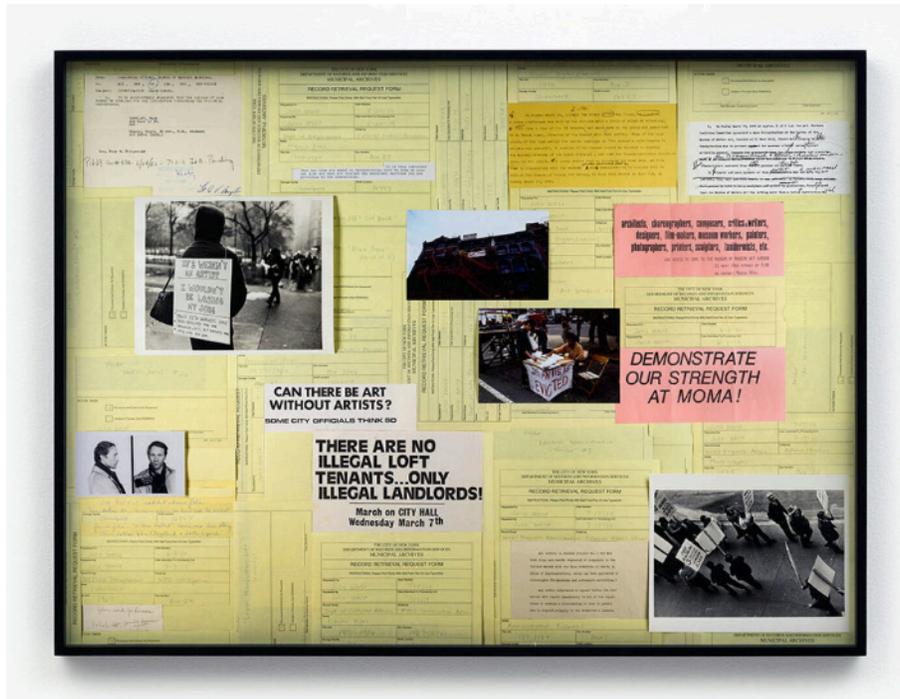


rachel uffner
BOMB

Art and Government: Julia
Weist Interviewed by Cat Tyc

*A research-based project explores government involvement in the arts of
New York City.*

Jun 8, 2022



Julia Weist, *Demonstration*, 2020, archival pigment print, 29.5 x 39.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

rachel uffner

My first awareness of Julia Weist's work was through her brother, Nicholas, who championed her interdisciplinary, research-based practice and thought we would have much to talk about. As a proponent of nontraditional paths in artmaking, I was grateful to be able to spend an afternoon with Weist in her incredibly organized studio in Catskill, New York, where we discussed the various elements of her current exhibition, *Governing Body*, at Rachel Uffner Gallery.

I am moved by the excavation in this work to draw attention to the underexamined analysis of the artist's role in a society.

—Cat Tyc

Cat Tyc

Can we start by having you describe what's in *Governing Body*?

Julia Weist

I am exhibiting a suite of works in a variety of different mediums that all deal with the relationship between artists and government, or, perhaps more broadly, how the government tries to understand both artists and the artwork that they make and their role in civic life and public life.

CT

What sparked this interest in the relationship between artists and government?

JW

I was very fortunate to be given a really unique opportunity to access New York City's municipal government during a residency program called *Public Artists in Residence*, which is an initiative of the Department of Cultural Affairs and inspired by Mierle Laderman Ukeles's pioneering work as an artist-in-residence at the Department of Sanitation beginning in the late 1970s.

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

rachel uffner

I was selected in 2019 to be the Public Artist in Residence for the Department of Records and Information Services, which is called DORIS for short. I spent a year embedded within DORIS, working with its sixty-five employees and doing extensive independent research. I experienced being an artist within government while also researching other moments during the past one hundred years when artists and government have rubbed shoulders.

CT

So when you first came to this residency, what were you thinking about, or what was your intention for these archives?

JW

Throughout my practice, I find ways that I can integrate myself into systems. This residency was actually really perfect for the way that I work and the way that I think, and it was the ideal venue through which to circulate my work.

When I began my residency period, I wasn't sure specifically how my project would unfold. The department was very generous in giving me space. With a lot of opportunities, artists are expected to come in with a proposal and execute on day one without having space for the interrogation, experimentation, and research that makes the best work. I noticed very quickly in the archive's material that certain conditions of living in the city, not just for artists but for all residents, have persisted for hundreds of years. And I thought that was so fascinating, and it made me feel connected to New Yorkers of yesteryear and from all walks of life. I wondered if I could find where artists appeared in the collection and how they're documented by government records.

So I started in the records from the 1600s, but I very quickly realized that my interest was much more contemporary. I found the first reference I could to an artist in the DORIS collection. It was someone petitioning for a burgher right which was essentially an early form of colonial citizenship within New York City—a privilege not available to

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

rachel uffner

indentured servants, enslaved individuals and, initially, Jews. A non-Jewish, white, European artist was petitioning that they were owed the burgher right, without having to pay, because of a commissioned painting they made for an official.

So right away in the first instance we have rules and regulations, ordinances and exclusion. And in this case, there is a litigious element as well in which the city is sort of forced to adjudicate the value of art in a practical and black-and-white kind of way. But I quickly realized that the modern era was much more developed in how record keeping has evolved to be multi-format, capturing more perspectives and often with visual and audio-visual details. The proliferation of information and information recording devices has, of course, grown exponentially.

CT

Among my personal favorites upon looking at your work is some paperwork about Jonas Mekas. I was also struck by some review notes about the public installations that Faith Ringgold and Mel Chin were proposing for city hospitals. I am curious to know about some of the content that lit sparks for you and how those choices came together for the layouts of these photographic pieces.

JW

Each piece that I wound up making as part of my residency is essentially a large photographic print, but they look like collages. They're an assemblage of both original archival items and the retrieval slips used to access them. Using these retrieval slips, I pared the vast amount of information in those archival items down to a few visible sentences or images. Each composition is around a theme. So the items that you mentioned, with Ringgold and Chin, were in a composition called Critique (2020). As the name suggests, that work contains examples of city officials and city workers critiquing artists or artwork. But a huge majority of the time when civil servants are asked to do that they don't necessarily have a background in art history, visual art, or performing arts. They might be an executive at Health and Hospitals, which is the agency of the

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

rachel uffner

New York City public hospital system, and they're on a panel or committee that's overseeing a Percent for Art commission, which funds art for city buildings. Here and elsewhere throughout the project when civil servants were evaluating, trying to understand, trying to explain, or attempting to categorically organize artists and artworks, I found their language to be very real and jargon free. It was interesting, accessible language that was revealing of people's intentions and opinions. Sometimes this was wonderfully illuminating. Other times, it showed some of the biggest problems within government systems, specifically, how they operate in terms of hierarchies of power and privilege codified through public spending that prizes certain types of work over others. These systems often uphold standards, such as a rigid definition of "professionalism," that are not necessarily applicable for working creatives trying to produce things.

CT

You have explained to me how the photographs are part of the archive of the agency and how they can also have separate lives as your artwork. I'm really interested in the double life these images have. Could you break it down for me again?

JW

The photographs that I made are an edition of three with one artist proof. The first print of the edition for every photograph is in the custody of the government of the City of New York and will remain there forever. They now are part of the material that the government preserves and makes accessible to the public. The second prints of the edition have largely been acquired by museums around the country. In some cases, the museums are directly and thematically related to content in the pieces. For example, the Brooklyn Museum has acquired a piece that is about former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani's attempts to defund the Brooklyn Museum in the late '90s, and it includes some really fascinating material that I recently uncovered about that process. As part of these museum acquisitions, I was interested in making museological systems of recordkeeping visible. In the case of the Brooklyn Museum, the credit line that accompanies the acquisition names Giuliani as an artist. Specifically the credit line includes: "in

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

rachel uffner

acknowledgment of Rudy Giuliani, fine art photographer.” This is related to material in the piece and his personal photographic practice that I explore in the work. The credit line is a powerful site for intervention because it’s included on the wall text that accompanies an exhibited work. The third prints from the series are included in the show at Rachel Uffner Gallery, alongside new work focused on government and the arts.

CT

There’s another project that’s in the show. Could you speak a little about that?

JW

The last major work draws on research I did at the New York State archive in Albany. This archive has an incredibly detailed collection about film censorship in New York state. From 1921 to 1965, almost half of the twentieth century, films couldn’t be legally screened in theaters in New York until scenes that the state government felt were “immoral” or “indecent” were eliminated. Unbeknownst to many New Yorkers, including my mother and grandmother who grew up in the state in this period, theaters only showed these “sanitized” versions of contemporary films. The archive retained no film reels—only textual documentation about the edits—so I spent many months hunting down the eliminated scenes and stitching them together into a short film I called *Governing Body* (2021). I was interested to see how this film full of once-taboo content, nearly all of which was related to women and gender nonconforming characters’ bodies and freedoms, would be evaluated by authorities today. I submitted the film to the Motion Picture Association (MPA) which rated it by current standards. The film received a Restricted (R) rating specifically because of the realistic childbirth depicted and some sexual content. Once the MPA rates a film, they also gain control over movie posters and other visual representations of the film. I was fascinated to receive their rejection for several *Governing Body* movie posters that were deemed inappropriate for all audiences. These posters featured images of women breastfeeding and sculptures and paintings of nude women, not unlike what you’d see in any art museum. Technically, now that this material has been officially “disapproved” by the MPA, I’m not allowed to use it

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

rachel uffner

in public. I'm not sure if exhibiting the posters in this gallery show will trigger the punishments associated with defying the MPA's regulations, but we will see! I might be sanctioned and barred from ever receiving a film rating again.

Julia Weist: *Governing Body* is on view at Rachel Uffner Gallery in New York City until June 18.

Cat Tyc is an interdisciplinary writer/artist. Her most recent work has been published in *Maggot Brain*, *The Recluse*, *The Tiny*, and *FENCE*. She will have a solo exhibition of new media work at Tanja Grunert gallery this fall.

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com