

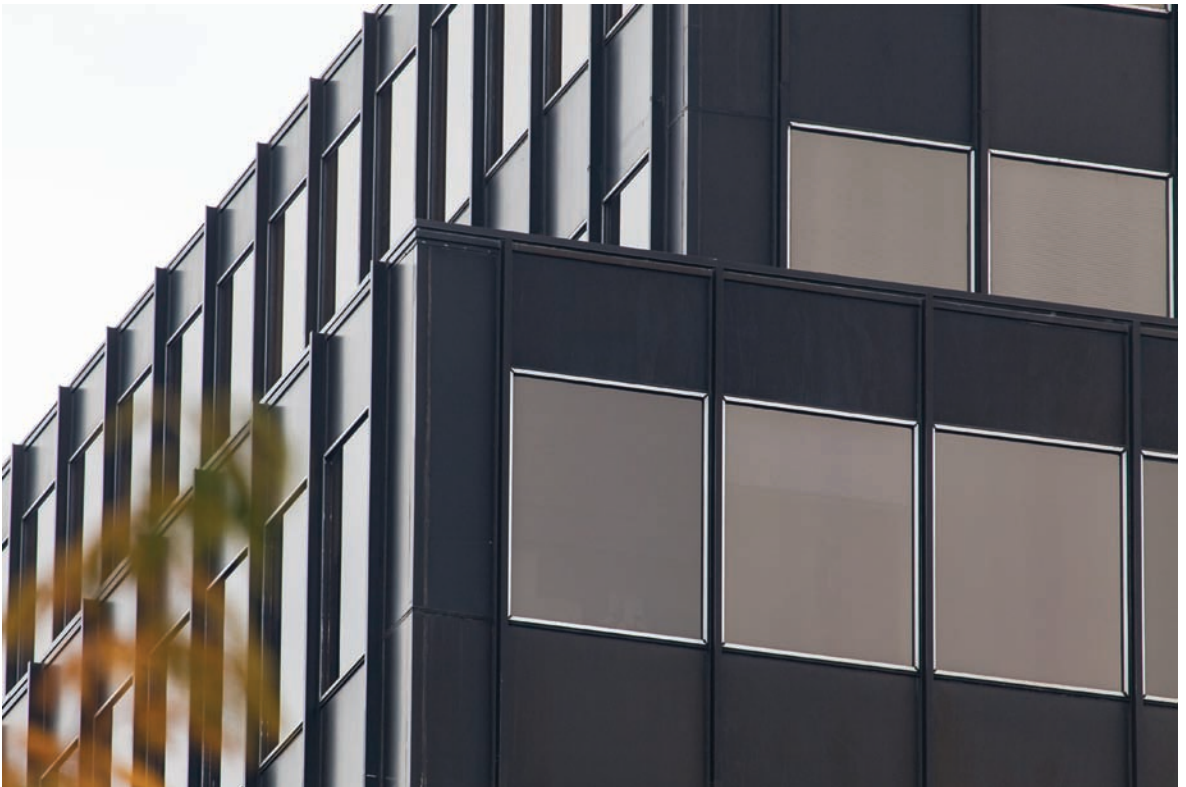
## Flash: Steve Rowell

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At its core, the US constitutional democracy is motivated by a theory that human cognition has a basic capacity to recognize stronger justifications among competing arguments.<sup>1</sup> Guided by their belief in this cognitive capacity, the Constitution's framers self-consciously chose to design our democratic institutions in a way that would compel organized groups, when making proposals for how best to use the coercive capacity of the government, to state their arguments and rationales in a way that is public and visible. Most notably, James Madison (1751-1836), the fourth US President, offered the conception of the “extended sphere” of a large republic, in which diverse groups with many

disparate interests could find common ground for action only in policies that articulated some larger, common interest. This optimistic view of human cognition also motivated the founders to elaborate the First Amendment rights for free expression. It is essentially this belief in the capacity of political institutions to induce rational public argumentation that provides the original moral and intellectual justification of our democracy.

Steve Rowell's *Parallelograms* (2015) offers a profound challenge to this essentially hopeful and optimistic view, using art as an analytical vehicle to question whether our democratic institutions



Competitive Enterprise Institute, 1899 L Street NW Suite 1200, Washington, DC 20036. Production still from *Parallelograms*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

can continue to play this constructive role of inducing public arguments in a world of dark money and organized subterfuge among ideologically driven advocacy groups. *Parallelograms* articulates this critique in a multimedia digital art project that juxtaposes the physical manifestations of organized groups in contemporary political life with an implied parallel, unseen world where corporations and ideological groups gain influence through a complex web of anonymous contributions and insider political trading—through fact-free or fact-denial argumentation, rather than through rational discourse in the public sphere.

Rowell's primary expression of this critique comes in the form of an experimental documentary video capturing the facades of advocacy group offices, such as those for the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the American Legislative Exchange Council, which for the most part are housed in office buildings designed in the Brutalist architectural style. The video's imperfectly still images of each office building convey a built environment of inscrutable political influence, the plain exterior betraying no sense of the character or content of the activities of the groups housed within. When filmed at an oblique angle, the Brutalist-style windows appear to the eye as geometric parallelograms, each coated in reflective material, obscuring activities within the offices while framing movements of the sun and clouds outside. To the viewer each window implies the existence of an intangible, abstract, elusive, alternate, or parallel world that is fully removed from public scrutiny.

The advocacy groups themselves provide the narration for these images in the form of their own answering service outgoing messages, with robotic voices responding to Rowell's after-hours phone calls. Each recording gives the name of an organization, its normal business hours, instructions on dialing extensions, and options to leave messages in the general mailbox. These pre-recorded messages at once suggest the presence, during normal business hours, of a receptionist instructed to screen out calls from outsiders, and the daily phone conversations among insiders who have access within the networked web of group influence. When the outgoing message for Raytheon encourages Rowell to say the word "Emergency" to trigger an after-hours response, the viewer can only speculate how the artist finds the willpower to resist.

Paired with the film is a website that provides interpretive text as well as a spatial representation of this network of influence in the form of an 1859 map of Washington, DC riddled with red- and white-colored dots marking the current geographic location of each lobbying group.<sup>2</sup> The pre-Civil War map evokes the original instantiation of Madison's hopeful conception of an extended sphere, while the profusion of dots conveys the scale of the corporate-industrial political landscape of contemporary DC. Rowell's key insight, and the basis of his devastating critique, lay in his differentiation of red from white dots in the spatial layout of organizations on the map. Rowell asserts the white dots indicate the traditional lobbying groups we normally associate with insider

influence: think tanks, advocacy groups, trade associations, firms, and other groups that state their organizational goals publicly.

Considering the white dots in isolation, that is, setting aside the red dots, one can perceive the extended sphere of interest group social and communication networks in which, given the scale and multiplicity of organized lobbying voices, no one organization can manage control of policy outcomes, and so are forced to resort to an elite discourse, using data-driven arguments and analysis as a common language.<sup>3</sup> While this inside-the-beltway discourse is inaccessible to non-experts and ordinary citizens, a modern-day Madison might hope that among the white-dotted organizations the publicness of policy argumentation might still harness science, data and analysis, rational arguments, and hence even possibly the better nature of human cognition.<sup>4</sup> Among the white dots, one could attempt to make a case for some version of democratic legitimacy, strained though that case must be, given the inaccessibility of the language of policy analysis to ordinary citizens.

The red dots, mingled among the white dots, represent the groups that, to Rowell, hide their agendas behind vague, insincere mission statements that do not match the groups' actual intended actions. Using artistic license to render this distinction, he offers this map as a criticism of the activities of groups such as Koch Industries Government Relations, Crossroads Grassroots Policy Strategies, Citizens United, and Goldman Sachs Government Relations. One can argue whether any given group should or should not be labeled with a red dot, but even so, Rowell's larger criticism stands given the growth industry of organizations and political discourse that rejects the very notion of public, rational argument. Groups that belong in the red dot category are the ones that fervently advocate policies that are not rooted in science or evidence. In advancing their political ambitions, red-dot groups reject science as ideology in parallel to their rejection of public discourse, and hence, no matter how hard one tries, one cannot construct any claim for democratic legitimacy for their practices.

Rowell's hope is that *Parallelograms* can raise awareness by shedding critical and constructive light on this corrosive phenomenon. As long as our society remains rooted in enlightenment science, our reaction as a society, with some perseverance, might eventually force such organizations to state their views in a way that can expose them to scientific assessment and rational debate, if not to public scrutiny and popular control. But as the discourse in the current election cycle seems to reinforce a notion that we are moving into post-fact politics, financed courtesy of the *Citizens United* decision,<sup>5</sup> and amplified by click-seeking traditional and social media, Rowell's red dots may very well document the beginning of the end of Madison's hope for a rational, constructive extended sphere for democratic discourse.

—Kevin M. Esterling

## Notes

1. Compare Thomas Jefferson's statement "Truth is great and will prevail if left to herself" from the founding generation, to Jürgen Habermas's contemporary assertion of "the unforced force of the better argument." See Thomas Jefferson, *Statutes at Large in Virginia*, ed. W.W. Hening, vol. 12, 1823: 84-86; and Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, eds. Ciaran P. Cronin and Pablo De Greiff, The MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 1998 (originally published 1996): 37.
2. See <http://www.steverowell.com/index.php/current/parallelograms> (accessed June 30, 2016).
3. See Hugh Hecló, "Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment," *The New American Political System*, ed. Anthony King, American Enterprise Institute, 1978: 87-124.
4. See extended argument in Kevin M. Esterling, *The Political Economy of Expertise: Information and Efficiency in American National Politics*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2004.
5. *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* was a 2010 US constitutional law case addressing the regulation of campaign spending by organizations. The Supreme Court held that Freedom of Speech prohibited the government from restricting independent political expenditures by the conservative nonprofit corporation Citizens United. This principle has since been extended to for-profit corporations, labor unions, and other associations.

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**Steve Rowell** (born in 1969 in Houston, TX) is a research-based artist currently living and working in Los Angeles. He works with still and moving images, sound, installation, maps, and spatial concepts. This transdisciplinary practice focuses on overlapping aspects of technology, perception, and culture as related to ontology and landscape. Since 2001, he is Program Manager at The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), Los Angeles, and he has collaborated with SIMPARCH, Chicago, and The Office of Experiments, London. His work has been exhibited at a range of galleries and museums, including MoMA PS1, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Yerba Buena Center for The Arts, San Francisco; Ballroom Marfa; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Center for PostNatural History, Pittsburgh; Institute for Visual Art, Milwaukee; Temporäre Kunsthalle, Berlin; Barbican Art Centre, London; John Hansard Gallery, Southampton; and as part of the 2006 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. In 2013 he received awards from Creative Capital and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts.

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**Flash! contemporary art series** features single works made within the last year. The series is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, at the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock. *Flash: Steve Rowell* is the fourteenth exhibition in the series.