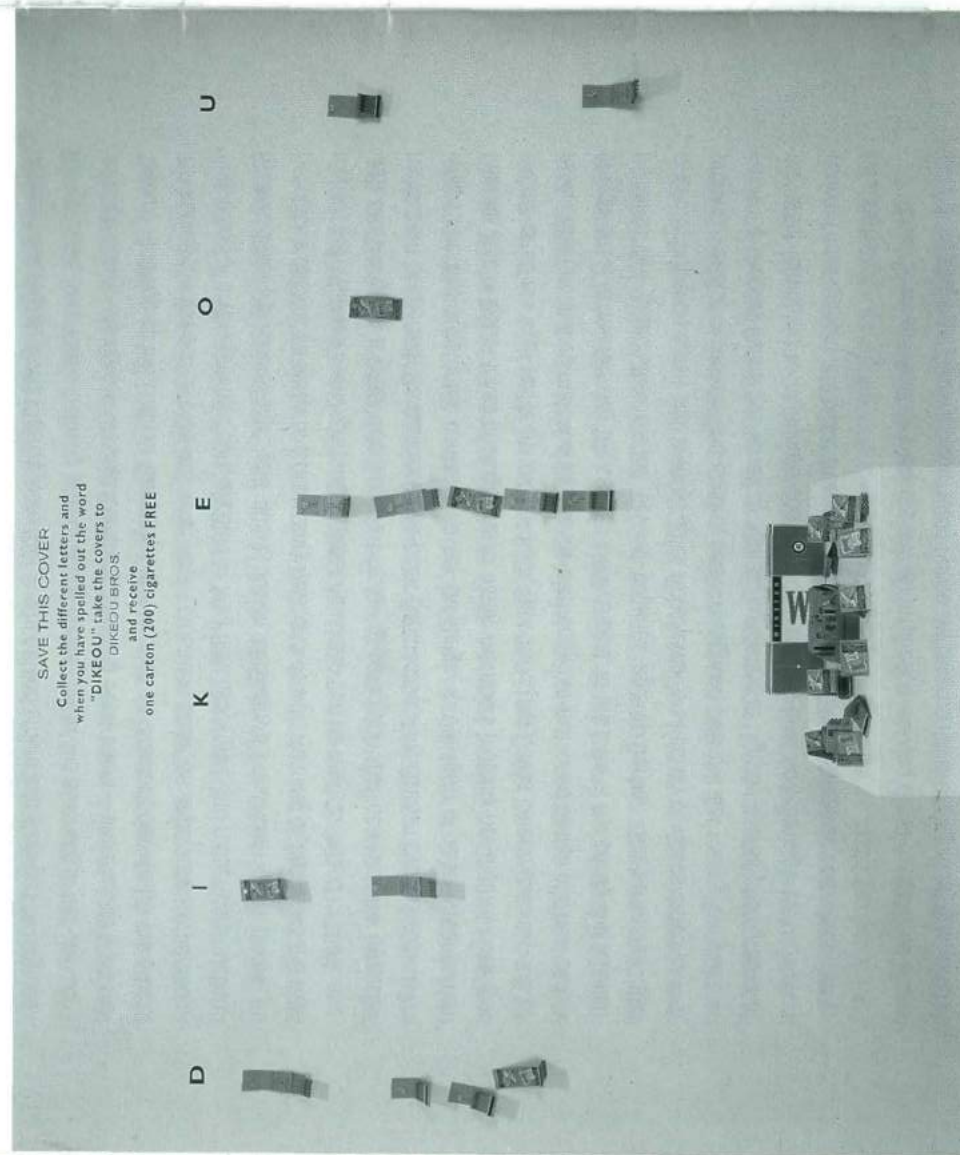
It has been an immense pleasure and an inspiration working directly with these artists during the course of the exhibition. What I hope we've accomplished, together, is an evocative exhibition that explores and opens up what "the personal" is or can be, and in ways refreshingly unencumbered by the prevailing critical discourse.

*Gregory Volk is a writer, curator, and regular contributor to Art in America, World Art, Sculpture, and other publications.*





7 **Josiah McElheny**, *Development in the Search for Infinity*, 1998



6 **Devon DiKeou**, *The Trick Is, There Is No "K"*, 1998



## Personal Touch

Sabine Russ

Naturally, personal experience enters into all art, even if its final form is devoid of any obvious hint of the person who created it. But there are many artists today who are not afraid to say directly /, this is me, this is my background, this is my life, this is my vision. As curators, we invited ten artists who in various ways are "personally present" in their work. The pieces were chosen or developed especially for this exhibition. *Personal Touch* doesn't focus on the private or an obsession with the self, but instead on works that convey self-confidence and generosity, large-mindedness and humor, curiosity and a deep engagement with others and the world.

"Personal Cinema" is what the influential Polish artist Józef Robakowski calls his œuvre of videos and 35 mm-films. In *Video Self 1973–1994*, a selection of ten short videos, the camera is turned into a kind of sensory organ on its own—sniffing around in the undergrowth like a dog, climbing a seemingly endless observation tower, becoming a limping foot in a park, or an eye zooming in and out on the window. Accompanying sounds—counting, singsong, the staccato-like naming of things seen, or oddly melodic cries of pain in *My video masochisms*—are an intriguing mixture of Dada and religious chant. Episodes of the everyday take on a fantastic aura, and repetitive activities turn into bizarre celebrations. Besides conveying a very personal and also Polish sense of life, what makes these works so intensely moving is the artist's unpretentious approach to existential matters and his deep belief in human dignity.

A slice of Americana and a specific part of her own history is presented by Devon Dikeou in her installation *The Trick Is, There Is No "K"*. Her grandfather's candy and tobacco company, Dikeou Bros., used to promise a free carton of cigarettes for those who spelled out the name Dikeou by collecting promotional matchbooks that were each imprinted with a single letter (except the nonexistent "K"). The artist re-created this situation of an impossible possibility in a bingo-style setting that is also strangely reminiscent of an altar (which gives the piece a certain blasphemous touch, considering that smoking in public is increasingly seen as a sinful act in the United States). The original forties-design matchbooks and the prize would hardly be objects of desire today, and the scam is rather amusing. But still, they stand for the societal input of generations of immigrants—their efforts to make it, to get their name out, to create a personal icon.

The Korean artist Sora Kim installed a branch of "Unlimited Concept Company" of which she herself is "head and tail." In her function as "cleaning master" she carried out a *Very Special Brown Quest* in New York, cleaning such places as Brown Shoe Co., Brown Memorial Baptist Church, and the dining table of a Mr. & Mrs. Brown. After completing her mission,

Sora Kim returned to Seoul, leaving an obsessively well-organized office painted and furnished in brown with cleaning tools and meticulous cleaning reports that speak a familiar but slightly twisted language alluding to ideas of perfection and spiritual matters. Here, the workaday activity of cleaning is carried to an absurd, almost fanatical level while becoming a highly creative act.

Another institution under an artist's auspices in this exhibition is Pascale Marthine Tayou's *Bank of Cameroon*. In an instruction board the "new director" (Tayou himself) asks the viewer/client to secure, first, their business card, second, their credit card, and, third, nothing in three water-filled receptacles. Tayou, who has previously installed semifunctional sites such as an embassy or a consulate of his native country in other parts of the world, approaches New York in a very direct way: the first and only Cameroonian bank in the city requests an unusual action in a highly competitive society—to reveal, to give, or to keep something for no apparent reason or award.

In *Intimate Embodiment with Five Easy Pieces*, the Polish artist Ryszard Wasko brings together fundamental elements of his artistic activities—as a sculptor and painter, as the founder of the Artist's Museum in Lodz, and initiator of "Construction in Process," a series of international exhibitions/events inspiring exchange and collaboration between artists. The centerpiece is a 1981 personal manifesto called "The Manifesto for the Rose"—here calligraphically painted on a rose-colored linen flag that hangs before the wall, gently animated by a fan. While every sentence of this manifesto starts with the imperative "Do not ...," it is not at all dictatorial but encourages artistic freedom, integrity, and generosity in a whimsical and refreshingly direct way. The manifesto is flanked by a pot of red borscht on a hot plate and by a red clay sculpture with artificial roses displayed on a board like in a living room. These objects, which over the years have become Wasko's personal symbols for sharing, growth, and communion, form a welcoming environment where there seems to be no separation between home and public space or, ultimately, between life and art.

While Meg Belichick's installation *Rubbermaid* both literally and formally alludes to the domestic, the piece is not really about that. Across two walls in a corner she has woven seventy-three red rubber-coated wire words—a childhood memory about the irksome task of dish washing—into a sort of spiderweb made out of thin wires. The words seem caught in the space, and their appearance suggests the way thoughts pop up in one's head and stay there awaiting an explanation. In a meditative process—similar to the mind-loosening act of dish washing—Belichick separates herself from these personal thoughts by materializing them in the room. One can physically enter this tangle of words, contemplating them individually or in order.

Amy Silliman's five vividly colored gouaches also contain language, but in a hidden way. While many of her other paintings and drawings actually include words, speech is indicated



here by empty bubblelike forms coming out of the figures' mouths. The people depicted in these abstracted narratives of consciously and unconsciously experienced events are drawn from her personal life, not as direct portraits but as seen through the mind's eye. Each drawing is a sort of silent movie, with several scenes overlaying each other, to be read according to one's own imagination.

Tracey Baran's triptych of photographs is a very particular take on personal touch, a pictorial poem about hands. Clutching a handkerchief, holding a cherry, or pulling a tape measure, these hands tell a whole lot about each of the people whose faces otherwise can't be seen. Here, the people are defined by these gestures, and the objects assume a symbolic meaning reminiscent of saints' attributes in religious paintings. Taken from both an insider's and outsider's perspective in a church, her mother's garden, and a bar in Baran's hometown Bath, New York, these photographs are at once an appreciative and acerbic approach to her own small-town culture.

Josiah McElheny, a highly accomplished American glass blower, shows two glass plates with elaborate spiral patterns on a display—just like museum treasures. A framed page seemingly extracted from a book called *Development in the Search for Infinity* (also the title for his work) describes how Renaissance glass blowers adopted the one-point perspective newly developed by their painter colleagues. McElheny, who in other pieces slips into the role of historical figures of his craft, insinuates that these plates were made hundreds of years ago. Conflating copy and original, past and present, they assume a fascinating power while both disregarding and addressing a common anxiety among artists today: to create genuine work. McElheny tells a story not from the viewpoint of a historian but through the making itself. In this sense he presents a personal fiction, revealing also that imagining and visualizing infinity—moreover, on an object that today is hardly associated with such large matters—is still a wondrous and engaging task.

Art historical concerns also play a role in Thomas Eller's *THE, Walking-SELBST*, an installation spreading through the entire gallery. Five larger-than-life-figures (cut out black and white photographs laminated on aluminum) are suspended slightly above the ground. They are self-portraits, but also not, for the figures' blank and blurry features don't really disclose anything about Thomas Eller. Captured in sequences of motion, from the front or from the back, they resemble the viewer walking and turning in the gallery, and they seem to encounter us as we encounter them. The traditional "self with easel" or "self with model" in painting has here become a "self with viewer," asserting a dynamic presence in the space.

Sabine Russ is a writer and curator who writes regularly for *Neue Bildende Kunst*, *zingmagazine*, and other publications.





## Checklist of the Exhibition

### Tracey Baran

*Untitled (Daren's Parents)*, 1998  
C Print, edition of 3  
31½ x 39½"

Courtesy LiebmanMagnan, New York

*Untitled (Mom with Cherry)*, 1998

C Print, edition of 3

31½ x 39½"

Courtesy LiebmanMagnan, New York

*Untitled (Tape Measure)*, 1998

C Print, edition of 3

31½ x 39½"

Courtesy LiebmanMagnan, New York

### Meg Belichick

*Rubbermaid*, 1998

Rubber and wire

Dimensions variable

Collection the artist

### Devon Dikeou

*The Trick Is, There Is No "K"*, 1998

Found matches, cigarettes, and Letraset

Dimensions variable

Collection the artist

### Thomas Eller

*THE, Walking—SELBST*, 1998

Black and white photographs on aluminum

Dimensions variable

Collection the artist

### Sora Kim

*Very Special Brown Quest*, 1998

Desk, brooms, dustpan, sign, typewriter, and shelves

Dimensions variable

Courtesy Unlimited Concept Co., Cleaning Dept.

### Josiah McElheny

*Development in the Search for Infinity*, 1998

Blown glass, text, photograph, and display

Dimensions variable

Courtesy AC Project Room, New York

### Józef Robakowski

*Video Self*, 1973–1994

Selected compilation of 10 videos (27 min.)

Collection the artist

*My video masochisms*, 1989

Six video stills, each 16 x 20"

Collection the artist

### Amy Sillman

*Projector #5*, 1998

Gouache and paper

22 x 30"

Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

*Film Strip Drawing #1*, 1998

Gouache and paper

22 x 30"

Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

*Amo Amas*, 1998

Gouache and paper

22 x 30"

Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

*Projector #1*, 1998

Gouache and paper

22 x 30"

Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

*Circuit*, 1998

Gouache and paper

22 x 30"

Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York

### Pascale Marthine Tayou

*Top Secret/Presence and Absence/Bank of*

*Cameroun* 1998, 1998

Credit cards, labels, glass jars, and painted

Cameroun flag

Dimensions variable

Collection the artist

### Ryszard Wasko

*Intimate Embodiment with Five Easy Pieces*, 1998

Cloth, sculpture, borsch, and photograph

Dimensions variable

Collection the artist

## Artist Biographies

**Tracey Baran** was born in Bath, New York, in 1975 and currently lives in Brooklyn. Her first solo show was in May 1998 at LiebmanMagnan in New York City, and she has also participated in group exhibitions in New York at Julie Saul Gallery, White Columns, and the Gramercy International Contemporary Art Fair. She studied at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

**Meg Belichick** was born in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1967 and currently lives in Brooklyn. She has been exhibiting her work since 1991; her exhibitions include a one-person show at Lombard-Freid Fine Arts in New York City, and many group exhibitions in New York, India, Poland, and Japan. She received her B.A. from the University of California at Los Angeles and is a past recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

**Devon Dikeou** received her B.A. from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, and her M.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Since 1990 she has exhibited widely, both in New York and internationally, including solo shows at Postmasters in New York, Ice Box in Athens, and Hohenenthal und Bergen in Cologne. She is also the publisher and editor of *zigmagazine*, an influential arts journal founded in 1995.

**Thomas Eller** was born in Coburg, West Germany, in 1964 and currently lives in both Berlin and New York City. Among his many exhibitions are solo shows at Galerie Anselm Dreher in Berlin, ID-Galerie in Düsseldorf, Stadtische Galerie Wolfsburg, and Wilhelm-Hack Museum in Ludwigshafen. He has also exhibited in group shows in Germany, Sweden, Russia, Italy, and Finland.

**Sora Kim** was born in 1965 in Seoul, Korea, where she currently lives. She studied at Seoul National University and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris. Since 1996 she has worked under the auspices of the Unlimited Concept Company—Cleaning Department. She participated in the First International Taipei Biennial in Taiwan in 1998 and was a 1997 resident at Art/Omi in Omi, New York.

**Josiah McElheny** was born in Boston in 1966 and lives in Seattle and New York City. He received his B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence and has apprenticed with master glassblowers Lino Tagliapietra and Jan-Erik Ritzman. He has had solo exhibitions at AC Project Room in New York, Donald Young in Seattle, Barbara Krakow in Boston, and Stephen Friedman Gallery in London and has participated in numerous group exhibitions.

**Józef Robakowski** was born in Poznan, Poland, in 1939 and lives in Łódź, Poland. His films, videos, television productions, performances, installations, and art objects have been shown widely in Poland and throughout Europe. He has also curated influential exhibitions of Polish and international art in Poland and runs the Galeria Wymiany (Exchange Gallery) in Łódź.

**Amy Sillman** received her B.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in New York City and her M.F.A. from Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. She has had solo exhibitions at Casey Kaplan and Lipton Owens Co. in New York and Kanoria Centre for Art, Ahmadabad, India. She has also participated in numerous group exhibitions. Sillman is a past recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

**Pascale Marthine Tayou** was born in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 1966 and currently lives in Paris. He has exhibited and performed extensively, including participation in biennials in Sydney, Havana, Johannesburg, Santa Fe, and Kwangju. Among his many other exhibitions are those at the Museum Van Hedendaagse Kunst in Ghent, Belgium; Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, The Netherlands; Galerie Bernard Duion in Paris, France; and Douai'Art in Douala, Cameroon.

**Ryszard Wasko** is the founder and principal organizer of an innovative series of international exhibitions called "Construction in Process," the first of which was held in Łódź, Poland, in 1981. The most recent manifestation—*The Bridge-Construction in Process VI*—was in Melbourne, Australia, in 1998. As an artist, he has shown his work extensively since the late 1970s, including solo and group exhibitions in Poland, Germany, the United States, Israel, and elsewhere.

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Founded in 1981, Art in General is a nonprofit organization in lower Manhattan that provides 3,500 square feet of exhibition space to contemporary artists. Exhibitions are based on themes or artistic concerns and include artworks in a range of disciplines: painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, photography, sound, and performance art.

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