

Artist as Mediator:

The History of the US Department of Art & Technology (2000-2005)

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“Painting isn’t an aesthetic operation; it’s a form of magic designed as a mediation between this strange hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires.”ⁱ – Pablo Picasso

Abstract

I moved from California to Washington, DC, the nation’s capital, at the turn of the millennium. Shortly thereafter, with the September 11th attacks, the nation began a dramatic descent into dark times, conditions that would deteriorate throughout the first decade of the 21st century. I found myself with a job to do in Washington, an artist in the center of power during times of crisis. I held a desire to engage, not as a passive observer, but with an active role: the artist’s role, one who sees, listens, analyzes, and translates. I found myself with a mission to construct a mythology that would illuminate the dangerous mechanisms of the unfolding political situation in America. This resulted in the founding of the virtual government agency, the US Department of Art & Technology (USDAT). The following narrative account is a portrait of the artist in time of war, the artist as mediator “between a strange, hostile world and the human spirit.”

Warning: You are entering a virtual United States Government System, which may be used only for artistic and socially motivated purposes. The Government may monitor and critique usage of this system, and all persons are hereby notified that use of this system constitutes consent to such monitoring and critical analysis. Unauthorized attempts to appropriate information are encouraged and are subject to review under the Computer Art and Aesthetics Act of 1986 and Title 18 U.S.C. Sec. 1001 and 1030.



Part I: Birth of a Mythology

I looked out over the expanse of the National Mall in Washington, with its icons, flags, statues, memorials, and monuments, the epic grandeur, the heroic narrative, the revolutionary brilliance - that perfect image of America sculpted by the founding fathers. The National Mall, a magnificent stage set for America, a cinematic backdrop for the spectacle of all that is America, Reagan's "shining city on the hill", an impossible dream made manifest. I found myself wondering: how does the artist fit into the narrative of America? How does the artist fit into this grand mythology? How has the artist participated in the creation of America? With these questions in mind, I began to think about how the narrative was constructed. If America is a nation of the people, for the people, and by the people, then how might the artist take ownership of the narrative and reinvent the mythology.

The Trigger

On September 11th, 2001, the world was in crisis at the speed of light, globalization imploding with the fall of the World Trade Center, an unseen enemy struck at the very heart of the capitalist world, the fall of its greatest symbol captured on live television for

all the world to see. Those twin towers crumbled under their own weight in response to the attack, they gave way in complete submission, as though surrendering - weak and terrified. The images now reside in the minds of those who witnessed the implosion, imprinted forever, an iconic moment revealing the collapse of America. These images, suddenly burned into our collective imagination, would challenge the very opposite image of strength inherent in the towering buildings of the World Trade Center. America and its epic dream, the invincible American Dream had been dealt a lethal blow. It was vulnerable, it had enemies that could bring it to its knees, on its own soil, make mockery of its government.

Letter to the President

During this climate of crisis, after thoughtful deliberation, I appealed to the President to consider a new proposal, a new direction, to follow the artistic lead. I could clearly see that military tactics would fail in this new 21st century war against an invisible, distributed enemy. I crafted a letterⁱⁱ detailing my proposal and emailed it to President Bush (copying the Vice-President), in which I outlined my request that he form a new government agency, the US Department of Art & Technology, an artist-driven agency that would embrace the transformative aspirations of the artistic avant-garde. It seemed to me, in this hour of darkness and uncertainty, that it might be a powerful strategy in an environment of cultural conflict, to insert the artist - a cultural beacon, a light on the horizon, an interventionist, a provocateur, and a mediator - into the growing morass of divisiveness. I quoted the British artist Wyndham Lewis "The artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present."ⁱⁱⁱ However, I received a polite auto-reply thanking me for "my ideas and comments," and that "my interest in the work of President Bush and his administration is appreciated."

Part 2: Invoking the Forces of Virtualization

Given the gravity of my appeal, I refused to take an auto-reply for an answer, to be silenced by government systems. I responded as an artist would: by engaging in techniques of appropriation and transformation, by putting into action the formation of my own bureaucracy, a more "intimate bureaucracy,"^{iv} an artist-driven system of bureaucracy that would sidestep the hierarchical, impersonal, useless mechanisms of government control to form a network of artist-participants, and would draw from legal protocol for the purpose of achieving "aesthetic authenticity." If in fact the current crisis would be fought and won in the distributed, networked environment of 21st century technological systems, I would create a new form of "government agency" in the realm

of the virtual, unburdened by the constraints and limitations of brick and mortar, that would, subvert, transform and bypass those anachronistic systems. A press release was issued stating that the White House had officially placed into action an Executive Order^v from the President announcing the formation of the US Department of Art & Technology.

The Nomination



Fig. 1. President Bush and Randall M. Packer shake hands following nomination. (photo by Phyllis Hecht)

Subsequently, I was nominated^{vi} by President Bush (Fig. 1) as the first Secretary of the newly formed US Department of Art & Technology, who referred to me as “a man of great integrity, a man of great judgment and a man who knows the arts” for my artistic achievements in the field of art and technology. With the congratulatory handshake from the President, USDAT had been given form, planted in the medial space, inserted visually, a viral entity now germinating, traveling amorphously, unrestrained, unchallenged through the system, burrowing deeper and more vividly into the consciousness of the viewer. While politicians expend considerable energy fabricating a public image, it is the artist, as well, who engages the mythmaking apparatus through techniques of media and illusion.

Swearing-in Ceremony



Fig. 2. Secretary Packer receives Oath of Office delivered by Alice Denney. (photo by Waturo Ito)

With the Swearing-in Ceremony,^{vii} (Fig. 2) followed by an address outlining the “artist as visionary, as social revolutionary,”^{viii} USDAT was officially secured. The invention of new systems of bureaucracy requires a renewal of protocol. The Oath of Office of the Secretary of USDAT could not be administered on condition of allegiance to and respect for the Holy Bible, rather, it required a revised text, a new moral authority, one that would offer a commitment to art and establish one’s faith in revolutionary systems of artistic thought, one that acknowledged the mediational forces inherent in art to bring about transformations in the culture, ultimately, one that would install a new trope of philosophical reasoning conceived by the artist, that text being, *Silence* by John Cage.

US DAT Seal – The Symbol of Virtualization



Fig. 3. USDAT Official Seal. (Image by Randall Packer & Marcos Novak)

The newly formed USDAT required an official seal (Fig. 3) to identify and articulate its symbolic representation. While many government agencies make use of the American Eagle as a symbol of strength, wisdom, and character, a virtual agency would require a new symbol: a representational icon demonstrating the forces of virtualization, the potentiality of the Idea, the transformational properties of the Idea in the process of unfolding in an imaginary space. I turned to the artist Marcos Novak, an inventor of worlds of potentiality in the virtual, and chose a complex geometrical construction in the process of germinating from its embryonic state to an extrusion into the outer, transgressing the virtual, thrusting itself into the real - mediating between the world of the unknown (the artist's world) and the known world (our world). The emblem was inserted into the seal as a symbol that could be defined in accordance with the virtual, "that which has potential rather than actual existence."^{ix}

US DAT Headquarters – Signs of Emergence



Fig. 4. USDAT headquarters in Washington. (photo by Randall Packer)

The US Department of Art & Technology began to extrude into the physical environment through techniques of virtualization that engaged and transformed the space of the nation's capital, signs of its potentiality and emergence into the world of the real. The Department established its headquarters (Fig. 4) at a site formerly housing the US Department of the Interior, the agency that paradoxically oversees the management of the physical space (land use) in America. The fragile divide between the real and the virtual had been blurred. The theatrical fourth wall that constitutes the demarcation between the imaginary space and the real world, between the world invented by the artist (not governed by physical constraints) and an outer world that is known, reasoned and understood, had been breached through the power of virtualization.

Office of the Secretary



Fig. 5. Office of the Secretary overlooking US Capitol. (photo by Phyllis Hecht)

Welcome to the office (Fig. 5) of the Secretary. The office has a shadowy presence, far removed from reality. It inhabits the space of mystery, where the alchemical properties of the artistic process are engaged. It lies within the domain of the magis, the shaman, who communicates with worlds not of our own. The office has a commanding view of the US Capitol, but it is also an office of the amorphous, the elusive and the impenetrable.. It is a space where one might contemplate new forms, or dream of a new society, or perhaps devise plots against the Government. The office is a space for managing invented bureaucracies, it is a place to undermine the status quo, it is fantastical, a place of trickery. Gazing out at the Capitol, I oversee the broad expanse of my World, it is here I plot my moves, strategically advancing USDAT, signing fictitious documents, plagiarizing, erasing, cutting-up, and superimposing. My World has become a collage, a remix. I am re-connecting the dots. I am building a new mythology of my own creation in search of new meaning, or as Jean Cocteau implied, "... history is made up of truths that later becomes lies and mythology is made up of lies that later become truths."^x

Role of the Artist – Conducting the Business of the People



Fig. 6. Secretary Packer descending the steps of the US Capitol. (photo by Phyllis Hecht)

The US Department of Art & Technology has as its mission statement: “[US DAT is] the principal conduit for facilitating the artist’s need to extend aesthetic inquiry into the broader culture where ideas become real action.” The artist functions as a vehicle for translating ideas into active models that take shape in the outer world, where they engage the viewer, manifesting what Joseph Beuys called, “the social organism... how we mold and shape the world in which we live.”^{xi} This is how art mediates the conditions of contemporary life. Art becomes a participatory process rooted in the principles of democracy, in which the artist constructs a model that serves as an inclusive platform for discourse and action, art that is relevant and speaks to the contemporary issues of the time, art that seeks to reflect and in turn shape history. The essential role of the artist in society (Fig. 6) is thus to function as a cultural barometer, to construct a totalizing vision of art and life that has no boundaries, which blurs the inner and outer worlds of the individual and society, a defiant rejection of insularity, the embrace of action, as Marshall McLuhan described, “the artist tends now to move from the ivory to the control tower of society.”^{xii}

Part 3: Ideas Become Action



Fig. 7. Secretary Packer delivers speech at the Hall of Congress in Berlin. (photo by Thomas Bruns)

Following the nomination, I received an invitation to speak at the opening ceremonies of the 2002 Transmediale Festival of Media^{xiii} in Berlin (Fig. 7). I delivered my first European address to announce the formation of the Global Virtualization Council,^{xiv} an international committee of artist-ambassadors to mobilize artistic forces internationally in times of crisis. That evening, I rose to the podium after an official introduction from the Cultural Attachée of the US Embassy in Berlin, calling on international artists to “establish conditions [which] ignite the most far-flung aspirations of humankind.” I declared: “virtualization remains the greatest power on earth! To that tremendous power alone; we will engage!” At the close of my speech, delivered in the Hall of Congress where President John F. Kennedy had given his Berlin speech some forty years prior, I stunned the audience in my now famous statement, “In this city of decadence, Dada, and indulgence... ich bin ein Berliner kunstler!”

Capitol Speech



Fig. 8. Secretary Packer delivers speech at the US Capitol with staff, President and First Lady. (photo by Wesley Smith)

On November 14, 2002, following joint Congressional passage to authorize war in Iraq, I stood with USDAT staff in front of the US Capitol (Fig. 8) to address the nation^{xv} with the announcement of the joint passage of USDAT J. Res.1,^{xvi} passed by USDAT and the Global Virtualization Council. I stood firm with the artists, declaring: With this Joint Resolution, we have now authorized the use of artistic force... Either the Government will cease to demonstrate its continuing hostility, inventing self-created and deadly dangers that are growing beyond our control, colliding with the forces of chaos, or, for the sake of peace, we will lead a global coalition of artists to carry out acts of artistic mediation. If any doubt our resolve, our determination, they would be unwise to test it.”

10,000 Acts of Artistic Mediation



Fig. 9. Secretary Packer delivers speech at the University of Colorado.

In early 2003 I traveled across America announcing the 10,000 Acts of Artistic Mediation campaign in a desperate attempt to rally artists across the nation. In the “Speech of the Rockies,” delivered at the University of Colorado (Fig. 9) on February 26, just three weeks before the war began, I warned, “Today, the gravest danger we face, the gravest danger facing America and the world, is the existential darkness that has possessed our government, that grips its soul. Out of fear of the unknown, pain, and death - the Gods, surfacing from the immemorial depths of time and space - they could use their lethal weapons to bring down fire from the heavens, death and destruction that devours us all.” In this hour of darkness, I delivered a final plea to put into motion the forces of new and experimental forms of artistic mediation, quoting William Burroughs, “Weapons that change consciousness could call the war game in question.”^{xvii}

US DAT Visitor Center



Fig. 10. Secretary Packer and the USDAT Visitor Center at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. (photo by Phyllis Hecht)

Returning to Washington with the Iraq War underway, I installed the USDAT Visitor Center^{xviii} at the Corcoran Gallery of Art (Fig. 10). The exhibit, “Enter a Citizen, Exit a Revolutionary,” told the story of how USDAT was formed by artists seeking to reclaim America’s Government, to take it back, to make it their own. With the museum’s close proximity to the White House, we had realized the intent to insert our story into the heart of the nation’s capital in order to revolutionize the public. The Visitor Center featured a unique collection of tactical media, information panels, and a historical timeline detailing the chronology of the Department and its extraordinary achievement to construct a new political reality through techniques of art and illusion.

Part 4: Forms of Artistic Mediation

In the wake of the Iraq War, the crisis deepened. The impact of military intervention, with its dangerously naïve aspirations of democratic transformation, rendered a politics of chaos, breeding cultural divisiveness with apocalyptic ramifications throughout the world. I hastened to bring the principles of artistic mediation into action, designating 2004 as the “year of the experimental,”^{xix} and activated the Experimental Party to stage a political awakening, an artist-driven politic. The Experimental Party was conceived as a journey into an alternate reality, a shift to experimental thinking, a system of communication and production, a collective event that would transform the

disenfranchised into active citizens, enabling them to enter the political process with renewed hope and agency. The manifestations of the avant-garde were invoked, “linking aesthetic practice with political militancy, modern rupture with revolutionary history,”^{xx} with the hope of overcoming deteriorating political conditions with new forms of agency and artistic determination – inspired by André Breton’s surrealist call: “perhaps the imagination is on the verge of recovering its rights.”^{xxi} I recruited USDAT staff artists into action to produce a body of mediational works under the banner of the Experimental Party.

WetheBlog.org – “In Order to Form a More Artistic Union”

WetheBlog.org^{xxii} was the creation of USDAT Deputy Secretary Jeff Gates, which grew into a powerful on-line platform for critiquing conditions in America. It emerged as a virtual community of USDAT staff who were repositioning themselves as leaders on the world stage – the power of collective agency unleashed through a new form of publishing to “reframe issues for different publics and ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard.”^{xxiii} Wetheblog.org offered our readers on the Internet “an alternative to the propaganda of the spin doctors of the mainstream political parties.”^{xxiv} One of the first artist blogs to present critical commentary on political issues, WetheBlog.org effectively became a tool for tracking and analyzing events, a powerful tool of democracy, giving voice to the people, freely and non-hierarchically, to “fuel new ways of communicating... these methods... would result in human actions that were never possible before.”

Abe Golam for President



Fig. 11. Abe Golam on plasma monitor in the Oval Office of the White House. (image by Randall Packer & Mark Amerika)

With his campaign motto “representation through virtualization,” we announced the candidacy of the first digital avatar for President, Abe Golam,^{xxv} the info-shaman of the electrosphere from Mark Amerika’s hypernovel, *Grammatron*. Golam, as a chameleonic digital persona, inserted himself directly into the Oval Office of the White House (Fig. 11). Golam’s digital makeup guaranteed that he would “stir up controversy in the global computer networks, that “non-place” place where the true battle for democracy in America would be fought and won.” A daring wordsmith (like his creator), Golam understood the power of rhetorical subterfuge as a political tool for challenging the dominant political thought and other anachronistic paradigms, thus rewiring the consciousness of the viewer.

Media Deconstruction Kit



Fig. 12. Media Deconstruction Kit, remixing live television. (image by Randall Packer)

The reality of the 21st century has emerged as a hyper-reality of propaganda and illusion, a fabricated cultural narrative constructed by the news media. Events, information, ideas, and images are filtered through the media, packaged, and delivered to our screens where we enter into a state of seduction, hypnosis and submission. This state of affairs was compounded in the aftermath of 9/11: the use of media and the manipulation of its content must be understood as a breakdown between credible, meaningful communication and the frightening distortion of reality that confronted America. As a form of resistance to the systems of control that govern broadcast cable television and its propaganda, the *Media Deconstruction Kit* (MDK)^{xxvi} was designed, in collaboration with Wesley Smith, to reconfigure, disorient, and amplify the disinformation of news media. The MDK was used to scramble live news broadcast (Fig. 12) to underscore the hypnotic power of mass media to effect control, “to manufacture consent... to bring about agreement on the part of the public for things that they didn’t want.”^{xxvii}

Homeland Insecurity Advisory System



Fig. 13. Homeland Insecurity Advisory System Website. (artwork by Jonah Brucker-Cohen & Randall Packer)

The Homeland Insecurity Advisory System (HIAS)^{xxviii} was designed as a web-based, public rating system (Fig. 13) to allow citizens from across the globe to issue an advisory determining the US Government's daily threat level. In a tactic of reversal, the HIAS allowed the people to collectively challenge the internally determined, blatantly arbitrary, and highly manipulated threat level system of the Department of Homeland Security. This was accomplished through a real-time ranking system that averaged a daily sampling of public opinion from major US news sources. Through the careful analysis of news articles that describe the effectiveness of the US Government, citizens were given voice in anticipating imminent danger resulting from its actions. If the US Government could arbitrarily manipulate fear in the hearts and minds of citizens worldwide by raising and lowering its own Advisory System based on 'supposed' threats from abroad, then a system managed by the people must be in place to monitor government activities.

Voice of America



Fig. 14. Voice of America (Jill Steinberg) gazing at the Washington Monument. (photo by Randall Packer)

The Experimental Party and its tactics of mediation confronted a nation gripped by a nationalist fever and an existential fear of an unknown dark enemy. The American flag became increasingly ubiquitous as a symbol of determination and pride. Politicians brandished it on their lapel as a medal of honor, a badge of war. Congress passed the Patriot Act, a set of laws they claimed would protect citizens from the threat of terrorism, but in reality, crippled our democracy, threatened our freedom and our individual rights, deepening the fear. The Voice of America emerged (Fig. 14), the voice of the new America, blinded by patriotism, suffocating in pride, the military on the advance, culture wars erupting, battle lines drawn – our great experiment with democracy coming swiftly to a close.

Part 5: Anarchic Entertainment for the Nation



Fig. 15. Secretary Packer delivers speech at the Freedom of Expression National Monument in New York City.

With the 2004 Republican National Convention coming to New York City, a grand spectacle of political theater timed to exploit the 3rd anniversary of September 11th, USDAT prepared for its “convention intervention.” I delivered the “10,000 Acts of Artistic Mediation”^{xxix} speech at the Freedom of Expression National Monument in downtown New York (Fig. 15) – a brazen act of total theater, a call to artists resounding through the corridors of the City: “The artists of America have worked hard to get to this moment. We’ve survived the Patriot Act. We’ve spent months creating new work while on active duty. We will create a nation of radical self-expression through spontaneous theatrics and creative political play. In response to the Republican National Convention, we revel in sculpting transformative moments for ourselves and for the world around us, ‘we have to match that theater, to supplant it, and the RNC is going to be our 9th Symphony.’^{xxx}

Experimental Party DisInformation Center



Fig. 16. Experimental Party Disinformation Center installed at the LUXE Gallery in NYC. (photo by Randall Packer)

The decision to hold the Experimental Party DisInformation Center^{xxxi} (Fig. 16) at the 57th St. LUXE Gallery while the spotlight was on New York was of tremendous significance. It represented the need to manipulate worldwide media coverage of the 2004 Republican National Convention (RNC) while the Bush Administration was exploiting 9/11 for political propaganda. The installation was the culminating efforts of USDAT to activate forms of artistic mediation. At the opening, a coterie of politicos, press, protestors, performance artists, and the public gathered for an evening of pre-convention revelry. Inside the installation, visitors experienced the Media Deconstruction Kit manipulating live coverage of the RNC. Additional works were staged as a “digital mediarama” to create a theater of political counter-propaganda - the re-teleprompting and media hacking of all things politic. The Experimental Party Disinformation Center was at heart an information portal, the direct insertion of artistic mediation into the locus of the political arena.

Occupation of Madison Square Garden



Fig. 17. Occupation of Madison Square Garden during the 2004 Republican National Convention. (image by Andrew Nagy & Randall Packer)

One of the most ambitious initiatives of the Experimental Party was the Occupation of the Republican National Convention,^{xxxii} (Fig. 17.) carried out on the day of the opening gavel as Madison Square Garden was seized by General Andrew Nagy and the troops of the USA Exquisite Corpse. The occupation demonstrated that artistic forces utilizing tactics of virtualization could move at will and command the space, that imaginary construction transgressing the limits of reality “recognizes true statements to be islands in an alien archipelago, sometimes only accessible by leaps, flights, and voyages on vessels of artifice.”^{xxxiii} Following the handshake with General Nagy in the 7th Ave. theater of operations, I jubilantly concluded a press briefing with the official pronouncement: "Mission Accomplished."

Part 6: The Aftermath



Fig. 18. Secretary Packer delivers speech at the White Box Gallery in New York City. (photo by Phyllis Hecht)

In the aftermath of the Republican National Convention, with the run-up to the national election in full swing, I delivered the “Speech for the End of the World”^{xxxiv} at the White Box Gallery in New York City (Fig. 18) as part of the exhibition, *Democracy is Fun?*, which investigated the social mechanisms of art in politically tense times. In my speech, I warned, in apocalyptic terms: “If the artist shows uncertainty or weakness in the final days before the election, our nation may drift toward tragedy and ruin... Now we go forward, grateful for artistic freedom, faithful to our cause, and confident in the power of virtualization to invoke the deconstruction of all things politic. Yes, my fellow artists, I hereby declare, beyond the shadow of a doubt: Democracy is Fun! So help us God.”

End of Utopia



Fig. 19. America's Grave installed at American University. (artwork by Randall Packer & John Anderson)

If once I held Utopian aspirations for the role of the artist on the world stage – America transformed through revolutionary artistic thought, inspired by the avant-garde, Bureaucracy revised - this dream of a Utopia was abruptly crushed with the re-election of President George W. Bush on November 2, 2004. Despite the disinformation, the distortions, and the non-existent weapons of mass destruction, a majority of Americans were seduced and hypnotized by the media and its propaganda. America was dealt a fatal blow. On January 20, 2005, inauguration day, the nation died. In its memory, we installed America's Grave, (Fig. 19) where the last remains of the corporeal body of the nation now lie in electronic state.

America's Descent



Fig. 20. The Secretary-at-Large. (photo by Phyllis Hecht)

With the death of the nation, I fled underground to arm myself against justice and confront the powers that be, to retool techniques of artistic mediation and transform anew the evolving mythology of the US Department of Art & Technology. I re-emerged (Fig. 20) as the author of the Blog-Chronicles of the Secretary-at-Large,^{xxxv} tracking America's descent into the Abyss during perilous times. I now bid adieu and welcome you, with eyes wide open, to follow me in the artistic process, wherever it leads, to bear witness to unfolding post-apocalyptic conditions in America and around the world during the remainder of the Bush era (2005-2009). As Jean Cocteau described Orpheus' journey through the underworld: "Here are men's memories, and the ruins of their beliefs."^{xxxvi}

Coda

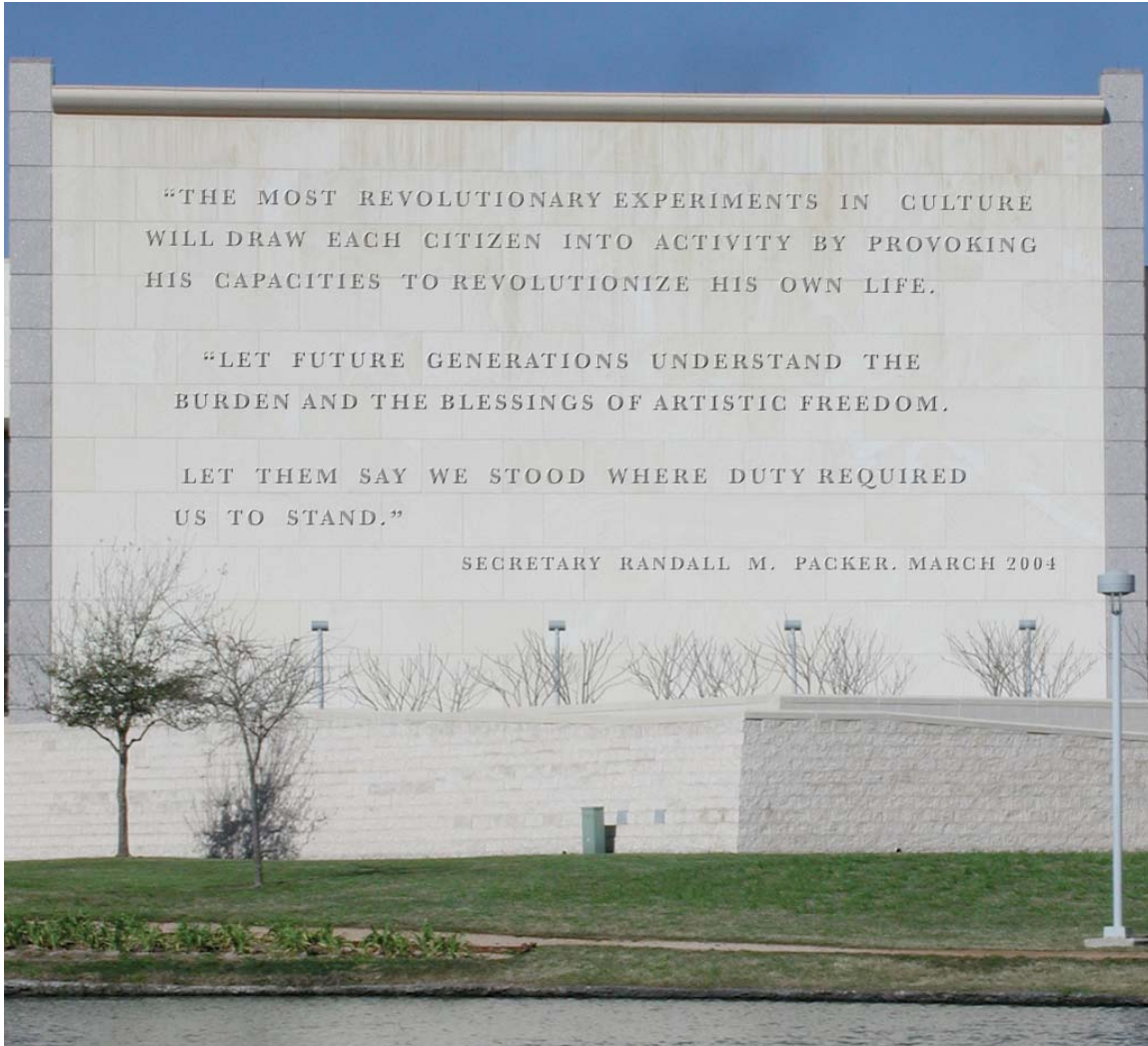


Fig. 21. Inscription at USDAT Archives. (photo by Randall Packer)

USDAT Secretary-at-Large Randall M. Packer is now at work on the video opera, “A Season in Hell,” a journey through the underworld of post-apocalyptic America. In addition to his urgent government responsibilities, he is Assistant Professor of Multimedia at American University in Washington, DC.

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ⁱⁱ “Letter to President Bush,” October 31, 2001, <http://www.usdat.us/archives/BushLetter.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, MIT Press, 1964

^{iv} Craig Saper, *Networked Art*, pg. x, University of Minnesota Press, 2001

^v “President Bush Establishes Executive Order,” November 9, 2001, http://www.usdat.us/archives/release_11-9.html

^{vi} “President Bush Nominates Randall Packer...” November 13, 2001, http://www.usdat.us/archives/release_11-13.html

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- xxv Mark Amerika, *Abe Golam for President*, <http://www.experimentalparty.org/abegolam/>
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