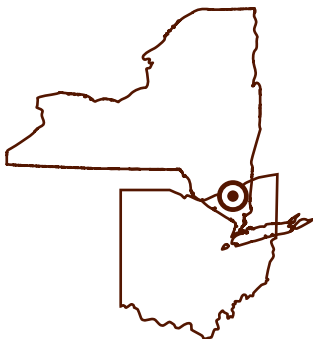


STEVE LAMBERT

SPACES

THE RESOURCE AND PUBLIC FORUM FOR ARTISTS WHO EXPLORE AND EXPERIMENT



The SPACES World Artists Program (SWAP) is a residency program for international, U.S. and local artists to foster cultural exchange between audiences in Northeast Ohio and artists from around the world. SWAP residencies are intensive opportunities for experimental artists to produce and present new work.

Steve Lambert participated in the 34th SWAP residency since the program's inception in 2002.

SPACES / 2220 Superior Viaduct
Cleveland, OH 44113 / 216.621.2314
www.SPACESgallery.org



A close-up portrait of a man with a long, full, light brown beard and mustache. He is wearing a light-colored, textured fedora-style hat and black-rimmed glasses. He is smiling slightly, showing his teeth. He is wearing a blue and white checkered button-down shirt. The background is blurred, showing a brick wall and a yellow light source.

STEVE LAMBERT

Beacon, NY

Residency: June 15 – August 31, 2011

Exhibition: August 26 – October 21, 2011

By Christopher Lynn, SPACES Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

Day in and day out, capitalism dictates every facet of our lives. Groceries, gas, cars, apartment rent or home mortgage, utilities, clothing, and health care are all influenced and shaped by capitalism. The statement “Capitalism Works for Me!” emblazoned across Steve Lambert’s 20 foot by 9 foot sign is a simple statement, and one that is assumed to generally be the case.

By simply asking people if they find the statement “Capitalism Works for Me!” to be true or false, and publicly tallying the results, Lambert invites a discussion of a seemingly taboo topic. Some voters were die-hard capitalism fans who remained unconvinced that there is any better alternative. Some voters admitted that the system works for them, but that it is flawed. For others, they found themselves stuck to the bottom of capitalism’s boot. Is a system where inequality and poverty are designed into its fabric the best we can do?

Steve Lambert allows the possibility that we can do better, and we are invited to consider how.

Those who helped Steve and SPACES on this utopian venture included Woody, Pam and Lisa at Berea Moving, Alexander Reben, and a cast of dozens listed at the end of this publication. They gave us hope that sometimes people do things out of love, rather than to further their positions in our economic system.



Capitalism Works for Me!, 2011
aluminum, LED, paint





▲
Participants voting at the sign,
Capitol Theater, Cleveland, OH



▲
Market Ave., Cleveland, OH
Ingenuity Fest, Cleveland, OH
▼





▲
SPACES, Cleveland, OH
Public Square, Cleveland, OH
▼



A discussion between Paul F. Tompkins and Steve Lambert

BEING IRRESPONSIBLE

Paul F. Tompkins: Now... you are an artist.

Steve Lambert: *[Laughs]*

PFT: Do you consider yourself one?

SL: Yeah. That's what I've been writing on my taxes.

PFT: There you go. Now, I'm sure you've had conversations about the responsibility of the artist, right?

SL: Yeah.

PFT: Starting out as a comedian, I was told that my number one responsibility to the audience was to make them laugh. But that seems simplistic to me. I feel that's an *entertainer's* responsibility, rather than an artist's. I feel an artist's responsibility is to come from a place of honesty, and hopefully people enjoy it. If you're trying to second-guess what people like, you're not being true to yourself, even if your thing is to provoke people. You can still be honest, even if you're trying to manipulate a feeling. So *does* the artist have a responsibility of any kind?

SL: Totally. You have to have integrity, but I also believe you have to be accessible and reach people.

PFT: You shouldn't intentionally try to alienate people.

SL: You can't just ignore the audience, because if it is truly just about you, then why are you presenting it to anyone? If you're sincerely doing it for yourself—and you're putting everything in your closet or burning it—that goes

more in the direction of art therapy: "I'm working through some issue I have, so I'm making these drawings." Don't put that in front of other people.

PFT: "That's private. We don't discuss that at the dinner table."

SL: Well, beautiful things can happen by sharing that kind of thing; amazing things can happen. People can relate to it, can learn something from it, and you're doing more by sharing it than by keeping it to yourself. But it needs to be consciously prepared for an audience.

PFT: For me, the way the process begins is, I have a thought that makes me laugh. I then have to translate that from my own brain, where it's *instantly* funny, to a conversational form that will make sense to strangers. That's where the work comes in. Does that relate to what you do? Let's take the Capitalism piece. How do you arrive at what that piece is going to be? Do you see this sign in your mind and think, "All I gotta do is build it"?

SL: When we spoke back in February, I told you, "I have this idea, I don't know what it's going to be, but it sort of has to do with capitalism and whether or not it works for most people." I actually had sketched out a few different ideas for it that didn't really take off. The first sketch for it looked totally different. It was kind of shitty. But there was a big issue at the core of what I've been dealing with in my work for a long time. I've been feeling it's not "polite" to bring it up, worried about how to creatively address it. I've talked around it, and eventually I thought, What if I

just deal with this head on? I have the same thing you do, that first moment of feeling, Oh, this is a good idea! And then it's all refining and refining until it's ready to go. I've realized in the last few weeks that I have this double standard for myself, which keeps me relatively sane: at the beginning, my goal is for every single person to have this incredible, transcendent experience; but in reality, it doesn't reach everyone, or it isn't quite a "transcendent experience," but it still works and it's good. That initial idea is incredibly motivating, but it's never perfect in the end, right?

PFT: I work on a piece of material for a while and I might give it, say, ten tries, thinking, "This is so funny to me, it's impossible that I can't find a room full of people that will agree." Ten tries later, it might be, "Oops, guess I'm alone on this one." For you, do people even see those types of pieces? Or do you rely on an internal monitor that has become very keen over the years, a better sense of when something is going to work and when it's not? I'd imagine there are things that you might try to create and then you'll step back and go, Nope, that's not it.

SL: Nobody sees those.

PFT: Do you smash those things?

SL: I kind of keep them for a while thinking, I can redo this...

PFT: Have you ever smashed one?

SL: I've torn them up, I don't know if I've made... I've smashed stuff, yeah.

PFT: *[Laughs]* How do you not? It just feels good to smash stuff. Now, do you feel that the audience has any responsibility in the artistic equation? Why's it all up to us? They just get to sit back like Nero, eating grapes and saying yes or no? Like I was telling you about the rule in the comedy clubs: it's

always up to you to make them laugh. Any crowd. If you don't make them laugh then you have failed. That's crazy when you think about it. Going up in front of mob after mob, win them over and control them every single time, even if people are too drunk to pay attention.

SL: Before I answer that, when you were starting out, did that make you work harder? Did it make you better or worse?

PFT: I don't know what effect it had other than it made me feel bad if it didn't go well. I was trying to make people laugh. I wasn't trying to alienate people. But the notion of my responsibility being absolute remained. Now I'm in control of my instrument. I'm a mature artist, but if it doesn't go well, somewhere inside my skull a voice whispers, "This is your fault." There is something you could have done differently to win these people over. Then I have to sit with that and figure out, Well what the hell could I have done differently? I went out there with the best of intentions...

SL: Well on the other hand, the general rule in art is that the audience doesn't exist. That's how you're trained. At school, you learn aesthetics, composition, theory, but any consideration of audience is often lumped in with pandering or playing to the market. The audience is so disconnected from the whole idea of making, it's absurd. Unless you're in film or theater, where the idea of people watching something in that way is inherent, but for visual art the concept of a viewer is isolated from the process. And after it's done and someone doesn't understand it, it's the fault of the viewer. If they do understand it and still don't like it, then, "It's not for them, I made it for these other reasons..." I'm stereotyping a little here but there can be a lot of arrogance.

PFT: What has been the thing that stuck with you most from observing people interact with the Capitalism piece?

SL: I kind of expected people to have complex reasons for why they were voting one way or the other, but I guess the reality of it—and some very simple questions that people have—it's really complex. Like, "What is capitalism?" At first, you think, "Really?" How do you not know? Then second, How do you even answer that? How do you explain capitalism to someone who doesn't know? A lot of people who voted yes stated, "Well, it works for me, but I know it doesn't work for most people" or, "Five years ago it didn't work for me."

PFT: What was something you *didn't* see coming in peoples' interactions with it?

SL: I have a friend that I really respect. He's one of those people I run stuff by, and he said, "C'mon Steve, all you're doing is riling people, then they vote FALSE and they feel like they did something, but it's hollow." He

thought everyone was going to vote FALSE and it would be a means to vent anger. I was worried he might be right, but fortunately it's been much more complicated. The sign may be simple, but the interaction is not simplistic. The sign will show up in a park, dazzle passersby with the spectacle, and then I walk up and say, "We're keeping score to find out if capitalism works for people in the park." Without thinking, sometimes people will say, "Of course it works for me!" But if I ask, "So you're getting paid enough?" then you can see the reaction in their face where now they have to think this through in a whole other way. I guess what I was really surprised by was how much the default answer was "yes," and how complicated the responses on both sides are. I even saw a homeless person say, "Yeah, it's working for me."

PFT: I hope he elaborated.

SL: He did, but unfortunately it did not make any sense. I really wanted to understand. I really tried, but after a long while I just ended the conversation with, "It was very nice to meet you."

Paul F. Tompkins is an actor and comedian who has written and performed on *Mr. Show with Bob and David*, *The Daily Show*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, and hosted *Best Week Ever with Paul F. Tompkins*. In addition to live performance and television appearances, he is the host of the critically acclaimed podcast, *The Pod F. Tompkast*.

THANKS

Alexander Reben designed the electronics using the open source Arduino circuit board and various electronics supplies. The crew at Signature Sign in Cleveland worked with us to make the sign happen, and put in extra hours to get it done. The staff and board at SPACES has been great, as well as everyone who volunteered, including Michelle Bashian, Jason Buchter, Ian Charnas, Jeff Chiplis, Dana Depew, Bridget McGuire, Melinda Placko, Drew Ratcliffe, Steve Smith, Kate Sopko, David R. Stempowski, Laila Voss, and Bob Zombar. The assistance of Tom Starinsky, Cleveland Public Art, Terry Schwarz and Corrie Slawson was also greatly appreciated. Berea Moving / Wood-Lee International Art Handlers helped get the sign around Cleveland, and Dave's Market kindly furnished sustenance for the tour roadies. Special thanks to the 434 Kickstarter contributors who helped augment SPACES' initial budget; actor and comedian, Paul F. Tompkins; and my live-in significant special lady-friend partner, Victoria Estok.

STEVE LAMBERT

Born: Los Angeles, CA, 1976

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS

- 2009 *Everything You Want Right Now!*, Charles James Gallery, Los Angeles, CA.
- 2005 *Offices of The Anti-Advertising Agency*, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA.

SELECTED PUBLIC ART WORKS & CURATORIAL PROJECTS

- 2011 *I Want You To Have This*, The Present Group.
- 2008 – 11 *Add-Art* browser extension.
- 2008 *Black Market Type & Print Shop*, Viva! Art Action Montreal, Montreal, QC.
- 1999 – 05 The Budget Gallery, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 Creative Time's *Living as Form*, New York City, NY.
- 2010 *False Documents and Other Illusions*, Portland Art Museum, Portland, Maine.
HollywoodMerchmART!, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles.
Zurich Drawings, Barbara Seiler Galerie, Zurich, Switzerland.
EDITIONS '10, Lower East Side Printshop, New York City.
- 2009 *Piemonte Share Festival*, Torino, Italy.
Play It Forward, Schroeder Romero Gallery, New York City.
Ars Electronica Award Exhibition, OK Centre, Linz, Austria.
- 2008 *Democracy In America: The National Campaign*, Park Avenue Armory/Creative Time, New York.
International Guerilla Video Festival, Milan, Italy.
Whitney Biennial, with *Neighborhood Public Radio*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
- 2007 *OFFF Festival*, with Graffiti Research Lab, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain.
- 2006 *Anti-Advertising Agency*, with Packard Jennings, Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

SELECTED AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

- 2010 Headlands Center for the Arts, 2010 Bridge Residency.
- 2006 – 10 Eyebeam Art & Technology Center, Senior Fellowship.

AFFILIATIONS

- 2011 Founder and Co-Director, Center for Artistic Activism.

SPACES receives major support from The Cleveland Foundation; The George Gund Foundation; Donna and Stewart Kohl; Toby Devan Lewis; John P. Murphy Foundation; and the Ohio Arts Council.

The George Gund Foundation

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts
Foundation for Contemporary Arts

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For major support of the SPACES World Artists Program we are indebted to the Ohio Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts.



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Printing: Phil Vedda & Sons, Inc.

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