

# HIDDEN AGENDAS

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## Table of Contents

|  |        |
|--|--------|
| ABSTRACT.....  | pg. 1  |
| 1. INTRODUCTION.....                                   | pg. 2  |
| 2. SIGN AS SIMPLY A SIGN.....                          | pg. 3  |
| 3. RULES OF THIS WORK.....                             | pg. 5  |
| 4. APPROPRIATION OF <i>THE THEY LIVE CONCEPT</i> ..... | pg. 7  |
| 5. INFLUENCES.....                                     | pg. 9  |
| 6. FROM DOORS TO FENCES.....                           | pg. 13 |
| 7. CONCLUSION.....                                     | pg. 14 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....                                      | pg. 16 |

## List of Figures

|   |        |
|---|--------|
| 1.1. Examples of sign and symbol .....  | pg. 3  |
| 1.2. Kenneth Wilson, <i>Hidden Agendas</i> : installation view .....  | pg. 3  |
| 2.1. Roland Barthes, <i>Mythologies</i> , cover image .....   | pg. 3  |
| 2.2. Mark Titcher, <i>The World isn't Working</i> , 2008 .....  | pg. 4  |
| 2.3. Guy Debord, <i>Society of the Spectacle</i> , cover image .....  | pg. 4  |
| 2.4. Jacques Rancière, <i>The Politics of Aesthetics</i> , cover image .....  | pg. 5  |
| 3.1. Break room & private property signs .....  | pg. 6  |
| 3.2. "Mind the gap" warning sign .....  | pg. 7  |
| 4.1. Still from <i>They Live</i> , 1988 .....   | pg. 8  |
| 5.1. Banksy, <i>No Park, Just Parking...They Paved Paradise...</i> , unknown date .....                               | pg. 10 |
| 5.2. Kenneth Wilson, <i>Somewhere in Between, Police &amp; Thieves, and Notes<br/>on Nationalism, 2010-2011</i> ..... | pg. 10 |
| 5.3. Carsten Höller, <i>Test Site</i> , 2006 .....  | pg. 11 |
| 5.4. Mark Wallinger, <i>State Britain</i> , 2007 .....  | pg. 12 |
| 6.1. Simulation of CNC milled door .....  | pg. 13 |
| 6.2. Simulation of canvas with a hidden slogan .....  | pg. 13 |
| 7.1. Photo of <i>Hidden Agendas</i> on opening night .....  | pg. 15 |

Summary of Project Option in Lieu of Thesis  
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*Hidden Agendas* explores the role of signs within our daily life. Through a lens of semiology, the work reveals possible hidden meanings and ideologies within signs found in both public and private places. The work is a constructed representation of the suburban neighborhood including a fence, sidewalk, grass and gentle glow of fluorescent lighting. By engaging the work in a participatory fashion, the viewer is able to traverse this landscape, revealing concealed images and text within signs posted on the fence by use of a “device.” The components of the work, as well as the hidden elements, confront the viewer with an inquiry into the true meaning and motives of these authoritarian tools. More importantly, *Hidden Agendas* highlights the conflicting nature of a public verses private voice within signs.

## 1. Introduction

*Hidden Agendas* is a participatory gallery experience exploring the role of sign and symbol in the public/domestic threshold. The installation acts as a space for the exploration of semiology, or more simply, the role of sign and symbol and the meaning and values they dictate. Life is a constant mediation of sign and symbol, within both the domestic and public spheres. From the red and blue markings that denote hot and cold on the faucet we use to brush our teeth in the morning to the never-ending barrage of traffic signs on our commute home in the evening, our ingestion of signs and symbols is a quotidian action. We pay little attention to the semiology of our daily landscape. This piece invites the viewer to rethink our daily conditioning and to examine what we take for granted, locating a deeper political and ideological message in signs of the everyday.

*Hidden Agendas* is a representation of an actual environment, simulating the boundary between the public neighborhood and domestic home spaces. The site consists of a wooden plank fence, roughly sixteen feet by six feet, mounted onto the gallery wall. Two endcaps are used on either side to create an inaccessible space inside the fence and endcaps. Placed on the floor in front of the fence are pieces of sod and cement slabs to complete the aesthetic of a suburban neighborhood. On this fence there are a variety of signs arranged in a linear fashion. Centered in the middle of the fence and above the other signs are three custom-fabricated signs whose only purpose is to serve as the three main rules imposed on the other side of the fence. Two fluorescent lights are mounted behind the fence, which portrays the glow of light from the homestead. Finally, positioned along the right hand endcap of the fence are five “devices” which are placed on shelves. As the gallery audience approaches the work from the right, the devices are picked up by the viewer and turned on by a press of a button. Once the device is picked up and turned on, the viewer explores the posted signs, revealing hidden counter slogans within the signs as they move from right to left. *Hidden Agendas* creates a space to negate the dominant messages of these signs and imagines an alternative meaning to the messages and ideals they signify, as well as exemplifying how signs are representative of a dominant ideology. However, the authoritarian voices of these signs are not as easily revealed as one may think.



Figure 1.1. Examples of sign and symbol.



Figure 1.2. *Hidden Agendas*: installation view2.

## 2. Sign As Simply A Sign

Societies, institutions, and the places around you uniquely shape your beliefs and perhaps nothing better exemplifies this than the signs contained within these spaces. Morality, the sense of

right verses wrong, the feeling of belonging, the grip of religious ideology, and blinding political conviction are preprogrammed all around you in the patch of earth you call a home. More importantly, would be the effects of the aesthetical-political layer, or more simply, the imagery around you and its political connection. The terms semiology and Semiotics are synonymous with each other, both referring to the study of signs and their processes within our life. I choose the word semiology in the fashion of French theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes, who uses the term to explain the connections between sign and myth creation. *Hidden Agendas*

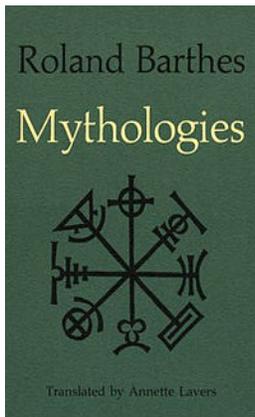


Figure 2.1. *Mythologies*.

focuses on one of the most simplistic examples of this kind of system, actual, physical road signs. By composing the installation artwork with

multiple signs of various materials and sizes and concealing hidden messages within them, I am focusing on the semantics and pragmatics of the messages these signs contain. What I am exploring in the creation of *Hidden Agendas* is the viewer's reaction to the original sign and message and then the concealed message I've created - which antagonizes the original message or changes the original meaning entirely. The concealed layer acts to critique the institutional intent of the signs and plays with our culturally dictated interpretation. This participatory action of picking up a "device," scanning the signs and revealing hidden messages, forces the viewer to reconsider the original motive of the sign as well as the effect these messages may have on the viewer's thought process by presenting them with new components that reveal an alternative agenda than what might first be considered.



Figure 2.2. Mark Titcher, *The world isn't working* (2008)

In the case of *Hidden Agendas*, as well as with daily life, we are dealing with image as the sign and all its visual components considered as a whole. Other forms of sign as image might include the television commercial, the corporate logo, or the city billboard for example. Roland Barthes would argue that semiology is so pervasive in society that even household consumer items need to be scrutinized for how they shape our belief structure (Barthes, 1972). For example, take how the packaging of your laundry products reflects a sense of gentle purity, yet strong capabilities to fight through tough stains (p. 36). Guy Debord (1970) would elaborately describe to use how our consciousness is a perpetual onlooker to a permanent social spectacle, a spectacle of society shaped by images. We are accustomed to signs in our everyday life. So much so that we do not scrutinize them for any agenda other than the obvious one signified by them. A lot can be gained by questioning the cultural need for this sort of

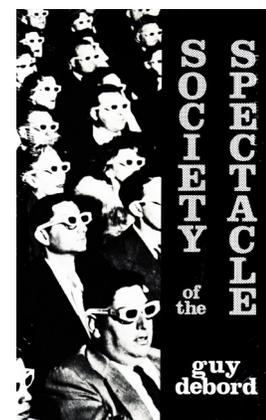


Figure 2.3. *Society of the Spectacle*.

control on society and as consumers of these structures a reflection on their control on us is needed. He states, “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (p. 2). Jacques Rancière would propose that the aesthetic layer of life is in fact the

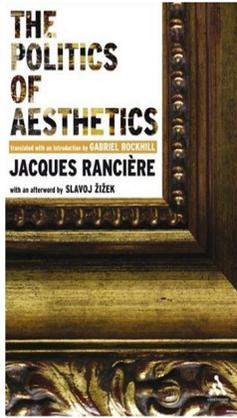


Figure 2.4. *The Politics of Aesthetics*

political layer glorified (Rancière, 2006). All images, whether traffic sign or not, need to be understood for the intrinsic connection to a society’s political agenda. While all three philosophers have distinct convictions about the visual/political constructs of society, there is a commonality. The important consensus is that we live in a world mediated by images, and more importantly for this work; many of those images are signs. Images play an important role in shaping of consciousness in regards to opinions, beliefs and morals. You are what you read, see and hear. What you read, see and hear; moreover, are indeed symbolic images shaping your opinions, beliefs, and morality.

With *Hidden Agendas*, the sign as image is constructed through the use of text and graphic elements as well as a concealed text and graphic layer. This creates two separate voices speaking their opinions, beliefs, and moralities to the viewer. The first being the system in which the original sign elements are agreed upon as a universal image with a universal meaning in a particular space, agreed upon by a particular group of individuals. Take for example the committee that publishes the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices*, A publication of the Federal Highway Administration (United States Department of Transportation, 2012). The second voice being the change in meaning created by me in the concealed messages as well as the custom fabricated signs. The next section explores this further.

### 3. Rules of This Work

Signs are tools of an authoritarian voice. Sometimes the voice is that of a government, for example the Department of Transportation approved traffic signs telling you the proper rules of your daily commute within a public space. Other times, the voice is that of a corporate entity such as the sign that delineates the break room from other places of production in the workspace. This voice can even be of a personal nature, taking as an example the common “No Trespassing” sign many home dwellers conspicuously place somewhere within the boundaries of their home space. What is important to realize here is the voice of the sign and its intrinsic relationship to a political ideology within the space it is located and where it broadcasts itself.



Figure 3.1. Break room & private property signs.

With *Hidden Agendas* we have a fence and endcaps, which acts to divide a public space and a private space. What is in front of the fence - the grass, the cement slabs, and even the posted signs - are in a public space. They are open to the gallery and it's patrons to walk on and around and is akin to the neighborhood sidewalk. What is behind the fence is private, the fence barricades it along with the endcaps, and no one can enter that space. This resembles the homestead often concealed behind such fences. In this sense, *Hidden Agendas* creates a threshold between the public and the private. What is interesting with delineating devices, such as fences, is the direction signs posted on them speak towards. For example, a "beware of dog" sign is voiced inwards. It tells you that inside this space is a dog in which may cause harm to you. On the other hand, a "25 mph" sign posted on a fence along a street speaks outwardly. It informs you that driving on the street, which is outside of the space confined by the fence, you must not exceed 25 mph while traveling.

Early investigations with my work began with a book with a rather long title: *Of Hospitality, Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida To Respond* (Dufourmantelle & Derrida, 2000). This was my first exposure to the writings of Derrida and more importantly, his notion of the threshold and it's dialectical nature. When speaking of hospitality as framed by a political threshold, take two homes separated by a fence as an example, he states: "Nowadays, a reflection on hospitality presupposes, among other things, the possibility of a rigorous delimitation of thresholds or frontiers: between the familial and the non-familial, between the foreign and the non-foreign, the citizen and the non-citizen, but first of all between the private and the public, private and public law, etc.," (p. 47). *Hidden Agendas* plays on this antagonism by having three signs that have no hidden messages. They are the rules to the land behind the fence and are spoken in a private voice. The voice in these three signs is direct and honest and therefore they contain no hidden agendas. There are also two signs,

apart from the three just discussed, in *Hidden Agendas* that are distinctly of a private nature. However, they are not honest in intention. The “for sale” and “beware of dog” are signs that are utilized by the dweller of a domestic space and are hung to speak inwardly. They inform you that if you enter this space, a dog may cause harm to you or that the space signified by the sign is open for purchase. In *Hidden Agendas*, these two signs reflect the will of the space behind the fence along with the three fabricated signs previously mentioned.

With signs, I am not quite convinced whether I believe you are being forcefully told what to think and do, or rather, being politely reminded of what to think and do. But what underlines either opinion is the action of being told what to think and do nonetheless. For example, trips on the London tube as a young child were not complete without the friendly reminder to “mind the gap.” I find this a rather polite way of warning against the potential of serious bodily harm if you think about it. I can also recall when I was younger that my stepfather often referred to the “idiot light” on his manual transmission Jeep. When inquired as to why he referred it as such, he would quickly inform you that having a warning light to tell you when you needed to shift gears, was like having the vehicle tell you that you were an idiot. I think the analogy suites *Hidden Agendas* as well. The viewer is able to reveal a new meaning from the signs, which antagonizes the original motives of the signs and plays with the notion of your assumed inferior intelligence. A further inquiry into the writings of Ranci re brought me to a very powerful statement. When speaking about human development in terms of the signifiers around it (2009), he states: “From this ignoramus, spelling out signs, to the scientist who constructs hypotheses, the same intelligence is always at work – an intelligence that translates signs into other signs and proceeds by comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate its intellectual adventures and understand what another intelligence is endeavoring to communicate to it” (p. 10).



Figure 3.2. "mind the gap" warning sign.

#### 4. Appropriation of the *They Live* concept

*Hidden Agendas* is participatory in that the viewer must have a “device” and actively search the installation for hidden slogans and images. The action of revealing the concealed in everyday life

came to me while watching a cult classic movie of the 1980s. The movie, *They Live*, presents us with a world in which class divisions have reached a pinnacle (Blay and Gordon, 1988). The rich are getting richer while the poor are growing poorer, much akin with today's Occupy Wall Street movement, who argue that this very scenario is a present reality. In the movie, however, the rich, elite class and the political leaders are aliens who have successfully blinded the human population with totalitarian slogans by hiding them in media such as billboards, magazine ads, television adverts, and consumer-commodity product packaging. It is only when viewing the world through special sunglasses, which were made by a small group of rebels, that a person is able to reveal the hidden messages in these socioeconomic, consumer-controlling devices. By brainwashing the populace through radio transmissions, the aliens are able to keep the human populace blind to their control and their subliminal messages, thus perceiving life as normal and aliens as fellow humans.



Figure 4.1. Still from *They Live* (1988).

While the movie presented a novel approach at critiquing the visual jargon of consumer-consumption back in 1988, Barthes had already well familiarized his readers with the mythological layer of visual media much earlier than that. The mythology in his case was the subliminal and hypnotizing effects and thus cultural conditioning of the advert system (Barthes, 1972). *Hidden Agendas* changes the case to the sign and explores the political and ideological meanings for this system of sign. The work stands to showcase how these tools act in a propagandist fashion for the institutions that mediate our daily lives. I am not voicing an explicit judgment on the altruistic nature of these signs in the work and I fully believe life, as we know it, would not exist if not for the implantation of these sorts of signs. Many signs do serve an important purpose and help to bring organization and understanding to an ever increasingly chaotic world. However, we must

acknowledge that this enforcement of rules came from outside us as an individual, no matter what the motive of the sign may be, good intentions or not. Our lives and our culture are bound by rules which are dictated and reinforced by signs. This is what opens the door for considering this system as propaganda, assuming we are able to move past the negative connotation that comes with the term. Take a sign persuading you to come to a stop at an intersection for fear of an accident and even death, for example. This sign is an instrument that reflects the opinion and consensus of a political entity – the United States Department of Transportation. It signifies that you must stop your vehicle here and proceed according to the law and that if you disobey this rule you may cause an accident or face injury. Though, the red octagon shape, which contains the word STOP, neither tells you where exactly to stop nor what you should actually stop doing. I find this functioning in an almost Orwellian sense, much like Oceania's three party slogans: war is peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength, which were pasted in large, bold font all over its land (Orwell, 1949). Through the use of the "devices", *Hidden Agendas* constructs a second system of meanings, intentions and morals upon the original system contained within them. The "devices" work like the sunglasses in the movie, they are tools to reveal the true motive and a reality that is hidden. So instead of the standard red octagon/text combination signifying you to stop your car, the addition of a hidden text element changes its meaning to inform you that you must stop making sense.

## 5. Influences

My earliest influence that shaped my artistic aesthetic was the well-popularized Banksy. As with all street artists, his work is controversial within the fine art realm, however, there is no denying the popularity the movement has had on contemporary culture. Notoriously known for his stencil and wheat-paste based street art, Banksy is also known for his simplistic, yet effective sculptures such as *Stonehenge* (2007), which was a recreation of the original Stonehenge made out of spray painted portable toilets. He is also credited with placing subverted images throughout galleries in the New York area, making a bold statement against the gallery system. The first couple years of my MFA schooling explored the appeal of street art, creating inject prints on canvas using transitional images which closely emulated the street art look. As I familiarized myself with stencil making and the use of laser cutters, I began making my own stencils. After creating a number of works with stenciled imagery I began to be concerned on how I was going to progress in an area already heavily recreated and how I was going to express my particular perspectives. That is where the exploration of U.V. paint began. The inspiration to make participatory work came next.



Figure 5.1 Banksy, *No Park, Just Parking....They Paved Paradise...*(unknown)



Figure 5.2. Kenneth Wilson, *Somewhere in Between, Police & Thieves, and Notes on Nationalism* (2010-2012).

Carsten Höller, A German born artist working in Sweden, was the first artist to spark the concept of participation as something beyond just the novel to me. He has had a very influential role in my art practice over the last year. My connection to him as an artist and his works is two folded. Firstly, he holds a Doctoral degree in the study of insect olfactory systems. I myself have experience working in an Urban Entomology lab (Höller, 2011). Ever since that experience, human life for me has been viewed as analogous to one large insect colony, moving about our daily life in constant response to strict stimuli. Secondly, his work focuses on the theme of human mediation. At times in his work this is political, though mostly it is through chemical responses, much akin with the systems of communication and instruction for insects. *Hidden Agendas* is an experiment in mediation too, however, I focus on the controlling nature of sign and symbol rather than with chemistry. His work, *Test Site* (2006), consisted of two steel tube slides installed at different heights

in the Tate Modern, London Museum (Höllner, n.d.). The work firstly forces a decision to be made - choosing which slide to partake in, creating a dialectic of sorts. The work then creates a sense of freeness from the mediation of that decision with the fun and engaging experience of sliding. This action of sliding creates a very different set of chemical and mental reactions in the participant than those at the time of the decision. Sets of these slides, in variations, have been installed in museums across the world. Works such as *Upside Down Mushroom Room* (2000), a room with various large scale recreations of mushrooms, and *Pill Clock* (2011), which is a machine that discharges one pill every 15 minutes into a pile, engage the viewer in issues of chemical control in today's overly medicated society, at times questioning the issues of legality and political influence. Höllner's works are mostly participatory, inviting the viewer to partake in the work rather than just observing it. His works illustrate Bourriaud's sense of relationalism, presenting a level of social and political engagement I find resonating with my conceptual interests (Bourriaud, 2002). Most of my early artwork aimed for a traditional, finalized, art object in the form of clean and neat canvas prints and projected computer programs. It was only after reviewing Höllner's work that the idea of participation fully entered my head as an approach I wanted to explore.



Figure 5.3. Carsten Höllner, *Test Site* (2006)

Finally, my work was most impacted by the British artist Mark Wallinger. As a child my father was stationed outside of Ipswich England. Years of my youth spent in Britain and my family connection to the military created a deep interest in the political agendas of both Britain and

America and their underlining relationship with each other. Wallinger's early career focused on issues pertaining to British nationality and politics. Later in his career he moved his attention to the gripping ideology of religion (Wallinger, 2011). Perhaps his most critical and influential work for me is his installation, *State Britain* (2007). The work is a recreation of an Iraq war protest camp originally created by the protester Brian Haw. Officials forcibly removed the original camp, located near the House of Parliament, after the passing of a new national security law. Wallinger formed a team that recreated all six hundred individual pieces of protest propaganda and rebuilt the camp inside of Tate Britain. Though later repudiated, Wallinger then placed a black line on the gallery floor which delineated the part of the work that fell inside of the newly formed anti-protest line that had been created as part of the new national security law and which was the reason for the original camp being torn down to begin with (State Britain, 2011). In this sense, Wallinger questioned the role of the art institute, taking what was once deemed as deviant and casting it under the acceptable light of fine art. His ability to make small, yet powerful political and theological critiques in his work is a quality I truly admire. Sometimes the boldest statements are said in subtle voices and Mark Wallinger is a perfect example of this.



Figure 5.4. Mark Wallinger, *State Britain* (2007).

## 6. From Doors to Fences

*Hidden Agendas* began as a way to explore the notion of the threshold. My reading of Derrida left me with need to explain how thresholds delineate dialectics and to express that this framing device was something much more than what holds a door in place. Initial plans for *Hidden Agendas* began with creating a series of doors that were to be freestanding in the gallery space. The viewer would open the doors and move from one side of the threshold to the other. Images on the doors were to refer to a particular social construct that exists as a dialectic in society, such as religion or politics. However, experiences with milling the images into the doors, utilizing a 3-axis CNC mill, left with me with less than desirable aesthetic results. The planning I had done in regards to making these doors was not going to give me the results I wanted and the approach had to change shape.



Figure 6.1. Simulation of CNC milled door.



Figure 6.2. Simulation of canvas with a hidden slogan.

What was to accompany these freestanding doors was to be a set of five large canvas prints containing totalitarian slogans. These prints would have hidden counter slogans on them and these hidden messages were to be revealed through the use of a U.V. black light. Similar to how the project was finalized, the black lights would be placed somewhere in the vicinity of the prints so that the viewer could make the connection that they are to pick it up and explore. I was attempting to make a connection between the thresholds created by the doors and the authoritarian nature in which they mediate our life. However, the work was too complicated together at this moment. Two distinct sets of works with such heavy theoretics proved too difficult to coalesce into one gallery experience. For me the work needed simplification.

What I did have working for me, however, was this concept of threshold as a delineating device and the layer of the concealed in ideology. The inclusion of a fence as a base object satisfied my need to portray a threshold and *Hidden Agendas* formed into the exploration of signs from domestic and public spaces. I moved away from sign as totalitarian slogan on canvas to sign as physical sign. I began thinking about the signs of my everyday, observing them all around my home

and me and I became particularly interested in the traffic and informative signs I was seeing all around me. More importantly, I was intrigued at how these signs function and how the sign's voice seemed to mask a higher agenda. Keeping in mind the connection of the aesthetic layer of life with the political, I began creating counter meanings and messages to the signs I was seeing. This was a perfect resolution for the clear U.V. black light paint I was exploring; I could utilize the paint to create concealed images and messages on real signs.

After the initial framework of fence and sign was established, the final phase was to resolve the full aesthetics of *Hidden Agendas* and to ground the work within the gallery experience. Discussions with my committee brought the idea of grass and concrete as major symbols of the suburban atmosphere to light. The addition of these elements not only helped accent the signs and fence, it is the strongest connection the viewer has to the everyday neighborhood experience. Even houses in major metropolitan areas find room for a little grass, even if just a small strip. Grass is precious, one only has to remind themselves of the numerous "keep of the grass" signs darting our suburban landscape. It is a commodity to be protected.

Finally, the need to highlight the space delineated by the fence and end-caps was needed. Since it was my intention to portray the fence as separating the public from the private, the idea of a light glowing from a house seemed appropriate. By utilizing 2, 4-foot fluorescent lights and mounting them just inside of the fence, the simulation of a populated dwelling is created. I noticed only after implementation in the gallery that one might also view the lights and how they fall onto the wall above the work as similar to the glare of two headlights heading right for the fence. I think this rather macabre suggestion is a good place to close with.

## 7. Conclusion

*Hidden Agendas* is finished only in a temporary sense. As an artist I believe in the value of never fully closing the book on any one particular piece and this work is no different. What I will say next may be hard to believe, and even more so to understand, but *Hidden Agendas* is the first work I can say I'm truly proud of because I feel influences, practice and engagement with the work was fully resolved in way I have not been able to achieve before. The excitement and enthusiasm I observed while people exchanged with my work was truly electrifying and deeply fulfilling. I was in a state of amazement and astonishment I have never felt before and I loved it. Whether or not people agreed with my work, they enjoyed engaging with it in a provocative way and I recall not

seeing anyone who wasn't excited by my approach. I overheard comments of approval, comments of concern and even comments of outright disapproval, however, when all was said and done, I knew I had made people think. That has been and always will be my goal as an artist – to make people think about the constructs and institutions around them and how they shape our daily lives. I would like to pursue a PHD in studio practice at some point in my future, preferably in the U.K. or Australia, however, it is increasingly hard to predict ones future in these trying economic times. I feel there is still a lot to be explored with the concept of revealing the concealed in the everyday. Hidden U.V. paint might reach a point of repetitiveness quickly for me, but the level of participation it brings is unique. I'd like to continue finding new ways to activate or bring to light, that which is unseen. Above all, however, my goal is to feel what I felt on opening night with *Hidden Agenda* again. The feeling of gratification an artist has when a work comes together and fully engages the audience with the issues presented to them is beyond words.



Figure 7.1. Photo of *Hidden Agendas* on opening night.

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