

Public Art Fund presents...

THE MUSTER
A PROJECT BY ALLISON SMITH
On Governors Island
Saturday, May 14, noon-5pm

Come one, come all to *The Muster*, a one-day, open-air celebration centering on the question “What are you fighting for?” posed by artist and self-appointed Mustering Officer Allison Smith. This public art event, organized by Smith and produced by the Public Art Fund, will take place on Governors Island, the former national military post located in New York Harbor. Beginning at noon on Saturday, May 14, free ferry service from Lower Manhattan will bring the public on the 5-minute trip over to the island. Once there, visitors can tour an encampment of more than 50 campsites and art installations, created by an army of “enlisted troops” selected by Smith and the Public Art Fund. The event will be located on the marching grounds of Fort Jay, the 18th-century, star-shaped fortification that looks out onto spectacular vistas of the Statue of Liberty and the Manhattan skyline. The afternoon will include an array of activities—mock battles, American Folk portrait painting, magic shows, quilting bees, soapbox speeches, and more—culminating with a formal “Declaration of Causes” at 2pm on a central stage.

What is *The Muster* ?

As a military term, muster refers to a gathering of troops for the purposes of inspection, critique, exercise, and display. *The Muster*—which Smith describes as a “polyphonic marshalling of voices”—adopts the language and aesthetic of a Civil War reenactment, a longstanding tradition in which military history buffs form regiments, wear period uniforms, and recreate battles and other scenarios. Like Civil War reenactors—or like people who dress and act in “living history” displays at historic sites like Colonial Williamsburg—participants in *The Muster* will engage in the articulation of identities through performance.

Beyond its military roots, *The Muster* will also bear a resemblance to a country fair or an early 20th-century carnival. Blending art, craft, culture, history, and social activism, the event embodies Smith's interest in community and freedom of expression. *The Muster* will not involve enacting a specific war from the past; instead, Smith uses the format to create an occasion and a forum for individual expression of diverse causes. The day's structure will be organized by Smith, but it is the participants themselves who determine what shape the actual event takes.

Smith has long been interested in the notion of "authentic reproductions," a common if oxymoronic phrase describing contemporary objects or tableaux that conjure historical aesthetics and episodes. She uses American history and, in particular, the charged circumstances of the Civil War as a starting point from which to imagine and create new narratives for the 21st century. *The Muster* expands on the reenactor's belief that events lost to history can gain meaning and contemporary relevance when performed live in an open, participatory manner.

The Participants

Earlier this year, Smith distributed a broadsheet "call to arms and art," asking fellow artists and all others "What are you fighting for?" She invited people to declare a cause and enlist in *The Musters's* volunteer militia: "Emblazon your Cause on a self-fashioned uniform. Enact your own costume drama. Wear your war on your sleeve. Show off your revolutionary style....Use your art supplies to make new forms of trench art. For, wherever you place yourself amidst the advances and retreats of art history, we are making an arsenal, a record, a form of currency, and a conversation."

In the days leading up to May 14, each of Smith's enlistees will create a uniform and build a campsite that revolves around his or her stated cause. The causes vary widely, from the political to the whimsical, addressing art history, technology, gender, democracy, sociology, and so on. In the participatory spirit of the event, several projects center on collective art-making. Artist Albert Pedulla will set up a campsite where visitors can express their "right to paint" by making art directly onto the tent's interior—his project even includes a "Get Out the Paint" campaign. Liz Collins will organize Knitting Nation, where a team of 15 knitters armed with portable machines will be at work making a giant banner.

Several proposals revolve around the themes of communication and documentation. One enlistee, Abby Walton, will act as “Muster Mail” postmaster, supplying materials for visitors to write letters that will be sent from Governors Island. Nicole Eisenman and A.L. Steiner will create a soapbox for the purpose of “exclamatory and investigative reflections.” Patrick Meagher’s cause is the “Desktop Revolution,” where visitors can create stickers, flyers, buttons, and other media munitions. Artist Lora Morganstern, who is fighting for “Art Education through Folk Arts,” will paint miniature portraits of visitors. In a related vein, Eve Fowler, who is fighting “to archive,” will make short video portraits inspired both by Andy Warhol’s screen tests and Matthew Brady’s Civil War-era battlefield photography.

Other artists address issues relating to the military, both historic and contemporary. William Bryan Purcell will fashion an elegant, all-pink Civil War infantry uniform—complete with pink musket and flag—as part of his Pink Brigade encampment, where visitors can take part in hair-braiding, nail painting, and other “sweet and girly” activities. Marie Lorenz, Melissa Brown, and others will fight for a “return to chivalrous battle techniques,” attempting to preserve and promote a cross-section of historic military style. Michael Cluer’s tent will feature photomurals of the Iraq War, which visitors can look at while sipping cups of tea.

Other projects, activities, and events include a haunted Civil War-style ghost campsite (Gary Graham), a Muster Trading Post (Beth Houfek and Lee Taylor), a contemporary hardcore/rock update of the traditional marching band (Kathleen Smith), a “magic cube” (Jacob Robichaux), yoga (Sam Gordon), a periodic reading room (Brindalyn Webster), marine conservation (Leslie Wayne’s Blue Ocean Infantry), and more than thirty others.

This event is free of charge. Refreshments will be available for purchase.

Schedule for Saturday, May 14, 2005

11:45am – Ferries begin running between Lower Manhattan and Governors Island

Noon-5pm – The Muster is open to the public

2pm – Declaration of Causes will take place on stage

5:45pm – Last ferry departs

Directions: The Governors Island ferry is free-of-charge and departs from Slip 7 of the Battery Maritime Building on FDR Drive (South Street) at Broad Street. The building is

adjacent to the Staten Island Ferry at the southern tip of Manhattan. By subway: 1, 9 to South Ferry; 4, 5 to Bowling Green; R, W to Whitehall Street. By car: there is no public parking available at Slip 7. A map indicating parking facilities in Lower Manhattan can be downloaded from www.themuster.com. Please note, *no pets allowed*.

Ferry Timetable: Leaving Manhattan: 11:45am, 12:15pm, 1pm, 1:45pm, 2:30pm, 3:15pm, 4pm

Return from Governors Island: 12pm, 12:30pm, 1:15pm, 2pm, 2:45pm, 3:30pm, 4:15, 5:15pm, 5:45pm

Allison Smith is a Brooklyn-based artist. In her sculptures and mixed-media installations, she investigates the ways in which a simple prop, bridging past and present, can come to signify more than its appearance suggests. She creates colonial handcrafts, Civil War memorabilia, and 19th-century weapons, often arranged to transform the exhibition space into that of a historic home or period room. *The Muster* on Governors Island will be Smith's second such event: over the summer of 2004, she organized a weekend encampment on the Catskills property of Mark Dion and J. Morgan Puett.

She was born in Manassas, Virginia in 1972. She received a BA in psychology from the New School for Social Research (1995), a BFA from Parsons School of Design (1995), and an MFA from Yale University School of Art (1999). She participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program (1999-2000). She has had solo exhibitions at Bellwether Gallery (2002) and the Eldridge Street Project (2001); her next show at Bellwether Gallery opens May 26, 2005.

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