

On the Relationship between Theory and Practice in Socially Engaged Art

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Recent debates around socially engaged art have focused on the spatial and temporal nature of social change (the relationship, for example, between an ephemeral event and the more lasting transformation of a given social structure, or between local or situational action and global, or geographically extensive, forms of organized resistance). More specifically, these debates ask how the local, situational or “ad hoc” actions often encountered in socially engaged art practices are related to systematic forms of domination.¹ A typical reproach directed at projects of this nature is that they function as little more than window dressing for a fundamentally corrupt system. The only way to produce real, meaningful change is to engage in the direct overthrow of the capitalist economy in its entirety. This criticism is necessary but not sufficient. The problem with this approach, of course, is that it relies on a hyperbolic model of capitalism (as an entirely impenetrable and fixed system of domination) while also assuming that artists today actually have the option of aligning themselves with an existing revolutionary movement, poised to launch an all-out assault on neo-liberal capitalism, and have simply refrained from doing so. The conventional avant-garde resolution to this impasse is to withdraw from any direct engagement with the social or political world in order to embody a pure principle of radical negation, assaulting all existing values and systems of meaning. Not surprisingly, these gestures have become almost entirely routinized within the protocols of international exhibitions and biennials (often serving as the necessary scandal that demonstrates the openness of a system predicated on hierarchy and wealth). In most cases they simply allow artists to pose as incendiary critics of capitalism while securing a comfortable living from the investment habits of the 1%, to whom they sell their work.

The residues of this larger belief system continue to inform art criticism. We can identify two related assumptions that have been especially problematic when directed at the analysis of socially engaged art.

- The assumption that any form of art practice that produces some concrete change in the world or is developed in alliance with specific social movements (via the creation or preservation of a park, the generation of new, prefigurative collective forms, shifts in the disposition of power in a given community etc.) is entirely pragmatic and has no critical or conceptually creative capacity.² Or, alternately, that such projects, by suggesting that some meaningful change is possible within existing social and political structures, do nothing more than forestall the necessary, but inevitably deferred, revolution.
- The assumption that any given art project is *either* radically disruptive or naively

ameliorative (trafficking in “good times, affirmative feelings and positive outcomes” as a typical blog posting describes it).³ This is paired with the failure of many critics to understand that durational art practices, and forms of activism, always move through moments of *both* provisional consensus or solidarity-formation *and* conflict and disruption.

This isn’t to say that there aren’t numerous “social art” projects that are based on simplistic, de-politicized concepts of community. However, if these projects are problematic it’s not because they seek to engage in a concrete manner with the world outside the gallery or museum, or rely on processes of consensually-based action. It’s because they have a naïve or non-existent understanding of power and the nature of resistance. The most damaging of these assumptions, for a theory of socially engaged art practice, involves the failure of critics to grasp the generative capacity of practice itself—it’s ability to produce new, counter-normative insights into the constitution of power and subjectivity.

Is there another way for us to understand the transformative nature of socially engaged art practice? This complex question is made more difficult by the accumulated weight of past art theory and criticism. Conventional forms of artistic practice (installation, painting, sculpture, time-based media, and more traditional, actor-centered modes of performance art) raise a very different set of questions that are, in many cases, not applicable to socially engaged art projects. Here the “practice” entails the artist devising a particular set of forms, events or objects that are presented to a viewer. In this case the primary generative moment, the moment when decisive choices are made regarding the formal, material and discursive constitution of the work as a unified, apprehensible object, occurs prior to the arrival of the viewer. The situation is, of course, quite different with many socially engaged art projects. Here the act of production (“practice” in the conventional sense) and reception are coincident. Moreover, artistic practice at this level becomes “transgradient” (to use one of Bakhtin’s favorite concepts) with other, non-artistic, forms of cultural production, from participatory planning to environmental activism to radical pedagogy. Thus, we have a form of art production that requires us to reconceptualize our understanding of both the “viewer” and the act of reception, and that also exhibits a promiscuous relationship to other modes of cultural action.

This promiscuity opens up an important line of analysis that connects socially engaged art with a larger set of debates over the more general interrelationship between theory and practice. We might recall here the dramatic transformation that occurs in the ambitions of the Frankfurt School between the moment of its founding in the early 1930s and the period during and after WWII. As Horkheimer outlines in his inaugural lecture (“The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks for an Institute of Social Research” in 1931) the goal of a properly “critical” theory was to challenge the abstraction and pseudo-transcendence of traditional theory by integrating theoretical production with the empirical analysis of, and practical engagement with, actual social movements. The Frankfurt School was thus organized around a transdisciplinary approach that would unite scholars in the fields of sociology, psychology, political economy

and philosophy with the goal of producing an exhaustive analysis of the nature of capitalist domination and the most effective mechanisms for challenging it. The reciprocal interconnection between theoretical reflection and political action was central to the definition of a “critical” theory. By the mid-1940s the mission of the Frankfurt School had been dramatically curtailed, leading to an often sterile functionalism. Confronted with the failure of the proletariat to unite in opposition to fascism and the emergence of a “totalized domination” that made the capitalist, fascist and communist state systems virtually indistinguishable (at least to Adorno and Horkheimer), the germ of an authentic revolutionary drive had been transferred to the sequestered realm of fine art, where it would be held in trust until a more fortuitous historical moment called for its reactualization.

The key effect of this shift was to uncouple theory from any relationship to the specific, empirically verifiable, effects of social and political resistance. Under the monolithic power of a “totally administered society” outlined in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, virtually every other cultural form except art, and every other intellectual discipline, except a very specific mode of self-reflexive philosophy, had been irredeemably contaminated by the instrumentalizing drive of capitalist rationality. If no real change was possible here and now, then there was no point in cultivating a set of analytic tools for understanding the nature of contemporary political resistance. And if art could only preserve its new role as singular bastion of revolutionary truth by abjuring any direct involvement with the social or political world, there was no reason to reflect on the potential relationship between art, or theory, and practical resistance. Here we encounter two key beliefs that remain a persistent feature of much contemporary art criticism. First, that the artist (or artist qua theorist) possesses a uniquely privileged capacity to comprehend the totality of capitalist domination, standing in for a proletariat that has remained stubbornly indifferent to its historical destiny (Adorno uses the metaphor of the artist as a “deputy”). And second, that art can preserve this remarkable prescience only by refusing to debase itself through any direct involvement with social resistance or activism. This is the foundation for Adorno’s famous attack on what he viewed as the naïve “actionism” of student protestors during the late 1960s.⁴

We can observe here a symptomatic ideological and discursive transference, in which the conventional principle of aesthetic autonomy is infused with a new, revolutionary, rationale (the very distance that art takes up from quotidian life provides it with a privileged vantage point from which to diagnose the overdetermination of this life by economic imperatives). This transformed concept of aesthetic autonomy is evident across a range of contemporary art practices, most recently in Thomas Hirschhorn’s crude opposition between “pure art” (the foundation of his own practice) and “social work”. In his widely publicized *Gramsci Monument* project, Hirschhorn was able to provide an extraordinary level of economic support (including summer art classes and a computer center for children, as well as comparatively well-paying jobs) to the residents of the Forest Houses complex, located in a chronically under-resourced working class neighborhood in the Bronx. He was able to retain his “purity” precisely by refusing to take any responsibility for the disappointment, frustration or

disillusionment of those residents when, after eleven weeks, these resources, and the accompanying outpouring of public concern that the neighborhood had enjoyed, were abruptly withdrawn. The lesson, for the residents of Forest Houses, was that in the absence of the artist's charismatic personality (and funding sources), "art" as such is no longer sustainable.⁵ For Hirschhorn, the practices and methods of creative transformation necessary to produce more sustainable or meaningful change in Forest Hills are dismissed as intrinsically uncreative "social work".

I would suggest that, far from violating the purity of the aesthetic, socially engaged art practices often represent a compelling re-articulation of it, involving as they do many of the key features we have come to associate with aesthetic experience, including the suspension or disruption of habitual forms of thought, the cultivation of an openness to our own intersubjective vulnerability, and a recognition of our own agency in generating normative values. In order to develop a more substantive theoretical analysis of socially engaged art, however, I do believe it's necessary to challenge the singular privilege we've been taught to assign to art and the personality of the artist, and to acknowledge that art exists along a continuum with a range of other cultural practices that hold the potential to produce disruptive or counter-normative insight. Artistic practice certainly carries its own specific methods, protocols and capacities, generated through its extremely complex history, but it also shares points of productive coincidence with other practices. I would also suggest that we need to reconsider the specific ways in which the relationship between the pure and the impure, theory and practice, and art and life, have been configured in existing art criticism. To often each of these is treated as a synchronically fixed, *a priori* entity, when the space between them is always, potentially, semipermeable. Certainly "life," if fully comprehended, is not the realm of simpleminded habitual blindness that is so often evoked by the canon of critical theory, and art, in its actual effects, is not always its opposite. Autonomy, or the space of autonomy, is produced diachronically, through the tactical shifting of certain material frames and discursive and institutional systems. And in these spaces it's possible to engage in both "practical" action and the generative, distanced reflection that we have come to associate with theory. Action, as such, always contains both a practical moment (in its orientation to concrete change and in the pragmatic feedback loop that must always exist between this change and self-reflection) and a utopian or prefigurative one, expressing in embryo forms of the social that might be reactualized in another space or time.

¹ See, for example, the ABOG theme for 2014-15, "Future Imperfect":

Social change often challenges "the system". Sometimes the system is visible—the prison system, the health care system, the education system. Sometimes, the system is a habit of thought or internal "cop in the head" (hat tip to Augusto Boal) that polices our behavior and governs the way we see ourselves in the world. Perhaps the failures of our governmental, economic and social systems can be seen as a failure of the imagination. If so, what happens when art, an act of imagination, is used to creatively address these failures? What happens when

instead of “fighting the man,” artists become involved in reimagining the way things work? A Blade of Grass’ 2014 Fellows for Socially Engaged Art and Organizational Grantees address this notion in different ways. By creating and expanding on ad hoc solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems, the artists’ projects we are working with this year visualize ways of addressing, changing, getting around and otherwise confounding “the system” to foster greater freedom and equity in our society.

² The concept of “prefigurative” modes of social organization, developed in sociological accounts of new social movements, is concerned with the ways in which specific forms of collective action and decision-making (deliberative democracy, horizontality, etc.) have practical value while also serving as potential models for future social systems. See, for example, Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America: The Art of Organizing Hope* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

³ Amy Spiers, “Is there a place for disruption/reaction/antagonism in social practice art?,” *100 Questions*, Open Engagement blog, <http://openengagement.info/69-amy-spiers/> (March 9, 2014).

⁴ See Grant Kester, “The Noisy Optimism of Immediate Action: Theory, Practice and Pedagogy in Contemporary Art,” *Art Journal* (Summer 2012), pp.86-99.

⁵ Out of the veritable blizzard of media and art journalistic coverage dedicated to Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument* only one writer, Whitney Kimball in arfcity, thought it relevant to actually talk to the residents of Forrest Houses after the project had run its course. This elision is, of course, symptomatic of the limitations of current socially engaged art criticism. Among others, Kimball spoke with Susie Farmer, the mother of Hirschhorn’s primary contact at Forrest Houses, Erik Farmer. Their exchange provides a useful indication of the consequences that ensue when conventional notions of artistic purity and autonomy are projected onto complex social and political sites.

Whitney Kimball: I remember the last time I talked to you, you were telling me about kids who were getting really inspired by the art there. Have you seen that [enthusiasm] grow at all over the year? [Note: Last year, Susie had told me a story about a little boy who’d been particularly inspired by the monument, and had been thinking about going into an art program because of it.]

Susie Farmer: No. And one little boy who we particularly thought would be very good [with art], I don’t even know if he’s going to school now like we’d encouraged him to do. The children are asking every day if it’s going to come back. No, they’re not going to come back. It was a one-time thing. Every day they had something to look forward to. They would get up early and come to the monument. It was something they never had in their area before, and they may never have it again.

Whitney Kimball, "How Do People Feel about the Gramsci Monument One Year Later?," *Artnet* (August 20, 2014). <http://artfcity.com/2014/08/20/how-do-people-feel-about-the-gramsci-monument-one-year-later/>