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CULTURE · THEORY

A critique of social practice art

What does it mean to be a political artist?

By Ben Davis

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LOCATED IN Houston's predominantly African-American Third Ward, the Project Row Houses stand today as one of the most-lauded examples of a burgeoning genre of contemporary art: "social practice." In fact, the project's origin story could well serve as a parable about the significance of the entire concept. In the early 1990s, founder Rick Lowe was an artist working in a more traditional genre of engaged art-making, creating works that called attention to various causes. The turning point came for him, however, when a group of students from the Third Ward came to visit his studio:

I was doing big, billboard-size paintings and cutout sculptures dealing with social issues, and one of the students told me that, sure, the work reflected what was going on in his community, but it wasn't what the community needed. If I was an artist, he said, why didn't I come up with some kind of creative solution to issues instead of just telling people like him what they already knew. That was the defining moment that

pushed me out of the studio.¹

And so, Lowe was pushed to reconceive what it meant to be a political artist. Instead of making work *about* community topics, he would have to become involved directly in community organizing. With seed money from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, and help from corporate volunteers and local museum staff, he set out to rehabilitate a series of “shotgun houses” in the Third Ward, to turn them into a community space integrated with artist residencies. The experiment opened in 1994. Today, according to its website, “PRH’s campus has grown from the original block and a half to six blocks, and from 22 houses to 40 properties; including twelve artist exhibition and/or residency spaces, seven houses for young mothers, artist residencies, office spaces, a community gallery, a park, low-income residential and commercial spaces.”²

Many artists, including famous ones like Edgar Arceneaux, Andrea Bowers, Sam Durant, Julie Mehretu, and Coco Fusco, have worked on and contributed to the Project Row Houses. As for the community, the Project Row Houses’s “Young Mothers Program” offers temporary affordable housing to a handful of young women each year, as well as job training, classes on parenting, mentoring, and counseling. “Community is Our Artform,” states the project website, taking the rhetoric of German “social sculpture” artist Joseph Beuys, who insisted that “everyone is an artist,” and giving it a more down-to-earth twist.

The Project Row Houses have not completely avoided the bureaucratic perils that come with maintaining a non-profit infrastructure that requires about a million dollars a year; in 2006, a former finance administrator of the Project pled guilty to felony theft, having spent at least two hundred thousand dollars on items including personal vacations and San Antonio Spurs tickets.³ Another obvious peril of such well-intentioned artist-led projects is that they might serve as the beachhead for gentrification, driving out the very community they claim to serve. Aware of this, and noticing rising property prices in the area, Lowe’s organization founded the separate Row House Community Development Corporation in 2003, “to broaden PRH’s focus to preserve community.” It claims to have built nine low-income housing units and to be in the process of building and acquiring additional properties in the surrounding neighborhood to keep it mixed income.⁴

The Project Row Houses have become a model for artists and for urban planners. Lowe says he is often approached by other cities looking to replicate his success. And yet, to assess the true status of this social art experiment, a second narrative is equally important to bring in. Here is the beginning of a 2012 article in the *Houston Chronicle*:

The applications started pouring in at 8 a.m. on Monday, straining the server at the Houston Housing Authority and translating into tangible terms what so many already know: Thousands of Houstonians are in dire need of affordable housing.

By 3:30 p.m., more than 33,000 online applications had flooded in, each representing a family hoping for a spot on a waiting list for the Housing Choice Voucher Program, also known as Section 8 housing.⁵

Juxtaposed against this tremendous need, the handful of properties that the Project Row Houses maintains seems like a drop in the bucket, a feel-good footnote to the real story. Even more importantly, according to a Brookings Institution paper cited by the same *Chronicle* article, during the very period when the careful work of the Project Row Houses has won it worldwide praise, the issue that it was designed to address—housing conditions in Houston—has gotten worse, not better: “The number of Houston-area residents living in extremely poor neighborhoods nearly doubled over the past decade.”

This larger picture crystalizes the question that hangs over today’s “social practice” art: Is this strand of art a starting

point for addressing social problems, or a distraction that keeps us from seeing their true extent? Coming up with a constructive way to answer this question will be crucial to figuring out how activists should interact with a strand of art that often looks so much like activism.

Art to change the world

“Social practice” as a genre has been around in one form or another for a long time, though it hasn’t always had that label, or been quite so lauded. With the creative activism of the Occupy movement on one side and the sheer nauseating decadence of the commercial art world on the other (to give a sense: Christie’s recently did a half billion dollars in business off of a single seventy-two-lot evening sale), the idea of charging art with a concrete social mission is having a bit of a moment. A recent article on the phenomenon in the *New York Times* explained the vogue for “social practice” like this:

[I]ts practitioners freely blur the lines among object making, performance, political activism, community organizing, environmentalism and investigative journalism, creating a deeply participatory art that often flourishes outside the gallery and museum system. And in so doing, they push an old question—“Why is it art?”—as close to the breaking point as contemporary art ever has.⁶

As the passage suggests, “social practice” includes a dizzyingly vast array of initiatives hatched by professional artists, arts non-profits, and plain old social services organizations. Certain examples are repeated with particular reverence: Dutch artist-activist Rebecca Gomperts’s *Women on Waves*, a boat that provides abortions to women in countries where abortion is illegal, using the freedom granted by international waters; the Danish group Superflex’s *Guaraná Power* project, an attempt to help Brazilian small farmers develop a commercial soft drink to compete with corporate cartels; and artist Theaster Gates’s *Dorchester Projects* on Chicago’s south side, which saw him renovate an abandoned property and transform it into a cultural center with a library, archive, and Soul Food Kitchen.

The very fact that “social practice” focuses on tangible issues means that, quite often, its aesthetic aspect is downplayed. Consequently, as it is theorized, the genre often becomes indistinguishable from simple museum outreach, or any other vaguely progressive type of work with some creative connection. In its article on the trend, the *New York Times* highlights a town hall meeting at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis about the city’s ongoing de facto racial segregation as one example of “social practice” art. In the catalogue for his 2011 survey of artists working in this genre of art, “Living as Form,” curator Nato Thompson goes so far as to include the spontaneous eruption of jubilation in Harlem that followed the 2008 election of Barack Obama as a work of street theater (“the mass, spontaneous eruption of spirit seemed unified, at times even choreographed, as if residents had been waiting backstage.”)⁷

But logically, if the concept is so broad that celebrations of Obama’s election can be treated as art, then so too could the jingoistic celebrations that greeted Obama’s assassination of Osama bin Laden, with people chanting “USA! USA!” in front of the White House, or the militant Americana of Tea Party gatherings, or the theatrical passion of evangelical rallies, or any of hundreds of other more troubling social phenomena.⁸ By its nature, the criteria that define “social practice” as a genre of art are *political* not *formal*. Yet in “Living as Form” and elsewhere, the specific politics that define it are neither theorized nor specified; “social practice” becomes merely a vague aesthetics of progressive uplift. It is as if its claims to be art were so tenuous that focusing too much on its politics would cause it to vanish. Yet this only serves to obscure the political stakes.

The past, present, and future of “social practice”

To flesh out the stakes of this political turn in recent art, it may help to locate where “social practice” stands in relation to the mainstream commercial art world. The category has many precedents, from the participatory and activist theater of the 1960s, to the feminist explorations of everyday rituals and anti-hierarchical structures in the 1970s. The

recent theory that it most immediately draws on, however, is the 1990s vogue for the freewheeling forms of performance known as “relational aesthetics.” The canonical example is the artist Rirkit Tirivaniya’s 1992 artwork in which he served curry to visitors at New York’s 303 Gallery as a work of participatory performance art. (The piece has been incorporated into the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, where it was recently restaged.)

In the new millennium, “relational aesthetics” became one of the single most hotly debated terms in art criticism. Its foundational theorist, curator Nicolas Bourriaud, explicitly pitched the idea as a form of constructive opposition to an over-commodified world, a way of recovering moments of communal experience. However, “relational” art also came under sustained attack for being essentially mystifying, staging pretend moments of togetherness and obscuring the very real divisions that split the world with happy rhetoric of “participation.”⁹ As the art industry became ever more global in the 2000s, demanding new events each week at new biennials and art fairs around the world, “relational aesthetics” came to seem like merely a new wing of art commerce. Its playful idea of creating artworks that used “people as a medium” resembled little more than an excuse to generate theme parties for jet-setting VIPs.

“Social practice,” thus, can be seen as something like a radicalization of a recent trend, picking up on the intellectual armature of “relational aesthetics” but attempting to give it a more explicitly political edge to escape the latter’s incorporation into the art industry. Against the background of an art world increasingly dominated by grotesque displays of wealth, a growing number of artists steeped in theories of experimental art have looked to examples like Lowe’s Project Row Houses as the basis for a practice that feels more real—and that might even serve as a radical call to action. “[L]iving itself exists in forms that must be questioned, rearranged, mobilized, and undone,” Nato Thompson writes, waxing poetic about the potentials of socially engaged art. “For the first time, the importance of *forms of living* seems to be questioned altogether by the conceptualization of *living as form*.”¹⁰

Yet it is here that some radical art history might help. For it is one of the lessons of Marxist art theory that no artistic gesture, on its own, can be intrinsically radical or anti-capitalist. What appears at one juncture to be radically opposed to the values of art under capitalism often later appears to have represented a development intrinsic to its future development, for the simple reason that without changing the underlying fact of capitalism, you cannot prevent innovations in art from eventually being given a capitalist articulation.

Two examples will suffice here. In Weimar Germany, it was still considered wildly radical to devote oneself as an artist to creating well-designed and affordable art objects for the common person rather than for the elite. Inspired by Soviet Productivism, this valorization of art for all informed the Bauhaus—which later became the basic influence on industrial design, that is, the application of artistic principles to consumer goods. What seemed practically socialist in its day is the ideology of Ikea.

In the 1960s, the first generation of Conceptual artists set out deliberately to make art that could not be owned or shared in the same way as conventional object-based work. Yet today, when computers send image files across the world in seconds and 3-D printing is becoming mainstream, it may be difficult to recover the radical charge of Sol LetWitt’s provocation of creating instructions for other people to draw his murals rather than painting the murals himself. As for the Conceptual ideal of valorizing ideas themselves as works of art, in an era when giant corporations wage war over intellectual property and try to patent intangible concepts, it hardly seems radical.

In some ways, the category of “social practice” attempts to forestall the problem of its own incorporation into the system by deliberately removing itself from commerce and making outwardly avowed political solidarity part of its defining trait. Yet the fixation on escaping the *commercial* art world itself shows a narrowed understanding of art’s role in a capitalist society. Art has a variety of functions for today’s ruling class—and these include many that have little to do with raw profit. In fact, one classical function of art is precisely to allow robber barons and rapacious corporations to symbolically associate themselves with something that distances them from their own ideology,

allowing them to put on a good face. Among the patrons listed on the Project Row Houses website, along with Chevron and Ikea, is Bank of America—currently in the crosshairs for making a deliberate policy of deceiving home owners hit by the housing crisis, extracting extra profits by keeping them languishing in misery.¹¹

In her book on the social turn in contemporary art, *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop points out that in the European context, the rhetoric of “social practice” actually dovetails quite nicely with an overtly neoliberal agenda of replacing government-run social services with well-meaning volunteers offering creative entrepreneurial solutions.¹² In fact, in introducing his Big Society program of promoting civic engagement and volunteerism, David Cameron specifically singled out an example from the art world: the work of volunteers in maintaining the National Museums Liverpool. As government cuts looked to slash thousands of jobs from the area—including workers at the National Museums Liverpool and the Tate—a representative of the Public and Commercial Services Union told the BBC, “We are concerned this whole ‘big society’ idea is a smoke screen for making a smaller state, cutting jobs and bringing in volunteers to fill the gaps.”¹³

Sometimes, “social practice” can seem like little more than aestheticized spin on typical non-profit work. “Project Row Houses is a nonprofit organization initiated by an artist,” Nato Thompson writes. “If it can be included as a socially engaged artwork, why not include more nonprofit organizations as artworks as well?”¹⁴ Consequently, it is vulnerable to all the weaknesses of non-profit focused activism: Having to lower one’s rhetoric in order to please donors, mopping up the symptoms of social problems instead of going after the disease itself, and, ultimately, reducing the vital work of political organizing to a symbolic gesture—the very pitfall of political art that political artists have always tried to escape.

Constructive critique

The critique of “social practice” is neither particularly new nor itself particularly radical. From the right, as one can imagine, this trend is simply deemed the latest incarnation of “radical chic.” Arch-conservative critic Maureen Mullarkey declares that it is little more than proof that contemporary art is “fast becoming a variant of community organizing by soi-disant promoters of their own notions of the common good.”¹⁵ In fact, the ability of this brand of art to still enrage social and aesthetic conservatives may well be the strongest evidence that it is still worth engaging with.

“Social practice”—both as a form of art-making and as a theory of art-making—grows out of a dispirited reaction to the commercial art industry’s complicity with capital, and a corresponding, and altogether wholesome, hunger for an art that actually makes a difference. The questions it raises are real. Its limitations are worth assessing and criticizing, but it would be a mistake to say that it is simply to be denounced.

An anecdote by the critic Martha Schwendener from the early days of the Occupy movement in New York strikes me as particularly symbolic on this score. The outbreak of activism in Zuccotti Park happened to coincide with Nato Thompson’s long-planned, Creative Time-sponsored “Living as Form” show, a sprawling attempt to capture the essence of “social practice” art, ranging from Ai Weiwei and the Yes Men to all of the examples I have mentioned above. This juxtaposition, of course, raised an obvious question: What does it mean to celebrate art-as-activism in the presence of real live social movements? Schwendener recalls being at the talk as part of the program of events around the show. “Shortly into the discussion,” she says, “a woman stood up and asked why, instead of sitting there, we didn’t head down to Wall Street.” And, as she recounts it, a contingent from the panel went down, and actually did end up participating in the occupation.¹⁶

The best approach, it seems to me, is to say that the genre of “social practice” art raises questions that it cannot by itself answer. But it would be missing an opportunity not to join the debate, even if the goal is to take it in a completely different direction.

1. Rick Lowe, quoted in Michael Kimmelman, "In Houston, Art Is Where the Home Is," *New York Times*, December 17, 2006.
2. "About Project Row Houses," <http://projectrowhouses.org/about/>.
3. Patricia C. Johnson, "Administrator admits stealing from Project Row Houses," *Houston Chronicle*, November 19, 2006.
4. For a summary of the Project Row Houses' mixed success on this front, see Deborah Wrigley, "New development surging in Houston's Third Ward area," ABC 13 News, March 11, 2013.
5. Monica Rohr, "Thousands apply for housing voucher waiting list," *Houston Chronicle*, August 21, 2012.
6. Randy Kennedy, "Outside the Citadel, Social Practice Art Is Intended to Nurture," *New York Times*, March 20, 2013.
7. "Election Night: Harlem, New York (2008)," *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991-2011*, edited by Nato Thompson (New York: Creative Time Books), 148.
8. Thompson acknowledges this dilemma, but leaves it as an unresolved, hanging question. See Nato Thompson, *Living as Form*, 31.
9. See Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110, Fall 2004, 51–79. While I value Bishop's critique of both "relational aesthetics" and later "social practice" (in her book *Artificial Hells*), it's worth stating that her post-Marxist frame of references limits what she has to offer as a positive program.
10. Thompson, "Living as Form," *Living as Form*, 29.
11. Michelle Conlin and Peter Rudegeair, "Former Bank of America workers allege it lied to home owners," *Reuters*, June 14, 2013.
12. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012), 13–18.
13. Pete Middleman, quoted in "Big society' museum plans in Liverpool condemned," BBC News, July 19, 2010.
14. Thompson, "Living as Form," 27.
15. Maureen Mullarkey, quoted in Randy Kennedy, "Outside the Citadel."
16. Martha Schwendener, "What Does Occupy Wall Street Mean for Art?," *Village Voice*, October 19, 2011, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2011-10-19/a...>

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