

# **A SOCIALLY ENGAGED ARTS READER**

Compiled 2019  
GSholette

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# THE SCHOOLHOUSE AND THE BUS

Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement

Two projects by

Pablo Helguera and Suzanne Lacy / Pilar Riaño-Alcalá

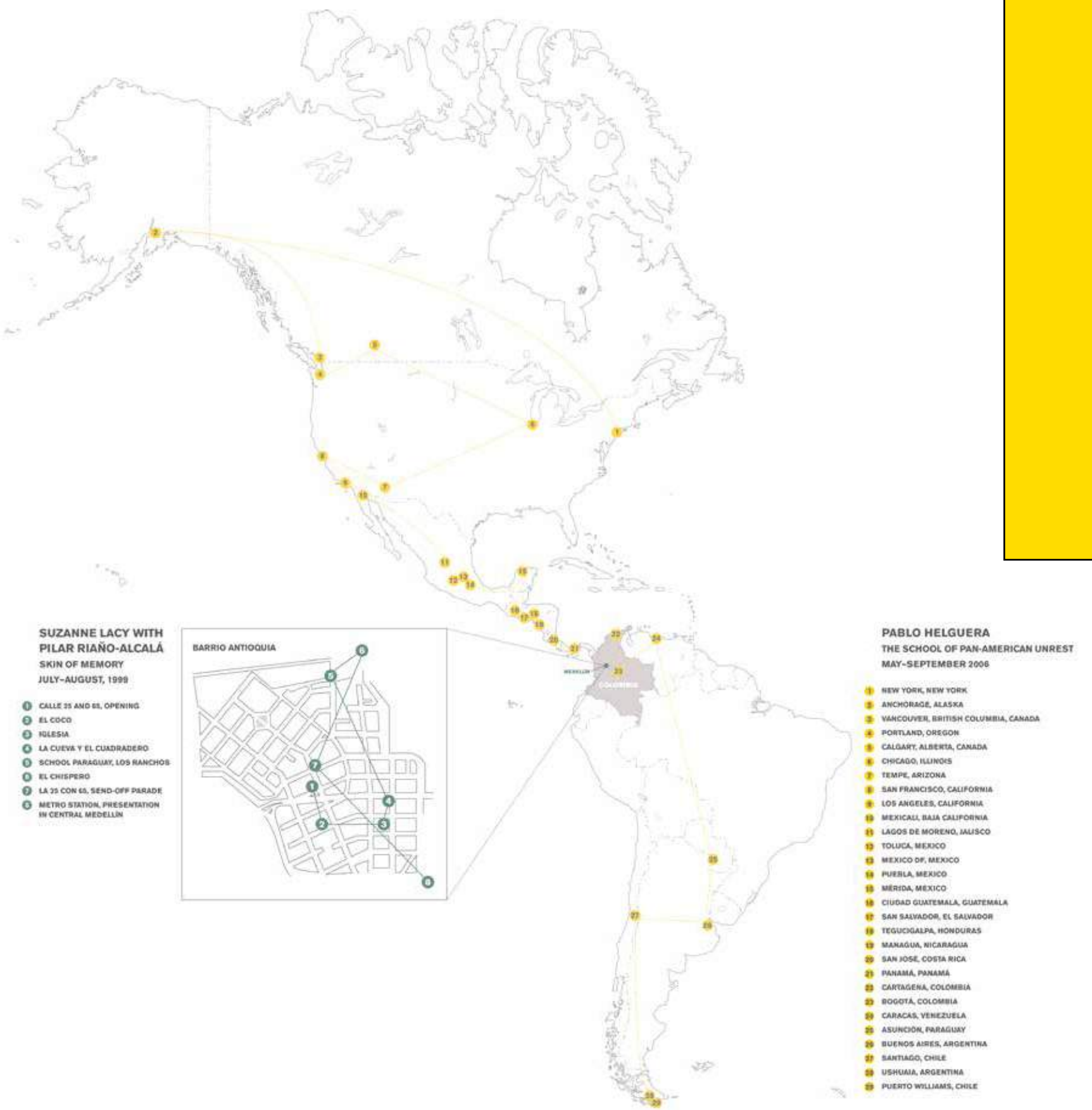
edited by Elyse A. Gonzales and Sara Reisman

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Pablo Helguera and Suzanne Lacy / Pilar Riaño-Alcalá  
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# INTRODUCTION

by Elyse A. Gonzales and Sara Reisman

*The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement*, referring to the exhibition and this publication, is the result of conversations about the nature of art’s role in society. Though our audiences and settings are incredibly different, with one at a university in Santa Barbara, a regional seaside city, and the other in New York City, a major urban art center, both of our institutions are focused on the belief that art and artists can transform individuals and communities. These transformations may not always be immediately visible, but we regard artists as having the potential to be catalysts for change, especially through dialogue that fosters mutual understanding. Our audiences, with their vantage points from the east and west coast, largely comprised of students, faculty, activists, practicing artists, and other cultural producers, are eager to understand the means and methods of utilizing art to affect change in these particularly unstable and challenging times.

Focusing on the work of two social practice artists was a natural outgrowth of our conversations, considering the field’s emphasis on engagement, with a goal of affecting positive outcomes in relation to social and political concerns. The more we talked and listened, the more we understood *The Schoolhouse and the Bus* as an opportunity for broader audiences to experience the work of important artists in this field. Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera represent two generations of socially engaged artists who have also built their careers and work on pedagogical engagement. Their transcribed exchange “On Social Practice: A conversation between Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera,” serves as a terrific record of the artists’ overlapping concerns and guiding principles.

The works we have chosen to highlight are seminal for not only Helguera and Lacy as artists, but also the field itself. Helguera’s *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (2006), and Suzanne Lacy/Pilar Riaño-Alcalá’s *Skin of Memory* (1999–2017) are focused on local conditions, from the broad perspective of twenty-nine communities in the Americas to a single neighborhood in Medellín, Colombia, respectively. Additionally, linked by their mutual emphasis on mobility, both artists are attendant to the ways in which geographic location informs the possibilities of social and political transformation, a concept that is addressed by Elyse A. Gonzales and UC Berkley professor and leading thinker in social practice, Shannon Jackson in their essays. Another incentive in organizing this exhibition and publication was the opportunity to delve into questions and concerns that revolve around exhibiting social practice works, which are made for a specific time and place. Sara Reisman’s essay unpacks the complex nature of representing these live, audience-based works through the objects that remain and the projects’ more ephemeral, lasting impacts.

In total, we see *The Schoolhouse and the Bus* not only as an essential record of these artists’ projects and contributions to the field, but also as a lens through which readers can examine the issues raised therein. Just as importantly, we see the relational and experiential nature of these works as a means of highlighting the essential aspects of social practice, an art form that is increasingly bridging the divides between museums and communities, as well as art and activism.

THE SCHOOLHOUSE AND THE BUS  
by Elyse A. Gonzales

Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).  
Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*  
(New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., 2011).

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Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera are social practice artists, representing two generations, who have helped shape the field through their influential writings, teaching, and artworks. Over the past two decades, many contemporary artists have increasingly sought a way for art to foment larger societal change. This has given rise to social practice —also known as socially engaged—art, which is notable for its emphasis on performance, activism, and often non-object-centered art making. This field is reliant on audience participation generated through time-based events such as performances, conversations, and workshops. Lacy’s and Helguera’s works are further identifiable as socially engaged art by the fact that they respond to cultural and political concerns, and promote the empowerment and transformation of communities. In short, they intend for their work to be catalysts of positive change for the communities in which they work. Their pairing in this exhibition is based on a number of connections and intersections between their respective practices.

Lacy and Helguera have taught together, conducted public conversations with each other, and even collaborated on a work at the College Art Association’s annual conference in Los Angeles (2012), staged as an impromptu class about social practice. Despite this history, their contributions to the field have never been specifically addressed in relation to each other. Their deep affinities include the means and methods by which they have influenced socially engaged art, not only through their works but also through their extensive and ongoing writings and teachings about the field, all of which continue to contribute to the implementation and interpretation of socially engaged art.

Lacy (b. 1945, Wasco, CA) is a pioneering social practice artist, and her work dates to the early 1970s, through her initial involvement in feminist art movements. Highly influential, her unique artistic vision is related to social issues such as class, mass media, violence, and racial and gender inequities. Many of her earlier artworks serve as primary exemplars of what was then called “new genre public art,” a term Lacy coined in her influential writings, which preceded “social practice.” *Mapping the Terrain: New*

*Genre Public Art* (1995), the most well-known of her books, was the first definitive collection of essays devoted to explaining the field with her own selections, as well as those by other artists and curators.<sup>1</sup>

Helguera (b. 1971, Mexico City) represents the next generation of social practice, and his work has evolved using methods of public engagement that are in dialogue with Lacy’s seminal strategies. For the last twenty years he has made work that addresses a range of subjects including anthropology, museums, pedagogy, sociolinguistics, ethnography, memory, and the absurd. Helguera, like Lacy, has contributed extensively to the discourse of social practice: in addition to publishing numerous articles on the subject of social practice, his book *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (2011) became an influential text within and for the field.<sup>2</sup> While Lacy’s book established and laid out the nascent territory of social practice, *Education for Socially Engaged Art* is the first social practice primer to offer practical advice for making socially engaged art that is both artistically and ethically sound. Furthermore, the book raises issues and questions related to assessment of socially engaged art, advocating the use of tools from other fields of study as a potential means of addressing this concern. This is an increasingly important discussion topic that Helguera has spearheaded, considering social practice’s growing popularity, and the fact that this genre, by its very nature, eschews traditional notions of success—that is, the expected formal and aesthetic parameters established by the mainstream art world.

These artists also share a keen understanding of pedagogy and an incorporation of pedagogical principles into their work, which is to be expected considering social practice’s roots in learning and teaching techniques. From early on Lacy has incorporated fundamental pedagogical tools into her practice, of which the most essential are conversation and the act of listening. As she often states, these two basic tools guide her throughout the research, development, and implementation phases of her projects, with the hope of changing cultural attitudes by informing and engaging diverse audiences.





Pablo Helguera, phone conversation with Suzanne Lacy, July 23, 2017.  
Helguera, phone conversation with Lacy.

3 4

2017), executed with Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, and Helguera's *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (2006) are artistically and personally pivotal projects linked by their emphasis on public engagement, pedagogy, and mobility. These critical elements continue to make these works pivotal for the field. (An in-depth description of both of these projects can be found on pages 16 and 46)

#### SKIN OF MEMORY: A MOBILE MUSEUM FOR THE COMMUNITY

*Skin of Memory* was initially presented in Medellín, Colombia in collaboration with anthropologist and professor Pilar Riaño-Alcalá of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Lacy was invited by Riaño-Alcalá, who is from Colombia and has worked for many years in Medellín, to develop an art project in relation to an ongoing, multiplatform initiative that dealt with the incessant social disruption of Barrio Antioquia, a neighborhood affected by drug-related, political, and everyday violence.

Guided by Riaño-Alcalá's in-depth (and continuous) research on youth, violence, and memory in Medellín, the two collaborated with numerous stakeholders, including community members, activists, educators, artists, architects, historians, social scientists, and NGOs. Together they developed a project that transformed a bus into a mobile museum. Locals lent over 500 mementoes that filled the interior and related to their lived experience of this violent neighborhood, whether joyful or mournful. Many of the items on display directly related to the rampant gang violence and deep-seated factional divides in the barrio, which made this project potentially dangerous when considering the sadness and retaliatory desires it might inspire in visitors. By treating all the objects as equally important, in a sanctified manner, on custom-made shelves outfitted with small light bulbs, the lenders and their implicit stories were given dignity and respect. Such an installation offered the residents a communal opportunity to both celebrate their neighborhood and grieve for those losses. Consequently, public emotional reactions

Helguera is perhaps best known for works that are overtly about and based on principles of pedagogy, works that collectively incorporate standard learning elements such as lectures, symposia, workshops, and games. *Education for Socially Engaged Art* articulates his investment in pedagogy, arguing that educational tools are not only useful but also essential for producing socially engaged art.<sup>3</sup> Although Helguera was already invested in this methodology, he credits Lacy—a reader of the book's early drafts—with helping him to realize that pedagogy should be more of focal point.<sup>4</sup>

The incorporation of pedagogy and pedagogical methods is less surprising when one considers that both artists have taught social practice. For over thirty years Lacy has influenced the study of social practice at university level, by helping to establish academic programs devoted to socially engaged art, most recently in 2002 as Founding Chair of the MFA in Public Practice at Otis College of Art and Design. In 2016, she was named a professor of art

at USC's Roski School of Art and Design, where she continues to influence and train scores of artists in the field. Simultaneously to his practice, Helguera works as a museum educator—currently as Director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Like Lacy, Helguera has helped the public, artists, and students learn about and understand how to produce socially engaged works through his own museum education programs, as well as numerous international adjunct teaching positions. (For more in depth information about both these artists please see their artist biographies on pages 92–93.)

Rather than conduct a broad survey in the form of a book or exhibition—an impossibility considering their equally extensive bodies of work, and the expansiveness of their working methods—*The Schoolhouse and the Bus* focuses on one significant project by each of these artists, demonstrating their affinities and reflecting a conversation among and across art and the artists through the development of social practice. Lacy's *Skin of Memory* (1999–



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5 Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, “Medellín, Colombia: Reinhabiting Memory,” *Art Journal*, 66, no. 4 (December 2006), 105.

6 Additional discussion of this project and its impact on the community is found in numerous presentations Dr. Gutiérrez Castañeda has given, as well as his doctoral thesis dissertation, “Ejercicios del Ciudad. A propósito de La Piel de la Memoria,” Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores, Campus Morelia, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, October 2016.

7 Dr. David Gutiérrez Castañeda, phone conversation with author, September 3, 2017.

8 Bill Kelley Jr., phone conversation with author, August 21, 2017.

and responses among visitors to the bus, which ran the gamut, were encouraged despite the fear of violence. Having their personal losses so publicly recognized, residents could, just as importantly, recognize the mutual suffering and losses of others.<sup>5</sup> Scholar David Gutiérrez Castañeda, who has written extensively on the project, sees the work as an example of how collaboration between artists, community organizers, social workers, and human rights activists can “interconnect art with social projects, with community healing.<sup>6</sup> In this instance, if it weren’t for the art objects and their display some of the most important aspects of the grieving process in Barrio Antioquia in 1999 would not have been able to be articulated.”<sup>7</sup> Visitors to the bus and lenders of objects were also linked by anonymous letters, which the artists asked participants to write discussing their hopes for the barrio’s future. Such acknowledgment of collective memories and mutual hopes for the future are the fundamental basis for confronting past violence and the resulting social fragmentation, as well as the beginning of the facilitation of any kind of resolution of the traumatic past.

*Skin of Memory* continues to be significant for its efficacy not only as a community-building and healing exercise, but also as a seminal example of community-activist public art in Latin America, which influenced a generation of youths, activists, and artists, especially in Medellín. When curator Bill Kelley Jr. was commissioned to co-curate the Encuentro Internacional de Medellín (MDE11) at the Museo de Antioquia, he asked Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá to re-present this work. In his research, Kelley came to understand that *Skin of Memory* was a key reference point for many who experienced or participated in the 1999 iteration. For the first time, affiliated activists and organizers saw that their work was “marked as an important cultural, artistic venture, not solely as activism. It allowed a generation of activists to consider their work in concert with, and as art, inspiring them to continue in this vein.”<sup>8</sup>

Lacy speaks fondly of the project because it was the first time she was commissioned to make work as

part of a larger initiative comprised of anthropologists, educators, community leaders, historians, social leaders, and activists. Adding to this unique opportunity was the fact that each of these team members already believed that art could be a force and means of dealing with the past in order to envision new, better presents and futures. In this instance, Lacy was able to act more like a consultant, focusing her attention on the aesthetic conceptualization of the project. As a result, she was able to execute it more quickly because an infrastructure for implementation was already in place, made possible through the concerted efforts of this larger overall team, already in place for several years. Unlike her previous projects (and even since), Lacy did not have to spend time making connections between stakeholders, gaining their trust, justifying the project, or organizing the production elements such as the media components and educational training. Consequently, *Skin of Memory* gave her a vivid example as to how artists could strategically, and more easily and effectively, be included as a force in the ongoing community-building initiatives of a city. However, this was only possible if a committed group of advocates valued artistic contributions and continued to maintain complex and dynamic community relations as well as the infrastructure to facilitate such projects.<sup>9</sup>

Foundational elements of *Skin of Memory*, beyond engagement, also included pedagogy and mobility. Like all her other works, this project was and continues to be built on models of learning, which promote discussion at their root. Lacy saw this endeavor as a form of public pedagogy, especially with regards to the youth and women who participated by soliciting objects from community members in Barrio Antioquia. By giving them this charge, along with appropriate training and monetary compensation, they gained important skills and, just as importantly, a sense of confidence and membership in another community of peers. “They were learning leadership skills, going to the neighborhood watch groups to speak and seeing their issues emerge as important sources for policy development.”<sup>10</sup> As a

9 Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá, “Medellín, Colombia: Reinhabiting Memory,” 110.

10 Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá, “Medellín, Colombia: Reinhabiting Memory,” 110.

11 Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, “The Skin of Memory/La Piel del Memoria,” unpublished draft essay, September 18, 2006.

12 Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, email message to author, August 26, 2017.

13 Pablo Helguera, email message to author, August 23, 2017.

result they came to understand how to represent themselves, and the political implications of that self-representation.

Another important element in the work is its emphasis on movement and transition. The concept of the mobile museum grew from an understanding of the territorial divides between gangs that made it impossible for neighborhood residents to experience the work, unless it moved to areas they could safely access. This idea of mobility is poignantly embedded in the project through experiences of the participants who facilitated the project. Young teens who helped acquire the objects for the mobile museum, normally isolated in their individual areas, “were going out of the barrios, meeting with other youth and thinking of themselves as part of their city.”<sup>11</sup> Even the culmination of the project in 1999 was based on increasing community exchange and mobility, with a series of six spirited processions that included mimes, bicyclists, stilt walkers, and pedestrians, all of whom traveled through various areas of the barrio to deliver a letter from an anonymous neighbor to each home. It concluded in a celebratory send-off for the bus, and under the mantle of this closing event, those who participated or followed along, experienced freedom of movement, as they were able to visit normally unsanctioned areas.<sup>12</sup> This mobility remains a visual component of the project in the iterations that followed, through accompanying maps documenting the path of the bus.

THE SCHOOL OF  
PANAMERICAN UNREST:  
A MOBILE SCHOOLHOUSE

Helguera’s recent artistic conceptualizations, books, and articles are rooted in his seminal work, *The School of Panamerican Unrest (SPU)*. For this project Helguera erected a schoolhouse, or “nomadic think tank,” at twenty-nine stops, beginning in Anchorage, Alaska, and continuing south across the hemisphere to its southernmost tip, Tierra del Fuego. Along the way, he conducted talks, film screenings, panel discussions, civic events, and workshops that focused on the concept of “Panamericanism”—or the once prevailing, nineteenth-century,

utopian ideal of a unified, collaborative coalition among all the countries in North, South, and Central America. This concept has become controversial since the mid-twentieth century due to the rise of nationalist ideologies, neoliberal policies, and the increasingly dominant economic and government strategies of the US. The discussions that he instigated, which sometimes became contentious, surrounded topics such as immigration, globalism, national identity, regionalism, and art’s role in society.

*The School of Panamerican Unrest* remains one of the most extensive public artworks to have ever been realized. Its scale and goals—to try to understand and connect seemingly disparate communities throughout the Americas—deeply affected Helguera’s practice, and inspired many artists. The formative influence of the work on the artist, at a personal level, is due not only to the physical and emotional demands that surrounded it, but also to its contribution to his deeper investment in pedagogy and the conceptualization of all his work thereafter:

The type of challenges and situations I encountered in my trip, and the way I was forced to respond to them, made me aware of how important pedagogy is as a tool to create meaningful communication with different communities [...] It made me realize that socially engaged art, if it is to be the result of meaningful interaction, has to go beyond the nominal and the symbolic, and the listening process. It has to be earnest and sincere—not simply a blank space onto which participants are invited to have their say, but a process by which their input has direct and relevant impact in the resulting outcome of the work. This was the objective, for example, of the Panamerican Addresses.<sup>13</sup>

These addresses allowed anyone who wished to participate in a workshop the ability to channel their ideas, feelings, and emotions into a public statement summarizing issues facing a city and/or individual artistic communities, while suggesting potential solutions. Later they were read in semi-formal presentations organized by the artist and his hosts.



Although the incorporation of such pedagogical tools in art—question and answer sessions, games, and collaborative exercises, especially evident in the project's collective writing sessions—is a common occurrence now, his methods and their implementation were less prominent at the time.<sup>14</sup> In so doing, he created his own unique artistic approach, based on the experimentation that his project necessitated. Helguera's work encouraged other artists to consider similarly ambitious projects that incorporated new forms of engagement, based on pedagogical models that fostered a deeper understanding and discourse among their audiences.

Adding to the project's influence was Helguera's insistence on transparency throughout and after its conclusion. His blog and web posts plainly revealed not only the transformative, revelatory moments that occurred, but also the external challenges of social practice projects, such as low attendance at an event, car troubles, or even inclement weather. This straightforward approach allowed the public to fully grasp

the rewards, intricacies, and difficulties of this manner of working. His ongoing review of the many elements of the project as it exists now—ephemera, diary entries, outside commentary, and video documentation—has helped him begin to assess this project and others like it in a broader context. His bilingual book, *The School of Panamerican Unrest: An Anthology of Documents* (2011), is an attempt at one form of assessment. Although it includes the addresses and an essay by the artist, the overwhelming majority of written contributions are frank statements about the work, some of which are critical, by those who witnessed and participated in the project. The anthology allows both participants and public alike to evaluate *The School of Panamerican Unrest* and formulate their own appraisals. With this in mind, Helguera has offered to open the related archive of materials to anyone who wants access, with the hope that others will devise different methods of evaluation.

Movement is another explicit device in Helguera's project. That he developed a work incorporating travel isn't so unusual,



considering his inclination toward nomadic endeavors. One of his earlier works, *Conservatory of Dead Languages* (2004–ongoing), involves the artist traveling throughout Mexico to record the voices of the last living speakers of native languages, resulting in a phonographic archive. Still, given its epic scale, *The School of Panamerican Unrest* is certainly an extreme example of this interest in travel:

I decided that, in order to be consistent with the comprehensiveness of the premise, I had to drive with the school down the entire Pan-American Highway. The idea in part, was to give attention to the expected 'capitals' of the art world (Los Angeles, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, etc.) but focus equally on locations outside of the regular routes of art-world biennials and art production.<sup>15</sup>

His continuous presence throughout the entirety of the journey helped him remain focused on the concepts and ideas engendered by the myriad conversations he was having and witnessing. As he frequently

states, central to the project were those interpersonal encounters, and his ability to share those experiences with others along the way. The project ended up being a unique snapshot of the concerns, fears, and joys facing communities and artists in different places at a specific moment in time.

This exhibition and book demonstrates how two renowned socially engaged artists, Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera, have approached the field. Their seminal projects utilize differing but complementary methods to positively impact communities through engagement, pedagogy, and mobility. *The Schoolhouse and the Bus* functions as a lens through which visitors can examine the universal issues addressed by the artists. Just as importantly, the exhibition provides an opportunity to learn more about the genre of social practice that is increasingly bridging the divides between art, life, and activism.

Pablo Helguera and Sarah Demeuse, eds., *The School of Panamerican Unrest: Anthology of Documents* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., 2011), 5.  
Helguera and Demeuse, *The School of Panamerican Unrest: Anthology of Documents*, 6.





- 08 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Photo by Suzanne Lacy
- 09 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Photo by Carlos Sanchez
- 12 Pablo Helguera with Paraguayan sculptor Hermann Guggiari at the Plaza del Cabildo, Asunción, Paraguay, September 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.
- 13 Pablo Helguera near Tok, Alaska, May 2006. Photo by Sean Arden.
- 14 SPU schoolhouse at the School of Fine Arts in Mérida, Yucatán, June 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.
- 15 SPU schoolhouse at the Plaza de la Merced, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, June 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.



# THE SCHOOL OF PANAMERICAN UNREST

Project description by Holly Gore

*The School of Panamerican Unrest* (2003–2006) was a social practice art project and mobile think tank. Initiated by Pablo Helguera, a Mexican artist based in New York City, it investigated current sociopolitical issues in light of nineteenth-century utopian ideals of Panamerican unity. The crucible for its development was the post-9/11 US, an environment marked by patriotism, guardedness, and militaristic policies such as the Bush Doctrine, which authorized preemptive attacks on other countries in the name of national security. By contrast, *The School of Panamerican Unrest* sought to encompass the sprawling narratives of the Americas—North and South—and, in doing so, promote intercultural understanding.

Piloting in Zurich in 2003, *The School of Panamerican Unrest* centered around a wooden schoolhouse erected in the Shedhalle Zürich, in which Helguera held discussions on topics relating to Panamerican identity. A grant from Creative Capital allowed the project to expand into a major work of public art. In the spring of 2006, after an inaugural ceremony on Ellis Island, Helguera flew to Anchorage, Alaska, and from there took *The School of Panamerican Unrest* on the road. From May 19 to September 15 he traveled approximately 25,000 miles by van on the Pan-American Highway to Tierra del Fuego at the southernmost tip of South America. Along the way, he made twenty-nine official stops, putting on film screenings, lectures, and workshops that explored issues such as immigration, housing, urban development, and the social role of artists.

The visual centerpiece of the nomadic *SPU*, a collapsible schoolhouse made of steel pipe, yellow canvas, and an iconic brass bell, grounded the work under the rubric of pedagogy. The *SPU*'s educational methods incorporated games, dialogic strategies, and inquiry-based learning. Local hosts identified crucial issues facing their city as topics for discussion. At times Helguera acted as the workshop's secretary, by facilitating the writing of a "Panamerican Address," a document signed by its multiple authors, expressing their hopes and fears for the future of their city, and identifying opportunities for activism.

The strenuous and sometimes dangerous trip down the Pan-American Highway was a onetime event for Helguera, yet a public presence of *The School of Panamerican Unrest* persists. To brand his project, Helguera created banners bearing the emblem of a bell with an eye, an image that speaks to symbols of freedom used throughout the Americas such as the Liberty Bell in the US, the Bell of Dolores in Mexico, and the Independence Bell that figures in the histories of some Central American countries. The banners were hung alongside the schoolhouse at each of the twenty-nine stops, transforming museum galleries and city squares into ceremonial spaces, where speeches were made, Panamerican Addresses read, and a "Panamerican Anthem" played. These rituals continued off route in postscript 'stops' in cities such as New York and Santa Barbara, California. Upon completion of the original journey, Helguera began *Panamerican Suite* (2006–ongoing), a series of collages that wrestle and play with the concept of Panamericanism.

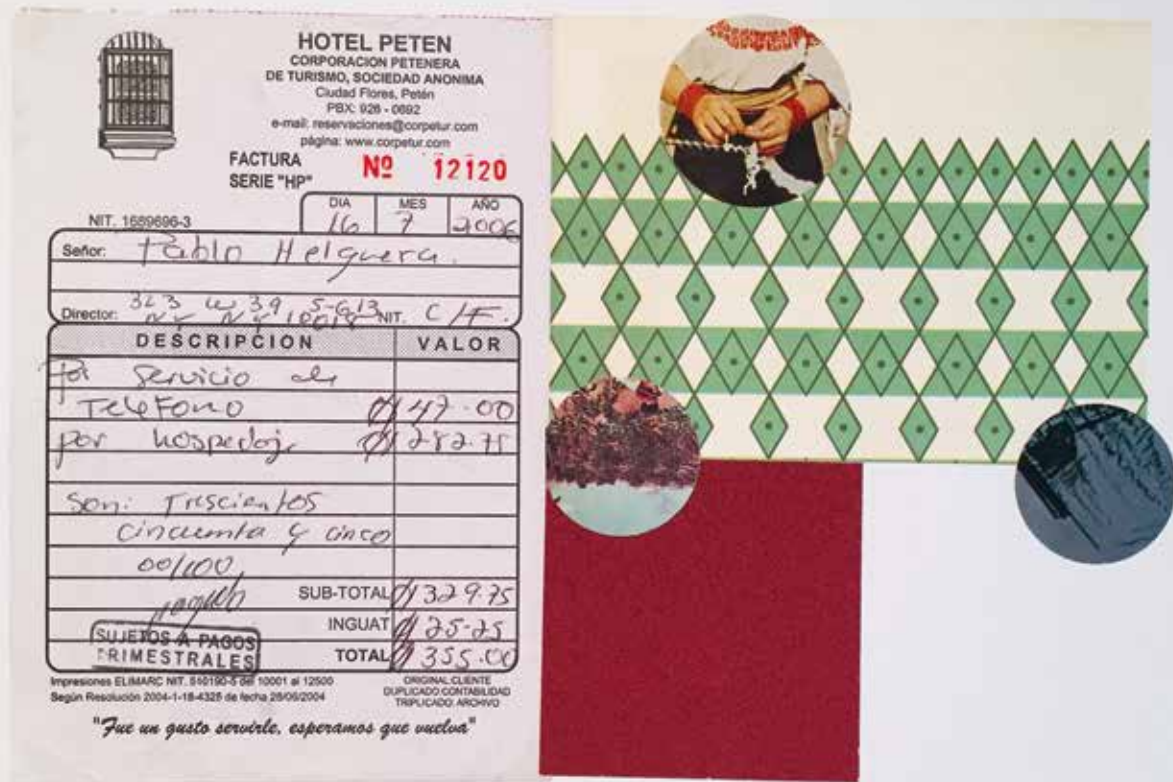


18 San Salvador, El Salvador. Photo courtesy of the artist.  
19 Pablo Helguera in television interview, San Salvador, El Salvador, June 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.









After the disturbance began, things happened rapidly.

- 22 Two-phase, four-pole, parallel connection, from Panamerican Suite, 2006.
- 23 Collage on paper, 9 x 12 in. Courtesy of the artist
- 24 The Call of the Spring, from Panamerican Suite, 2006.

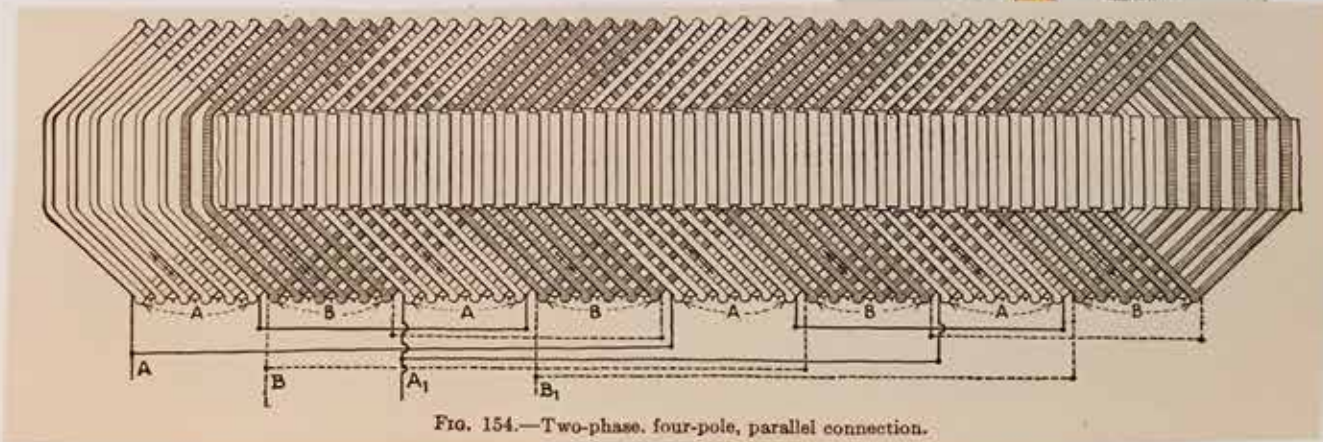


FIG. 154.—Two-phase, four-pole, parallel connection.





I saw herds of thousands of wild beasts grazing in soundless peace, beneath the breath of the primeval world, as they had done for unimaginable ages of time, and I had the feeling of being the first man, the first being to know that all this is.

## JOURNEY NOTES OF PANAMERICA: THE SOCIAL PRACTICES OF ART

A conversation between artist Pablo Helguera  
and Adetty Pérez de Miles

**APM** Would you ever consider undertaking a performance like *The School of Panamerican Unrest (SPU)* in the future? And if you did, how you would do it differently?

**PH** I most definitely do not consider it a performance piece, but a socially engaged art project. It consisted of a series of actions or activities that would be impossible to repeat because of the specific context and time within which they happened. So repeating this trip would mean something completely different, apart from the fact that I am in a different stage in my life, where I feel I could not undertake such a project, knowing what I know now.

Latin America has also become a very destabilized region in some places. For example, I don't think I would be able to safely go to Venezuela at this point. But, most importantly, what would be the objective of repeating the journey myself? I would not mind if someone else were to undertake the same journey. In fact, it would be really interesting for someone else to do it. Because it would be a different person, a different time, a different perspective, for whom and which all I did was offer, perhaps, a model.

**APM** How did the work of Suzanne Lacy and that of Juan Downey, such as *Video Trans Americas* (1976), which documented his travels from North to Central and South America, inform your practice or the thought-process behind *The School of Panamerican Unrest*?

**PH** I knew Suzanne's work at the time and admired it, and had been told about Downey's work while planning my trip, yet his intentions and purposes seemed to differ from mine, and I still feel that way.

I should stress that artistic genealogy was not at the top of my concerns at that moment. I was mainly reacting to the events of the moment—the post-9/11 foreign policy (known as the Bush Doctrine) that had emerged then, and I was thinking a lot about the role that the US played in trying to shape the “world order.” I was also thinking about education, which is why, generally, it is difficult for me to discuss this project as an artist-centered, conceptual activity. In executing this project, my job was the one that I normally play: an educator. In the process of education you are not there to talk about yourself, but rather external issues. The personal impact, implications, and emotional involvement were so powerful, however, that this impact was impossible for me to ignore, though I tried. But when I completed the *SPU* and returned home I realized that I had a lot to process in that regard.

I still think that, if anything, the value of the project lies in the conversations that took place and the kind of debates that it triggered surrounding nationalism, regionalism, and national identity—and more specifically about the question of art's role in constructing or deconstructing national identity. While there was definitely a travelogue aspect to it, to me at the project's core were those encounters, those conversations with people. It was about them and their views of the world in that moment.

I would like the project to exist in collective memory, as a snapshot of a period in the Americas.

**APM** One of the things that I thought was important was precisely a notion of time and space: how the reception of the work and engagement with the work differed in North, Central, and South America. In North America, north of the Mexican border, there seemed

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to be an emphasis on the function of art. What different types of engagement did you see with the work, for example, in New York versus Honduras?

**PH** I noticed in general, first, the willingness and desire of local communities to engage with and entertain my ideas of how to do the workshops, which was very important. When I arrived to a particular location, I proposed a certain structure to my visit: First, I would develop, in collaboration with the local host, a topic for a panel-style discussion. The following day I would run a workshop that resulted in the collective writing of the Panamerican Address, or a proclamation inspired by the discussions we had the previous day.

**APM** What caught my attention in some of the conversations at *SPU* events, was not so much the discussion of the “instrumentalization” of art, but rather discussions of cultural capital, the labor of internships, and the work that goes on behind the scenes to create a massively produced piece like this one. There was suspicion and questions in places like New York and Argentina—who is the work for, and who benefits from it? At the same time, there were people genuinely interested in talking about your work in relation to their own context. Does that make sense?

**PH** The question of how an artist benefits from any socially engaged artwork is always present. To an extent, it is conceivable that an artist might be taking on a particular social cause to improve his or her standing in the prestige economy, and/or, going even further, that this artist might be more interested in getting credit for what they do, rather than in the actual results a project generates. I don't think an artist can, or should, ever try to hush those criticisms, nor are we ever exempt from receiving them. For that reason, in my view, the only thing one can do is to go about their work with sincerity and integrity, and hopefully the work will be recognized as more than a superficial, self-serving gesture. I have also argued in other places that artists can never “disappear” as authors or instigators of a socially engaged project because authorship also means accountability.

In various places I received criticisms about the project and/or the “covert agenda” that some perceived in it. But there was no covert agenda. The project was plainly laid out to the participants wherever I went. Interestingly, in places like Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia, the critical reactions of some artists, which were videotaped, ironically described the precise political and cultural juncture that some of these communities were undergoing at the time. In cases such as in Buenos Aires, where artists wanted to debate the notion of “debate,” the dynamic and meta-meta-meta-analysis that took place showed how an obsession with critique, while stifling and unproductive, was also representative of the local critical discourse.

**APM** Although I think there were parallels between some of the art capitals like New York and Argentina, the sensibility of each place was also different. For instance, in Tegucigalpa there was a great desire to engage with you and with the *SPU* as an art project. We've talked a bit about your interest in collaboration, and how communication is at the center of community-building. How did your collaborative or communicative goals change as you were going through the process of the artwork?

**PH** Some aspects of the project evolved as the trip unfolded. For example, when I started these debates and discussions in Alaska, I did not initially think of the idea of inviting people to write a collective address. This evolved naturally as part of a process that, to me, became increasingly important because it made sharing the consensus of discussion and ideas from every place with the other locations not only possible but also our goal. We published the addresses on a blog, since it was before social media, and communication was not as fluid as it is today

In order to accomplish that goal, I counted on people’s willingness and desire to be part of the process, even if only to humor me. Many times that didn’t work out because people were not so interested in being a part of it, or because people didn’t show up, or because people wanted to talk about other things. So, in some places, I wasn’t able to do the address in those workshops. The point is that my goals started to become clear as I interacted with these communities, and so the project had the potential to connect different cities. We had a number of instances where people in other cities were following what we were doing—they were excited to welcome us and had great expectations. They were getting ready to do their own presentations once I got there.

**APM** You situate the work clearly within education or within the pedagogical impulses of art. How were these pedagogical impulses and identifying yourself as an educator, an important part of the work? I think that there’s a lot of talk about the pedagogical turn in art, but how a work is pedagogical is not often “defined.” What are some of the characteristics that give the work the pedagogical impulse that you often write about and talk about in relationship to this project? How does the pedagogical impulse in your work impact or mediate the work of the *SPU*, in ways that it might not, if it didn’t have that component?

**PH** I think it has to do with the idea of outcomes. When I started the project and called it *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, I was explicitly thinking about my own professional involvement with museum education. Specifically, the objective was to employ a pedagogical discursive process to elicit a collective response. In other words, debates and workshops were the approaches through which we would reach a collective reflection that would later become public.

It was important that there were actionable items that resulted from the conversations. So the Panamerican Addresses became statements of purpose, as well as an outcome of the project, or a way in which the discussions could turn into something specific. In the discourse of critical pedagogy you could see it as a statement of *conscientização* (educator), Paulo Freire’s term for critical consciousness.

Each address was meant to be a collective statement about a reality that was considered present at the time. So that was a very simple way in which pedagogy informed my thinking. Thinking about how the project had to change and adapt, it was a huge challenge to consider all of the different ways in which the project could take place. I had to use everything that I knew about being an educator at the time to make things work. In education you have a toolbox of approaches and methods that you can employ depending on the circumstance. If I were in a gallery speaking to a group of people with PhDs in Art History,

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it would be completely different to working with a group of kids who had never been to a museum before. You need to learn to use the appropriate structures to have a conversation that will be meaningful to that particular group of people of art.

It’s less an issue about how much you know of a subject and much more an issue of how you are able to construct a conversation or debate on a particular subject. In the case of going to these different cities, I was obviously the least knowledgeable person in each one of those places because I was the visitor, the tourist, I guess. At the same time, however, I could use my own ignorance in a productive way by inviting those to tell me, “How would you describe this place in five words?” Things like that. The responses from each of them were fascinating, and what they disagreed on was even more fascinating.

**APM** Your pedagogical approach here is very much centered on critical pedagogy, and also it reminds me a little bit of Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). Not without its tensions, there have been some critiques and misreading of Rancière’s work. Still, the figure of the ignorant schoolmaster calls our attention to ways in which educators summon students to use their own intelligence, without attempting to impose expert knowledge on their learning. Modes of education that rely on authoritarian knowledge presume that the learner is unequal and, therefore, less capable than the expert, which, according to Rancière, has a “stultifying” (stupefying) effect on learners that is oppressive rather than emancipatory. This outlook is contiguous in part with Freire’s writing on non-hierarchical and collective learning. Your pedagogical approach avoids a deficit-based understanding of the knowledge of a community; instead, *SPU* moves beyond an education that is top-down...

**PH** *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was very much in vogue in some art circles when I did my trip, yet I confess I have an ambivalent relationship with it. I appreciated Rancière’s arguments, and even felt vindicated by my approach as a generalist educator who works in museums. With that said, I also felt that the book opens the door for many misinterpretations of what education can be, the worst of which suggests that one doesn’t need any expertise to teach (which I don’t think was Rancière’s message in any case). It goes without saying that there is a difference between not knowing a subject that you have to teach and not knowing how to teach. And paradoxically, being an “ignorant” schoolmaster is more difficult than being a supposedly “learned” schoolmaster who teaches with conventional methods.

In a sense, I remained adamant that I was there to help the group construct their own ideas. I was the ignorant schoolmaster, who helped them give shape to their statements without telling them what statement to write.

**APM** How did your experience with *The School of Panamerican Unrest* inform your work, and your book *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2013)?

**PH** *The School of Panamerican Unrest* was the most important project in my development as an artist. It informed my thinking about education, social practice, public art, and the role that art plays in our society. Remember: these were the early years of social practice. Now, we see it in a historic way, but at that time we were not really using the term “social practice.” In fact, I remember my first meeting and conversation with Claire Bishop, in London two years before my trip.



Though she told me that she was researching this type of art form, it was not a phrase that we, as its practitioners, regularly used.

After the trip, I was invited to lead a class at Portland State University taught by Harrell Fletcher and Jen Delos Reyes. Harrell had established an important social practice program at PSU. I also taught at the social practice program started by Ted Purves, who unfortunately passed away recently. Those initial experiences of teaching social practice showed me that there was a great need to articulate some of the guiding principles of social practice. That’s what led me to write the book, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, which was my attempt to describe how these approaches or educational methods can work in the creation of a socially engaged experience.

We are so invested in this objective interpretation of art that we think it is impossible to measure the impact of an artwork on the world. I felt that, if anything, social practice should be a commitment to verify that what you’re doing in fact has an impact in the world. It is not about the good intentions; it’s about actual impact in places and communities and in reality.

**APM** The notion of “verifying” the impact of a work of art is quite complicated. Can you “measure” the impact of a work of art?

**PH** That is what I think distinguishes social practice from performance. Performance art to me is a discipline, and it’s an art form that gives physical reality to various ideas. Those ideas happen in the world, but in the end they still are read in the symbolic realm of art, whereas in social practice, you have to insert yourself in reality and affect it outside of the protective definition of art. It doesn’t work to say, for example, that you are creating a school if you’re not teaching anything—that is, if it is not actually educating or functioning as a school. It doesn’t work to say that you’re doing a music project if you don’t play the music. In these cases, you’re not doing social practice; you are creating a symbolic representation that is not dissimilar to painting. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it should be acknowledged that it is a symbolic representation, not a direct engagement with the world.

An artist should establish what they’re trying to accomplish and how to go about it, and then figure out what impact it has. There is a whole set of evaluation criteria that you use in museum education to know things: what drove people there; if anything changed in their thinking after the experience; if they would do it again; and questions that are not yes/no questions but open-ended, providing a more complex and nuanced understanding of where this person was emotionally or mentally before the experience, as well as after it. You can determine whether you had any impact.

Artists often argue that they don’t want to be subjected to bureaucratic standards of effectiveness because that would limit their creativity, but this argument is weak. If you have a mission you have a purpose, and this purpose can and should be evaluated. If you do a political piece that intends to get people to reflect on the happening of the country, then ostensibly you want people to reflect on this thing and not on something else.

**APM** In the art world we talk about participatory art practices, but often the audience or the participants are excluded from the conversation.

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**PH** *The School of Panamerican Unrest: An Anthology of Documents* (2011), a book that I edited in collaboration with Sarah Demeuse, has this evaluation as a goal. With that in mind, I invited people to speak about their experiences. Not everybody had nice things to say; some of them were very critical, but that was okay with me. I felt that’s what it is: it’s the public evaluation of the projects. The most important thing is the ability to create a transparent process by which the participants can provide their feedback, and not as an art review. You can witness the meaning of the experience to them. Still, we as practitioners have a lot left to do with regard to how we evaluate public experiences.

**APM** How do you, as an artist, go about doing that, or are you leaving that work for someone else?

**PH** I feel I have reached a point where all I can do is provide the entire archive for others to make those assessments. Every time I tried to exhibit the project, which is indeed massive, I confronted issues like how to accurately communicate what that experience was, and what happened. I have decided that the best I can do is to offer the entirety of the documentation, as an archive, to people who may want to explore it, allowing them to draw their own conclusions. I think in the future, there will be people who will have different methods of assessing impact. They will probably have a better sense of what was helpful, interesting, or meaningful about those experiences.

As an educator and artist, I believe that we are, by nature, outsiders, and that the notion of the artist who speaks exclusively about individual experience belongs to a modernist tradition that we have to overcome, because we speak to and about experience, and human experience is universal. I am trained to work with other people’s perspectives and views of life. Individuals around the world share many more things than they think. In other words, culture does not make us Martians or complete extra-terrestrials to one another.

**APM** The notion of a nomad is used in theory, art, and academia without much examination as to how it can help raise questions of who has privilege. The type of privilege I’m referring to comes with being an artist: associated cultural capital and money granted. Although artists often struggle to get grant money to support their projects, this type of privilege allows artists to travel, to be nomadic.

**PH** I was confronted with my privilege at every stop, and more so when I was in Latin America. In places like Colombia, for example, I realized at some point that part of the reason I was resented—at least I suspected—was because I was a Mexican artist based in New York City, with this ability to have mobility throughout the continent.

I was very aware of the fact that I had support from a significant foundation, Creative Capital, to do this project, and was repeatedly reminded of this financial privilege. At the same time, it became a boring discussion: Yes, I have the ability to do this—so what? Let’s move on. To me, it didn’t matter at all who I was; what mattered was that we were there to have a discussion. Transparency about it was a necessity, one that goes back to critical pedagogy and to Freire, who did not hide his privilege. He would say, and I paraphrase here, “Well, I have been given this opportunity to be in this place where I can be a teacher, and I have this knowledge that you might not have, but sometimes you have knowledge that I don’t have.” It was a direct acknowledgment that I always tried to convey during the project.



Despite the funding, I carried out the project with hard work and a tight budget. Many times I was completely stranded with no money, and it was very stressful at different times.

**APM** In moving forward, what did you learn in this process? What would you like to continue to do or advance, regarding this project? Are there things that you wouldn't do again?

**PH** Yes, perhaps. As you get older, you develop thicker skin and learn not to become too emotional. I think the process of social engagement in art is still a fairly new to artists. We are not yet entirely capable of dealing with it emotionally. I know this from artist friends who have also engaged in projects that are really powerful and transformative, but sometimes difficult to assimilate. These projects result in emotional trauma, which we are ill-equipped to deal with.

**APM** Well, I think what I hear you say is that the *SPU* affirmed the importance of social practice as a method for you, a method of living, with some caution here—the emotional impact of the work—but you survived it!

**PH** More and more, social practice is simply becoming social justice, art for social justice. That's fine—except that in the process of politicizing the practice, we need to ask ourselves: Why is it important for it to continue being art? That is something I wish we could reflect on a little bit more. What is it about its identifier as artwork that makes it meaningful and worth producing in this way? Or should we completely forget about it as art and become activists? Those are some of the questions that we will be have to deal with in the future with socially engaged art.

Another key discussion that we're having right now is how do you activate these practices. We ask ourselves: What are the standards for communicating these ephemeral forms to a third audience that was never part of it in the first place? How do we communicate what happens? How do museums that traditionally collect, preserve, and display objects engage with these art forms, and how might they "preserve" the ideas behind them for future knowledge? Those are some of the questions that need solutions, or approaches to solutions, especially as we try to historicize this practice.

**APM** This is why the work of the curator is so important. I think that they are not only doing all of the above but also trying to reach a third audience. They are thinking about how these "standards" are communicated, while addressing how these practices become legitimized. A similar process occurs when art is being professionalized. I think there's a great deal of room to continue to work in these directions from multiple perspectives.

**PH** Absolutely.

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- 33 Quinta de Bolívar, Bogotá, Colombia, August 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.  
34 Panamerican ceremony at the Universidad Matías Delgado, San Salvador, El Salvador, June 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.  
35 Pablo Helguera at a Panamerican ceremony, Casa del Lago, Mexico City, June 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.





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Driving through Colombia, August 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.  
Portland, Oregon, May 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.





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Schoolhouse at Casa del Lago, Mexico City, June 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.  
Panamerican ceremony, Puebla, Mexico, June 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.





OBJECT LESSONS: THE ROLE OF MATERIAL CULTURE IN SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART  
by Sara Reisman

REISMAN

1 Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 1997 (original printing 1973), xxii.  
2 Interview between Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, September 18, 2006

How does a socially engaged artwork translate when transplanted into the space of a gallery? How do objects that are byproducts of an artistic process figure into the presentation of an ephemeral, relational project? To what degree does the archive of an artwork become the work itself? Featured in the exhibition are maps of Medellín and of a journey across the Americas, *Panamerican Suite* collages, on-the-road documentary footage punctuated by addresses, video interviews with residents of Medellín, souvenirs, ephemera, and records including news articles, letters, and blog posts. These materials—some of which were conceived as artworks, whereas others have been selected to create context—point to two projects that differ in scale, duration, and atmosphere. Larger structures have been restaged—the yellow fabric tent of a school house, an illuminated shelf displaying personal effects—to reflect the elastic characteristics of time and place, as a partial representation of the lived experiences that continue to comprise two socially engaged projects. Pablo Helguera’s *The School of Panamerican Unrest* and Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá’s *Skin of Memory*, originally realized in 2006 and 1999 respectively, intersect conceptually within the exhibition *The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement*, having been informed by and produced within the broader geographic frames of the Americas, and specifically in Medellín, Colombia.

From the beginning, Helguera, Lacy, and Lacy’s collaborator Riaño-Alcalá questioned the efficacy of an exhibition that relies heavily on the display of objects to adequately capture and represent their respective works. The questions surrounding the limitations of conventional exhibition making are acutely raised in the context of socially engaged artistic practice, where the desire to show the work, and the experiential and relational nature of the artwork, are often in conflict with the means of translating an experience into a display. Indebted to the legacy of conceptual art, artists and curators are continuously compelled to attempt this process, whether it is for visibility, legacy, art world legitimacy, or the more engaged notion of pedagogy. Lucy Lippard has noted, “Conceptualists indicated that the most exciting ‘art’ might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art.”<sup>1</sup>

Whatever impulses drive us to show works of art that begin as social energies can never be fully re-presented as they were originally realized. The opportunity to learn from ephemeral practices, particularly human exchange, is one that has become increasingly urgent in times of political and social instability.

Leading up to *Skin of Memory* (1999), artist Suzanne Lacy was approached by Colombian anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, to collaborate with a team that included architect Vicky Ramírez, designer Raul Cabra, and local artisans, to contribute to a process conceived to “find alternatives to violence and strengthen civil society,” in Medellín’s Barrio Antioquia, an area ravaged by increasing violence related to the drug trade. Riaño-Alcalá invited Lacy to work within the community based on the sustained engagement and success of her decade-long *The Oakland Projects* (1991–2001). Staged in eight parts, *The Oakland Projects* included *The Roof is on Fire* (1993–1994), which explored the tensions between youth and the police in Oakland, California, and *Expectations Summer Project* (1997), which examined the personal and political impacts of teen pregnancy. Lacy’s multilayered approach to engaging local youth on issues concerning their wellbeing—health, education, safety, and public policy—interested Riaño-Alcalá, who at the time was organizing on the community level in Medellín in response to the needs of neighborhood youth, whose experiences were fraught with the trauma associated with localized violence. The parallels between the youths in Medellín and Oakland are based in what Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá describe as “unprocessed personal losses” and “consequent paralysis and violence.”<sup>2</sup>

In 2003, artist Pablo Helguera began planning a six-month journey titled *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (2006), which would result in a road trip across the Americas, beginning in Anchorage, Alaska, and concluding in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, with twenty-nine stops across two continents. At each stop—in places like Mexico City, Bogotá, Vancouver, Calgary, Mérida, and San Salvador—Helguera set up a mobile schoolhouse, where he collaborated with local organizations and individuals





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I wanted to understand how the American ideals of peace, brotherhood, and unity had evolved to a project of global hegemony, and I felt that we needed to look back at history, at the time when the conscience of the new world had been founded. Where were those nineteenth-century ideals of perfect American democracies imagined by leaders like Jefferson and Bolivar? Where was the America described in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Jose Marti?

The installation also features many archival elements. Like Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá's project, Helguera's archival material is, at times, absorbed into his artistic output. His series of collages, *Panamerican Suite*, were made in a restorative, therapeutic effort, following the conclusion of the six-month trip, which left him physically and emotionally drained. The collages combine maps, scientific and mathematical diagrams, and captions excised from book pages. The phrases, "It seems almost the same way

with countries as with people," "We will be heroes together," and "It involves a sense of inner time, an inward perspective," read as if a postscript of musings, reflections on his rigorous itinerary.

If we recognize that objects in and of themselves are limited in their capacity to re-present a project, create an atmosphere, or impart the experience of being there, then what are other ways of understanding the transformative potentials of a socially engaged artwork? One approach might be to reconstruct a scene and invite the public to experience a simulation. Another might be to restage a similar project in a new place, with information about the original artwork. Additionally, we can try to capture some record of the ripple effects of said project, to try to assess what, if any, connections can be made in terms of the project's realization and its subsequent impact and legacy. The problem with determining impact is that social practice does not necessarily follow a scientific method of research and evaluation that can be assessed with standardized criteria.

in participatory workshops that were a hybrid of performance art and experimental education. The people involved in or local to the locations shaped the workshops, each of which featured a combination of readings, performances, and lectures. Motivated by the lack of communication between different countries within the Americas, Helguera's project offered an opportunity to draw connections between the vast diversity of cultural communities that make up the two continents. In order to reveal the potential relationships between these varied geographic locations, Helguera worked with local participants on a community-specific basis to articulate the role and possibilities of art and culture to address the social, political, and economic issues of that moment in 2006 at each site.

The installation of Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá's *Skin of Memory* is anchored by the display of a partial collection of personal objects that, together, function as a community memorial. Originally presented in a bus in Medellín, the "museo arqueológico del Barrio Antioquia" was a mobile commemorative

exhibition that traveled to different parts of the barrio, crossing contested boundaries rather than having residents risk the trip, in order to safely share the project with different communities. The bus displayed 500 items selected and offered by participants, including currency, figurines, identification cards, stuffed animals, toys, and clothes of those killed in shootouts. Within *The Schoolhouse and the Bus*, what was displayed in the mobile museum has been reduced to a partial installation (actual ephemera was retrieved from individuals in Medellín), with video documentation flanking the commemorative display. Adding to the experience of the project, Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá present maps, news articles, and a timeline in order to enrich our understanding of this conflicted period in Barrio Antioquia.

At the center of Helguera's installation of *The School of Panamerican Unrest* is a yellow schoolhouse. Inside the schoolhouse, an hour-long documentary of Helguera's odyssey begins with him reflecting on then-recent events during the time leading up to his project: 9/11 and the Iraq War. In it, he posits





Because socially engaged art is an art form, our understanding of the best practices in re-presenting any socially engaged artwork must be based on its particular components, characteristics, and relationship with context. It is important to make a distinction between the archival components and the artwork within the exhibition—but can art and archive ever be separated? Or does all of the content of the exhibition become artwork—albeit archive-based—by virtue of being exhibited in an art museum or gallery? There is a tension generated by the idea that an artwork’s value—in terms of people, places, and even money—changes when it leaves the site of its production and enactment, and is brought into the gallery. Are the work’s participants relegated to artistic material, or does a gallery setting elevate their status?

The answers to these questions are subjective, and will depend on whom you ask. Ultimately, it is the aftereffects or legacies of Helguera’s and Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá’s projects that reflect their value as art or otherwise. Both projects clearly resonate with those who experienced them directly and for others who have learned about them. In 2011, the Medellín Biennial MDE11 invited Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá to present *Skin of Memory Revisited*, to reflect on the decade that had passed since the project was initiated and understand where the project had succeeded and failed. In the years that followed the first iteration of *Skin of Memory*, the Victims of Armed Conflict Care Program began laying the groundwork for Medellín’s Museo Casa de la Memoria, which opened its doors to the public seven years later in 2012. Founded with support and input from many of the collaborators involved in *Skin of Memory*, the Museum’s mission is closely linked to the promotion of civil society and democratic engagement, with interactive educational installations that facilitate dialogue about Medellín’s history of violence.

The ripple effects of Helguera’s *The School of Panamerican Unrest* are more difficult to trace, largely because of the project’s vast geographic scope, with twenty-nine participating communities. Taking into account Helguera’s 2008 presentation of documentation of *SPU* curated by Itzel Vargas at Casa del Lago in Mexico City, one of the project’s art world echoes could be found in

*Panamericana*, curated by Jens Hoffmann for kurimanzutto gallery in Mexico City in 2010 (although any connection between Helguera’s project and the show at kurimanzutto was not acknowledged by the curator), which aimed to connect artists from different countries in Latin America. Published in 2013, Claire Fox’s book *Making Art Panamerican* situates the visual arts programs of the Pan American Union within the context of hemispheric cultural relations during the Cold War. Helguera was extensively interviewed by Fox, whose work illuminates the institutional dynamics that helped shape aesthetic movements following World War II.

Another example of an outcome of Helguera’s project was triggered by his stop in Mérida in the Yucatán, where he worked with La Escuela Superior de Artes. In writing about her experience with *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, then-director Mónica Castillo witnessed the realization among students of La Escuela Superior de Artes regarding the rarity of the practice of art criticism. This prompted one student, Debora Carneval, to organize critiques of artwork made in Mérida. In its Panamerican Address, the city of Mérida had declared, “there is a lack of critical analysis of the art scene; that we consider that the end is not to necessarily transgress, but rather to make art as we see fit in order to reflect our ideas.”

A shared ethos of both Helguera’s *The School of Panamerican Unrest* and Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá’s *Skin of Memory* is that each has been conceived to engage participants in ways that maintain their agency, whether by making declarations that reflect on local conditions, or by selecting objects for display that represent loss. From the distance of time and place, it becomes clear that the relational nature of each artwork is supported by objects—maps, documents, newspapers, collages, videos, and souvenirs—whether it be in the production or presentation, as prompts for sustained engagement.



44 Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, *Skin of Memory*, 2017, installation view, AD&A Museum, UC Santa Barbara.  
45 Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, *Skin of Memory*, 2017, installation view, AD&A Museum, UC Santa Barbara.  
47 Pablo Helguera, *School of Panamerican Unrest Banner*, 2006, installation view, AD&A Museum, UC Santa Barbara.

SKIN OF MEMORY

Project description by Holly Gore

*Skin of Memory* (1999–2017) is a social practice artwork by artist Suzanne Lacy and anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, which grew out of a community-led process in Medellín, Colombia. Lacy was invited by Riaño-Alcalá and a team of historians, political scientists, activists, and educators working to strengthen community in neighborhoods divided by violence. During the 1990s, Colombia was one of the most violent countries in the world. Drug cartels, leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary groups, the Colombian army, and US interventions forged a multilayered conflict, subjecting Colombians to homicides, kidnappings, massacres, and forced displacements. In Medellín’s Barrio Antioquia, rival youth gangs staked their territories and allegiances; to cross these lines was dangerous. *Skin of Memory* (1999) and *Skin of Memory Revisited* (2011) investigated spaces, in which citizens could share histories and unite in mourning to rebuild their communities.

For *Skin of Memory* (1999) women and youth acted as collectors; they went door-to-door throughout Barrio Antioquia, gathering objects with powerful connections to the residents’ lives and experiences, and recording the stories that made them significant. Because the neighborhood was deeply territorialized, they created a movable museum, which displayed these keepsakes in a bus retrofitted with aluminum shelves. Over the course of ten days this museum of Barrio Antioquia was visited by 4,000 people, who were invited to write a letter to an unknown resident of the barrio, expressing a wish for a peaceful future. *Skin of Memory Revisited* (2011) created for the Medellín Biennale, reconvened participants to reflect on personal, social, and political changes in Colombia over the intervening decade between the first and second parts of the project. Lacy, Riaño-Alcalá, and their original collaborators organized an installation and public conversation at the Museo de Antioquia, an established city museum. In a dimly lit gallery, new and former objects of memory were exhibited on a long aluminum shelf lit with small white lights, reminiscent of the interior of the bus. Two video projections illuminated opposing walls, one of which documented the 1999 project, while the other showed former participants now reflecting on the past and future of civil society in Colombia.

This current iteration, *Skin of Memory* (2017) continues a dialogue with ongoing political processes and aligns with a significant moment in Colombia: the signing of a Peace Agreement with the former guerrillas of the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC). The AD&A Museum’s exhibition poses a significant challenge for Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá: to consider how this new presentation in the US will impact viewers’ understanding of the work. US stereotypes of Colombians are enhanced by a Trump-era narrative that disparages Latin Americans—one that ignores the impact of US policies on the daily lives of youth in Medellín, California, or wherever drug-related policies or military aide are enacted. The US-led “war on drugs” and the “war on terror” have directly affected Barrio Antioquia which, in past decades, was the main producer of “drug mules.” Over time the conflicts in Colombia have been particularly deadly for youth, such as those who began this project, and now for their children. With *Skin of Memory* (2017) Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá hope to encourage a deeper curiosity for, as well as conversation about, the relationship between Colombia and the US and its impacts on the lives and deaths of youth in each country.





- 50 *Skin of Memory*, detail, 1999. Maps marking where the bus will appear.  
Photo by Suzanne Lacy.
- 51 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Workmen installing. Photo by Suzanne Lacy.





- 52 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Barrio Antioquia residents lining up to see the bus.  
Photo by Suzanne Lacy.
- 53 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Maps mark where the bus will appear. Photo by Suzanne Lacy.







54 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Visitors on bus leave letters to an unknown neighbor.  
Photo by Pilar Riaño-Alcalá.

55 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Visitors waiting to get onto the bus. Photo by Pilar Riaño-Alcalá.





56 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Photos of youth who died in the conflicts. Photo by Suzanne Lacy.  
 57 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Visitors to the bus. Photo by Carlos Sanchez.







- 58 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Visitors to the bus. Photo by Carlos Sanchez.
- 59 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Workmen installing lights on the bus. Photo by Suzanne Lacy.
- 60 *Skin of Memory*, 1999. Closing performance organized by Pilar Riaño-Alcalá as bus moves to center of Medellin. Photo courtesy of Pilar Riaño-Alcalá.









62 *Skin of Memory*, 2011. Installation view Museo di Antioquia, Medellín.  
Photo by Christina Sanchez.

63 *Skin of Memory*, 2011. Installation view Museo di Antioquia, Medellín.  
Photo by Christina Sanchez.







- 64 *Skin of Memory*, 2011. Installation view of 1999 videos. Photo courtesy of Museo di Antioquia.
- 66 *Skin of Memory*, 2011. Installation view of archival materials. Photo by Suzanne Lacy.
- 67 *Skin of Memory*, 2011. Shelf detail. Photo courtesy of Museo di Antioquia.



RELATIONSHIPS, MATERIALITY, AND POLITICS IN THE SKIN OF MEMORY

A conversation between Suzanne Lacy and anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá<sup>1</sup>

RIAÑO-ALCALÁ

LACY

This conversation is a combination of texts from 2006 and 2017. When this part of the interview was conducted in 2006, Alvaro Uribe was the president of Colombia.

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**SL** One of the best things about this multiyear project has been our conversations. In 1999, one of our colleagues, William Alvarez, came up with the name “Skin of Memory” (La Piel del Memoria).

**PRA** *Skin of Memory* dealt with loss and its relationship to memory. With this title we connected the way memory relates to sensation, as does skin; we explored the reciprocal relationship between body and memory.

Memory, in this metaphor, has sensation—it is mutable. It is not only individual but also resides in physical spaces. If memory were like a texture, a surface, then wherever you touch that surface would be felt sensorially within the whole. We hoped that if we touched the skin of people’s memories there would be some impact on their sensory world. The project’s central image, a transformed school bus, became a collective body that stored a myriad of individual and family memories, as represented by the objects that they lent us. But you mentioned this idea of the skin as container?

**SL** Skin is the container of a living organism with its sinews, vessels, organs, chemistries, and fluids. When you peel back that skin, the body is exposed, vulnerable, revealed. Once this barrier between ourselves and our environment is removed, pain results. It was as if Barrio Antioquia was a living organism, with the skin as all that stood between the neighborhood and the tremendous loss experienced there. We explored that territory between the individual and the body of the whole of the barrio, with its calcified memories.

**PRA** A key to memory is that it is not only isolated within an individual. Much of what you remember is part of a relationship. When you work with people who have experienced violence for a long time, you see how memories of loss may become an obsession. Memories haunt them.

**SL** In Oakland, where I worked for a decade in the ’90s, so many young people carry deep and largely unprocessed personal losses—the disappearance of fathers into prisons, the break-up of families, the deaths of friends by gun violence. Many have a huge reservoir of depression, fear, and anger that can lead to nihilism, recklessness, and despair about the future.

**PRA** Living with unprocessed loss and its consequent paralysis and violence is not restricted to poor youth. In Colombia, the president himself is trapped by memories of the kidnapping and murder of his father, and he swears to fight the guerrillas to the end.<sup>2</sup> Obsessive memory can take one to the point of revenge, and this might be expressed in many ways.

**SL** Through teaching women incest survivors I learned that making art is one way that people reconstruct memories of loss in order to gain some control over their experiences.

**PRA** I’m not talking about the act of remembering per se, but how, in the process of remembering, you remember as part of a group—the relational capacity of memory as a bridge between past, present, and future, between the individual and the collective, memory as a never-ending source of collective positioning.

**SL** You talked about the importance of reconciliation and neutrality in peace processes in Colombia. In Barrio Antioquia, did people who wouldn’t normally transgress local factionalisms visit the bus in neighborhood areas that would not have been safe for them?

**PRA** They went when it was in their own residential sector, except when it was in the central district, which everyone can access. But though they didn't necessarily physically cross territorial lines, as far as we know, we do know they began to make the kinds of connections that we were hoping they would make, a slight crack in the rigid boundaries caused by grief.

**SL** How do you know?

**PRA** Because of what they said when they left the bus, comments that are well documented. What we felt was important about art—that it lives as a visual and embodied memory—proved to be the case. The bus remains embedded in people's minds as a place of memory and a record of suffering, a lived sensory and collective memory.

**SL** In this third iteration of the project, now in 2017, we began with the question of whether this installation is a documentation of two previous manifestations or a new work? Are we reflecting on projects from 1999 and 2011? I am interested in how the work and our conversation continue.

**PRA** We are reflecting on the current implications of those past projects: what are the movements this project inspired in both social and political practices? Now we are working with three women in Medellín to collect objects for this show. We cannot actually keep them because their owners treasure them, but what makes those objects meaningful is that they are part of a very dense network of relationships between people and their pasts, and between you and me. They continue to speak to us in the present, and what we want to consider is the question: what do these relationships continue to tell us?

**SL** One of the most difficult things to portray in social practice art is experience including that in relation to others. In museum installations, social practice artists deploy a series of tropes. I worry that in a US context objects displayed on a shelf will be collapsed into a simple narrative: here is this object, owned by this family, representing this story of loss. In the bus, we made specific decisions not to reveal the narrative or the ownership of each object. But, in educating a US audience, we should carefully stage enough narrative context to create what amounts to a new position from which viewers can witness this Colombian reality.

**PRA** In the beginning of our conversations on the meanings and materiality of these objects, we explored how to avoid fetishizing or instrumentalizing them. We worked from the idea that violence and armed conflict objectify people, dehumanizing them as "an other," the enemy. We thought we could only challenge this dehumanizing impulse if we reconstructed the relationality between the people, the place they lived in, the territory where they walked, and the things and stories they kept to remember their loved ones.

**SL** When I first came to Medellín in 1999 at the invitation of you and your colleagues, it was a real privilege to enter the conversations there. That Alonso Salazar, a journalist and author on youth culture and violence in 1999, had become the mayor when we worked there in 2011, indicates the level of engagement that we all had in the civil society discourse. For me, entering a context where practices from anthropology, education, activism, and art weren't isolated within the academy offered a rare opportunity to be part of a politically effective team. One of the reasons I've stayed interested in

LACY

RIANO-ALCALA

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After more than five decades of armed conflict in Colombia, the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a leftist guerrilla group, signed a peace agreement in December, 2016.

the project over time is that it has an ongoing embedded-ness in the social and political life of Colombia.

**PRA** When we first began to think about the project, we felt that it might strengthen local peace processes that were being negotiated and broken repeatedly during those years. A peace process is as much about trust building and relationship building as it is about negotiating the content of the agreements. In the context of Colombia today, with the unprecedented signing of a peace agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), this is more relevant than it was even then.<sup>3</sup> It also has international importance, because when I think about police violence and Black or Latino youth in the US today the same type of questions come to the fore.

**SL** Exactly. We began this work together based on my work in Oakland, your work in Medellín, and the cultural dynamics that were just coming into focus about the ways societies violated the racialized bodies of youth, both of us interested in the connection between young people, the violence inflicted on them, and the politics of our two countries.

**PRA** Someone in Medellín put it this way: this is art that matters, not necessarily by leaving behind a monument, but by fostering relationships and deeply political conversations. *Skin of Memory* was not about an anthropologist doing art or an artist doing anthropological research. It was an interdisciplinary dialogue that included all types of knowledge exchange: the knowledge of our team members Ruben or Angela as social practitioners, of Alonso as a politician, of the youth from Barrio Antioquia who worked on the project—Sebastian, Nancy, Milton, or Elliot—who had everyday experiences of death, loss, and gang violence.

**SL** I remember during my first tour of the barrio I saw a roped-off street scene with a young person lying under a blanket, the victim of gang violence. It was not unlike what was happening in Oakland in the '90s. But while we were dealing with loss, we were also expressing the hope, pride, and optimism of local youth and adults by working together on this project. In the second project, the idea was to bring the work itself, and the people who produced it, into a place of cultural importance. Over a decade later, our installation conveyed the symbolism of the shelf, the objects, and the expressive meanings of a community's experiences.

**PRA** Today we wonder what will happen when we bring this work to North America. What is the relationality that we are constructing here? Is there a meaningful connection for those who are immigrants, or the children of immigrants, with no legal status in the US, living in fear under the Trump administration? Is there a relationship with Black activists and youth who have experienced firsthand, similarly to youth in Medellín, that their lives don't matter from the perspective of the police and society at large?

**SL** The installation begins in a state university, so we should have a complex mix of visitors from the student body. But I wonder how many undocumented people or residents of poor communities will make their way to a gallery? An art museum is not necessarily the best way to reach larger audiences. As we work on this, we need to think more deeply about paradigms of social practice art, to move the field forward, to consider how audiences are also witnesses.



**PRA** With the work in 2011 we wanted to examine ideas of responsibility: What is the responsibility of those who are not part of the community that experiences everyday violence? What is your role when you enter the museum? That's when we began to explore witnessing as a practice of being accountable to each other in new forms of relationality, between the witness and the storyteller, the witness and those who provide testimony, or the witness and the object.

**SL** While the first project's focus was Barrio Antioquia's individual and collective memories and how they spoke to youth violence and the city, in 2011 we focused on the relationships formed during the project in 1999, and the intervening time between 1999 and 2011 for both Barrio Antioquia and Medellín. The newly borrowed objects were, in a sense, the material link between those two moments in time. The reunion conversation in the middle of an international conference, for over 75 people who participated in 1999, was a performance of self-enactment by that community. I really enjoyed that moment of reconnection.

**PRA** Why was it special for you?

**SL** Well, aesthetically I like the notion of "performing" life, bringing people back together to reflect on the intervening years in Medellín and what the project meant for them personally and politically. In another sense, it's fairly simple: I loved seeing everybody again and knowing that I was part of a community engagement, a process, and that I remain in people's memory as they remain in mine. I am committed to that time and those conversations from 1999 through 2011 and even up to today. It feels almost familial. But there's something in that kind of love that is both personal and political. It's love that is civically minded and has a commitment to ethical relationships, a motivation for social justice.

**PRA** Because there are so many debates about what makes something transformative and what social justice looks like, some of the most basic ideas risk being lost. As the Indigenous Lakota people say in greeting, "All our relations," to stress we are all related. This is the idea of relationships as the basis of life and how we experience politics day-to-day. The women we work with today, who were teenagers when we first met, have gone through so many things since 1999. So much has happened—pain and sorrow have been very present—but somehow this project captured and located them in a process that became transformative for them.

**SL** I agree, but am uncomfortable representing those transformations as a demonstration of the success of the projects. That is a default position for artists: four women's lives were impacted, and therefore the art was successful. It goes to your idea of emplaced witnessing.

**PRA** I see what you're getting at when you talk about artists. But this happened not only because of an art project, but also because it was something broader, with so many people and social movements thinking about how to respond to the crisis of youth dying as a result of armed violence. It was much more than a public art project. It was simultaneously an educational, political, and community-building exercise, a project of personal development and a project of local cultural expression. It was a project to find alternatives to violence and reconstruct civil society. Witnessing is central to this. It speaks of accountability and responding to the call of those who provide testimony through their stories and the objects they lent us.

RIAÑO-ALCALÁ

LACY

4 FARC has been involved in the continuing Colombian armed conflict since 1964.

**SL** The peace process is a significant marker of this moment, in which we produce a new iteration of our work. It's happening as we speak. Why are we doing this project now, and what are the dangers of doing it in the US?

**PRA** One of the major challenges that Colombia faces today with the peace agreement is that many are not willing to trust the ex-FARC members or to accept them as full members of society.<sup>4</sup> This project taught us about the possibilities of listening to someone who you may see as your enemy, to connect with them through another means, through the act of witnessing. So for me, it speaks to the peace process in quite significant ways.

**SL** Now we're getting into the heart of the conversation. One of the first lessons that you taught me was, "don't come to Colombia thinking this is only about drug violence." When there, I was acutely aware, not so much of my whiteness but of my US-ness. You explained the multiple violences and displacements that created the Medellín context. You see this US stereotype of Colombia and drug cartels now in the Trump-era narrative: that it is Mexican gangs that cause violence in the US, not our drug usage and gun sales.

I think your reminder about the genesis of this project in racialized and politicized youth experience and its relationship to, for instance, the Black Lives Matter movement is important, but this connection has not yet materialized in our installation.

**PRA** We do need to clarify it further. The Colombian peace process for those in the US and for the visual art world may appear as a distant experience, but it is not that remote when you consider governmental policies. The US-led war on drugs has had a direct effect on Colombia and particularly in Barrio Antioquia. In the 1950s through the '60s and '70s, most of the people who became drug mules carrying cocaine and marijuana to the US were from Barrio Antioquia. During the last decade, US funding of Plan Colombia, the largest military aid package to a Latin American country, has failed in ways that directly impact people there.

In terms of international politics, we need to think on how the US relates to Latin America through policies and aid and the impact of this relationship on the daily lives of the youth in Colombia, but also the youth in Oakland or Canada, or the people impacted by these drug-related policies. We are connected in one way or another.

**SL** We should see this installation in Santa Barbara as the beginning of an inquiry on context. We're struggling to produce physical forms in the gallery that communicate the complex reality we lived through the projects. How this work might now operate within the context of Colombian peace efforts is also compelling.

**PRA** Your work has taught me that this type of conversation doesn't take place as much in the installation as in the moments of encounter and dialogue that the installation fosters. This happened with the first project when people came to the bus and talked about memory and loss, and it happened again in the museum in 2011 during our reunion conversation. I wonder how this installation may trigger conversations here with the university students, or beyond? They need to feel invited to create a relationship with the exhibition.

The arguments of this essay are in dialogue with these texts: Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces* and *The One and the Many*; Shannon Jackson, *Social Works*; Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, and Dominic Willsdon, eds., *Public Servants*; Nato Thompson, ed., *Living as Form*; Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells*; Ted Purves, *What We Want Is Free*; Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made*; John Dewey, *Art as Experience*; Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*; Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*.

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Lacy and Helguera: we have a great deal to learn from this artistic pairing, indeed, a great deal to learn about how “learning” itself propels artistic making. Of course, Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera have been implicitly paired—and compared—before. They have shared the dais in public dialogues and shared space in art catalogs and other publications. They have been found together on syllabi (including mine at UC Berkeley) and in many other books, events, workshops, and venues that seek to come to terms with the practice of socially engaged art. With *The Schoolhouse and the Bus*, however, we have the chance to look deeply into the practices and processes of two artists and two art projects. In particular, we have the chance to see how these extraordinary practitioners claim and resist their identities as artists in order to create meaningful social experiences that are educational (though not in the usual sense), cross borders (often through unorthodox means), and move within the geography of the Americas, including the LA/LA geography signified and debated in 2017/2018 at Pacific Standard Time. In what follows, I follow a daisy chain through this proposition. So let me begin, again.

ART AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

As noted in the book’s introduction, Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera are exemplary figures in a socially oriented movement of cultural practitioners whose work challenges traditional parameters of art. In the wider world of art and culture, there are many different ways of labeling this kind of practice—relational aesthetics, social practice, post-studio art, community art, participatory art, and socially engaged art. Lacy herself coined the term “new genre public art” to characterize a mode of public art practice that differed from the nationalist traditions and plop-art conventions of “public art,” asking what might happen if art became truly “publicized,” that is, undone and redone by the public’s claims. If one creative model finds the artist working hermetically in her studio, releasing a finished work into a gallery or onto a public, other models now start with the site of arrival. New genre public artists and socially engaged artists are now trained to excavate the material, historical, and sociological

conditions of the commissioning site, crafting a public artwork that responds to the local conditions that they find.<sup>1</sup> For many artists, those conditions include volatile political and economic factors that might exceed the values and original intentions of the commissioning body. And for many of those artists, the central “material” of socially engaged art is social exchange itself. Indeed, the embrace of the social is partly an embrace of the relational—that is, an embrace of person-to-person encounter is akin to a material aspect of the art object. Rather than conceiving art as a thing bound by a frame or balanced atop a pedestal, art becomes most interesting as a structure for enabling interaction among those who encounter it; in such social practice artwork, social interaction is a central material and itself an artistic form. The art requires action and encounter in order to become itself and, to some ways of thinking, requires continued action to remain itself.

Both Suzanne Lacy’s *Skin of Memory* and Pablo Helguera’s *The School of Panamerican Unrest* foreground social exchange as a central condition and material of artistic practice. Indeed, in the region surrounding the Colombian city of Medellín, the site of Lacy’s work with sociologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, sociality was particularly volatile. After decades of violence and trauma within and across barrios in the region, citizens had lost the capacity to trust as well as to create conditions for safe dialogue. To enter into any kind of social dialogue was a highly political, not to mention risky, act. While his goals were different, Helguera, too, chose to transform public dialogue into an aesthetic practice within the networked conversation spaces of *The School of Panamerican Unrest*. Moving across the Americas from cities such as Vancouver, Chicago, Portland, and San Francisco to Mexico City, San Salvador, Caracas, and Guatemala City, Helguera and his interlocutors established dialogic spaces for reflection and deliberation about the social and artistic values that they held most dear.

SOCIAL PRACTICE  
AND PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

Of course, the decision to turn toward “sociality” in art is hardly meaningful without pragmatic ideas for execution. On the one hand, we can say that the aesthetic encounter is always a



social encounter. It provides a space for large and small groups to gather; *pace* Modernist critics, the meaning and experience of the artwork will be influenced by the social context in which it is housed. To some degree then, social practice foregrounds a relational dimension in art that was always there. On the other hand, the techniques and skill sets of social practice art expand beyond the technical skills of brushwork or the manipulation of clay, so the expressive and conceptual skills of such work change when the art's site, its public dialogue, and its community engagement become central goals rather than peripheral effects.

At this point, it is worth noticing another shared dimension of Lacy and Helguera's work: their excavation of pedagogical practice as an art form, and as a pragmatic resource for artistic action. Indeed, the social turn in art very much coincides with a pedagogical turn, even as many educational domains have come to rely on art to animate the classroom. Following in the educational tradition of John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, innovative pedagogical critics and teachers consistently turn to the arts—employing storytelling, image-making, peer-to-peer dialogue, and hands-on exercises to inspire active learning. Of course, these artistic techniques in education can be adapted to reinspire the experience of cutting-edge public art as well. As such, we also find many social practice artists using these aesthetically inspired pedagogical techniques in their own community engagement. Indeed, Helguera's own book, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, is a pragmatic exploration of this synergy. The stories, images, and perspectives of participants do not simply respond to the artwork but are themselves part of the art's production. Interpretive and educational engagement does not only come after the artwork but is part of its origin.

For artists such as Lacy and Helguera, this pedagogical shift also has politics attached. It echoes not only Dewey's conceptions of the democratic potential of pragmatic pedagogy, but also the perspectives of Paulo Freire on the power of radical pedagogy. As elaborated in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, socially responsive education requires a shift not only in content, but also in method. Specifically, it must counter hierarchical and unidirectional methods of what Freire called "banking"

education into participatory pedagogy where power is shared among "teacher" and "student." Such practices adapt themselves well to situations where artists and activists are also concerned with their own hierarchical positions vis-à-vis the communities they serve. New genre public art thus makes use of new genres of public pedagogy. Whether framing Panamerican exploration as a "school" or making transformational use of a "school bus," Helguera and Lacy's experiments demonstrate how a pedagogical consciousness can transform the art experience, and conversely how schooling could be transformed by an aesthetic imagination. At a time when art seeks to become more pedagogical—and the school seeks to become more artful—such social practices embody a mutually productive intersection.

#### PUBLIC PEDAGOGY AND MOBILITY

"Share a meaningful object with others," said Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá, to shaken communities surrounding Medellín. "Write a new declaration for your city," said Helguera, to artistic communities across the longitude of a Panamerican circuit. In both cases, the artists extracted and circulated a cherished exercise of progressive pedagogy. Within *Skin of Memory*, Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá asked their participants to investigate their personal archives. Sometimes, this meant peeling back the layers of trauma and violence; sometimes this meant touching the treasured stories of lost family history. In all cases, this meant daring to retrieve a delicate object of deep personal value, and daring further to share that object with others. It meant sharing that object with strangers unknown, strangers who might even have been connected to one's experience of trauma and violence. It was a volatile pedagogical exercise of show and tell. Some seven years later, Helguera's gathered communities marshaled and reimagined the rhetorical address of a democratic declaration, connecting anew to that first person plural—"WE, the PEOPLE"—and allowing themselves to deliberate about what that pronoun could possibly signify in complex political times. Both gestures opened the process of aesthetic making to a community of participants that exceeded the authorial vision of the

artist-teacher. And both gestures made use of progressive pedagogical techniques that value the stories and aspirations of citizens and students as more than, or as much as, those of politicians and teachers.

It seems no coincidence that these two artistic projects gained their energy and inspiration from a Latin American imagination—what for some might be called an "Americas" consciousness or, for others, a Bolivarian consciousness. The inspiration and compass for both those projects seem to ally with a southern hemispheric understanding of hemispheric connection. Their sensibilities recall the performative pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal as they plotted a new revolution—as well as that of the more recent, much-heralded Mayor Mockus of Bogotá, who understood the role of art in reimagining civic connection. The political-aesthetic leadership traditions of Latin America are propelled, too, by the historical legacies of José Vasconcelos and José Martí, as well as Simón Bolívar himself, in plotting a movement that truly *moved* across regions of the world. In both cases, *Skin of Memory* and *The School of Panamerican Unrest* "move" in a school bus and across geographies variously mobilized under a school's portable pop-up tent. They are guided by a "South" American tradition of progressive pedagogy that undoes the borders within and across the regions that they encounter. Borders among barrios are shaken loose when memories of lost children are shared. Borders between "South" and "North" America are undone by Panamerican people and Panamerican practices that unsettle South/North distinctions, opting instead to (s)pan into a networked conversation across the equator, across LA and... LA.

#### MOBILITY AND ART, AGAIN

Having routed through a daisy chain of connections—among social practice, pedagogy, and geography—we are ending where we began in the space of art. When Riaño-Alcalá reached out to Lacy after doing on-the-ground social work in Medellín, she knew that an artistic consciousness could help advance the community work she had already begun. An art project was allowed a degree of mobility and freedom to travel across psychological and geographic lines

that were otherwise taboo. Meanwhile, in order to activate a public conversation about the Americas, Helguera's mobile project relied upon artists as well; a network of artistically allied friends created landing points for *SPU's* unrest across a Panamerican line.

But artistic mobility is not only a spatial concept but also a temporal one. The *Skin of Memory* launched in 1999 and again in 2011; *The School of Panamerican Unrest* traveled in 2006, and its documentation has been recalled for various occasions since. Now in a joint exhibit, these projects are moving again; they are moving across time to enter 2017 and across medium, as the current exhibition attempts to recall processes of the past. Such a remounting inevitably invites new questions about the politics of mobility and global citizenship, especially at a time of debate about a fortified "wall" across the borders of the Americas. This recalling also creates new conceptual challenges and new aesthetic opportunities as curators install documentation of processes and social exchange inside the relatively static scene of an exhibition format. In such a space, mementos become spaces, and behaviors become artifacts. At the same time, these objects prompt a new kind of reflection as we stare into the glass-paneled reflections of past memories, or as we encounter a pop-up tent and imagine the conversations that might have happened there. And, in such moments, these specimens, images, objects, and artifacts might also become invitations to new processes and new behaviors. What memories must we recall now? What new conversations need to occur inside the gathering spaces of a school that will not rest? Recalling the social experiments of Helguera and Lacy also means imagining new public pedagogies for the future. Let's be sure that they—and we—keep moving.



## THE SCHOOLHOUSE AND THE BUS

Installation views at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum,  
UC Santa Barbara

78 *Skin of Memory*, 2017. Photo by Tony Mastres.  
79 *Skin of Memory*, 2017. Photo by Tony Mastres.









- 80 *Skin of Memory*, 2017. Photo by Tony Mastres.
- 82 *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, 2017. Photo by Tony Mastres.
- 83 *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, 2017. Photo by Tony Mastres.



ON SOCIAL PRACTICE  
A conversation between Suzanne Lacy and  
Pablo Helguera

HELGUERA

LACY

**PH** When we ask about what kind of expertise or practice we incorporate into our work, I see the artist as a composer: someone who does not play every single instrument, but knows what those instruments can do, and how they can be incorporated successfully into a larger reflection. While we as artists have to perform many roles, the objective is not to impersonate or to supplant an actual expert, but to create gestures that help bring other disciplines into the art discourse. Suzanne, how would you describe your methodology for approaching each of the constituencies in Medellín that were engaged in your projects there?

**SL** I think there are incredibly varied sets of practices that social practice artists draw upon, from community organizing to conflict resolution. As I tell my students, the ability to negotiate is a definer of success in this work.

I was invited by Pilar Riaño-Alcalá and several NGOs to support their ongoing work on building a civil society in Medellín. Pilar’s book, *Dwellers of Memory* (2006), discussed local applications of “memory work” in Barrio Antioquia where youth deaths were astronomically high. I was invited to join the team because of the work I’d done in the ’90s with Oakland teenagers. It was an incredible opportunity be part of a larger process—one I didn’t initiate. My colleagues in Medellín were exploring how “the city educates.” Now, many years later, Antioquia Province is “The State That Educates.”

**PH** When I made *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, I did not have any preestablished strategy. In fact, when I conceived it originally, it was not meant to be a road trip: I thought it would be a series of encounters in different cities around the Americas. A lot of the project unfolded in real time, and a lot of the circumstances would have been impossible to predict until they actually happened. I had to use everything that I knew, at that point, about performance and education.

At times I was an educator, an activist, therapist, and journalist. I was the screen onto which people projected their frustrations, interests, or ideas. I had to contend with performing all of these different roles, while learning how to perform them successfully. I also learned the importance of improvisation, of thinking on your feet, as new circumstances arose and evolved.

My role as artist was played in a rather predictable manner until I crossed into Guatemala. After that point, the question of whether this project was art or not became gradually less important. [SPU] was really about coming to address and engage with local issues. And to be a successful listener and activator of conversations and debates that mattered in those places at the time.

**SL** What’s interesting is that you traced—with your body—a learning trajectory for social practice. When your project first came across my radar, I thought, “This guy is positioning himself as a performer as well as a student and producer of others’ learning experiences.” You created an expanded classroom to transcontinentally explore political, pedagogic, and interpersonal experiences, and you put yourself through an educational process as an artist.

**PH** Thinking about the artist as outsider, specifically what kind of license do you have to enter into a cultural community that is not your own? I think this is a delicate question that has become very important right now. Today we are witnesses of the ‘biennialist’

syndrome—the tendency to parachute artists into random cities and countries to make an artwork about that place, often with little engagement with the local reality. We know that a lot of site-specific work can mean well but is often misguided. And yet, I think it is also important to recognize two things: that as artists we can never shed the condition of being outsiders, and that this condition can be a strength when we are honest about it—i.e. when we don't pretend to be insiders.

I always think of Paulo Freire's pedagogy—how he approached relationships with others, acknowledging very directly, with whichever group he was working with, that we are not the same people. We have different personal histories, different cultural backgrounds, education, and perhaps social status.

**SL** I think you're right, but I can nuance this a bit with my involvement as a white woman in racial conflicts and, in other countries, as a US citizen in places where our government has been destructive. One has to be agile to work cross-culturally in circumstances where strong politics are at play, whether it's a man working with women, or a free person working with prison inmates. "Difference" operates differently within various moments and contexts. Working with Pilar, I'm always very conscious of how deeply the US is implicated in the politics and violence in Colombia.

It's the degree to which you can listen, learn, co-create, analyze, and make an empathic connection through the work that positions you as a student of others. In each project I begin as a learner. What I learned in Oakland, in the early '90s amidst the rise of neoliberalism, working with the racialization of youth as political signifiers brought me to Medellín, Colombia. For the "we" that typifies all my work—it is collectively produced—the mutual exploration in an expanded classroom results in a project.

**PH** Absolutely, that was the way I thought of the school, but I never imagined *The School of Panamerican Unrest* as advocating indoctrination of a particular view. It was more like a horizontal platform for collective learning.

**SL** That process we are describing is often missing in colleges. The only way you get to proficient in community organizing is if you're willing to put yourself in risky and powerless positions. Universities have a hard time producing risky experiences, but they *are* good at teaching representational skills suitable for museums and galleries. While there is a genuine interest in exploring context-based social issues within university art education, the real "rewards" of the art world are still linked to the market.

Today, communication with the art profession is largely through some form of exhibition. It wasn't true in the '70s, or maybe I should say it wasn't true in my experience coming out of CalArts and entering a developing performance art scene. Since I was in school, when we eagerly adopted Portapak and photography, the technology of presentation has developed exponentially. Where we used to use high 8 film, you can now use 70 mm cameras. Presentation is much more important, which can be a dilemma for an art practice that comes out of ephemeral ideas.

Considering that our exhibition has been framed by the curators as involving "mobility, pedagogy, and engagement," an idea of translation is critical: there is the art in communities, and then there

LACY

HELGUERA

are those to whom it is communicated—whether directly to people in a community, over news media, or to art professionals. In this translation from a Medellín installation and performance project to the exhibition, so many questions arise. Pablo, I'm curious about the striking visual quality of your work and how you navigate between the beautiful presentation of the work and the public sphere where the work is constructed.

**PH** When teaching social practice, I have noticed that many students come to the field without an art background. They come from anthropology or psychology, etc., but they have no knowledge of art history, nor have they made art objects. For them, art historical references from Duchamp to anyone else are remote and unclear. They struggle with the visual manifestation of the things they do.

This made me value the type of traditional studio education I received, through which I learned the basics of painting, printmaking, photography, etc. It is this proximity to making things that can be helpful in creating sensorial experiences. In addition, because I have worked in museums for twenty-five years, I do think a lot about how things are presented to a public and how they might interact with them, sensorially and intellectually.

I am grateful for having been exposed to traditional ways of making and exhibiting art because they offer a tool kit for shaping experience. I see education as part of that tool kit, of course, particularly in how one considers the type of audience that one may engage with and the ways in which an experience could be meaningful to that audience. Finally, I think of ways in which this sensorial or intellectual type of engagement might manage to slow down the viewer to make the experience more meaningful.

**SL** That goes to that issue of being adept at communicating ideas to different audiences. Art does provide something other than the visual, and, particularly in social practice, we engage with ideas of coherence, political analysis, and the "shape" of engagement. What I like about *The School of Panamerican Unrest* is not how beautiful the display will be, though I know it will be, but the coherency of the idea. How does the body of an artist move from one tip of a continent to the next, organizing, formulating conversation, gathering people around it... there's an aesthetic in the idea and in the action itself.

**PH** When I talk about enticing or engaging the public, I don't necessarily mean aesthetically. I think it can also be a utilitarian type of engagement, where you offer them something that is useful, that is interesting, and that can play a familiar function. With the *SPU* project I proposed types of interactions that were familiar. Participants would come to talks, workshops, and civic ceremonies, at which we'd read speeches. At times it took the form of the political ceremony: we would sing anthems and then read speeches. The workshops were more literary, something that people connected with in a very basic manner.

**SL** Pilar and I are struggling to capture the Medellín projects for a US audience. The complexity of the interacting forces and themes of that project read very differently when displayed in Colombia. In the US we often think of Colombia through the lens of narco-trafficking. Our project engaged with a political trajectory, anthropological research, community development, and a national process of memory recuperation and policy formation. How do we show the complexities of violence and



US interventions, the nuances of relationships that we formed and that still operate over time, and the way in which social scientists are deeply engaged with constructing a civil society, all of which has led to the current peace process?

I'd be curious, Pablo, what has the process of preparing this exhibition brought up for you, as an artist? Because that's part of the reason you and I were interested in this exhibition, to crystallize these projects in forms of display.

**PH** One challenge that this project has always presented for me is precisely how to fit it into an exhibition. I almost gave up the idea that I could authentically transmit or communicate what this project was. I think it's an intractable problem because I cannot bring people to the places and times where and when this project happened. Perhaps I have a very idealistic idea of what it means to "recreate." I do completely relate to your comments about when you present it, when you go through the motions of recreating something you did twenty years ago: it feels more like theater.

Given this, I've concluded that you can only create approximations of the experience. In one of my attempts to address this, I created an anthology for *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, for which I invited people who were a part of it to give a firsthand account of what they saw. I was disciplined: I did not want to influence the views of the contributors. Some were critical of the project, and that was okay. Some of them saw the experience differently from me, and that was okay too. I imagine this is like the process of reconstructing a historical event. When you compile witness accounts, everybody's perspective differs. No single interpretation becomes the final "version," but we all know that the truth lies somewhere amidst the summation of these different perspectives.

**SL** Yes, I can't show everything about a multiyear project involving so many actors, but our representation of the political issues inherent in our project doesn't yet feel complete. There's a responsibility to communicate clearly here, one that might be a bit different from other circumstances. We are displaying actual objects that represent residents' memories of loss; if we then prominently posted photos of the owners talking about their memories including, for instance, trafficking, it would reinforce US audiences' simplistic perspectives. But if we present a timeline of the political forces over a thirty-year period like the US drug war policies, including the moments when our project deployed its strategies, then the objects will hopefully read differently.

The second area I am concerned with representing is the inherent relationalities that have occurred over almost twenty years. This set of relationalities has taken place within a timeframe during which political and personal events have shaped the lives of people there. I don't know how to talk about the intimacy of common cause that we have with each other, the seventy-five or eighty people and beyond, who came together as a result of a variety of efforts by NGOs, social scientists, activists, and educators, some of whom later entered government. This project was a symbolic manifestation of an existing national effort to recuperate memory as a political force in the life of the country. The experience of operating within that context was so powerful for me, and I feel the responsibility of communicating it without playing into US prejudices.

HELGUERA

LACY

**PH** I think everything has deficiencies, and the best I can do is to see them together: photographs, documents, witness accounts, and video. That is closest I can get to narrating what happened. I think we just need to accept that these are ephemeral things and difficult to frame in a clean or final narrative.

**PABLO HELGUERA** (b. Mexico City, 1971) is a multidisciplinary artist and educator based in New York City. Working in performance, photography, drawing, installation, lectures, and musical composition, among other diverse media, he creates artworks that investigate topics such as history, pedagogy, sociolinguistics, ethnography, memory, and the absurd. Helguera’s projects often blur the line between pedagogy and politically engaged art, raising the question of how educational methodologies can contribute to social practice, and vice versa.

Throughout his career, Helguera has worked at the intersection of art and education. He attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, both an art school and a museum, where he worked in the museum education department while earning his BFA. He has since held positions in education at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and is currently the Director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Helguera’s tenure as a museum professional informs his art. Invested in social practice, he critiques cultural institutions, while respecting their potential, with the aim of redirecting their power. Such an approach underlies *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (2003–2006), a community-oriented think tank, whose open-ended organizational structure invites audiences to consider what an educational institution can be.

Helguera has performed and exhibited extensively throughout Europe and the Americas. His works have been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Museo de Arte Reina Sofia, the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, Brooklyn Museum, the Guggenheim, and many others. He is the recipient of awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation/Fideicomiso para la Cultura Mexico, Creative Capital, Franklin Furnace, and a Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art from A Blade of Grass. His publications include *The Pablo Helguera Manual of Contemporary Art Style* (2005), *What in the World: A Museum’s Subjective Biography* (2010), *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (2011), *The School of Panamerican Unrest: An Anthology of Documents* (with Sarah Demeuse) (2011), and *Art Scenes: The Social Scripts of the Art World* (2012). In 2012, he received a PhD from Kingston University in London.

Over the past four decades, **SUZANNE LACY** (b. Wasco, CA, 1945) has created art that is grounded in themes of social justice. A pioneer of social practice, Lacy coined the term “new genre public art” to describe art that affects empowerment and change. In Europe, throughout North and South America, and in her home city of Los Angeles, Lacy has orchestrated projects that address difficult and complex issues such as rape, violence, labor, immigration, incarceration, aging, and gender identity.

After graduating from UC Santa Barbara with a major in Zoology in 1968, Lacy became a founding member of Judy Chicago’s Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College. She moved with the Program when it relocated to CalArts, where she met Allan Kaprow, whom she credits with exposing her to the potential of participatory, performance-based artworks, or “Happenings.” Lacy’s best-known

early projects, *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977), a collaboration with Leslie Labowitz-Starus, and *Three Weeks in May* (1977), were feminist performances and media interventions. Staged on Los Angeles city streets, they transformed audiences into witnesses to the prevalence of rape in their midst. Community organizing, media representation, and social activism continue to define her artistic practice. *The Oakland Projects* (1991–2001) represented a ten-year involvement with teenagers in Oakland, California. The project resulted in a series of installations, performances, and political actions that gave a public voice to local youth on issues ranging from police relations to pregnancy. *Between the Door and the Street* (2013) brought hundreds of activist women together in conversations on New York City stoops.

Lacy’s works have been exhibited at Tate Modern, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the New Museum, and MoMA PS1, as well as the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. She has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, Henry Moore Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts, as well as a Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art from A Blade of Grass. Also recognized for her academic work, she edited *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (1995) and authored *Leaving Art: Writings on Performance, Politics, and Publics, 1974–2007* (2010). Lacy was founding chair of the MFA program in Public Practice at Otis College of Art and Design in California. In 2013, she received a PhD from Gray’s School of Art at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen, Scotland, and is currently a professor at the Roski School of Art and Design at the University of Southern California.

**ELYSE A. GONZALES** is the Assistant Director/Curator of Exhibitions at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara. She has organized numerous collection exhibitions and group shows, including *Shana Lutker, Anna Sew Hoy, and Brenna Youngblood: CB08 the California Biennial* (2008), *The Stumbling Present: Ruins in Contemporary Art* (2012), *Peake/Picasso* (2013), and *Starting Here: A Selection of Distinguished Artists from UCSB* (2014). In 2009, she initiated an Artist-in-Residence exhibition program, through which she has commissioned numerous artists to create new works in the museum’s galleries. Gonzales received an MA from Williams College and a BA from the University of New Mexico.

**HOLLY GORE** is a scholar of modern and contemporary art whose particular focus is on craft. A PhD candidate at UC Santa Barbara, she is currently writing a dissertation that investigates the emergence of modernist woodworking practices in postwar design, sculpture, and pedagogy in the US. From 2016–2017 she was the Graduate Curatorial Fellow at the AD&A Museum, UC Santa Barbara, where she curated *Body Matters: Contemporary Art from the Collection*.

**SHANNON JACKSON** is Associate Vice Chancellor of the Arts and Design and the Cyrus and Michelle Hadidi Professor at UC Berkeley. Jackson’s research and teaching focuses on two broad, overlapping domains: collaborations across visual, performing, and media art forms; and the role of the arts in social institutions and political change, including *Social Works* (2011) on contemporary trends in socially-engaged art. Most recently, she co-edited “Time Zones: Cross-art



Collaboration in a Global Landscape,” a special issue of *Representations* (2016), and *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of Public Good* (2016).

**ADETTY PÉREZ DE MILES** is an educator and scholar of art education and visual art studies. An assistant professor at the University of North Texas College of Visual Arts and Design, her teaching is centered on inquiry-based approaches to learning and socially responsible teaching. She earned a dual PhD in art education and women’s studies at Pennsylvania State University. Her dissertation, *Dialogic Encounters: The School of Panamerican Unrest*, investigates the pedagogical function of contemporary art. Pérez de Miles is the author of numerous scholarly articles on dialogic pedagogy, contemporary art, and feminist epistemology, featured in journals such as *Studies in Art Education*, *Knowledge Cultures*, and *Visual Culture and Gender*.

**SARA REISMAN** is the Executive and Artistic Director of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, where she oversees philanthropy in support of New York City-based organizations that connect art and social justice. As Artistic Director, Reisman has curated exhibitions including *When Artists Speak Truth* (2015), *In the Power of Your Care* (2016), and *The Intersectional Self* (2017) at The 8th Floor, on themes related to the Foundation’s mission. Reisman was previously the Director of New York City’s Percent for Art Program, overseeing a hundred permanent public art commissions for civic sites across the City. She earned her BA from the University of Chicago and participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program.

**PILAR RIAÑO-ALCALÁ** is an anthropologist and professor at the University of British Columbia. Her scholarship is primarily concerned with three broad themes: the lived experience of violence and displacement, the politics of memory, and the ethnography of social repair. Riaño-Alcalá has published widely on topics, including forced migration, historical memory, witnessing, and public art as civic pedagogy. From 2008 to 2013 she was one of the researchers of the *Grupo de Memoria Histórica* (Historical Memory Commission) in Colombia and is now an advisor to the National Museum of Historical Memory of Colombia.

As curators of the exhibition we are indebted to artists Pablo Helguera and Suzanne Lacy, as well as Lacy’s collaborator, cultural anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, for their significant contributions to the field of socially engaged art, and commitment to the process of developing this exhibition and publication.

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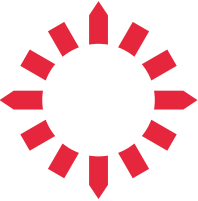
THE SCHOOLHOUSE AND THE BUS:  
Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement  
Two projects by Pablo Helguera and Suzanne Lacy /  
Pilar Riaño-Alcalá

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## **Interference Archive: Building a Counter-Institution in the United States**

Jen Hoyer and Josh MacPhee

In the Fall of 2017, Interference Archive moved to a small, non-assuming storefront space just off a main commercial street in the neighborhood of Park Slope, in Brooklyn, New York. With acid-free boxes lined up along industrial metal shelving and flat file drawers stuffed with posters, the Archive opened the doors of its new home inconspicuously, but brought with it a formidable presence in the world of community archives. Initially founded in the Summer of 2011 by four friends and comrades (Kevin Caplicki, Molly Fair, Dara Greenwald, and Josh MacPhee), it grew out of a shared sentiment that the kinds of politicized culture these founders were active in both producing and collecting was not being adequately archived in more traditional academic and art institutions. All came from backgrounds in art and political engagement, but only Fair had formal training in archiving or library science.

Interference Archive is not the first of its kind. New York City is a vibrant environment for radical political archives as well as other political education and history projects. The Political Art Documentation and Distribution collective (PAD/D), active in the 1980s, existed as a collective focused on collecting and sharing political graphics. Earlier in the 20th century, the Tamiment Library flourished as an independent collection of socialist thought and labor history before becoming part of New York University in 1963. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, situated in the same neighborhood that Interference Archive calls home, has been operating since 1972, and the Moncada Library functioned as an anti-imperialist library and social center around the corner from Interference Archive's current location in the 1970s. Other spaces such as the Brecht Forum (now the Marxist Education Project) and ABC No Rio have focused on creating space for conversations about the history and present work of movement organizing; we are also grateful to the legacy of radical education projects in New York City such as Free University and Alternate U.

The concept of community archives also isn't new. These types of spaces are different from traditional institutional archives in that they create a place for communities whose histories are untold or mis-told in major archives to have control over their own story. Community archives do this in a variety of ways: by focusing on very specific issues or communities such as LGBTQ histories, immigrant histories, etc; by existing in independently run, community-controlled spaces that do not have to answer to the bureaucracy of overarching institutions; by rethinking the basic practices of archiving which have traditionally resulted in access barriers between some communities and the documents that tell their history.

After opening its doors as a highly engaged experiment in community archiving, Interference Archive quickly began holding exhibitions and events with a goal of giving voice to the movements represented on its shelves. These movements range across the political spectrum, representing a wide range of issues and ideologies: mobilization around labor organizing, racial injustice, prison organizing, international solidarity, immigration, climate change, women's rights, anti-colonial struggles, and more.



As the base of participants expanded, the collection initially donated by the four founders grew. Word-of-mouth spread across New York City and beyond that an actively politicized archive was preserving and sharing the culture produced by social movements, and many involved in these movements responded by donating to the collection. The material collected by Interference Archive reveals the broad output of all these organizations and political groupings, including newspapers, pamphlets, posters, t-shirts, films, and vinyl records. While some of this material is very text-based, such as newspapers and pamphlets, the collection as a whole gives testimony to the strong use of graphics across social movement organizing. Interference Archive provides a valuable testimony to the visual elements of radical politics.

Rather than continue with a stiff narrative about the evolution of Interference Archive, it will be more interesting to explore nine key pillars that give foundation to the thought and activity of the Archive:

### **History As a Tool for Change**

We live in a culture that fetishizes the now. This only further solidifies the reification of our dominant socio-economic system, capitalism. In a context of permanent status-quo, we labor under the illusion that everything that is has always been and always will be, and as such, is immutable and impervious to change. But if we wield history as a flashlight to illuminate the fact that things have been different in the past, it can crack open the present to a renewed sense of future possibility. As an archive we focus on history not with the goal of preserving the past in stone, but to activate it as a tool which can help us imagine and organize for a better future.

Our 2015 exhibition *We Won't Move: Tenants Organize in New York City* explored the history of action by tenants across the city for affordable housing, and it brought more than ten current tenant groups into dialogue by including archival material which highlighted their greatest past accomplishments as well as their current organizing goals. Public programming included Know Your Rights workshops for tenants, a panel discussion of lawyers who work on housing rights issues in New York City, and a film screening around issues of gentrification. While portions of the United States left has a tendency to fetishize tenant organizing elsewhere (for instance in Italy in the 1970s) as revolutionary while diminishing local activity as reformist, through *We Won't Move* we were able to show a long history of radical housing organizing very close to home, including waves of rent strikes in the 1950s and '60s. This historic archival material became inspiration for groups of tenant organizers who visited the exhibition to rethink tactics available to them. A publication created to go with this exhibition functioned as more than a catalog, containing reproductions of archival material alongside curatorial text detailing the history of tenant movements in New York City, as well as a section of resources for current tenants and organizers.

A 2014 project, *Self-Determination Inside Out: Prison Movements Reshaping Society*, spotlighted the rich history of political organizing behind prison walls within the United States. While conventional wisdom posits incarcerated people as either monsters or victims, this

exhibition and event series showed how people in prison are not only protagonists of their own struggles, but they often innovate protest tactics and strategies which leave their cages and heavily influence organizing on the outside. In particular, activism around HIV/AIDS by women in prison was some the first and most vital work towards articulating the disease as a key threat to poor women and women of color. Some of the strategies for AIDS and HIV education developed by women in prison became the blueprint for broader pedagogical work across society. Our collection includes newsletters from HIV education groups inside prisons in the US, as well as gay and lesbian publications publicizing these activities to those outside prison walls.

Interference Archive has also participated in the movement to improve Wikipedia, because we understand that the historic material in our collection, alongside our broad community of history-minded individuals, can play a key role in that change. Less than 10% of Wikipedia editors are women, and systemic biases in our society—racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism—are replicated across Wikipedia. We host regular Wikipedia edit-a-thons during which we increase representation of women, of social movements, and of underrepresented communities on Wikipedia by using source material from Interference Archive. These events also provide an opportunity for anyone to learn Wikipedia editing skills, thereby diversifying the Wikipedia editing community.

### **Social Movement Culture**

When we speak as archivists about “culture,” we are referring to the physical materials—archival evidence, if you will—produced by a community. We believe the culture produced by groups of people organizing to create social change is unique from other types of culture. The culture that movements produce is created through a complex interplay amongst available resources, forms of expression and organization, as well as aesthetic decisions. In contrast to material produced, preserved, and celebrated in the mainstream mediasphere or commercial art world—some of which could be claimed “political” or “socially aware”—movement culture is usually generated through alternative means: authorship may be individual or communal but is often anonymous and prioritizes the right for broad reuse over creator rights; production volume may have been high and likely relied on ephemeral techniques such as cheap newsprint or fading ink; and all of it is fundamentally social and collective in its conception, creation, distribution, or all three.

For these and other reasons, traditional educational and art collections or archives have a poor track record of successfully assembling and managing this material. Many collections that do exist are housed in larger institutions which are directly antagonistic to the politics of the material produced by social movements. More often, social movement culture is overlooked for more mundane reasons: until recently its commercial value was limited. For example, the photocopied zines of the riot grrrl movement have only been identified as having commercial and academic value in recent years. Social movement culture is less studied than other forms of culture, generally lacking the academic cachet that would ensure its spotlighting and preservation. In art contexts, it is often lost in a sea of self-expression and passed over in favor of work by well-known authors.



By contrast, at Interference Archive we recognize that the creators and donors represented in our collections (many times one and the same) are essential elements in our community and are allowed to play a determinative role in our work, should they choose. We frequently remind ourselves that “we are who we archive.” In this community and organizing sense, Interference Archive itself is a form of social movement culture.

A key element of social movement culture is that most material generated by social movements was created for mass reproduction and distribution. While we do not claim to have the reproduction rights to the culture we house, we provide the option for visitors at Interference Archive to take photographs and/or make scans for further educational and movement use, honoring the original intent of the material. We have no interest in policing others’ claims to ownership of this material or supporting any attempts to monetize it; rather, we encourage individuals to track down creators when possible and to give credit where credit is due.

Our own interaction with other archives across the United States has shown us that many institutions claim ownership of rights to any material in their collection, unless the material specifically states otherwise. By contrast, we work from the base assumption that we do *not* own the rights to anything. When loaning material for exhibitions, we make careful stipulations about credits, and when available we provide contact information for borrowing institutions to obtain permissions from living creators before we include that material in the loan. We also work with artists who are interested in building on the design work of others to put them in touch with original creators, so that they can ask for appropriate permissions. We understand that this creates a large amount of labor for us, but we believe that it is critical to the ethics of movement collaboration. We also understand that we are only able to do this because we are in contact with so many of the organizers and creators whose material is in our collection. To us, this network is affirmation that we truly embody the community which we archive.

### **Non-Sectarian Yet Partisan**

Interference Archive is clearly a political project and is invested in fundamentally antiauthoritarian ideals rooted in social transformation towards increased equity and decentralized power structures. We share many common ideals related to racial equality, gender justice, migration as a right, prison abolition, and more. At the same time, volunteers do not share a unified political line, nor are ideological discussions at the center of the work. We recognize that we are partisan, yet we attempt to collect, preserve, and share the culture of a very broad base of social movements because we recognize that history is composed of multiple narratives and we value creating space for all of these voices and actions. We understand that our collection itself contains many conflicting points of view, and we welcome—and even encourage—conversations that include respectful disagreement. We recognize that we are working to create a space in which we may sometimes end conversations with more questions than answers. In order to foster this, as a public community space we do not allow harassing behavior or language.

In addition, while we would be defined as a project of the “left,” we also actively collect materials from far right movements. While we do not support the goals of these groupings, we recognize that they are movements attempting to disrupt the status quo and as such are equally deserving of study. In addition, because we see them as enemies—and often quite successful ones—it is arguably equally or more important for us to understand how they function as it is for us to study our own work. A 2018 exhibition on grassroots antifacist organizing gave us an opportunity to have conversations about the small number of explicitly fascist and white supremacist items in our collection. While we agreed that we do not want to provide any exhibition space for these kinds of ideas, we included them in a drawer of additional reading materials for the exhibition, and we marked them clearly with the disclaimer that they represented ideals in opposition to the viewpoints expressed in the exhibition.

### **Volunteer-Run**

From its founding, Interference Archive has been entirely run by volunteers. While this began as a practical solution to having no capital, it has evolved into an ideological position. Our experiences within, and observations of, small non-profits within the United States has led us to a critique of traditional non-profit structures. We have seen that it is extremely difficult to maintain low-levels of hierarchy and healthy internal social relationships when an organization can only afford limited paid staff and must make troublesome decisions about which kinds of labor are financially compensated and which are not. Common examples of this that we see in the non-profit world include paying a salary to an Executive Director while providing hourly part-time wages without benefits to program staff and asking a volunteer to maintain website infrastructure. Or, within the context of libraries and archives, we often see that librarians and archivists in major institutions might have long-term job security and opportunities for advancement while technical staff—such as those who run the archive’s database and any other computer systems—are employed on a precarious contract basis.

Due to this all-volunteer nature, everyone at Interference Archive is involved because they want to be, and is both motivated by and a participant in the creation of our mission. Being organized around and through free association and desire means that, under ideal conditions, we can accomplish immense projects in short periods of time and are able to tackle multiple issues and problems simultaneously. All of this work directly encourages more participation.

At the same time, we can’t be ignorant of the problems this structure entails. Some of these include the difficulties in developing accountability structures in an all-volunteer context; allowing valuable opportunities to pass us by when no volunteers are available to take them on; confusion as to where institutional knowledge lies; and the danger of personal burnout. Additionally, we recognize that our society remains rooted in structures based on capitalism, and some individuals are not able to volunteer because they need to dedicate all their available time to earning money for basic living expenses. While being all-volunteer comes with these problems and more, we have decided—so far—that they are better problems to have.

### **Sustainability Through Community**



The majority of Interference Archive's operational budget is funded by individual donors. The core of this funding is a sustainer program, where people donate between \$5 and \$50 per month to help us keep running. This sustainer base has hovered just over one hundred people for the past few years, with many of the archive's regular volunteers and users being part of this group. In addition, we collect donations at free public events we hold two or three times per week. The more active and engaged the archive is, the better we are able to draw in the revenue needed for continuing our activities.

We focus our funding structure on individual donors because we want to be accountable to the people that use our space, and by extension to the movements these people participate in and that we archive materials from. We recognize that many non-profit institutions root their budgets in large funding institutions. These granters that have little or no direct connection to the funded projects but hold large influence by virtue of their weight in the revenue stream. They often change their priorities, forcing organizations to scramble and adjust their work to fit new funding interests. We especially saw this phenomenon after the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States, when many large foundations were suddenly much more interested in supporting politically active projects. While this aligns more directly with our work than the traditional goals these funders express, we have viewed this shift with caution: we are wary of becoming dependent on this funding having seen how quickly it shifted to work in our interest, and knowing therefore how quickly it could shift away again. So far we have avoided this peril by ensuring our rent is paid by a broad base of individuals who are either active at Interference Archive in some capacity or invested in our existent mission.

We also understand that Interference Archive exists within a broader community of archives and education institutions. We frequently host class visits from local schools, and some of our operational costs are funded by charging for these visits using a sliding scale: well-resourced institutions pay more than local high schools. We understand this relationship as an equitable exchange of the resources each institutions has at their disposal: our archive provides access to materials in a way that many institutions cannot offer, and these institutions in exchange have access to financial resources that we do not.

### **Primacy of Use**

The popular imaginary of "the archive" is that it is a repository, a place where preservation of unique and fragile items is the primary goal. At Interference Archive we attempt to take that logic and turn it on its head. The material we archive was produced with the intent that it be distributed, seen, and used. Our mission is to continue this intended use. To that end we have open stacks—our collection is entirely available for public perusal when our doors are open. While many of our materials are rare and need to be handled carefully, this does not seem like a reason to keep them from the very communities that created them. If a torn poster corner or cracked book spine is the price of allowing people access to their own history, this seems like a fair price to pay.

We see many different types of use of our materials. Researchers visit from around the world to study specific movements—for example the Occupy Movement, Puerto Rican liberation movements, and the Black Panthers; creators—such as People’s Press or Fredy Perlman; formats—including comics, newspapers, and printmaking; or social issues, such as punk feminism, climate change, and prison abolition. We also see current movement organizers come through our door. They may be interested in learning how past activists have designed graphics to represent specific issues they’re currently dealing with, or they might want to learn about tactics used to combat various problems. Both of these identities intersect with each other and with our third category of visitor, the creator. We enjoy making our collection accessible to artists who are making various types of material in support of current movements and who seek inspiration from history.

As a volunteer-run archive we realize that our labor is limited, and we prioritize much of our effort towards keeping our doors open four days each week because our priority is access and this allows visitors to have access to our collection. We also host class visits from local high schools and universities during our open hours. Our collection has been organized such that visitors can locate materials they are interested in with only basic instruction from a volunteer: all material is organized by format (posters with posters, pamphlets with pamphlets, etc), and within most formats, materials are organized by subject. For several of these format-based sections (including our posters and ephemera files), we are able to provide visitors with lists of subjects; other formats (such as our pamphlets) have subjects clearly written on their boxes.

We know of other community archives who have made decisions to allocate their similarly scarce labor resources instead towards cataloging their collections; while we have an online database, we have made a conscious choice to spend less time working to catalog our materials than we do to give in-person access. We understand the value of browsing and serendipitous discovery in our collection—many visitors have found something much more relevant than they expected while browsing for the single item that they thought they wanted to find—and so we are not concerned with providing better in-person access through an improved online catalog. We understand that researchers who cannot travel to our archive will rely on online access to our database; because this is still very incomplete, we provide email reference assistance to any researchers who contact us.

### **Non-Hierarchical**

While hierarchies are largely unavoidable, we believe it is possible to organize in ways that minimize their development. We also believe that where they do grow, they can be rooted in the quality of people’s ideas and labor rather than pre-existing societal prejudices and privileges. Our archive is organized through a series of interlocking working groups, none of which are more valuable than the others: Administration, Audio, Cataloging, Education, Born Digital, Staffing, and ad-hoc Exhibition Working Groups. One’s standing within any particular group is largely a product of the work one does, rather than one’s wealth, educational level, or social status.



It has generally been true that if power and hierarchy becomes concentrated anywhere, it is within the Administrative Working Group. This is the group that ensures rent is paid, the lights are on, overall communications are dealt with, and everything else that falls through the cracks of the other working groups is picked up and sorted through. Although being part of this group confers a certain amount of power, it also comes with a high level of responsibility. Because of this it has been one of the hardest Working Groups to keep volunteers engaged in. The Administrative Working Group constantly seeks new and better ways to share both power and responsibility with the wider volunteer community, largely through continual adjustment of training and communication strategies across all volunteers as the community grows.

As an example of these changing training strategies, we began hosting periodic general volunteer orientations in 2013 as more individuals wanted to help run Interference Archive. However, our growing and increasingly active volunteer community has more recently inspired us to organize these general orientations alongside specific training for other activities, including staffing, event hosting, and archive cataloging. Specific working groups have also focused on skill sharing and training as a way to allow maximum participation from all volunteers. For instance the Audio Working group has held multiple skill shares focusing on the use of various recording and editing hardware and software. We are also constantly learning new ways to communicate as an organization. When the number of working groups began to increase, we implemented an online project management system that includes a shared calendar and separate digital spaces for each working group. We added a volunteer listserv to this strategy as a tool for engaging semi-regular volunteers in the various projects we are organizing, and then as our cohort of staffing volunteers has expanded to meet the increased traffic of the storefront space we relocated to in 2017, we have created a specific email listserv designated for staffing communication. We recognize that a key part of breaking down hierarchy is through communication, which distributes information more equitably through the community, and we implement all these various forms of communication to remain as non-hierarchical as possible.

### **Counter-Institutional**

Our goal is to be an enduring counter-institution. A place—yes, a physical place—where the knowledge gained through organizing to transform society can be collected and shared. But also a place independent from mainstream institutions which all too often play key roles in the maintenance of the status-quo. We recently signed a ten-year-lease on our space, and plan on being around long after that. But we recognize that stability in an all-volunteer project with direct connections to social movements cannot be based in a set of rigid rules, but instead needs to be flexible so that it can evolve with the ideas and interests of the changing community involved in this work.

The organization of our project through overlapping Working Groups allows each semi-autonomous cluster of volunteers to set its own meeting schedule and communication patterns—which should be accessible to others across the organization. Members of all Working Groups come together at quarterly all-volunteer retreats, which provide a forum for sharing updates about our work, discussing bigger issues together, and thinking through

larger-scale upcoming projects. This system has evolved as we have grown and it is effective for our current community, but we continue to try new things in hopes of improvement. We see our open organizational structure, our community-rooted funding system, and our focus on material access to the collection and overall transparency as important elements which help define us as counter to traditional institutional structures.

### **Archives Should be Social Centers**

We believe that archives can and should be social centers—in two distinct yet overlapping ways. First, the organization of the archive itself should be social, with relationships between the collection's caretakers being both key to the maintenance of the project but also important in their own right. Second, as a public-facing space, the archive should function socially, actively inviting people in to participate in all of its functions, from cataloging the collection to watching films, taking in exhibitions as audience or helping to organize and install them. At Interference Archive, we archive history so that diverse communities can have access to non-mainstream narratives about their role in society, and ultimately we hope that these communities will develop relationships with us as an archive and as individuals, playing a role in the way we archive all this material.

We hope that not only can we develop relationships with other communities in the context of our work, but also that we can be a nexus for connecting different groups across our broader community. As an example, in 2014 we began collaborating with Mobile Print Power, a local intergenerational and immigrant-focused print collective, by hosting them for research visits to our archival collection. This relationship grew, including a collaboration in 2015 where we hosted Mobile Print Power alongside friends from Combat Paper New Jersey for a paper making and printing event. In 2016, Mobile Print Power approached Interference Archive about organizing an exhibition in our space about their collaborative work with a series of other grassroots groups; this exhibition included their continued collaboration with Combat Paper New Jersey, which had grown since the groups were introduced to each other at Interference Archive the year before.

We are continually searching for new ways to make it clear that Interference Archive is a space for individuals and groups to take part in our public work. We understand that the average person does not imagine an archive to be a place they would want to hang out on a Saturday afternoon, so we organize an immense amount of programming with the goal of engaging people and encouraging them to become involved. Our goal is to make the archive both pedagogical and fun, and to encourage ourselves and others to interact with new people and new ideas. While in the abstract this claim to breaking down the barriers between audience and participant sounds utopian and gestural, the majority of Interference Archive's sixty-plus volunteers first interacted with the project as event attendees and researchers, and returned to participate at a deeper level. A local college student who spent time at Interference Archive to fulfill the requirements of her American Studies program became involved as a volunteer working on exhibitions and staffing shifts; one participant in a 2016 reading group on James Baldwin's essays returned to organize a new reading group; two attendees at a 2017 reading group have



become involved regularly, one by volunteering her graphic design skills for event promotion, and another staffing open hours shifts and working to organize our radical newspaper collection. This newspaper project has in turn inspired the same volunteer to pursue related graduate studies at a local university, with the hopes that he can spend more time working with the Interference Archive collection while he pursues his education.

We were excited to launch a new format of participatory “propaganda parties” in the summer of 2016, rooted in our core belief that history can be used as a tool for change. For each unique event we work with activists, organizers, artists, and designers focused on a political issue. We come together to make and share graphic and informational material that can be directly used in organizing work. Over the past two years we have worked with groups organizing around climate justice, closing city jails, women’s reproductive rights, and immigrant rights to produce posters, t-shirts, patches, block prints, stickers, and buttons. These parties have been one of our most successful series of events, with those organized after Trump’s election being attended by hundreds of people, all leaving with piles of agit prop to further distribute throughout the city. Public events like this also provide an opportunity for visitors to make new connections with each other and with organizations doing work around the city related to the issue that particular party has been organized in support of.

Our 2017 move into a public-facing storefront was also a consciously social decision. Previously, the archive was in the back of a warehouse space only three blocks from the new location; most individuals who visited Interference Archive made a very conscious decision to find its sequestered location. In its new space, Interference Archive is located off of a main commercial street with significant foot traffic. We have seen an immense increase in interest in the archive, with a steady trickle of people walking in off the street and asking who we are and what we do. In the United States right now, our very public facing expression of social movement politics is extremely rare and is a strong statement in its own right. Almost all street-level space is otherwise dedicated to various forms of commerce.

We recognize that our work is ever growing and changing; the Interference Archive of today is vastly different from only seven years ago when we first opened our doors. As we and the world around us continue to shift we are sure that our archive will keep evolving. While many archives thrive on notions of permanence, we understand our goal instead to be sustainability—and, for us, being sustainable means changing as our communities develop to face new circumstances. We hope that we continually rise to the challenge of creating space for social movement communities to store and re-tell their history, in whatever form is most pressing and by whatever means are possible. One of the most exciting components of our counter-institutional work is to continually ask ourselves how another world—and another archive—could exist, and what we can do right now to make that possible.

**Interference Archive in Context: a broader network of radical community archives in the United States**

While to our knowledge there are no other counter-institutional community archives quite like Interference Archive in the United States, there are a number of projects which share several of the above key values, and which help us understand the work of Interference Archive in relation to a broader context of domestic archives. Below is a list of some of the most important of these for readers who are interested.

It is helpful to note that the list could be much longer if we account for any archive that meets the majority of our nine key characteristics, but because we see our counter-institutionality and focus on social movement culture as especially critical to our identity, we have not included any archives that do not share these two characteristics.

We have developed relationships with some of the archives listed below. Beyond staying in communication and visiting each other when we happen to be in town, we send duplicates of archival materials to other collections, we help each other with particularly difficult research queries, and we share advice on secure database server options. Other archives listed here have provided inspiration as we follow their work from afar, and we look forward to becoming better connected to them in the future.

The Center for the Study of Political Graphics

*Online:* <http://www.politicalgraphics.org/>

*In person:* 3916 Sepulveda Blvd, Suite 103 Culver City, CA 90230

The Center for the Study of Political Graphics has worked for over three decades to collect visual resources produced by social movements around the world. At present, this amounts to over 90,000 posters that are made accessible for educational research and that are used for exhibitions, tours, and classes.

Freedom Archives

*Online:* <http://freedomarchives.org/>

*In person:* 522 Valencia St, San Francisco, CA 94110

The Freedom Archives is an independent, nonprofit archive that collects audio, video, and print culture from progressive movements, focusing on the 1960s through the 1990s. This archives collection has been created to uplift stories of resistance and to give space to marginalized voices, and the Freedom Archives hosts programming that engages young people with this material as an educational experience. Their funding comes from individuals and small grants, and not from government or corporate sponsors.

Kate Sharpley Library

*Online:* <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/>

*In person:* Grass Valley, CA

The Kate Sharpley Library is an all-volunteer, independently-funded institution that preserves and promotes anarchist history through an archives collection of the cultural production of the anarchist movement—books, pamphlets, newspapers, patches, recordings, and more -- as well as through publishing projects.



#### Lavender Library

*Online:* <http://lavenderlibrary.com>

*In person:* 1414 21st Street Sacramento, CA 95811

The Lavender Library was founded in 1998 by local community members as a research and information hub for Sacramento's LGBTQI community. Beyond preserving the history of the local LGBTQI community, one of the Lavender Library's key initial goals was to use this collection as a tool for meeting community needs.

#### Leather Archives and Museum

*Online:* <http://www.leatherarchives.org>

*In person:* 6418 N Greenview Ave, Chicago IL 60626

The Leather Archives collects and preserves material related to leather, kink, and fetish lifestyles, and presents educational exhibitions as well as a reading library and archive in support of current research. It was created out of a desire to have a dedicated home for this history, independent of other arts and culture institutions.

#### Lesbian Herstory Archives

*Online:* <http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/>

*In person:* 484 14th St, Brooklyn NY

The Lesbian Herstory Archives is home to the world's largest collection of materials by and about lesbians and their communities, and has existed independently since the early 1970s. The Lesbian Herstory Archives has owned its own home since 1993, and has several travelling exhibitions that can be requested by organizations in the United States and Europe.

#### Maximum Rocknroll Archives

*Online:* <http://www.maximumrocknroll.com/cat/mrr-archive/>

*In person:* The Maximum Rocknroll Archive gives home to recordings produced by the punk movement, the archive of the Maximum Rocknroll zine, as well as related ephemera—newspaper clippings, letters, postcards, flyers, and more. All of this material is made available for research, and is cared for entirely by volunteers.

#### Mayme Clayton Library and Museum

*Online:* <http://www.claytonmuseum.org/>

*In person:* 4130 Overland Ave, Culver City, CA 90230-3734

The Mayme A. Clayton Library & Museum collects books, films, documents, photographs, artifacts, and works of art related to the history and culture of African Americans in the United States, and exists as an independent organization under the umbrella of the Western States Black Research Center.

#### Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space

*Online:* <http://www.morusnyc.org>

*In person:* 155 Avenue C, New York, NY 10009

The Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space collects and provides free access to the history of grassroots activism in New York City's Lower East Side, with a focus on the history of squatting and community gardens. MoRUS exists as an independent organization within a former squat, and curates public programming including an annual film festival hosted in community gardens of the Lower East Side.

#### Queer Zine Archives Project

*Online:* <http://www.qzap.org/>

*In person:* Milwaukee, WI

The Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) collects and provides free access to queer zines, making them available to other queers, researchers, and anyone who has an interest in this culture. QZAP has a physical collection of zines but focuses its energy on making a digital database of downloadable zines available to the public.

#### Sexual Minorities Archive

*Online:* <https://sexualminoritiesarchives.wordpress.com/>

*In person:* 135 Lincoln St. 01040 Holyoke, Massachusetts

The Sexual Minorities Archive is housed in the home of its founder, and advertises itself as one of the oldest and largest collections of LGBTQIA+ historical documents, media, and artifacts in the world. It works to make sure that the voices of sexual minorities are not silenced, by preserving the histories of these groups and by engaging in education and community building work.

#### Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research

*Online:* <http://www.socallib.org/>

*In person:* 6120 S. Vermont Avenue Los Angeles, CA 90044

The Southern California Library documents and makes accessible histories of struggles that challenge racism and other systems of oppression so that all can imagine and work towards freedom. Founder Emil Freed began collecting Communist material during the McCarthy era, when comrades were forced to burn leftist materials out of fear of being caught with them. This collection also absorbed the library of the California Labor School when it closed in 1952. The Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research has existed in its current home, which it owns, for over fifty years.

#### About the Authors:

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**Natasa Ilić**

Zagreb, May 2006

Exhibition catalogue: *A Place Under the Sun*

Zagreb, Gallery NOVA

**A Place Under the Sun**

Andreja Kulunčić is one of Croatia's most internationally recognized artists, whose works are presented at some of the most established manifestations of contemporary art (Manifesta 4, 2002, documenta 11, 2002, 8 Istanbul Biennial, 2003, Liverpool Biennial, 2004, etc.) and owned by relevant contemporary art collections. Her artistic practice is characterized by a shift from expressing unbound creativity to the creation of new models of sociability and communication situations, an interest for socially engaged themes, confrontation with different audiences, and collaboration on collective projects. Although these ambitions are typical for different artistic attempts from the time of historical avant-gardes, and the idea that art work can be a potential trigger for participation has been generally accepted in today's institutional framework and theoretical discourse on contemporary art, as developed since the appearance of the happening, of Fluxus, of performance art and of Joseph Beuys's declaration that "everyone is an artist", in a local context it still provokes the rather futile question "but is this art?". The Croatian cultural establishment is still dominated by a representative understanding of culture in which there is a considerable mistrust for art which is not object-based, but rather process and anti-market oriented, and especially for art which problematizes and challenges the status quo of political, economic, social and psychological conditions prevailing in mainstream culture. The dominant cultural model in Croatia has institutions, a market and concepts based on Western models, but many elements of the modernist paradigm that have long been removed from the Western world, such as the notions of utopianism, formalist aesthetic values, the idea of the artist-hero, the transcendent character of art, the separation of art and life, art as opposed to theory, etc., still essentially form the system of art institutions, and not of any art institution in particular, but the institution of Art itself. In these circumstances, the exhibition *A Place Under the Sun*, a certain retrospective of works never shown in Croatia, reacts within the local context to the insufficient institutional support for contemporary art which critically reworks the tradition of the historical practices of experimental art such as was developed in its last metamorphosis in the period around 1968, as well as to the fact that in a situation in which these practices are considered marginal and "alternative", validation from the phantasmatic "West" is often the main means for securing "cultural capital" at the local level. Most of the works presented at the exhibition *A Place Under the Sun* evolved outside of Croatia, in relation to specific circumstances of exhibitions with curatorial conceptions focused on the "relevancy" of social and political meanings of the exhibition projects, as well as to the place the work was being made for. Their "translation" into a new exhibition demands the reactivation of their thematic complexes and aesthetic considerations, which triggers many questions central to current debates around artistic practices operating in the extended field of relational practices. (1)

As described in a recent essay by British critic Claire Bishop (2), these practices, which are currently happening under many names - socially engaged art, community art, experimental communities, dialogic art, research art, participatory, interventionist, collaborative art etc. - are less concerned with the relational aesthetic than with the creative rewards of collaborative activity, whether in the form of working with existing communities, or by establishing new interdisciplinary networks. Claire Bishop develops her critique on the opinion that the evaluation of these practices is too often dominated by ethical criteria, reduced to evaluating the quality of collaboration and participation (whereby the renunciation of the cult of authorship is ascribed automatic priority in terms of a critique of the art system and its markets), and points out that instead of demonstrating the experiences of transcendent human empathy which levels antagonisms in temporary social harmony, criticism should investigate the aesthetic effects of the work essential for a new perspective on the human condition. The insisting on criteria of critical evaluation of these practices as art (and not on the basis of their political attempts) could be seen as a symptom showing that the art world has grown tired of the changes



from the 90s onwards which enabled that a large part of art production be read as a politicization of the art field. But that cannot be said for activist and politically oriented critique, which claims that within the art system and the art world as we know it truly political and socially engaged activity is not possible at all (3). The structural similarities between late capitalism and conceptions of autonomous self-organization, until recently considered "alternative", as well as those between the managerial rationality of the ideal worker and the quality of flexible creativity that are ascribed to the figure of the artist, cancel any value automatically ascribed to a work of art understood as a "social form" whose values of collaboration, self-organization and interdisciplinarity support positive relations between people, and therefore are necessarily political and have an emancipatory effect.

But between the extremes of the "aesthetic regime of art" and the imperative of activism that uses art to trigger social change, there is art which tries to think aesthetics and sociability together, in a productive contradiction of trust in artistic autonomy and belief in art tied in to the possibility of social change. The works of Andreja Kulunčić offer a chance for society to reflect collectively on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its self-understanding, in a way which does not concede to the ruling regime of manipulating desire and maintaining political anesthesia. Art is understood as research, by which research results are no longer primary, but are rather one of the integral components, the background on which artistic production unfolds. The interdisciplinarity in which specific artistic skills are complemented by complementary skills from other areas is an important element of Andreja Kulunčić's artistic practice, whose works are almost regularly created in collaboration with sociologists, philosophers, scientists, designers, or marketing experts. Since her work *Nama: 1908 employees, 15 department stores* (2000) displayed as city-light posters, the artist has often used the tactic of appropriating advertising methods and inserting her works into the regular media flow, and especially her Internet-based works (*Closed Reality - Embryo*, 1999-2000, <http://embryo.inet.hr>, *Distributive Justice*, 2001-2005, <http://www.distributive-justice.com>) which operate both inside and outside of the art world, utilizing gallery space and the institutional framework of art as one of the possible areas of activity.

The works being presented at the exhibition *A Place Under the Sun* were made in relation to the demands of specific exhibitions, but their site-specificity is not taken literally, as an individual perceptual experience of a certain place, but as the discursive vector of a political, social or theoretical problem, thus creating relations between different locations. In that sense, the problematic issues featured in the works - migration (*Austrians Only*, 2005, *Sight Seeing*, 2003), teenage pregnancy (*Teenage Pregnancy*, 2004), hierarchical social division of public spaces (*A place under the sun*, 2004), criteria and models of "success" in the art market (*New York art scene for dummies*, 2005, *Artist from...*, 2002), transition (*Homewards*, 2003, *City Walks*, 2004) - are not spatially and contextually isolated phenomena, but unfold against the common backdrop of the dominant model of globalization as the project of neo-liberal capitalism, for which we all share responsibility. For example, in the work *Austrians only*, made for the Festival of Regions in Upper Austria (2005), the artist produces ads for degraded and badly paid jobs, which in Austria (and other countries of developed capitalism) are mostly carried out by immigrants, and publishes them in local newspapers, as street posters and direct-mail leaflets. The text's tone promises career possibilities and money for jobs that can never be achieved, but in that sense it does not differ much from regular marketing language. But the fact that jobs are offered only to Austrians subverts a viewer's sense of "inclusion" and causes identity anxiety by unveiling the unspoken rules of ethnical and class exclusion (and inclusion). The artist does not offer solutions or services, but discreetly enables enhanced sensibility, not presenting divisions in harmonious reconciliation or as absolute opposites, but in the tension that implicates their instability and openness to change. Andreja Kulunčić's position is not one of a detached observer, but one that simultaneously questions its own condition of production and reception, especially in light of the prevailing clichés of the "eastern European" artist temporarily working in the West. The fact that a large number of Austrian immigrants who are performing the worst paid jobs come from post-socialist countries, of which many are war refugees from ex-Yugoslavia, sets off a critical reflection on the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operative in the mutual dynamics of the West and others, the European Union and its margins, of "us" and "them". Instead of a politically correct and functional educational suggestion of non-conflicting transition towards the liberal ideal of equalizing multicultural sociability, the real effect of the work is a twisted manifestation of that which is being suppressed in the name of normalizing consensus and

indisputable consent. By operating in the marginal areas of opposition and focusing her critique on the central values of imaginary institutions of globalizing societies and divisions conditioned by them, the artistic production of Andreja Kulunčić suggests the capability of art to offer polemical grounds for the rethinking and dissolution of certain institutional forms and the creation of new ones.

1. "Relational aesthetic" is the title of the collection of essays by Nicolas Bourriaud from 1998, in which he describes the art practice of the 1990s.
2. Claire Bishop, The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents, Art Forum International, February 2005.
3. Brian Holmes claims: "When people talk about politics in an artistic frame, they're lying." (in Brian Holmes, Liar's Poker, Representation of Politics / Politics of Representation, 2004, <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/000943.php>), and Stephen Wright writes that "art, in short, is the chief obstacle to artistic collaboration", and that it is "far more interesting when artists do not do art (...) when they inject their artistic aptitudes and perceptual habitus into the general symbolic economy of the real" (in Stephen Wright, The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration, Third Text, Volume 18, Issue 6, November 2004. p. 535).



and full of meaning, to explore the rise of possibilities in emptiness, and to explore the possibilities of *daydreaming*.

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SPQ seminars and Art As Social Action Projects

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### **Transforming Corona Plaza/ Corona Studio**

A seminar developed by Queens Museum, Queens College Art/SPQ, and the Urban Studies Departments with instructors Professor Tarry Hum, Maureen Connor, Gregory Sholette, and Queens Museum staff members Prerana Reddy, and José Serrano-McClain (New York City).

"Intricate minglings of different uses in cities are not a form of chaos. On the contrary, they represent a complex and highly developed form of order."

Mary Jane Jacobs <sup>103</sup>

[Figure 1: Pablo Alvarez identifies the area to be transformed.]

### **Meet Corona Plaza Queens: A Complex Informal Space**

Initially, Corona Plaza seemed little more than a crumbling triangular patch of broken

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<sup>103</sup> Jacobs, Jane, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House, 1961, p 340.

concrete, an abandoned city park now home to hordes of rodents and flocks of pigeons. Below the clamorous elevated tracks of the number seven train in the outer borough of Queens New York, our initial impression was only superficially correct. On closer inspection Corona Plaza revealed itself to be one of those curious liminal zones that locals imaginatively re-purpose to suit their unmet needs. Despite a shortage of city dollars the Plaza served the surrounding low income, pan-Latino neighborhood including many undocumented people. It was a spontaneous meeting place, playground, sales space for gray market goods, and an unofficial parking lot for Mendoza trucks: short-distance retail haulers.- The challenge in our seminar was how to propose improving Corona Plaza's environment to gain needed municipal maintenance and cultural programming dollars without disturbing the myriad ways residents were already transforming this space into an informal commons for enhancing their lives and community.



[Figure 2: Bird's eye view of Corona Plaza.]

### The Seminar

Transforming Corona Plaza was as a four-hour weekly intensive seminar that took place off-campus at Immigrant Movement International (IMI), an ongoing community space founded by artist Tania Bruguera and located seven blocks from Corona Plaza.- The course brought together graduate and undergraduate students from the Queens College Urban Studies Program and the Art Department. Throughout the semester, it hosted an assortment of guest



speakers who added a variety of perspectives into the mix. Among them were: Tom Agnotti (Professor Hunter College Graduate Urban Planning Studio), Tania Bruguera (artist and founder IMI), Ricardi Calixte (Neighborhood Development Director, Queens Economic Development Corporation), Julissa Ferreras (Corona City Council member, District 21, Queens, N.Y.), Tom Finkelppearl (then Director of the Queens Museum), Dylan House (Hester Street Collaborative), Aurash Khawarзад (Project for Public Spaces & DoTank: Brooklyn, N.Y.), Vaidila Kungys (N.Y.C. Department Of Transportation, Plaza Program Coordinator), Ruben Peña (Director Corona Community Action Network, Corona Business Alliance), Quilian Riano (DSGN AGNC), Arturo Sánchez (Community Board 3 member, Professor of Urban Planning, Cornell University), Carl Skelton (Project Director of Betaville), Valeria Treves (Director of New Immigrant Community Empowerment).



[Figure 3: Tania Bruguera, Prerana Reddy and Seth Aylmer discuss the design presented by Team Kansas.]



[Figure 4: Kristie Hirten examines background information about the plaza.]

### **Description of assignments**

Corona Plaza and its surrounding environs became a living laboratory for researching, debating, and re-imagining knotty issues of class, culture, ethnicity and social autonomy particular to the fractured city infrastructure of deregulated urban environments. The workshop generated neighborhood stakeholder profiles, followed by the design and modeling of four proposals and programming ideas for enhancing public experience in and around the plaza. Following the seminar the Queens Museum played a key role in the city-sponsored restoration of the plaza incorporating some visual and architectural elements from our classroom designs.

### **Actual steps we took to realize the seminar's goals**

Each class began with a presentation by an instructor or visiting guest. Lectures addressed topics on the history and demographics of Corona, various waves of immigration, forms of entrepreneurship within Corona's informal economy, and the theory and politics of community generated, semi-autonomous spaces. In preparation students were assigned weekly readings.

After each week's formal presentation students split into smaller project teams of four groups with five to six students each. During the second half of each class teams debated ideas raised by presenters and then left IMI to make first-hand observations at Corona Plaza, meeting community leaders and developing new relationships with other local stakeholders.

Students from social science partnered with artists as faculty mentors guided both



cohorts' research and facilitated communications between students, community, participants including Mexicanos Unidos, The Louis Armstrong Historical House, Casa Ecuatoriana, Make the Road, and the Corona Senior Center among others.

By week six the seminar addressed the similarities and differences between research methods developed by social scientists and by socially engaged artists. Students built on this information and that gathered from their particular stakeholder interviews, developing a specific design focus pivoting on these concerns.

The last three weeks of the course teams presented their projects using a scripted PowerPoint talk and a scale architectural model of their transformed plaza concept. The class critiqued final presentations along with some previous guests including community members, scholars, and artists.

Throughout the semester students were encouraged to think critically and weigh the community merits and deficits of proposals from a social science and art-aesthetic perspective. In other words, our motto was: *take nothing for granted*.



[Figure 5: Model presented by Team Kansas.]

[Figure 6: Map of existing structures in Corona Plaza.]



[Figure 7: Walter Sinche of Alianza Ecuatoriana and Monica Aviles, 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> from left, discuss the Corona Plaza Design with Aurash Khawarзад, last on right).

## **Methodological tools**

### Stakeholder Interview General Questions

(Adapt to your specific stakeholders)

. General Questions.

*How long have you lived/worked in Corona?*

*How often do you pass by Corona Plaza? Do you use it?*

*Are there enough places to sit? Are seats conveniently located?*

*Any animals or plants present (be specific)?*

*What types of trash are found in the space? Does it tell you, about the space and surrounding community?*

. Spatial Politics.

*Does the arrangement of spaces, entrances and exits, allow access for some, while denying it to others?*

*What games do children play in the area and are games adjusted to fit within the actual limitations of the space?*

*Is there a space that teens gather, and is it different from other spaces?*

*Are there unused spaces? Can you get lost in the space?*

*Are there more women than men, and people of different ages?*



. Spatial Memory.

*Is there a perceptible sense of memory or history present in the space?*

*What kind of fantasies does the space invoke or perhaps make unthinkable ?*

*Who are you in this space?*

## **Reflections**

Transforming Corona Plaza was an experiment in trans-disciplinary pedagogy that brought urban studies students together with art students to research and design spatial solutions for the target space. It was a new experience for everyone involved and provided a de facto crash course in the dynamics of community outreach for both disciplines.

Summaries of students' interviews with stakeholders showed each team discovered a broad range of potential community uses for the plaza. Most stakeholders agreed that the plaza could be a catalyst uniting local businesses, organizations, and citizens around their mutual needs including green spaces, educational, and recreational opportunities for children and seniors. There was also consensus about existing risk factors concerning upkeep and misuse such as the plaza's dirty, unpleasant conditions, dangerous volume of automobile traffic, noise, and the presence of homeless people, sex workers and drug dealers in the evenings.

In retrospect, Corona Plaza confronted students with poverty levels many had never seen. And while student proposals addressed community needs and risk factors, more time should have been taken to discuss the causes of this deeply institutionalized poverty.

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# WHAT WE MADE

Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation

# TOM FINKELPEARL

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## WHAT WE MADE





# WHAT WE MADE

Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation

TOM FINKELPEARL

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This book is dedicated to my most inspiring teachers:

Jeff Weiss, *middle school science*

Nancy Sizer, *high school composition*

Richard Rorty, *undergraduate philosophy*

James Rubin, *undergraduate art history*

Alice Aycock, *graduate school sculpture*

They were often way off the (narrowly imagined) subject, so each one taught me far more than the curriculum might have predicted.



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## PREFACE

IN THE FALL OF 1984, Group Material arrived at P.S.1, where I was working to install “Artists Call against U.S. Intervention in Central America.” Building the show was an interactive process; in the gallery the collective (which then comprised Tim Rollins, Julie Ault, and Doug Ashford) worked with a couple of dozen other artists both physically and intellectually to interweave art and political commentary into a forceful and depressing timeline. During this process I asked Tim Rollins if he had a piece in the show. He pointed out some painted bricks and said that he had helped create them in collaboration with several young men and women who were also in the galleries working on the installation. He identified his collaborators as the “Kids of Survival” and told me that they had recently been working together on a number of projects in the Bronx. I admired the bricks, but I asked him if, aside from the collaboration, he had any time to do his own work. Rollins told me his work was a contribution to their collective work. I found the idea energizing, and twenty-seven years later I still do. In 1987, along with Glenn Weiss, I organized a show at P.S.1 called “Out of the Community, Art with Community.” That project introduced me to Bolek Greczynski and his work at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s work with the New York City Sanitation Department, and the ongoing debates surrounding cooperative art that I have found fruitful and confusing ever since.

In 2003, as we were preparing for her exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art, Wendy Ewald was telling me about her collaborative photography and its reception. She said that after more than three decades of work, she still sensed a profound misunderstanding of what she and her peers were up to. Even after considerable critical writing on artistic cooperation, exchange, and artistic participation, people still ask her if the collaborations are all she does, or if she has time for her own work. I cringed, remembering my own question to Tim Rollins. We agreed that a book specifically on socially cooperative art might be helpful.

With Sondra Farganis we gathered a group of colleagues for a one-day symposium at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School for Social Research. The discussion circled around a series of the most important issues, in particular the ethics and aesthetics of collaboration.

After the conference Brett Cook, Wendy Ewald, and I continued our discussions regarding a possible publication and developed the format of this book: an introductory text setting a framework for cooperative practice inside and outside artistic traditions, followed by a series of conversations between artists and an array of thinkers from social history, aesthetics, political science, urban planning, education, and other fields. Since the conceptual, intellectual, social, and physical sites of these projects are so complex, it is helpful to look outside of the discourse of art criticism for new perspectives. And why not use conversation as a structure of a book on interactive, conversational, dialogue-driven art? Nine years later the project is complete. So first, thanks to Wendy and Brett for those generative early conversations and for the ongoing discussions that have followed.

I would like to thank Ken Wissoker and Jade Brooks at Duke University Press. Ken has been intelligent, patient, good humored, and encouraging while guiding me through the publication process. Jade was responsive and enthusiastic in every query and request. For Duke, Judith Hoover was a superb copyeditor with amazing attention to detail. The anonymous readers to whom Duke sent the manuscript were immensely helpful in this project. The review process can be a bit humbling, but it is what makes university press books consistently worth reading. The designer, Jennifer Hill, did a wonderful job making it all look great.

Prior to final submission of the manuscript I worked with Nell McLister, who is a truly excellent editor, and her invisible hand is on every page. Ricardo Cortes was a promising research assistant before his own book hit the bestseller list, but Adrienne Koteen stepped in and did a stellar job in his place. It really helped that Adrienne is so deeply steeped in the subject matter. Writing a book, even one filled with conversations, is essentially a solitary pursuit. I spent many long days at the computer overlooking the beach in Rockaway, Queens, breaking only for a Greek salad at the Last Stop Diner. The staff there was encouraging, and that mattered.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Eugenie Tsai, for her cheerful support when I was off at the beach writing or editing and when I was running ideas by her over almost a decade. That might have been a bit tiresome, but she never let on. Her intelligent and honest insights were always on the mark.



### The Art of Social Cooperation

#### An American Framework

##### Definition of Terms

Consider two art projects.

November 1986. At dusk on a fall evening, you are approaching a tan brick building on the grounds of Creedmoor Psychiatric Hospital at the far end of Queens. In this season, at this time of night, the hospital's campus looks very much like the state mental institution it is. But Building 75 has been renamed the Living Museum with a brightly colored sign. It is home to the *Battlefields Project*, a series of art installations that a group of patients has been working on for several years with the Polish-born actor and conceptual artist Bolek Greczynski, who is by this time fully ensconced as Creedmoor's artist-in-residence. You walk into the building, through a lush garden of natural and artificial plants, through the workroom where refreshments are being served, and into the "museum" proper.

The four corner rooms of the ten-thousand-square-foot space are devoted to installations that address the subjects of hospital, church, workplace, and home, four battlefields in the lives of the participants in this venture. The hallways and antechambers between these rooms are filled with art that ranges from haunting images one might expect from the mentally ill, to hard-edge minimalist painting on the floors and walls, to art that is competent in a rather commercial-realist style. There is a chess table dedicated to Marcel Duchamp, an overflowing bin of memos from Creedmoor's health care bureaucracy, and a book in which every line has been carefully crossed out.

At first you feel the need to determine the mental health status of each person you encounter. A woman clad in skin-tight leather and spike heels introduces herself improbably as Greczynski's dentist (this fact is later confirmed). You meet a young man from the lockdown unit attired in a



A short poem spray-painted on two sheets of plywood in a corner of the Living Museum at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, 1986. Photographs of the project generally do not include the participants because psychiatric patients are not considered competent to agree to photograph releases. Photograph by Tom Finkelpearl.

three-piece suit. Another guy who looks like a doctor could just as easily be a patient. The crowd assembled for the occasion includes an assortment of Greczynski's eccentric, theatrical, art world, club world, outsider, and insider friends mixed with doctors, patients, and their families—so the distinctions are challengingly ambiguous at first but become less urgent as the evening progresses. The museum has been created in a complex series of interactions between Greczynski and a changing group of patients (hundreds have participated). But Greczynski will not call them patients. In the Living Museum they are artists. He does not see their work as symptomatic of their mental illness, he explains, but as a testament to their “strength and vulnerability.” He sees their sensitivity, which may have forced them into this institutional setting, as an asset for an artist. The doctors tell you that for these patients, having the opportunity to assume the identity of an artist has therapeutic value, but Greczynski is suspicious of this approach, siding with the patient against the controlling institutions of therapy and the interpretation of art as a symptom—even as a symptom of healthy progress. After several hours you drive off, acutely aware that there are those who are left behind.



Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City speaking at a press conference in Times Square launching Paul Ramirez Jonas's *Key to the City*, 2010. The project was presented by Creative Time in cooperation with the City of New York. Photograph by Meghan McInnis. Courtesy of Creative Time.

Patrick Li (left) and friends exchanging keys as part of *Key to the City* by Paul Ramirez Jonas (center), 2010. Photograph by Meghan McInnis. Courtesy of Creative Time.

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Spring 2010. Having received an intriguing email blast from Creative Time, a public art organization, you arrive in Times Square to experience a project by Paul Ramirez Jonas called *Key to the City*. You know little about what to expect except that it will be based on the longtime New York tradition of the mayor awarding a symbolic key to notable visitors and public heroes. You are informed that you will need a partner for a key award ceremony, and you pair up with a young woman, Annie, who has also arrived solo. You get in line with Annie (and a couple of hundred others), and you are instructed to fill in the blanks on the first two pages of a passport-size booklet that gives a bit of background. You and Annie chat as you decide why to honor each other with a key to the city. When you have arrived at the “Commons” area created for the event, she reads out the text: “I, Annie, on this third day of June, bestow the key to the city to you, being a perfect stranger, in consideration of your spirit. Do you accept this key?” Yes, you do. “Then, by the power temporarily granted to me and this work of art, I, Annie, award you this key to the city.” She hands you the booklet and a key that is inscribed with a small drawing of hands exchanging keys. You reciprocate, reading the formal text and handing her the booklet that you have inscribed, and that is the last you see of Annie.

The project's key is the opposite of the traditional key to the city: anyone can get one, and it is not merely symbolic. Over the next couple of months the key unlocks doors, closets, gates, display cases, and so on, at



twenty-four sites indicated in the booklet. One afternoon you take the 7 train to Corona, Queens, and visit the Louis Armstrong House Museum, where the key opens the door to Armstrong's private bathroom. Then you walk over to the Tortilleria Nixtamal, where, remarkably, the key opens up the downstairs kitchen and you receive a lesson in taco making. Over twenty sweaty minutes you also learn how a tortilla kitchen in Corona operates: hot, fast, and in Spanish. As you make your way around the city, you see sites that are normally hidden and meet the New Yorkers behind the doors. The work becomes something of the talk of the town, as more than fifteen thousand people participate.

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While both art projects were participatory, there were substantial differences. Both the Living Museum and *Key to the City* fall under the rubric of what is variously dubbed participatory, interactive, collaborative, or relational art. However, in recent texts on this sort of art, critics tend to distinguish between projects that are designed by artists and projects that are created through dialogue and collaboration with participants. For example, Grant Kester, an art historian at the University of California, San Diego, differentiates between collaborative, "dialogical" works and projects based on a scripted "encounter."<sup>1</sup> Claire Bishop, an art historian at City University of New York, identifies "an authored tradition that seeks to provoke participants and a de-authored lineage that aims to embrace collective creativity."<sup>2</sup> And the critic and curator Claire Doherty describes "those practices which, though they employ a process of complicit engagement, are clearly initiated and ultimately directed by the artist . . . and those which, though still often authored by the artist or team, are collaborative—in effect 'social sculpture.'"<sup>3</sup>

As Kester points out, the categories of the scripted encounter and the de-authored, dialogical collaboration are generalizations, and perhaps it would be more useful to describe a spectrum of activity rather than draw such a clear line between practices.<sup>4</sup> On this spectrum, *Key to the City* would tend toward the scripted encounter, while the Living Museum leans toward the dialogue-based tradition of works created collectively. Greczynski created a platform for the creativity of the patients at Creedmoor, while Ramirez Jonas sent the participants on a well-planned series of encounters. *Key to the City* was clearly a work by Paul Ramirez Jonas, though the individual participants—both the key holders and those who welcomed them to each site—took an active role. You were the actor, and

there were no spectators. The text you read in Times Square was prepared by the artist. As you traversed the city to the other sites, the interactions were considerably looser, but you were still on a route between access points prepared by Ramirez Jonas. On the other hand, the Living Museum was created in a long-term interactive process that was orchestrated (rather than authored) by Greczynski. The art projects that composed the Living Museum were created by Creedmoor patients working many hours a week over many years, interspersed with an occasional painting by Greczynski. The project was made by the group—hence the title of this book, *What We Made*.

When you visited an open house at Creedmoor, you seemed somewhat peripheral to the main event, which only Greczynski and the patient-artists experienced—an event that unfolded very slowly in a decidedly closed house. You got only a glimpse; you were welcomed as a temporary guest. This split between the collective creation of the art and the viewing and experiencing public is present in a number of projects discussed in this book. Importantly, the issue of social benefit was closer to the surface in the Living Museum than in *Key to the City*. Though Greczynski resisted the therapeutic interpretation of his project, the open and relaxed atmosphere at the Living Museum gave the tangible sense of a curative space for the mentally ill. While one can easily point to political meaning in the ways Ramirez Jonas opened up the city and in the democratization of an elitist tradition, there was no sense that the project was meant to turn around the life of its participants.

Walking through Building 75 at Creedmoor, the audience—art critics, psychologists, patients—had a hard time understanding the overall environment as an aesthetic project. Two decades later *Key to the City* unfolded in an art-historical context that has come to allow for an interactive moment in public space as an artistic product worthy of analysis. But the language surrounding the practice is still up for grabs. In her article “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” published in *Artforum* in 2006, Claire Bishop notes that there is a range of names for the activist wing of the less-authored practice, including “socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art.”<sup>5</sup> For the sake of that article, she settled on the term *social collaboration*. I would agree with Bishop’s use of the word *social*. Though no word can sum up the efforts of any group of artists, the word *social*—as in social encounters across social classes—helps locate this practice in an experiential and

intellectual realm that also includes social studies, social work, and social housing.

However, I favor the term *social cooperation* over Bishop's *social collaboration*. There are three main reasons for this. First, in art criticism, *collaboration* often refers to teams such as Gilbert and George or collectives such as Group Material. It implies a shared initiation of the art, and start-to-finish coauthorship. We have no clue what Gilbert or George has independently contributed to one of their photographs, or what Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Tim Rollins, or Felix Gonzalez-Torres individually contributed to a given Group Material installation. And even if we do understand that W. S. Gilbert wrote the words and Arthur Sullivan composed the music, there is a clear acknowledgment of equal coauthorship in a Gilbert and Sullivan opera. For many of the projects discussed in this book, collaboration is simply too far-reaching a claim to make; not all of the participants are equally authors of these projects, especially in the initiation and conceptualization. *Cooperation*, on the other hand, simply implies that people have worked together on a project. Even the projects on the de-authored side of the spectrum involve a self-identified artist who can claim the title of initiator or orchestrator of the cooperative venture, including the projects in which little or none of the final product is by his or her own hand. Second, calling the work *cooperative* situates the practice in the intellectual zone of human cooperation. There has been significant research in recent decades in the fields of evolutionary game theory, rational and irrational choice theory, theories of reciprocity and altruism, the new cognitive science of interconnection, and evolutionary economics. While acknowledging that human beings are territorial and aggressive animals, many in these fields are beginning to understand in what ways we are also a hypercooperative species.<sup>6</sup> Third, understanding what social cooperation means to John Dewey and other pragmatists has helped elucidate these artists' work for me, which I discuss in the conclusion. So for the sake of this book, I call the Living Museum and projects like it "socially cooperative," and works like *Key to the City* "participatory" or "relational." This is not meant to be a value judgment. There are trivial and profound projects throughout the spectrum, and both the Living Museum and *Key to the City* struck me as brilliant and provocative in their own right. Most of the projects in this book, however, lean toward the socially cooperative, works that examine or enact the social dimension of the cooperative venture, blurring issues of authorship, crossing social boundaries, and engaging participants for durations that stretch from days to months to years.



## An American Framework

While this book focuses on an American perspective, I try not to define too narrowly what it means to be an American artist. A number of the interviewees were born abroad but live in the United States now, including Pedro Lasch, Tania Bruguera, Lee Mingwei, Teddy Cruz, and Ernesto Pujol. Evan Roth was brought up here but lives in France. In fact at this point in the country's history, it would be inaccurate to represent cooperative art practice in America without a considerable representation of immigrant artists. But first let us take a couple of steps back and consider a framework for the development of this practice here in the United States.

### Historical Context: Social Movements in the 1960s

These practices, of course, have a history. In my conversations with progressive activists and artists, one after another they mention that they participated in, based their techniques on, or drew inspiration from the spirit of the 1960s, particularly the civil rights movement, the counterculture, and feminism. Some of the social relations and democratic institutions created in those movements during that period were mirrors of the socially cooperative art that was simultaneously emerging. In the 1960s there were competing models of negotiation and conflict within progressive political movements. In his essay "The Phantom Community," published in 1979, the Princeton sociologist Paul Starr distinguishes between two broad categories of counterinstitutions that developed during that period:

An exemplary institution, such as a utopian community or consumers' cooperative, seeks, as the term suggests, to exemplify in its own structure and conduct an alternative set of ideals. . . . Compared with established institutions, it may attempt to be more democratic in its decision-making, or less rigid and specialized in its division of labor, or more egalitarian in its distribution of rewards. . . . In contrast, an adversarial institution, such as a political party, a union, or a reform group, is primarily concerned with altering the social order. Oriented toward conflict, it may not exhibit in its own organization all the values that its supporters hope eventually to realize.<sup>7</sup>

In Starr's dichotomy, cooperative action is associated with the egalitarian and democratic *exemplary* institutions, while conflict is associated with the *adversarial* groups. But the dialectic is not rigid, and Starr points out that some of the most famous adversarial groups in the 1960s also

sought to be exemplary. He cites, for example, conflict-friendly community organizing within the civil rights movement, as well as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which was adversarial in many of its tactics but engaged in “extremes of participatory democracy” in an attempt to exemplify the changes that it was fighting for in society.<sup>8</sup> It is the practices of exemplary groups like these that resemble most closely the practices of socially cooperative artists.

### Civil Rights and Community Organizing

A number of the artists in this book cite the civil rights movement as an inspiration, including Wendy Ewald, who was stirred by the black power movement in Detroit as a kid; Brett Cook, who cites civil rights ideology; and Rick Lowe, who participated in African American activism in Houston.<sup>9</sup> But in the 1960s the civil rights movement was divided between the rhetoric of collective action most eloquently presented by Martin Luther King Jr. and a more radical politics of confrontation espoused by leaders like Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X. Cook refers in his interview (chapter 10) to King’s principle of a “network of mutuality,” a term he often used, including in his final Sunday sermon on March 31, 1968, five days before he was assassinated: “Through our scientific and technological genius we have made of this world a neighborhood, and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. . . . We must all learn to live together as brothers. Or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.”<sup>10</sup> King’s goal is not only economic justice but interpersonal interconnection, a model of anti-individualist mutuality. Steeped in Gandhian nonviolence and a Christian ethic of brotherhood, King sees this mutuality as both desirable and inevitable. We are not only seeking interconnection, we are “caught” in this “inescapable network.” But by the mid-1960s alternative voices were emerging. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was morphing into an increasingly radical counterinstitution. It had hailed the power of “redemptive community” in its Statement of Purpose in 1960 and had recruited countless northerners to engage in cooperative organizing in the South in the early 1960s.<sup>11</sup> But an SNCC memo from 1964 shows a growing frustration with the personal, self-actualizing impulse of some who were joining the civil rights fight. Lamenting their “bourgeois sentimentality,” the memo notes, “Some of the good brothers and sisters think our business is the spreading of ‘the redemptive warmth of personal confrontation,’ ‘emotional enrich-



The civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965. Photograph by Peter Pettus. Courtesy of Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

ment,’ ‘compassionate and sympathetic personal relationships,’ and other varieties of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation derived from the vocabulary of group therapy and progressive liberal witch doctors.”<sup>12</sup> Here the philosophy of cooperation is described as unsuited to the urgent work of resisting oppressive racism. This critique of cooperative action as accommodation and compromised liberalism is still leveled at socially cooperative projects, be they political or artistic.

But as Paul Starr points out, exemplary institutions were not limited to redemptive warmth and sympathetic relationships with those outside the group. Saul Alinsky, whose ideas took shape in the civil rights struggle, came to epitomize American community organizing. A hero of the non-communist Left, Alinsky was a pragmatist interested in what works for poor communities. In his book *Reveille for Radicals*, published in 1946, he outlines his strategies, which address many of the issues that cooperative art confronts. For Alinsky, the community organizer is a facilitator of social interplay out of which emerges the “people’s program.” His ideal organizer has faith in the ability and intelligence of the people to imagine a solution to their own problems. He wrote, “*After all, the real democratic program is a democratically minded people—a healthy, active, participating, interested, self-confident people who, through their participation and*





Saul Alinsky addressing a crowd before a meeting in Flemington, New Jersey, 1967. He was working with the coalition FIGHT (Freedom, Integration, God, Honor, Today) as part of an effort to promote racially diverse hiring practices at Kodak Corporation, whose shareholders meeting was taking place in Flemington at the time. Photograph courtesy of AP Photo.

interest, become informed, educated, and above all develop faith in themselves, their fellow men, and the future.”<sup>13</sup> Alinsky does not deny the community organizer’s pivotal role, especially at the initial stages of mobilization, but he insists that the action must come from the people themselves. After an additional twenty-five years of experience, Alinsky wrote *Rules for Radicals* (1971), in which the ethic of mutual growth is clear: “An effective organizational experience is as much an educational process for the organizer as it is for the people with whom he is working. . . . We learn, when we respect the dignity of the people, that they cannot be denied the elementary right to participate fully in the solutions to their own problems. Self-respect arises only out of people who play an active role in solving their own crises and who are not helpless, passive, puppet-like recipients of private or public service.”<sup>14</sup>

For Alinsky, the process of addressing the problem collectively is a major part of the organizing initiative. But he was far from an advocate of “redemptive warmth” or “emotional enrichment” for its own sake. He states quite clearly that “a People’s Organization is a conflict group,” and his strategy revolves around identifying issues, provoking conflict, and finding

winnable battles — seeking what he calls the “displacement and disorganization of the status quo.”<sup>15</sup> Through tangible and specific local victories, he hoped that the communities could rebalance power. It was *within* the organization, through the local identification of social complaints, through the activation of the community members, through collective, cooperative action that Alinsky helped facilitate what Starr would call exemplary institutions that also seek actively to change the social order. Community organization, undertaken on a massive scale by SNCC and articulated by Alinsky, became a staple of social movements throughout the country. Throughout this book you will hear about community participation, active contribution, and learning while teaching, all crucial ingredients of community organizing and urban planning in the 1960s.

In 1969 Sherry Arnstein, an advisor to the federal government’s Department of Housing and Urban Development, wrote an influential essay, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” in which she argues that participation in decision making is a cornerstone of a democratic society and that poor communities have traditionally been denied power over the use of federal funds in the United States. She lays out a hierarchy of forms of “citizen participation,” starting at the bottom with the least desirable approach and ascending to the most desirable at the top:

8. Citizen Control
7. Delegated Power
6. Partnership
5. Placation
4. Consultation
3. Informing
2. Therapy
1. Manipulation

Arnstein calls manipulation “the distortion of participation into a public relations vehicle by powerholders.” Therapy occurs when the powerful try to “cure” the apparent pathologies of the powerless—for example, teaching the impoverished how to control their kids. Informing citizens about plans for their community with a “one-way flow of information” fails to tap into local knowledge. Consultation is a step closer to drawing on community knowledge, but “offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account.” Placation allows a token amount of community input into the project design. Partnership invites citizens into the decision-making process. When an urban renewal program gives

majority say in a project to the local community, it has delegated power. Finally, when power and funds go directly to a “neighborhood corporation with no intermediaries between it and the source of funds,” citizen control has been achieved.<sup>16</sup> Arnstein takes pains to point out that the ladder is a simplification, but the article was widely read, and its ideology of participation clearly echoes Alinsky’s. It is easy to see how this taxonomy might apply to projects in this book. For example, Harrell Fletcher’s film (chapter 6) might be considered a partnership with the gas station owner Jay Dykeman, while Rick Lowe’s *Project Row Houses* (chapter 5) could be an example of citizen control.

Arnstein’s ladder is useful shorthand for a model of cooperative participation in the late 1960s: the less top-down the better. Critics might shudder at the application of this sort of chart to the evaluation of art; it is easy to imagine an art project that reaches the highest level of participation but remains simplistic aesthetically. The mere presence of deeply engaged community participation in an art project is not the final word on its merit, even if it is a great sign for community organizing. But the negative values on Arnstein’s list tend to echo what critics decry in some community art projects: manipulation, decoration, tokenism, and therapy. In any case the civil rights movement and community organizing of the 1960s offer models of participatory action that still resonate in present-day community organizing, urban planning, and art — not to mention social justice movements worldwide.

### The Movement and Participatory Democracy

The counterculture of the 1960s also created a range of important exemplary anti-institutions formulated on a model of participatory democracy. “The movement” was a catchall phrase for the activities of the counterculture, from antiwar protests to sexual liberation and alternative living arrangements. Many of the most important activists in the movement cut their teeth organizing in the South for SNCC, and the tactics and rhetoric of participatory liberation ripple through their actions and texts.

Students for a Democratic Society started primarily as a civil rights organization but increasingly focused on the antiwar movement as the decade progressed. One of its founding documents was the Port Huron Statement, drafted mostly by Tom Hayden in 1962. The document is a far-reaching indictment of the status quo in America, with discussions of foreign policy, workplace discrimination, industrialization, and other topics.



Of particular interest here, though, is the statement's position on participatory action:

In a participatory democracy, the political life would be based in several root principles:

- that decision-making of basic social consequence be carried on by public groupings;
- that politics be seen positively, as the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations;
- that politics has the function of bringing people out of isolation and into community, thus being a necessary, though not sufficient, means of finding meaning in personal life.<sup>17</sup>

Like Alinsky, Hayden et al. are arguing that only through social and political participation can democracy and justice be achieved, and that participation is both a means and an end, that “the political order should serve to clarify problems in a way instrumental to their solution.” The Port Huron Statement argues that the isolation of contemporary American social life can be overcome and community can be created when private problems “from bad recreation facilities to personal alienation” are “formulated as general issues.”<sup>18</sup> It is a matter not simply of experts understanding and solving the problems of the world, but of citizens themselves actively working in “public groupings” to address society’s problems and make decisions.

SDS sought to bring these ideals into reality through its own democratic structure, through community organizing (much of it in the North, though little was successful) and mass participation in the peace movement. Hayden states that the heritage for participatory democracy was transmitted to SDS through John Dewey, who was a leader of the League for Industrial Democracy (the original name of the organization that would become SDS). He cites Dewey’s notion that democracy is not only a governmental form but also a mode of living and communicated experience.<sup>19</sup> I return to Dewey in the conclusion.

In his essay on the history of communes, Timothy Miller, a religion professor at the University of Kansas, states that while communal living has existed in many periods in American history, in the mid-1960s “communitarian idealism erupted in what was to be by far its largest manifestation ever.”<sup>20</sup> In their book on communes, co-ops, and collectives, the historian John Case and the Tufts University sociologist Rosemary Tay-

lor argue that communes were emblematic of a difference between the American Left in the 1930s and the New Left of the 1960s. Unlike their predecessors, the New Leftists sought to practice a politics of everyday life. Hence the problems inherent in work and family life “could not be solved by individuals acting alone; they were, as the New Leftists saw it, the common costs of life in capitalist America, and they therefore called for collective action. One fundamental concern of the movement, then, was to find new ways of living and working.”<sup>21</sup> One of the most famous communal groups was the Diggers in San Francisco, and participatory art was at the center of their endeavor. Born out of the highly politicized San Francisco Mime Group, the Diggers were primarily interested in living freely as a group, creating live anarchic street experiences, and de-commodifying the alternative lifestyles of Haight-Ashbury, following the maxims “Do your thing” and “Create the condition you describe.”<sup>22</sup> It is impossible to draw a line between their art and their life, though their Intersection Game, which casually snarled traffic, tended toward participatory theater, while their Free Food initiative leaned toward community support.

The Diggers’ influence was felt strongly in New York, where Abbie Hoffman, Anita Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Nancy Kurshan, and Paul Krassner founded the Youth International Party, known as the Yippies. Kurshan, Abbie Hoffman, and Rubin had been important members of SDS and were schooled initially through the organizing efforts of SNCC in the early 1960s. According to Michael William Doyle, a historian at Ball State University, the Yippies began as the New York Diggers but soon found their own vision. While the Diggers were interested in live participatory action, the Yippies were intent on disrupting public discourse with their provocative street actions, and they developed a complex form of guerrilla political theater.<sup>23</sup> Famously, at the New York Stock Exchange in 1967, fifteen free spirits organized by Abbie Hoffman tossed hundreds of one-dollar bills from the gallery above the stock exchange, creating several minutes of mayhem as the stockbrokers scrambled to pick up the cash from the floor. It was a well-publicized and embarrassing moment for the center of American commerce.

Hoffman claims in retrospect that a source for his actions was Antonin Artaud’s book *The Theatre and Its Double* (1958), in which Artaud calls for a new “poetry of festivals and crowds, with people pouring into the streets.” Hoffman describes the planning process as relatively anarchic: the Yippies would just divide up into groups and work on various proposed actions. In some cases the results were well-planned tactical media events,



Yippies visit the New York Stock Exchange. Abbie Hoffman (smiling, right) and Jerry Rubin (right with mustache) hold up a burning five-dollar bill. The crowd applauds the parting gesture outside the Stock Exchange on August 24, 1967. Photograph by Jack Smith/*New York Daily News* via Getty Images.

while others were free-form “be-ins.” Many of these collectively imagined actions allowed onlookers to become involved. “If observers of the drama are allowed to interpret the act,” writes Hoffman, “they will become participants themselves. . . . The concept of mass spectacle, everyday language, and easily recognized symbols was important to get public involvement.” Some of the actions had a handful of participants, as at the Stock Exchange, while others had thousands or even tens of thousands, such as an alternative Easter action in Central Park.<sup>24</sup> The Yippies, joined by other activists and agitators, gained international recognition for their disruption of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968. The whole world was indeed watching as they exposed the brutal side of the Chicago police.

Hoffman correctly observed that the art world was not particularly interested in his theater. Like the other groups that he saw as his brethren (e.g., Bread and Puppet Theater, who were also regulars at the mass demonstrations), Hoffman was more concerned with public communication than art magazine press. He argues that the Museum of Modern Art’s interest in Allan Kaprow’s happenings and Pop art “while ignoring our brand of political theater just proves the connection between suc-



cessful artists and the rich.”<sup>25</sup> But just as the Diggers created a communitarian utopia that has echoes in today’s micro-utopias, the Yippies created a precedent for interventionist artists like the Yes Men, who would follow a couple of decades later.

Starr concludes that on an organizational level, “the counter-institutions unquestionably failed.”<sup>26</sup> One commune after another closed its doors; SDS, always plagued by a lack of structure, collapsed amid rancorous dispute in 1969. The intermingling of personal life, political action, and idealistic group orientation comes up over and over in accounts of the 1960s, but perhaps most importantly (and successfully) in feminism. While the living experiments of the communes seem to have risen and fallen in cycles in American history, the feminist movement has been more or less relentless in the past century. The progressive ideologies and practices of the 1960s were well suited to energize a new wave of feminist thought and action that still reverberates in American culture.

#### Feminism and Political Performance

After the Second World War many middle-class Americans sought refuge from what they perceived to be cramped and crowded cities. In the most advanced car culture on the planet, it was less imperative to live close to the center, as the husband could commute to his job while the wife organized the home and raised the kids. Suburbanization was in full swing for the white middle class. There were contemporary critiques, including *The Split Level Trap* (1960), an analysis of the psychosocial environment of the suburbs, and Lewis Mumford’s book *The City in History*, written a year later, which lamented the social conformity of the suburbs and the housewife’s alienation from the social relations of the city within a monotonous, uniform, television-dominated existence.<sup>27</sup> But the role of women in this world was blasted open with the publication in 1963 of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. At once a well-published author and a suburban housewife, Friedan was reacting against what she saw as the rigid and constricting life that confined women to the home without outlets to develop an individual identity. She wrote, “The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the 20th century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone.”<sup>28</sup> Only by naming the problem and shedding the oppressive gender role assigned to her, only by finding herself through creative work of her own, Friedan argued, could the new woman become confident, self-

aware, and capable of self-fulfillment. *The Feminine Mystique* became a bestseller, catapulting Friedan to public prominence and jump-starting Second Wave feminism.

*The Feminine Mystique* struck a chord of discontent, poking a hole in the prevailing image of the woman. But it was not an overall critique of the social trends in America, and it implicitly centered on women like Friedan herself: middle-class white suburbanites. Gerda Lerner (later to become an eminent historian at the University of Wisconsin) wrote to Friedan upon the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, hailing the book but also arguing that the problems that individual women face cannot be solved “on the basis of the individual family.” Lerner argued that solutions need to be framed in terms of the larger community and require “a system of social reforms [including] day care centers, maternity benefits, communized household services,” and so on.<sup>29</sup> In fairness, as the Cerritos College historian Susan Oliver points out, much of this agenda was embraced by Friedan when she became president of the National Organization of Women.<sup>30</sup> In *Redesigning the American Dream* (1984), the Yale architecture professor Dolores Hayden argues that the “haven” created for women in the postwar period, the architecture and community planning of suburbanization, was a gendered sociopolitical and environmental nightmare. While Friedan saw the main oppressor of women as “chains in her own mind and spirit,” others saw more systematic oppression, especially for women outside the comfort zone of the suburbs.

But as the 1960s progressed there emerged a group of women with the tools to take the critique further, with the birth of the women’s liberation movement. In her book *Personal Politics* (1979), Sara Evans, a historian at the University of Minnesota, argues that the roots of the women’s movement were in the civil rights movement and the New Left. Using copious examples, Evans argues that women learned firsthand about gender inequality by working in male-dominated groups like SNCC and SDS. Of particular importance in these organizations were new models of egalitarianism, including “the anti-leadership bias and the emphasis on internal process,” “the theory of radicalization through discussions,” and “the belief in participatory democracy,” but many women steeped in liberation ideology and Second Wave feminist self-confidence recoiled at the movement’s consistent blindness to or acceptance of sex discrimination.<sup>31</sup> (Accounts of the woman’s role in the Diggers commune are no better.)<sup>32</sup> “What was required to produce a movement,” says Evans, “was only for women to apply the new ideas directly to their own situation, to make the connections be-

tween ‘the people’ whom they sought to aid and themselves as women.”<sup>33</sup> This connection was made, and a new liberation movement emerged.

A key factor of women’s liberation was the group. The late 1960s saw the rise of feminist consciousness-raising through group interaction, a practice formalized by a collective called New York Radical Women (NYRW). In 1969 the feminist pioneer Carol Hanisch wrote an article, “The Personal Is Political,” in the Redstockings journal *Feminist Revolution*. She was responding to critics, including mainstream political feminists and radicals like the SNCC activist quoted earlier, who ridiculed consciousness-raising as self-indulgent “mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.” Hanisch made the argument that the collective act of discussing women’s personal issues (e.g., “Which do/did you prefer, a girl or a boy baby, or no children and why?”) was valid feminist practice that transcended self-interested therapy: “We discover in these groups that personal problems are political problems. There are not personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for collective solution.”<sup>34</sup> Hanisch’s article was widely reprinted and passed around in the next several years, and the notion that the personal is political is considered by many to be the “single identifying mantra” of Second Wave feminists.<sup>35</sup> As Mary Ryan, a women’s studies professor at the University of California, Berkeley, has written, “The first task of feminist scholars and activists was to dredge through their personal lives and women’s everyday experiences for those issues which required publicity.”<sup>36</sup>

Indeed the personal issues were publicized. According to Kathie Sara-child, a member of the NYRW, it was Hanisch who prompted the group to expand their consciousness-raising into the public realm, to go beyond a service or membership organization to what she called “zap” action on the model of SNCC. The most famous action undertaken by the group was a protest at the Miss America Pageant in 1968: about a hundred women picketed the event, then threw high-heeled shoes, girdles, *Playboy* and *Good Housekeeping* magazines, and other implements of what they called “female torture” into a “freedom trashcan.”<sup>37</sup> According to Hanisch, the impetus for the Miss America action came from a classic NYRW consciousness-raising session. After talking about the powerful and conflicting emotions evoked by watching the beauty pageant on television, the group decided to take action. Hanisch wrote, “From our communal thinking came the concrete plans for the action. We all agreed that our main point in the demonstration would be that all women are hurt by





An early consciousness-raising session at the Women's Center in Greenwich Village, 1970. Photograph by Bettye Lane.

beauty competition — Miss America as well as ourselves. We opposed the pageant in our own self-interest, e.g., the self-interest of all women.”<sup>38</sup> In a flyer that was handed out on the Atlantic City boardwalk the day of the Miss America action, the organizers referred to the event as “boardwalk-theater” and “guerrilla theater.”<sup>39</sup> Like the Yippies’ action at the New York Stock Exchange, the Miss America action received tremendous publicity, including front-page coverage in the print media. According to Hanisch, the protest “told the nation that a new feminist movement [was] afoot in the land.”<sup>40</sup> If the personal was political, boardwalk theater helped make it public. Though these actions did not have a huge impact in the art press, artists were simultaneously adopting, adapting, and translating this sort of collectively imagined, cooperatively created political theater in the aesthetic realm, even as the aesthetics began to blur with social action. With the well-known and broadly inclusive participatory experiments and community organizing of the civil rights movement, the counterinstitutions and street theater of the movement, and the collectivism and political theater of feminism, the table had been set for the emergence of cooperative art practices.



On the boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey, New York Radical Women dispute the image of American women being presented at the Miss America pageant nearby. The action, which was suggested at a consciousness-raising session, gained national media attention in 1969. Photograph © Jo Freeman.

### Pioneers in American Cooperative Art

Just as the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in the early 1960s was a necessary precursor to the actions of the New York Radical Women toward the end of the decade, ideas in the Fluxus network were precursors to cooperative art that unfolded later. Fluxus intended to put an end to art reflecting the artist's ego in favor of ideas that were unprotected by copyright, often consisting of directions for actions that could be undertaken by anyone, thus allowing art into the realm of the everyday for the benefit of the people. If ultimately Fluxus failed to achieve its goal of integrating art and life, it nonetheless opened the door to a range of anti-individualistic, participatory art practices and provided early intellectual inspiration.

Fluxus was an international network that included important members in Europe and Asia, but for the most part it was centered around the self-appointed chairman, George Maciunas, in New York. In 1962 Maciunas proposed that art could “arrive at a closer connection to concrete reality” and that Fluxus “anti-art forms are primarily directed against art as a profession, against the artificial separation of producer and performer,

or generator and spectator or against the separation of art and life.” Later he proclaimed that Fluxus “should tend towards collective spirit, anonymity and ANTI-INDIVIDUALISM.”<sup>41</sup> For all of Maciunas’s aspirations, however, there is no indication that Fluxus in fact broke out of the art world. A Fluxus store offering low-cost items, which was open for a year on Canal Street in New York, did not sell *a single item*.<sup>42</sup> As Joseph Beuys said, Fluxus “held a mirror up to people without indicating how to change things.”<sup>43</sup> John Hendricks, a Fluxus insider who produced a number of their events at Judson Memorial Church, was of a similar mind. Frustrated by the in-group nature of their activities, along with Jean Toche he proceeded to take a more public tack with the Guerrilla Art Action Group later in the 1960s.<sup>44</sup> But Fluxus and its intellectual and artistic community was an important early testing ground for two artists who would have enormous influence on the genesis of cooperative art: Allan Kaprow and Joseph Beuys. Kaprow was a member of the Judson Church circle and the Rutgers University Fluxus crowd and submitted work for Fluxus special editions in the early 1960s. Beuys was an early Fluxus participant, and Fluxus ideas reverberated through his work from the beginning to the end of his career. I will return to Beuys later.

While Kaprow was involved early on in Fluxus, he made his name outside the network as the father of the happening during the 1960s. In his essay “Participation Performance,” written retrospectively in 1977, Kaprow says that while there was audience participation in the happenings, the involvement was relatively inconsequential, akin to an audience member being called to the stage in a television show or a “guided tour, parade, carnival test of skill, secret society initiation,” thus remaining within the genre of the scripted participation. Kaprow emphasizes that the audience participants were well aware of the style and taste of the artists, as they were initiated into the contemporary art world, and he proposes that continuity of taste culture and community are a prerequisite for this sort of participatory art. “This may seem truistic,” Kaprow writes, “but participation presupposes shared assumptions, interests, languages, meanings, contexts, and uses. It cannot take place otherwise.”<sup>45</sup> This sort of performance was not designed to cross social boundaries.

As the decade progressed, Kaprow moved on from happenings to “life-art” and the conscious blurring of aesthetic categories. In the spirit of the concretist Fluxus artists, Kaprow began to examine the potential in declaring certain everyday activities as art, to “consider certain common transactions — shaking hands, eating, saying goodbye — as Readymades.”<sup>46</sup> As



he wrote in “The Education of the Un-Artist” (in 1969), “Random trance-like movements of shoppers in a supermarket are richer than anything done in modern dance.”<sup>47</sup> He was playing consistently on the line between life and art in the form of small-scale participatory performance. The critic Jeff Kelley observes that by the end of the 1960s “a Happening by Kaprow was no longer something you went to, but something you and a few others undertook. Performers were no longer mixed with the crowd; there was no crowd, only volunteers. Resonance tended to reside in the specific settings, communitarian experiences, and big ideas (like imitating nature, or turning work into play) that were part of the background noise of 1960s American society.”<sup>48</sup>

In 1969, the year he wrote “The Education of the Un-Artist,” Kaprow collaborated on an education art project called *Project Other Ways* with the educator Herbert Kohl, who was teaching at UC Berkeley at the time. It was an uncharacteristic endeavor for Kaprow that highlights the relationship of participatory art and progressive education, a theme that runs throughout the projects in this book (Mark Dion in chapter 2, Tania Bruguera in chapter 7, Wendy Ewald in chapter 8, Brett Cook in chapter 10). Rethinking education was a hot topic in the late 1960s, from the battles over curriculum to the social restrictions placed on college students and the local control of school boards. In 1968 Kohl published *36 Children*, which is both a chronicle of his experiences as a sixth-grade teacher in Harlem and an indictment of the educational system’s failures to meet the needs of inner-city kids.<sup>49</sup> Interest in radical pedagogy was opening the door to a flexible, interactive approach to working with students. As Kohl and Kaprow got started, there was ongoing turmoil down the street at UC Berkeley, and tear gas was in the air.

In *Project Other Ways* Kaprow and Kohl launched a series of pedagogical experiments to bring art into the Berkeley Unified School District, including a cooperative project with a group of sixth graders. Kaprow and Kohl had noticed that a faction of kids from Oakland who were thought to be functionally illiterate were in fact quite interested in writing—at least writing graffiti. After an initial positive experience with the kids over an afternoon photographing what was scrawled in the local bathrooms, Kaprow said:

Kohl and I saw a germ of an idea in what had just happened. We covered the walls of our storefront offices with large sheets of brown wrapping paper, provided felt-tipped pens, paints and brushes, staplers and rubber

cement. We invited the kids back the following week and put on the table the photos they had taken. They were asked to make graffiti, using the photos and any drawings they wanted to make, like the graffiti they had seen on our tour. At first they were hesitant and giggled, but we said there were no rules and they wouldn't be punished for dirty words or drawings, or even making a mess. Soon there were photos all over the walls. Drawn and painted lines circled and stabbed them, extending genitalia and the names of locals they obviously recognized.<sup>50</sup>

In that Kohl and Kaprow were catalysts of the creativity they saw in these sixth graders, the project mirrors the work of Wendy Ewald, who started her collaborative educational practice the same year as *Project Other Ways*, and it presages the work of Tim Rollins, who would collaborate with the Kids of Survival in the Bronx more than a decade later. For these egalitarian progressives, the imbalance of the teacher-student relationship seemed like a good target, and the educational environment would prove receptive to this sort of interrogation. But from the beginning of Kohl and Kaprow's project, there was a question of political versus artistic agendas. Kohl, a prominent social activist and advocate of the open school movement, had politics in mind, while Kaprow was interested in artistic play, emphasizing the open-endedness of the process and the product. When a park that was cleaned up and reoriented through community collaboration during the project was soon vandalized, Kelley says, "Kaprow was characteristically philosophical—the parks had come from rubble and were returned to rubble."<sup>51</sup> But Kohl saw politics, not poetry.

After a year Kaprow left *Project Other Ways* to take a position at the newly founded California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where at first he was surrounded by members of the New York scene, including Fluxus artists like Alison Knowles and Nam June Paik. So just as Diggers techniques were transplanted to the East Coast, post-Fluxus ideologies made their way across the continent to the West Coast. Kaprow's influence as a teacher (at CalArts and later at UC San Diego) was long term and profound. According to Kelley, when Kaprow got to CalArts, the same sort of social expectations that Kohl had for *Project Other Ways* were held by some of the students, particularly the feminists: "It was assumed by many activist artists that Happenings, if scaled to the ideological proportions of feminism, might change society. Students would often raise questions and issue challenges about the social efficacy and political purpose of



Audience members experience *Yard* 1967 by Allan Kaprow at the Pasadena Art Museum. Photograph © 1967 Julian Wasser for *Life* magazine. Courtesy of the Allan Kaprow Estate, Hauser & Wirth, and The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (980063).

Kaprow's art. They wanted to change the world; Kaprow wanted to play with it."<sup>52</sup> One of those students was a young artist named Suzanne Lacy, and I will return to her soon.

Back on the East Coast, artists were beginning to experiment with models that crossed the line from intragroup participation to social co-operation. A major figure was Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Though she had not read Carol Hanisch's article in *Feminist Revolution*, Ukeles says, "We all walked around in the early '70s saying that the personal is political."<sup>53</sup> Ukeles went on to translate feminist dictum into action. In the late 1960s and early 1970s she began blurring her private and public life in so-called maintenance art works. In these performances Ukeles did what she did at home—cleaning and maintaining—in public spaces and galleries, performing the scrubbing of the sidewalk or the dusting of a museum. A year after the New York Radical Women's action at the Miss America Pageant (and the same year that "The Personal Is Political" was published), Ukeles wrote and distributed the "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!":

I do a hell of a lot of washing, cleaning, cooking, renewing, supporting, preserving, etc. Also (up to now separately) I "do" Art. Now, I will simply





Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Hartford Wash: Washing, Tracks, Maintenance: Outside*, 1973. Part of Maintenance Art Performance Series, 1973–74. Performance at Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art. I will live in the museum as I customarily do at home with my husband and my baby, for the duration of the exhibition. (Right? or if you don't want me around at night I would come in every day) and do all these things as public Art activities: I will sweep and wax the floors, dust everything, wash the walls (i.e. "floor paintings, dust works, soap-sculpture, wall-paintings") cook, invite people to eat, make agglomerations and dispositions of all functional refuse.<sup>54</sup>

In this text Ukeles set the stage for "service art": cleaning buildings and serving food are both strategies that have been carried out by others in subsequent decades. But most important, she made public her own "women's everyday experiences."

Ukeles continued to generalize her maintenance work and eventually formed a partnership with the City of New York Department of Sanitation, where she has served as artist-in-residence since 1977. Her interweaving of the domestic acts of maintenance that are mostly carried out by women and the public acts of sanitation that are almost exclusively executed by men, and her interweaving of the art world genre of performance with the world of urban systems, constituted an unconventional leap across borders of gender and class. For Ukeles, the women's liberation ideology of the political personal formed a foundation that would later be augmented by her interest in artistic traditions of collaboration that were beginning to bubble up.<sup>55</sup> Working with the sanitation workers in New York she has built exhibitions, parades, and a ballet for garbage barges on the Hudson River. She has gone on to collaborate with service workers in Europe and Asia. Her residency in the Sanitation Department is one of the best-known and most influential American examples of socially cooperative art.

#### International Influences: Debord, Beuys, and Freire

Any discussion of collaborative art in the American framework must acknowledge important intellectual and artistic contributions from abroad. There are several writers and artists from overseas whose influence is beyond question. I am not referring to Roland Barthes and others whose proclamation of the death of the author was much discussed at the time, but the ideas of Guy Debord, Joseph Beuys, and Paulo Freire that have resonated strongly with artists and intellectuals interested in notions of cooperation, dialogue, and participation.<sup>56</sup>

The French writer and filmmaker Guy Debord and the Situationist International movement he led loom large in the field. Debord's artistic, intellectual, and political project was a fight against passivity, against a society divided between actors and spectators. His writings differentiate between the "spectacle" that is grand and impersonal (e.g., the mass media) and the "situation" that is local, personal, and interactive. He strove to loosen the grasp of the debilitating stupor of the spectacular. In his essay "Towards a Situationist International," published in 1957, Debord wrote, "The situation is . . . made to be lived by its constructors. The role of the 'public,' if not passive at least as a walk-on, must ever diminish, while the share of those who can not be called actors, but in a new meaning of the term, 'livers,' will increase."<sup>57</sup> Ten years later, in *Society of the Spectacle*, he was even clearer about his desire to activate the spectator: "The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere because the spectacle is everywhere."<sup>58</sup>

Though he was active since the late 1950s, Americans often perceive Debord as a figure of the late 1960s. One year after the publication of *Society of the Spectacle* in France, he and the Situationists achieved mythic status when their ideas escaped the academy and spilled onto the streets of Paris in the events of May 1968. In the catalogue for the large-scale exhibition on the Situationists that made its way to Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art in 1990, the film theorist and avant-garde historian Peter Wollen writes that in the spring of 1968 "student groups were influenced by the SI [Situationist International], especially in Nanterre where the uprising took shape, and the Situationists themselves played an active role in the events, seeking to encourage and promote workers' councils (and a revolutionary line within them) without exercising powers of decision and execution or political control of any kind."<sup>59</sup> By this account the Situationists stayed true to their philosophy, and the workers and students were "livers," collective actors in an event that is honored in the memory of the Left across the world. In 1968 the Yippies' street theater created a memorable political spectacle in Chicago, but it is the Situationists' antispectacle



in Paris that seems to carry more weight in the imagination of American cooperative artists.

There is no clear narrative of how or when Situationist ideas came to the United States. The critic Peter Schjeldahl suggests that Gordon Matta-Clark was inspired by Debord and the Situationists when he was studying in Paris in 1968, and Matta-Clark's urban cutting has been compared with the Situationists "dérives."<sup>60</sup> There was a branch of the Situationist International in New York in the late 1960s, and Leandro Katz, an active New York Situationist, published a translated text by Debord in 1969. (*Society of the Spectacle* itself first appeared in English in 1970.) Katz told me that the artists he was close to at that time included Matta-Clark, Helio Oiticica, Suzanne Harris, Kathy Acker, Joseph Kosuth, and Charles Ludlam, so some Situationist ideas certainly made their way through the tight-knit New York art world.<sup>61</sup> And some of the interactive projects created by this cohort seem to be cooperative art. In 1971, along with Carol Goodden, Suzanne Harris, Tina Girouard, and Richard Lew, Matta-Clark opened a restaurant and meeting place called Food. According to Goodden, Matta-Clark saw Food as a sculpture. He designed everything in the space, cooked some of the food, made a film there, cut out a part of a wall (inspiring his cut sculptures), and "tried to sell the whole idea of Food to Castelli [Gallery] as an art piece."<sup>62</sup> So perhaps Matta-Clark is thought to be a translator of Situationist ideas into interactive art in New York in the early 1970s, though I have yet to see any specific documentary evidence of his connection to the group. In any case, mainstream knowledge of the Situationists came much later, with general interest in the late 1980s and especially after the exhibition in Boston in 1990. Thus at the moment when cooperative art was beginning to find greater institutional support in the 1990s, Situationist ideas were freshly circulating in the United States, especially their notion of the antispectacular "liver" and their involvement in politics on the streets of Paris.

The artist whose name came up most often in discussing influences with the participants in this book is Joseph Beuys, with his notion of "social sculpture." Beuys's post-Fluxus work was known in America from the 1960s, but it was not until the early 1970s that the art world really took notice. In fact, though Fluxus was centered in New York, it was Beuys who brought some of its important ideas back home. By the time he came to New York in 1974 for his first public lecture in the United States, he was already a huge draw, for fans and detractors alike. This was two years after he had been dismissed from his academic position in Düsseldorf for re-

fusing to impose entry requirements for his classes, and the year of his first performance in America, at the Rene Block Gallery. About seven hundred people showed up for his lecture in the New School for Social Research's auditorium, which held only 350; half the audience was stranded outside. The transcripts depict a raucous event in which the audience seemingly felt encouraged by Beuys's rhetoric of dialogue to interrupt, disagree, and generally create an unruly atmosphere that Beuys seems to have embraced. This was the first time an American audience heard his ideas first-hand, and here is how he described his mission:

I would like to declare why I feel that it's now necessary to establish a new kind of art, able to show the problems of the whole society, of every living being—and how this new discipline—which I call social sculpture—can realize the future of humankind. . . . Here my idea is to declare that art is the *only* possibility for evolution, the only possibility to change the situation in the world. But then you have to enlarge the idea of art to include the whole creativity. And if you do that, it follows logically that every living being is an artist—an artist in the sense that he can develop his own capacity.<sup>63</sup>

Beuys is talking not only about social art forms but also about an open society that acknowledges the creativity of all, or, as he had said in 1972, “A total work of art is only possible in the context of the whole society. Everyone will be a necessary co-creator of social architecture, and, so long as anyone cannot participate, the ideal of democracy has not been reached.”<sup>64</sup> In this text Beuys sounds a lot like the Port Huron Statement's call for participatory democracy, but the intellectual context was different. In an essay on Beuys's influence here, the critic Kim Levin argues that Americans saw his work in our context, not his own, and that we drew faulty parallels. “In our literal climate,” writes Levin, “we never suspected that he was a symbolist, an expressionist, a mystical romanticist.”<sup>65</sup> What seems to have stuck in the consciousness of many artists is the inclusive notion of “social sculpture,” or at least an American literalist version of it. The self-defined “social sculptor” Rick Lowe (chapter 5) often cites Beuys as a major source of inspiration, even if he is not sure that Beuys would be able to relate to *Project Row Houses*.<sup>66</sup>

In 1973 Beuys said, “Communication occurs in reciprocity: it must never be a one-way flow from the teacher to the taught. The teacher takes equally from the taught.”<sup>67</sup> He was inadvertently echoing both Saul Alinsky, with his notion of the community organizer as colearner, and the in-



In the New School auditorium in New York in 1974, Joseph Beuys presented a “public dialogue” in which audience members were invited on stage to ask questions. Beuys answered and wrote notations on a blackboard. Photograph © Peggy Jarrell Kaplan. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

fluent theorist of dialogue, the Brazilian Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published in 1968. When the book came out in English in 1970, it was embraced by many progressive educators in the United States and by artists as well. Freire’s “problem-posing” pedagogy is based on dialogue in which the teacher and the student become “jointly responsible for the process in which all grow.” In the 1980s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was ubiquitous in activist artists’ studios. And while Beuys could sound like Freire, Freire could sound like Debord; in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire writes, “In cultural invasion the actors . . . superimpose themselves on the people who are assigned the role of spectators, of objects. In cultural synthesis, the actors become integrated with the people, who are co-authors of the action that both perform on the world.”<sup>68</sup> Again we see the emphasis on the oppressed subject (the student, in this case) becoming an actor and coauthor. As opposed to Beuys, there was no mistaking Freire’s politics; he had very clear leftist political goals, which he articulated as a dissenter under right-wing dictatorial rule.

Freire’s theories were quickly translated into artistic form by his compatriot Augusto Boal, who published *Theatre of the Oppressed* in 1973. Like



Freire, Boal was interested in the activated, politicized participant, and he created a wide range of theater works to be performed by professional or nonprofessional actors and “spect-actors,” the inadvertent participants in his public theater.<sup>69</sup> Both Freire and Boal were imprisoned in Brazil under military rule for their political activities and spent time in exile—Freire in Chile and the United States, Boal in Argentina and France. This exile, though painful, helped spread their ideas internationally.

The theorists discussed here would diverge on many points. However, when Debord envisioned situations lived by their constructors, when Beuys talked about the co-creation of social architecture, and when Freire spoke of people who are coauthors of the action they perform on the world, they promoted ideas that would influence American artists’ emergent practice of socially cooperative art. Among others, these writers helped plant the seed of the activated audience that was translated by some artists into active experiments in group creativity. But before returning to the artistic developments over the last quarter of the twentieth century, we must understand how these practices emerged in a dramatically altered political environment.

#### Political Shift to the Right in the 1970s and 1980s

If the groundwork had been laid for socially cooperative art through participatory strains in political action, early experiments by a handful of pioneering artists, and intellectual influences from abroad, the full-blown emergence of the genre took place in a transformed political and social arena. In the late 1960s and early 1970s Kaprow, Ukeles, Matta-Clark, and other artists were working and living in an America in the late stages of a progressive period that had begun during the New Deal. Yes, America was still involved in the Vietnam War; yes, grave inequities remained a generation into the civil rights movement; but there was a sense that what Alinksy had called the “displacement and disorganization of the status quo” through mass movements and cooperative action was possible, if not inevitable. This was much less the case in the last decades of the century, as America swung to the right.

In the 1970s and 1980s a new balance of power was emerging in America. In his book *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (2005), the Princeton history professor Kevin Kruse takes a look at how a new social geography realigned politics. He points out that by population, the suburbs were only a fourth of the country in 1950, a third in 1960, and fully half in 1993. According to Kruse, one of the main motivations for

flight from city centers was racism. The presidential election of 1968 was the first in which votes from the suburbs outnumbered those from either rural or urban areas. The Republican Party understood and capitalized on this new demography, and Richard Nixon prevailed. A Democrat was president thirty-two of the forty-four years that preceded Nixon's election; in the forty-four years since, Democrats have occupied the White House for only sixteen. During the 1970s the suburbs cut ties with the cities and created a new national power base "to ensure that the isolation they now enjoyed in the suburbs would never be disturbed." Kruse continues: "Free to pursue a politics that accepted as its normative values individualistic interpretation of 'freedom of association,' a fervent faith in free enterprise, and a fierce hostility to the federal government, a new suburban conservatism took the now familiar themes of isolation, individualism, and privatization to unprecedented levels. . . . At the dawn of the 21st century, America found itself dominated by suburbs and those suburbs, in turn, dominated by the politics of white flight and suburban secession."<sup>70</sup> What is conveniently described as a Red State–Blue State political divide in America is in fact more of a divide between the liberal cities and the conservative suburbs and exurbs. As mentioned earlier, the suburbs had been cast as inhospitable to interaction (Mumford) or as evolving hand-in-hand with an oppressive gender role for women (Friedan and Hayden), but the American apotheosis of domestic privacy, free enterprise, and home ownership continued to grow across the political spectrum. Dolores Hayden points out that "economic empowerment" for working women during this period often meant no more than home ownership.<sup>71</sup>

It is common knowledge that politics in the United States has become increasingly polarized over the past thirty years. In a *New York Times* column in 2002 titled "Things Pull Apart," the Princeton professor and Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman argues that this polarization echoes the growth of economic disparity between the rich and the middle class, starting roughly with the "conservative revolution" that brought Ronald Reagan to the White House. Krugman points out that after adjusting for inflation, middle-income Americans saw their income rise 9 percent between 1979 and 1997, while the income of families in the top 1 percent of the spectrum rose 140 percent. During that time, Krugman observes, American conservatives swung far to the right, while moderates remained constant in their economic policy. There was a sense among progressives that the division of wealth fueled by reduced taxation of high-income Americans was becoming disturbingly one-sided, but the

response was generally muted. Krugman says that we probably need look no further for an explanation for this passivity than “campaign finance, lobbying, and the general power of money to shape political debate” in the United States.<sup>72</sup>

In this conservative context art became a convenient target for ridicule. Grants awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts were questioned as profane or obscene. The museum education theorist Philip Yenawine writes, “Without question, the culture wars of the late 1980s and ’90s changed the context in which the art world operates, particularly in its relationship to government. A vocal, organized, and motivated body politic, rooted in fundamentalist religious beliefs, called art from the margins of society, where it thrived, to center stage of American culture, where it appeared bizarre and even ludicrous.”<sup>73</sup> In many cases the culture wars unfolded under the cloud of the AIDS epidemic that was ravaging communities across America. The formula for division and misunderstanding was almost perfect, pitting the increasingly empowered conservative sectors of society against artists, gays, and people of color. As opposed to the 1960s and early 1970s, when political action (even political street theater) was fairly well separated from participatory art practices, there was more cross-over in the 1980s. As the University of Rochester art historian Douglas Crimp points out in his book *AIDS Demo Graphics* (1990), the urgency of the crisis led to collective efforts, centering around the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). The visual imagery of AIDS activism was generally created by collectives like Gran Fury, DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television), Little Elvis, Testing the Limits, and LAPIT (Lesbian Activists Producing Interesting Television). Crimp situates this sort of activism in direct opposition to the hermeticism of critical postmodernism, which, he argues, never transcended an art world audience. Throughout *AIDS Demo Graphics* one gets a sense of the enraged and self-critical mind-set of ACT UP and its admittedly propagandistic motivation. Each poster, video, and act of street theater was analyzed in terms of instrumental results: What did the press say? Will it help open the door to greater distribution of health care resources? Will it destigmatize AIDS? For artists who came of age in this period, the model of art as collective political activism in the face of an immediate life-or-death threat was deeply imprinted.

Meanwhile new populations were arriving in American cities from around the world even as the white middle-class outflows continued. In 1965 President Lyndon Johnson had signed into law the Immigration and

Consciously framing events for media consumption, ACT UP brought AIDS into the spotlight. On the lower right an ACT UP member is being interviewed as a compatriot is hauled away by the police, 1987. Photograph courtesy of ACT UP New York Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.



Nationality Act. When the bill was passed, the percentage of immigrants in the United States was at a historic low, and the number of people to be admitted under the reunification provisions seemed relatively modest. But the legislators underestimated the implications of the law, and within a decade American cities were seeing the results. Between 1931 and 1965 only about 5 million immigrants entered the United States (147,000 per year), but between 1970 and 2000, as the effects of the new law kicked in, about 28 million arrived (933,000 per year).<sup>74</sup> The northern industrial cities that had been the destinations of the great African American migration north, now abandoned by the white middle class with suburbanization, were being refilled by new immigrants from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America, groups that had been virtually excluded under the old immigration quotas.<sup>75</sup> New Chinatowns were born along with Latino and Caribbean neighborhoods, each with its own habits of sociability. Across the country, but particularly in the Southwest, a massive flow of immigrants from south of the border began — with and without documents. To some, the new waves of immigration were undermining the very notion of what it means to be American. To others, these immigrants brought re-



newed vibrancy to cities, filling in the neighborhoods that the European Americans had fled.

One cheerleader for these transformations is the Los Angeles-based cultural critic Mike Davis. “Immigrant homeowners are indeed anonymous heroes,” writes Davis in his book *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* (2000). “While there is much abstract talk in planning and architectural schools about the need to ‘reurbanize’ American cities, there is little recognition that Latino and Asian immigrants are already doing it on an epic scale.” And new populations bring culture with them, a set of sociospatial habits. Davis writes, “Across the vast Pan-American range of cultural nuance, the social reproduction of *latinidad*, however defined, presupposes a rich proliferation of public space. . . . Latin American immigrants and their children, perhaps more than any other element of the population, exult in playgrounds, parks, squares, libraries, and other endangered species of U.S. public space, and thus form one of the most important constituencies of the preservation of our urban commons.”<sup>76</sup> Davis points to the reinvention of American cities as a positive phenomenon, counteracting mainstream America’s devaluation of the commons, focusing specifically on the relational, interactive use of public space. Interestingly, at the turn of the millennium the same flows that have been transforming cities are beginning to break the monocultural definition of the suburbs. According to the Brookings Institution, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, “for the first time, a majority of all racial/ethnic groups in large metro areas live in the suburbs. Deep divides by race and ethnicity still separate cities and suburbs in metro areas like Detroit, but others like Los Angeles show much greater convergence between jurisdictions.”<sup>77</sup> And as the suburbs are becoming more diverse, it is becoming more difficult to peg the politics of participation; in the late 1980s and especially in the early 1990s communitarian thought took on a new public face as a mainstream, moderate political stance.

By the late 1990s the UC Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah seems to have domesticated the participatory ideology of Tom Hayden when he writes, “Participation [is] both a right and a duty. Communities become positive goods only when they provide the opportunity and support to participate in them.” Instead of seeking a radical reorganization of American society, the communitarian periodical *Responsive Community* takes up unthreatening questions like how best to design a park for community participation, how to strengthen family bonds, and how to devise requirements for school-based community service. Yes, articles also appear in

that journal on how to create an informed electorate, but certainly not on how to bring down the capitalist state.<sup>78</sup> The communitarians found allies along the way in the anti-ironist Duke law professor Jedediah Purdy, as well as the “social capital” theorist and Harvard politics professor Robert Putnam.<sup>79</sup>

Meanwhile participation as an essential aspect of democracy was being espoused in some mainstream planning circles as well, much in the spirit of Arnstein’s “Ladder of Citizen Participation” and Alinsky’s community organizing. For example, John Forester, a planning professor at Cornell University, outlines a philosophy of interactive, socially cooperative planning in his book *The Deliberative Practitioner* (1999). In his case studies one gets a sense of how a process of active dialogue transforms an understanding of a city and its inhabitants. Forester argues for the transformative effect of dialogue:

Inspired by liberal models of voice and empowerment, many analyses unwittingly reduce empowerment to “being heard” and learning to considering seriously local as well as expert knowledge. Participation is thus reduced to speaking, and learning is reduced to knowing—and the transformations of done-to into doers, spectators and victims into activists, fragmented groups into renewed bodies, old resignation into new beginnings are lost from our view. . . . The transformations at stake are those not only of knowledge of class structure, but of people more or less able to act practically together to better their lives, people we might call citizens.<sup>80</sup>

In Forester’s approach, with its strong rhetoric of inclusion, spectators become activists. Like Freire, Forester works with a “dialogic and argumentative process.” Here again, becoming active is linked to acting together.

Finally, before we return to cooperative art, it is important to take note of the technological tools for cooperation that emerged at the turn of the millennium. In an essay titled “Technologies of Cooperation” (2007), the Internet theorist Howard Rheingold argues that electronic communication opens a door to larger-scale social cooperation than we have seen in any period of our development as a species. This communication technology can lubricate the operation of traditional cooperative ventures or engage with new sorts of social organization that will develop with the new tools. Rheingold’s Internet optimism may be proving correct—for example, in the large-scale, relatively leaderless, cooperative political movements that have challenged autocratic leaders in Tunisia and Egypt, fueled by social media from Facebook to Twitter. Rheingold sees the growth of

the “cooperation commons” in a wide range of new practices, from open-source software to social mobile computing and knowledge collectives.<sup>81</sup> While Robert Putnam blamed screen time (including both computer and television use) for a decline in interpersonal connection, it is far too soon to definitively evaluate the social implications of new social media. This set of issues is discussed in chapter 11.

### Cooperative Art since the 1980s

If Mierle Laderman Ukeles was New York’s leading cooperative artist of the 1970s, Tim Rollins + Kids of Survival (KOS) were the best known of the 1980s. Rollins was a member of Group Material, a visual arts collective that was active beginning in the early 1980s. Their work generally consisted of organizing group exhibitions and street art on sociopolitical topics. Some of these projects could be considered curating as art, with the overall artwork emerging from the group decision making and creative contributions of numerous artists. However, it was the other side of Rollins’s practice that emerged as a model for socially cooperative artists. He was teaching in the New York City public school system at the time, and he began working with a group of young people from special education classes in the South Bronx. The collaboration began at Intermediate School 52 and expanded into an independent out-of-school program called the Art and Knowledge Workshop. Typically the group would read a book together, interpret and distill it, and then literally take it apart, gluing its pages to a canvas and making a painting on them. In time these paintings began to enter major museum collections and fetched high prices at commercial galleries. The proceeds from these sales funded the workshop and were shared among the participants. Their work was warmly embraced in activist and mainstream art circles alike. In January 1987 Jean Fisher wrote a glowing review in *Artforum*: “Tim Rollins + Kids of Survival (K.O.S.) radically challenge purist and elitist notions. Their collaborative art interprets culture through young people who are generally dismissed as having virtually nothing to contribute to it. . . . Political without being propagandist, the work has a breadth that extends beyond its subtle commentaries on white/nonwhite cultural relations, and seeks to dismantle the representations that support dominant myths.”<sup>82</sup> Rollins was seen as a Freire-inspired pioneer, and the Kids of Survival became art world fixtures.<sup>83</sup>

However, the accolades were not universal. There were some rumblings of discontent from the CUNY cultural critic Michele Wallace about the mostly white authors that the collaborative tended to focus on in a cata-

A year after their founding, Tim Rollins + KOS shot this photograph of themselves at their studio in the Longwood Community Center in the South Bronx. Back row: George Garces, Nelson Montes, Nelson Ricardo Savinon, and Arcelis Batista. Front row: Tim Rollins, Chris Hernandez, Annette Rosado, and Richard Cruz. 1985. Photograph courtesy of Tim Rollins.



logue for their show at Dia Art Center in 1989.<sup>84</sup> However, the general tenor of the Dia publication and even much of Wallace's essay was laudatory; this was an exciting new sort of social collaboration in painting that used an experimental process to produce highly credible aesthetic results. Two years later a much more severe critique appeared in *New York Magazine* that depicted Rollins as domineering. While the project had produced compelling paintings and was motivated by the best intentions early on, wrote Mark Lasswell, it had degenerated when Rollins became increasingly disinterested in collaborative process as he pursued the dream of opening a school to be called the South Bronx Academy of Art.<sup>85</sup> While many people allowed for the sensationalism of a *New York Magazine* investigative report, and though the bitter accounts of former (sometimes expelled) members were never substantiated,<sup>86</sup> the article did some damage. Perhaps if the social benefit for the Kids of Survival was less than advertised, the art product was less worthy of purchase or display. In this view Rollins, the idealistic cofounder of Group Material, the innovator in dialogical education, was successful in direct proportion to the social



progress of his collaborators. Fairly or unfairly, Rollins + KOS faded somewhat from view. In 2011 Rollins + KOS seemed to be reinvigorated and accepting new members on the heels of their first full-scale traveling retrospective.

If Rollins + KOS were the familiar face of artistic social cooperation on the East Coast, Suzanne Lacy took much the same role on the West Coast in the 1980s. But while Rollins had only a peripheral conceptual connection to the 1970s generation, Lacy was a direct disciple; she had been a student of Allan Kaprow and Judy Chicago and merged their practices into her own brand of feminist performance. When Jeff Kelley said that some students at CalArts interrogated the “social efficacy and political purpose” of Professor Kaprow’s happenings, he was certainly speaking of artists like Lacy. She experimented with feminist body art in the 1970s, making a turn toward cooperative practice late in the decade, though never losing sight of Kaprow as a mentor; she dedicated her collected writings to him in 2010.<sup>87</sup>

Unlike that of Rollins + KOS, Lacy’s work unfolded far from the commercial gallery scene. By the mid-1980s she was creating large-scale cooperative performances. In 1984, for example, she orchestrated *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*, in which 154 women over the age of sixty-five, dressed in white, sat at tables for four on the beach in La Jolla, California, speaking of “death, the body as an aging shell, prettiness, nursing homes, leaving a mark on life, feminism, traditional roles of women, sex, face-lifts, the kind of strength that comes with age, personal tragedies, the need to identify with younger people, and the myth that only the aged die.”<sup>88</sup> Audience members observed from a boardwalk nearby, listening to prerecorded tapes, and then were admitted to wander among the tables as the women continued their discussions. Clearly the structure of the all-women discussion of personal issues echoes women’s liberation consciousness-raising, restaged as a public performance. For the New York Radical Women, a consciousness-raising session led to the Miss America action; in *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*, the consciousness-raising session itself became a performance. Lacy has used similar communicative structures for a number of other works, often centering on issues of the female subject but also exploring issues of race and class—while always remaining faithful to the feminist notion of making the personal political.

Lacy was not working in a vacuum, of course, and other important artists, like Jerri Allyn, a product of the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles, were experimenting with interactive



Women converse around tables on the beach as onlookers view from above at the beginning of Suzanne Lacy's *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*, 1984, La Jolla, California. Photograph by Barbara Smith.

feminist performance in the late 1970s. But Lacy became a leader of the emerging move toward experimental, activist public art. And through her art, teaching, and writing, she was a major figure for many artists, particularly those educated on the West Coast. One younger-generation artist who calls Lacy his mentor is Lee Mingwei, the subject of the second section of chapter 10.<sup>89</sup> It should come as no surprise that, given the economic structure of the art world, a noncommercial artist like Lacy (or her mentor Kaprow) made a living for the most part by teaching. In this book Daniel Martinez, Harrell Fletcher, Pedro Lasch, and Teddy Cruz are full-time professors, and many others, like Wendy Ewald and Tania Bruguera, have taught extensively. This concentration of participatory artists in the academy has helped spread the practice, even as MFA programs have gained power in the past three decades.

By the 1990s the public art movement in the United States was in full bloom. Across the country public art programs were sprouting up in city governments under the banner of Percent for Art (governmental programs that require a percentage of the construction budget of new buildings to be used for public art). For the most part these programs did not commission socially cooperative art, as the requirement to build perma-

nent works was often incompatible with process-oriented work. However, these programs brought thousands of artists out of the studio and into contact with neighborhoods and public sites far removed from the museum and gallery system. Simultaneously an array of opportunities for temporary projects appeared—in New York, for example, in the form of sponsoring and commissioning organizations like Creative Time and the Public Art Fund. On the model of these temporary interventions, there was sufficient activity in socially based work to merit some large-scale initiatives.

In the early 1990s Mary Jane Jacob organized two urban art events, each of which was accompanied by a significant publication. In May 1991 an exhibition opened across the city of Charleston, South Carolina, called *Places with a Past*, which included a series of site-specific installations by a range of artists, among them David Hammons, Ann Hamilton, and Lorna Simpson. The exhibition was widely covered in the press, and the reaction was mixed. Some hailed the originality of the work and saw new developments in site-specific art, while others, most notably the UCLA art historian Miwon Kwon, criticized the project as complicit with the development objectives of the city. In her book *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Kwon points to the sometimes hidden institutional control of the projects and the conscious or inadvertent complicity of these institutions in uneven urban development practices. Most notably, perhaps, there was what Patricia Phillips, an art historian at the Rhode Island School of Design, calls a growing “sense of artists and their works being parachuted into fashioned, artificial opportunities.”<sup>90</sup> Whatever the validity of that criticism, it would be hard to argue that Jacob herself parachuted into Charleston or retreated quickly, as she continued to work on a series of art projects in the city for another decade.

In any case it was not this criticism that got Jacob thinking about new directions. Leaving *Places with a Past*, she was intrigued by the possibilities suggested in David Hammons’s project, which was unusually interactive and inclusive. I asked Hammons how he came to create a cooperative artwork in Charleston, something he did not do before and has not done since. He answered:

How can you *not* when you’re in someone else’s community? It’s so arrogant not to have any kind of interaction. It’s just polite, and it’s so easy. They’ll protect you. They’re the ones who are going to keep you safe or just save you verbally, saying, “I like this piece in my community.” Others

might say, “Well, you like it because you got paid working on it.” But still it’s better than just jumping in there and putting something down and leaving.

When I started working on this lot, a guy named Albert Alston [a local builder] came up to me saying, “What you doing in the neighborhood?” I told him, and I ended up *giving* him the whole project. He did the whole thing. I just sat back and watched. Plus I gave him all the money and that was the real deal—to give them the budget and let them distribute it among themselves in the community. I automatically cleared myself of any wrongdoing. The situation could have been embarrassing. You know, northerners coming down South to take on this town.

There was a kid, Larry Jackson, an artist in the neighborhood. He had made paintings of houses from all over the neighborhood. I said, “Make yourself a gallery.” So he made a gallery and put his paintings in. Young kid. He told me, “Man, this is a dream come true; I can’t believe it. Are you really going to let me do this?” I said, “Sure, let’s go down to the office, and I’ll give you a check.” I got him a check for \$500 for being on the team. I was giving money out left and right, employing people from the neighborhood. Again, I felt that was as important as the art itself.

I was saying, “Help me, I’m drowning. I’m out here in no man’s land and I don’t know what to do.” So I sent out an SOS. They said, “We’ll help you out.”<sup>91</sup>

The final product was a slim house that looked a lot like a Hammons sculpture, immaculately constructed though abject in its materials. Hammons made the very best of a complex situation by embracing the possibilities of cooperative process. This embrace was on Jacob’s mind as she pondered her next venture.<sup>92</sup>

Jacob moved on to a second large-scale urban project two years later, in 1993, called *Culture in Action*, organized with Sculpture Chicago, that penetrated the city more deeply and consisted of cooperative art to a much greater extent than *Places with a Past*. While the structure of the projects in Charleston was generally fairly conventional, *Culture in Action* included not just artists but their collaborators, sharing authorship: Suzanne Lacy and a Coalition of Chicago Women; Sperandio and Grennan with the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers’ International Union. One of the projects was a pair of elaborate cooperative endeavors initiated by Daniel Martinez (discussed at length in chapter 2). *Culture in Action*, the wide publicity it received, and the publication that accompanied it cre-



ated a watershed moment in American socially cooperative art. This was a large-scale, big-budget project in a major city organized by a well-known former museum curator, and the accompanying book featured a significant contribution from the former *New York Times* critic Michael Brenson.<sup>93</sup> It was a watershed not only in the art created and the press it generated but also in the increased level of critical attention and insight. Around this time book-length studies and anthologies began to emerge that were highly influential. While the earlier artists invented the field, the younger generation had the opportunity to read volumes that began to lay out the parameters of the practice and define the vocabulary.

Bay Press, the publisher of the book accompanying *Culture in Action*, released two other books in 1995: *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, edited by the critic Nina Felshin, and *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, edited by Suzanne Lacy. While neither book was exclusively about socially cooperative art, both included extensive coverage of artists like Ukeles, Lacy herself, and Peggy Diggs. In her introduction to *But Is It Art?* Felshin dwells on the interactive and dialogical nature of activist art. She acknowledges the socio-aesthetic sources in the activism of the 1960s but also argues that the new activist art has roots in the postobject, immaterial, process-oriented practices of Conceptual art. In fact she sees the new activist art as fulfilling the promises of Conceptual art, which never thoroughly escaped the power structures of the art institutions.<sup>94</sup> The book includes chapters on the emerging canon of artists (Ukeles, Lacy, Helen and Newton Harrison, and Group Material) but also, as the title might suggest, is particularly useful in tracking public advocacy projects that may or may not be considered art, like Gran Fury's AIDS graphics and the Guerrilla Girls' poster campaigns. On the other hand, *Mapping the Terrain* places socially collaborative practice in a public art context, examining, for example, the genesis of guidelines in the NEA's Art in Public Places program. Like Felshin, Lacy sees roots for this art in American political action and the feminist movements.<sup>95</sup> These books point to the emergence of cooperative art into the critical light of day in the 1990s. It became a viable practice for artists and a topic worthy of serious criticism in the United States. Socially cooperative art was more or less on the map.

During this period other artists began to open doors to participatory practice even if they were not consistently working in this mode. For example, Krzysztof Wodiczko worked collaboratively with immigrants on *Alien Staff*, creating a multimedia walking staff as a mechanism for inter-



Adul So and Hamed Sow operating *Alien Staff (Xenobacul)* by Krzysztof Wodiczko in Stockholm, 1992. A video of the operator telling his own immigration story is playing on a small monitor on the front of the staff. Photograph © Krzysztof Wodiczko. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

action that included their videotaped statements about immigration. Wodiczko was supported by critics like Rosalyn Deutsche, who had been skeptical of emerging public art practices, and his politically charged work seemed to convince more theory-driven critics of the potential of cooperative art. Likewise Mel Chin, a conceptual artist whose work traverses media like few others, created several cooperative art projects, including *In the Name of the Place*, for which he enlisted scores of graduate students to work with him making set pieces for the television series *Melrose Place*. It was a rare venture by a cooperative artist into the sphere of popular culture.

Back in the galleries, the New York-based artist Rirkrit Tiravanija was beginning to experiment with food-based performances. In an economical and rather anticommercial gesture, Tiravanija created a series of installations that centered on serving Thai food to gallery-goers, creating a site for social interaction rather than an art object. This social performance became his signature piece, appearing in shows in the United States and abroad. By 1996 he had participated in the watershed show *Traffic*, organized by Nicolas Bourriaud, the French curator and critic. Bourriaud's book *Relational Aesthetics*, which developed themes that he had first proposed in the *Traffic* catalogue, was published in 1998, though it was not translated and published in English until 2002. In the book Bourriaud's



Nine instances in which Mel Chin and the GALA Committee placed artworks in scenes on the television show *Melrose Place*. The project, *In the Name of the Place*, was a collaboration between Chin, MFA students in Georgia and Los Angeles (hence GALA Committee), assorted other artists, and the set designers and script writers of the television show. The project was originally commissioned as part of the exhibition *Uncommon Sense* at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997. Photograph courtesy of the GALA Committee.

opposition of the words *relational* and *private* sets the stage for a discussion of a new sort of work based on a framework of interaction rather than isolation:

The possibility of a *relational* art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space) points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural, and political goals introduced by modern art. . . . What is collapsing before our very eyes is nothing other than the falsely aristocratic conception of the arrangement of works of art, associated with the feeling of territorial acquisition. In other words, it is no longer possible to regard the contemporary work as a space to be walked through. . . . It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like the opening of an unlimited discussion.<sup>96</sup>



Audience members gather for a collective meal in Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled 1992 (Free)* (1992–) at David Zwirner Gallery in New York City, 2007. Photograph courtesy of the artist, Gavin Brown's enterprise, and David Zwirner.

In his notion that works of art can be “lived through,” Bourriaud echoes Debord’s vocabulary—that “situations” can make people into “livers.” Bourriaud goes on to say that while art has “always been relational in varying degrees,” there is now a fundamental change: “Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise.” Bourriaud’s interest in art that is “focused upon the sphere of inter-human relations” has led him to works that fit into the category of the encounter (a word he employs to describe the work) more than social cooperation.<sup>97</sup> The artists he champions in his criticism and curatorial work tend toward the scripted interactive moment in the gallery, but his vocabulary has been broadly adopted within the field.

In *Relational Aesthetics* Bourriaud notes that some critics claim that the restricted context of the gallery contradicts “the desire of sociability underpinning [the relational work’s] meaning.” He goes on to say, “They are also reproached for denying social conflict and dispute, differences and divergences, and the impossibility of communicating within an alienated space.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed the Princeton art historian Hal Foster writes in a critique of Bourriaud that the “possibilities of ‘relational aesthetics’ seem



clear enough, but there are problems, too. Sometimes politics are ascribed to art on the basis of a shaky analogy between an open work and an inclusive society as if a desultory form might evoke a democratic community, or a non-hierarchical installation predict an egalitarian world.”<sup>99</sup> Claire Bishop writes that there may be a post-Bourriaud move toward more socially engaged collaboration: “Perhaps addressing the sense of unrealized political potential in the work that Bourriaud describes, a subsequent generation of artists have begun to engage more directly with specific social constituencies.”<sup>100</sup> For some artists and critics, it is Bourriaud’s ground-breaking vocabulary and philosophical observations, rather than his specific art criticism and curatorial work, that resonate, and many may agree with Foster’s and Bishop’s relational skepticism. Indeed there does seem to have been a swing toward more socially oriented art in recent years, but the older generation of American socially cooperative, activist artists got started decades before Bourriaud wrote *Relational Aesthetics*, and the younger generation often found motivation elsewhere.

In 2004 Grant Kester published *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, a book-length theoretical explication of and argument for the value of dialogue-based art. He calls for a shift of focus; if we are looking for art that challenges “fixed categorical systems and instrumentalizing modes of thought,” then, with performative and collaborative art, we can look beyond the art object itself to the “open-ended and liberatory possibility” in the “process of communication that the artwork catalyzes.” Kester argues that this sort of analysis requires two changes in perspective:

First, we need a more nuanced account of communicative experience: one capable of differentiating between an abstract, objectifying mode of discourse that is insensitive to the specific identities of speaking subjects (the kind targeted by figures such as Lyotard) and a dialogical exchange based on reciprocal openness. This distinction, between what Jürgen Habermas terms “instrumental” and “communicative” rationality, is typically collapsed in modern and postmodern theory. The second important shift requires that we understand the work of art as a process of communicative exchange rather than a physical object.<sup>101</sup>

Of course, the possibility (or desirability) of communication based on dialogical exchange and reciprocal openness divides critics. And it is an acceptance of the possibility of this sort of communicative exchange that opens the door to the sympathetic reception of cooperative art. Crit-

ics who champion activist, cooperative art practices look to theorists like Habermas and Freire as well as to the dialogical practices of activist political organizations for their theoretical horizons. On the other hand, writers like Kwon, Deutsche, and Bishop have attacked the political theoretical legitimacy of this position, often in the name of European postmodern writers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière, and Jean-François Lyotard.

By 2005, with the publication of *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*, edited by the artist Ted Purves, the art of gift exchange and reciprocity was on the table. Throughout the book a number of critics and artists debate the notion of generosity, with particular interest in the idea of two-way or cyclical exchange. Mary Jane Jacob, for example, proposes a notion of “reciprocal generosity” to create a mutual relationship, in contrast to the “deficiency model” that sees audiences as empty vessels needing enrichment. Jeanne van Heeswijk, on the other hand, critiques the “problematic nature of generosity” and its implications of hierarchy—the empowered “giver” being above the recipient. At the end of *What We Want Is Free* there is a short essay by the artist and critic Francis McIlveen that attempts to put exchange-based art in a historical context. While McIlveen makes a number of excellent observations about the usurpation of the commons and the etymology of *hospitality*, he ends up making the same sort of grand claims for interactive art that got Bourriaud in trouble with Hal Foster and Claire Bishop.<sup>102</sup>

In a closely related development, collectives have become a new art trend: from the Critical Art Ensemble to Flux Factory, from the Center for Urban Pedagogy to the Center for Land Use Interpretation. A good summary of this new phenomenon is *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945* (2007), edited by the artist Gregory Sholette and the UC Davis art historian Blake Stimson. While not all of these collectives create socially collaborative art, they occupy cooperative territory that Sholette and Stimson describe as “neither picturing social form nor doing battle in the realm of representation, but instead engaging with social life as production, engaging with social life as the medium of expression.”<sup>103</sup> If cooperative activity is an element of the spirit of our time, collectives are as much a part of it as socially cooperative art.

By 2008 scores of exhibitions, projects, and books were under way that addressed participation, but there was still no consensus on exactly what to call the art projects or how to narrate their genealogy. In the fall of 2008 the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art mounted *The Art of Participation 1950 to Now*, which emphasized the influence of performance

art (particularly Fluxus) and the sociotechnological possibilities of the Internet. On view almost simultaneously at the Guggenheim Museum in New York was *theanyspacewhatever*, a collaboratively produced show of relational art. The Guggenheim's publication includes Bourriaud's formulation of the notion of relational aesthetics in an essay called "The Relational Moment," reprinted from the catalogue of *Traffic*, the 1996 exhibition, and *theanyspacewhatever* included all of the same artists as *Traffic*. These artists are the core relational cohort, and they have shown together on a number of occasions as a loose collaboration. Nancy Spector, who organized *theanyspacewhatever*, situates this relational art as a quintessentially 1990s aesthetic, created in the "post-representational" period, under the theoretical sway of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of multiplicity and difference.<sup>104</sup> Surprisingly, then, from the East Coast to the West, from museums to public spaces, there was a movement toward mainstream interest in cooperative art. The relatively rapid rise in 2009–10 of Theaster Gates as an important artist in the emerging field of social practice, then, was not so surprising. He has an appealing set of talents and training from urban planning to ceramics, merging the resonant materials of inner city life (à la David Hammons) with the social intent and pragmatic approach to problem solving of Rick Lowe. His practice is rooted in the local, with an intense long-term investment in the Dorchester Project in Chicago. But he has reached out internationally at the same time. Gates sprung onto the mainstream art scene much quicker than his predecessors did, presenting at museums, art fairs, biennials, and Documenta. While Gates's art veers in and out of the socially cooperative mode that is the subject of this book, the rapid ascension of an artist with his dedication to direct action and interactive approach is a symptom of an art establishment that is at least for the time being ready to open its eyes to new forms of engagement.

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I am claiming that socially cooperative art in the United States was born from a confluence of local political sensibilities and international artistic influences. The exemplary counterinstitutions of the 1960s created models of participatory action from community organizing to progressive planning, communes, and consciousness-raising groups that sometimes morphed into performances at the New York Stock Exchange and the Atlantic City boardwalk. Simultaneously, through the 1970s artists were experimenting with social forms: happenings, sanitation ballets, feminist group performances. When international writings brought the

notions of lived situations, social sculpture, and dialogical learning to our shores, their vocabulary was readily absorbed into American practice. In the 1980s cooperative practice gained a strong foothold in more public venues, in the shadow of an increasingly conservative nation, and once again the international vocabulary, this time of relational art, merged with local traditions of artistic political action. Finally, cooperative art made it into mainstream museums and a string of influential books in the first decade of the twenty-first century even as a split began to emerge more visibly between activist and relational strains of participatory art.

One way or another the artists discussed in the following chapters have been working with artistic social cooperation. This core cooperative process infuses all the projects, but what they made differs widely. In some cases they made objects; in others, social environments. These ventures might take the form of a classroom or educational institution (Wendy Ewald, Tania Bruguera, Brett Cook, Mark Dion), a party or parade (Pedro Lasch, Daniel Martinez), a cooperatively created film (Harrell Fletcher, Evan Roth), an intercommunity meeting place (Mierle Ukeles), a research project (Ernesto Pujol), or an urban redevelopment project (Rick Lowe). But for all these projects, the art is a process of cooperative action—even as conflict and argumentation are sometimes important constituent elements. In the conclusion I make my own argument for the value of an American pragmatist reading of the antispectatorial art of social cooperation. But first I would like to pause for several hundred pages and share the podium with an interdisciplinary group of artists and writers. How did they cooperate? What did they make?



## Features

THE SOCIAL TURN: COLLABORATION  
AND ITS DISCONTENTS CLAIRE BISHOP

Phil Collins, *they shoot horses*, 2004, stills from a two-channel digital video, 7 hours.

**All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art. —Dan Graham**

**SUPERFLEX'S INTERNET TV STATION** for elderly residents of a Liverpool housing project (*Tenantspin*, 1999); Annika Eriksson's inviting groups and individuals to communicate their ideas and skills at the Frieze Art Fair (*Do you want an audience?* 2003); Jeremy Deller's *Social Parade* for more than twenty social organizations in San Sebastián (2004); Lincoln Tobier's training local residents in Aubervilliers, northeast Paris, to produce half-hour radio programs (*Radio Ld'A*, 2002); Atelier Van Lieshout's *A-Portable* floating abortion clinic (2001); Jeanne van Heeswijk's project to turn a condemned shopping mall into a cultural center for the residents of Vlaardingen, Rotterdam (*De Strip*, 2001–2004); Lucy Orta's workshops in Johannesburg (and elsewhere) to teach unemployed people new fashion skills and discuss collective solidarity (*Nexus Architecture*, 1995–); Temporary Services' improvised neighborhood environment in an empty lot in Echo Park, Los Angeles (*Construction Site*, 2005); Pawel Althamer's sending a group of "difficult" teenagers from Warsaw's working-class Bródno district (including his two sons) to hang out at his retrospective in Maastricht (*Bad Kids*, 2004); Jens Haaning's producing a calendar that features black-and-white photographic portraits of refugees in Finland awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications (*The Refugee Calendar*, 2002).

This catalogue of projects is just a sample of the recent surge of artistic interest in collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement with specific social constituencies. Although these practices have had, for the most part, a relatively weak profile in the commercial art world—collective projects are more difficult to market than works by individual artists, and they're also less likely to be "works" than social events, publications, workshops, or performances—they nevertheless occupy an increasingly conspicuous presence in the public sector. The unprecedented expansion of the biennial is one factor that has certainly contributed to this shift (thirty-three new biennials have been established in the past ten years alone, the majority in countries until recently considered peripheral to the international art world), as is the new model of the commissioning agency dedicated to the production of experimental engaged art in the public realm (Artangel in London, SKOR in the Netherlands, Nouveau Commanditaires in France are just a few that come to mind). In her critical history *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2002), Miwon Kwon argues that community-specific work takes critiques of "heavy metal" public art as its point of departure to address the site as a *social* rather than formal or phenomenological framework. The intersubjective space created through these projects becomes the focus—and medium—of artistic investigation.

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**Oda Projesi, *Picnic*, 2001.**  
Installation event with  
community participation,  
organized by Erik Göngrich,  
Oda Courtyard, Istanbul, June  
10, 2001.

This expanded field of relational practices currently goes by a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art. These practices are less interested in a relational *aesthetic* than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity—whether in the form of working with preexisting communities or establishing one's own interdisciplinary network. It is tempting to date the rise in visibility of these practices to the early 1990s, when the fall of Communism deprived the Left of the last vestiges of the revolution that had once linked political and aesthetic radicalism. Many artists now make no distinction between their work inside and outside the gallery, and even highly established and commercially successful figures like Francis Alÿs, Pierre Huyghe, Matthew Barney, and Thomas Hirschhorn have all turned to social collaboration as an extension of their conceptual or sculptural practice. Although the objectives and output of these various artists and groups vary enormously, all are linked by a belief in the empowering creativity of collective action and shared ideas.

This mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations to produce dematerialized, antimarket, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life. For Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), the defining text of relational practice, "art is the place that produces a specific sociability," precisely because "it tightens the space of relations, unlike TV." For Grant H. Kester, in another key text, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), art is uniquely placed to counter a world in which "we are reduced to an atomized pseudocommunity of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition." For these and other supporters of socially engaged art, the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanizes—or at least de-alienates—a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism. But the urgency of this *political* task has led to a situation in which such collaborative practices are automatically perceived to be equally important *artistic* gestures of resistance: There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. While I am broadly sympathetic to that ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze, and compare such work critically *as art*. This critical task is particularly pressing in Britain, where New Labour uses a rhetoric almost identical to that of socially engaged art to steer culture toward policies of social inclusion. Reducing art to statistical information about target audiences and "performance indicators," the government prioritizes social effect over considerations of artistic quality.

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Jeanne van Heeswijk, *De Strip*, 2001–2004.  
Performance view, Rotterdam, 2002.

The emergence of criteria by which to judge social practices is not assisted by the present-day standoff between the nonbelievers (aesthetes who reject this work as marginal, misguided, and lacking artistic interest of any kind) and the believers (activists who reject aesthetic questions as synonymous with cultural hierarchy and the market). The former, at their most extreme, would condemn us to a world of irrelevant painting and sculpture, while the latter have a tendency to self-marginalize to the point of inadvertently reinforcing art's autonomy, thereby preventing any productive rapprochement between art and life. Is there ground on which the two sides can meet?

**WHAT SERIOUS CRITICISM** has arisen in relation to socially collaborative art has been framed in a particular way: The social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism. This is manifest in a heightened attention to *how* a given collaboration is undertaken. In other words, artists are increasingly judged by their working process—the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration—and criticized for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to “fully” represent their subjects, as if such a thing were possible. This emphasis on process over product (i.e., means over ends) is justified as oppositional to capitalism's predilection for the contrary. The indignant outrage directed at Santiago Sierra is a prominent example of this tendency, but it has been disheartening to read the criticism of other artists that also arises in the name of this equation: Accusations of mastery and egocentrism are leveled at artists who work with participants to realize a project instead of allowing it to emerge through consensual collaboration.



Pawel Althamer, *Bad Kids*, 2004. Performance view, Maastricht.

The writing around the Turkish artists' collective Oda Projesi provides a clear example of the way in which aesthetic judgments have been overtaken by ethical criteria. Oda Projesi is a group of three artists who, since 1997, have based their activities around a three-room apartment in the Galata district of Istanbul (*oda projesi* is Turkish for “room project”). The apartment provides a platform for projects generated by the collective in cooperation with its neighbors, such as a children's workshop with the

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Turkish painter Komet, a community picnic with the sculptor Erik Göngrich, and a parade for children organized by the Tem Yapin theater group. Oda Projesi argue that they wish to open up a context for the possibility of interchange and dialogue, motivated by a desire to integrate with their surroundings. They insist that they are not setting out to improve or heal a situation—one of their project leaflets contains the slogan “exchange not change”—though they clearly see their work as gently oppositional. By working directly with their neighbors to organize workshops and events, they evidently want to produce a more creative and participatory social fabric. They talk of creating “blank spaces” and “holes” in the face of an overorganized and bureaucratic society, and of being “mediators” between groups of people who normally don’t have contact with one another.

Because much of Oda Projesi’s work exists on the level of art education and community events, we can see them as dynamic members of the community bringing art to a wider audience. It is important that they are opening up the space for non-object-based practice in Turkey, a country whose art academies and art market are still largely oriented toward painting and sculpture. And one may also be pleased, as I am, that it is three women who have undertaken this task. But their conceptual gesture of reducing the authorial status to a minimum ultimately becomes inseparable from the community arts tradition. Even when transposed to Sweden, Germany, and the other countries where Oda Projesi have exhibited, there is little to distinguish their projects from other socially engaged practices that revolve around the predictable formulas of workshops, discussions, meals, film screenings, and walks. Perhaps this is because the question of aesthetic value is not valid for Oda Projesi. When I interviewed the collective for *Untitled* magazine (Spring 2005) and asked what criteria they base their own work on, they replied that they judge it by the decisions they make about where and with whom they collaborate: Dynamic and sustained relationships provide their markers of success, not aesthetic considerations. Indeed, because their practice is based on collaboration, Oda Projesi consider *aesthetic* to be “a dangerous word” that should not be brought into discussion. This seemed to me to be a curious response: If the aesthetic is dangerous, isn’t that all the more reason it should be interrogated?

Oda Projesi’s ethical approach is adopted by the Swedish curator Maria Lind in a recent essay on their work. Lind is one of the most articulate supporters of political and relational practices, and she undertakes her curatorial work with a trenchant commitment to the social. In her essay on Oda Projesi, published in Claire Doherty’s *From Studio to Situations: Contemporary Art and the Question of Context* (2004), she notes that the group is not interested in showing or exhibiting art but in “using art as a means for creating and recreating new relations between people.” She goes on to discuss the collective’s project in Riem, near Munich, in which they collaborated with a local Turkish community to organize a tea party, guided tours led by the residents, hairdressing and Tupperware parties, and the installation of a long roll of paper that people wrote and drew on to stimulate conversations. Lind compares this endeavor to Hirschhorn’s *Bataille Monument*, 2002, his well-known collaboration with a mainly Turkish community in Kassel. (This elaborate project included a TV studio, an installation about Bataille, and a library themed around the interests of the dissident Surrealist.) Lind observes that Oda Projesi, contrary to Hirschhorn, are the better artists because of the equal status they give to their collaborators: “[Hirschhorn’s] aim is to create art. For the *Bataille Monument* he had already prepared, and in part also executed, a plan on which he needed help to implement. His participants were paid for their work and their role was that of the ‘executor’ and not ‘co-creator.’” Lind goes on to argue that Hirschhorn’s work, by using participants to critique the art genre of the monument, was rightly criticized for “exhibiting” and making exotic marginalized groups and thereby contributing to a form of social pornography.” By contrast, she writes, Oda Projesi “work with groups of people in their immediate environments and allow them to wield great influence on the project.”

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**Bataille Monument**, 2002.  
Performance view, Documenta  
11, Kassel.

It's worth looking closely at Lind's criteria here. Her assessment is based on an ethics of authorial renunciation: The work of Oda Projesi is better than that of Hirschhorn because it exemplifies a superior model of collaborative practice. The conceptual density and artistic significance of the respective projects are sidelined in favor of an appraisal of the artists' relationship with their collaborators. Hirschhorn's (purportedly) exploitative relationship is compared negatively to Oda Projesi's inclusive generosity. In other words, Lind downplays what might be interesting in Oda Projesi's work *as art*—the possible achievement of making dialogue a medium or the significance of dematerializing a project into social process. Instead, her criticism is dominated by *ethical* judgments on working procedure and intentionality.



**Bataille Monument**, 2002.  
Performance view, Documenta  
11, Kassel.

Similar examples can be found in the writing on Superflex, Eriksson, van Heeswijk, Orta, and many other artists working in a socially ameliorative tradition. This ethical imperative finds support in most of the theoretical writing on art that collaborates with "real" people (i.e., those who are not the artist's friends or other artists). The curator and critic Lucy R. Lippard, concluding her book *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (1997), a discussion of site-specific art from an ecological/postcolonial perspective, presents an eight-point "place ethic" for artists who work with communities. Kester's *Conversation Pieces*, while lucidly articulating many of the problems associated with such practices, nevertheless advocates an art of concrete interventions in which the artist does not occupy a position of pedagogical or creative mastery. In *Good Intentions: Judging the Art of Encounter* (2005), the Dutch critic Erik Hagoort argues that we must not shy away from making moral judgments on this art but must weigh the presentation and representation of an artist's good intentions. In each of these examples, authorial intentionality (or a humble lack thereof) is privileged over a discussion of the work's conceptual significance as a social and aesthetic form. Paradoxically, this leads to a situation in which not only collectives but also individual artists are praised for their authorial renunciation. And this may explain, to some degree, why socially engaged art has been largely exempt from art criticism. Emphasis is shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given work and onto a *generalized* set of

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**IN CONVERSATION PIECES** Kester argues that consultative and “dialogic” art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is—away from the visual and sensory (which are individual experiences) and toward “discursive exchange and negotiation.” He challenges us to treat communication as an aesthetic form, but, ultimately, he fails to defend this, and seems perfectly content to allow that a socially collaborative art project could be deemed a success if it works on the level of social intervention even though it founders on the level of art. In the absence of a commitment to the aesthetic, Kester’s position adds up to a familiar summary of the intellectual trends inaugurated by identity politics: respect for the other, recognition of difference, protection of fundamental liberties, and an inflexible mode of political correctness. As such, it also constitutes a rejection of any art that might offend or trouble its audience—most notably the historical avant-garde, within whose avant-garde lineage Kester nevertheless wishes to situate social engagement as a radical practice. He criticizes Dada and Surrealism, which sought to “shock” viewers into being more sensitive and receptive to the world, for presuming the artist to be a privileged bearer of insights. I would argue that such discomfort and frustration—along with absurdity, eccentricity, doubt, or sheer pleasure—can, on the contrary, be crucial elements of a work’s aesthetic impact and are essential to gaining new perspectives on our condition. The best examples of socially collaborative art give rise to these—and many other—effects, which must be read alongside more legible intentions, such as the recovery of a phantasmic social bond or the sacrifice of authorship in the name of a “true” and respectful collaboration. Some of these projects are well known: Hirschhorn’s *Musée Précaire Albinet* and *24h Foucault* (both 2004); Aleksandra Mir’s *Cinema for the Unemployed*, 1998; Ali’s *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002. Rather than positioning themselves within an activist lineage, in which art is marshaled to effect social change, these artists have a closer relationship to avant-garde theater, performance, or architectural theory. As a consequence, perhaps, they attempt to think the aesthetic and the social/political *together*, rather than subsuming both within the ethical.

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**Artur Zmijewski, *The Singing Lesson II*, 2003**, still from a color video, 16 minutes 30 seconds.

**THE BRITISH ARTIST** Phil Collins, for example, fully integrates these two concerns in his work. Invited to undertake a residency in Jerusalem, he decided to hold a disco-dancing marathon for teenagers in Ramallah, which he recorded to produce the two-channel video installation *they shoot horses*, 2004. Collins paid nine teenagers to dance continuously for eight hours, on two consecutive days, in front of a garish pink wall to an unrelentingly cheesy compilation of pop hits from the past four decades. The teenagers are mesmerizing and irresistible as they move from exuberant partying to boredom and finally exhaustion. The sound track's banal lyrics of ecstatic love and rejection acquire poignant connotations in light of the kids' double endurance of the marathon and of the interminable political crisis in which they are trapped. It goes without saying that *they shoot horses* is a perverse representation of the "site" that the artist was invited to respond to: The occupied territories are never shown explicitly but are ever-present as a frame. This use of the *hors cadre* has a political purpose: Collins's decision to present the participants as generic globalized teenagers becomes clear when we consider the puzzled questions regularly overheard when one watches the video in public: How come Palestinians know Beyoncé? How come they're wearing Nikes? By voiding the work of direct political narrative, Collins demonstrates how swiftly this space is filled by fantasies generated by the media's selective production and dissemination of images from the Middle East (since the typical Western viewer seems condemned to view young Arabs either as victims or as medieval fundamentalists). By using pop music as familiar to Palestinian as to Western teens, Collins also provides a commentary on globalization that is considerably more nuanced than most activist-oriented political art. *They shoot horses* plays off the conventions of benevolent socially collaborative practice (it creates a new narrative for its participants and reinforces a social bond) but combines them with the visual and conceptual conventions of reality TV. The presentation of the work as a two-screen installation lasting a full eight-hour workday subverts both genres in its emphatic use of seduction on the one hand and grueling duration on the other.

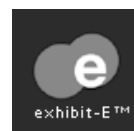


**Artur Zmijewski, *The Singing Lesson I*, 2001**, still from a color video, 14 minutes.

The work of Polish artist Artur Zmijewski, like that of Collins, often revolves around the devising and

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recording of difficult—sometimes excruciating—situations. In Zmijewski's video *The Singing Lesson I*, 2001, a group of deaf students is filmed singing the Kyrie to Jan Maklakiewicz's 1944 *Polish Mass* in a Warsaw church. The opening shot is staggeringly hard: An image of the church interior, all elegant Neoclassical symmetry, is offset by the cacophonous, distorted voice of a young girl. She is surrounded by fellow students who, unable to hear her efforts, chat with one another in sign language. Zmijewski's editing draws constant attention to the contrast between the choir and its environment, suggesting that religious paradigms of perfection continue to inform our ideas of beauty. A second version of *The Singing Lesson* was filmed in Leipzig in 2002. This time the deaf students, together with a professional chorister, sing a Bach cantata to the accompaniment of a Baroque chamber orchestra in Saint Thomas Church, where Bach once served as cantor and is buried. The German version is edited to reveal a more playful side of the experiment. Some students take the task of performing seriously; others abandon it in laughter. Their gestures of sign language in rehearsal are echoed by those of the conductor: two visual languages that serve to equate the two types of music produced by Zmijewski's experiment—the harmonies of the orchestra and the strained wailing of the choir. The artist's editing, compounded by my inability to understand sign language, seems integral to the film's point: We can only ever have limited access to others' emotional and social experiences, and the opacity of this knowledge obstructs any analysis founded on such assumptions. Instead we are invited to read what is presented to us—a perverse assemblage of conductor, musicians, and deaf choir that produces something more complex, troubling, and multilayered than the release of individual creativity.

It will be protested that both Collins and Zmijewski produce videos for consumption within a gallery, as if the space outside it were automatically more authentic—a logic that has been definitively unraveled by Kwon in *One Place After Another*. Her advocacy of art that "unworks" community might usefully be applied to the practice of British artist Jeremy Deller. In 2001 he organized the reenactment of a key event from the English miners' strike of 1984—a violent clash between miners and the police in the village of Orgreave in Yorkshire. *The Battle of Orgreave* was a one-day restaging of this confrontation, performed by former miners and policemen, together with a number of historical reenactment societies. Although the work seemed to contain a twisted therapeutic element (in that both miners and police involved in the struggle participated, some of them swapping roles), *The Battle of Orgreave* didn't seem to heal a wound so much as reopen it. Deller's event was both politically legible and utterly pointless: It summoned the experiential potency of political demonstrations but only to expose a wrong seventeen years too late. It gathered the people together to remember and replay a disastrous event, but this remembrance took place in circumstances more akin to a village fair, with a brass band, food stalls, and children running around. This contrast is particularly evident in the only video documentation of *The Battle of Orgreave*, which forms part of an hour-long film by Mike Figgis, a left-wing filmmaker who explicitly uses the work as a vehicle for his indictment of the Thatcher government. Clips of Deller's event are shown between emotional interviews with former miners, and the clash in tone is disconcerting. *The Battle of Orgreave* stages a political grievance, but plays it out in a different key, since Deller's action both is and isn't a violent encounter. The involvement of historical reenactment societies is integral to this ambiguity, since their participation symbolically elevated the relatively recent events at Orgreave to the status of English history while drawing attention to this eccentric leisure activity in which bloody battles are enthusiastically replicated as a social and aesthetic diversion. The whole event could be understood as contemporary history painting that collapses representation and reality.

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Jeremy Deller, *Social Parade*, 2004. Performance view, Manifesta 5, San Sebastián.

Operating on a less charged symbolic level, Carsten Höller's project *The Baudouin Experiment: A Deliberate, Non-Fatalistic, Large-Scale Group Experiment in Deviation*, 2001, is strikingly neutral by comparison. The event took as its point of departure an incident in 1991 when the late King Baudouin of Belgium abdicated for a day to allow an abortion law of which he did not approve to be passed. Höller brought together a group of one hundred people to sit in one of the silver balls of the Atomium in Brussels for twenty-four hours and to abandon their usual lives for a day. Basic provisions were supplied (furniture, food, toilets), but otherwise there were no means of contact with the outside world. Though it bore some resemblance to a reality show like *Big Brother*, the social action was not recorded. This refusal to document the project was an extension of Höller's ongoing interest in the category of "doubt," and *The Baudouin Experiment* forms his most condensed consideration of this idea to date. Without documentation of such an anonymous project, would we believe that the piece ever really existed? In retrospect, the elusiveness of Höller's event is akin to the uncertainty we may feel when looking at documentation of socially engaged art that asks us to take its claims of meaningful dialogue and political empowerment on trust. In this context *The Baudouin Experiment* was an event of profound *inaction*, or "passive activism"—a refusal of everyday productivity, but also a refusal to instrumentalize art in compensation for some perceived social lack.

Deller, Collins, Zmijewski, and Höller do not make the "correct" ethical choice; they do not embrace the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice; instead, they act on their desire without the incapacitating restrictions of guilt. In so doing, their work joins a tradition of highly authored situations that fuse social reality with carefully calculated artifice. This tradition needs to be written, beginning, perhaps, with the "Dada-Season" in the spring of 1921, a series of manifestations that sought to involve the Parisian public. The most salient of these events was an "excursion" (hosted by André Breton, Tristan Tzara, Louis Aragon, et al.) to the church of Saint Julien le Pauvre that drew more than one hundred people despite the pouring rain. The inclement weather cut the tour short and prevented an "auction of abstractions" from being realized. In this Dada excursion, as in the examples given above, intersubjective relations weren't an end in themselves but rather served to unfold a more complex knot of concerns about pleasure, visibility, engagement, and the conventions of social interaction.

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Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001. Performance view, Yorkshire, UK.

**THE DISCURSIVE CRITERIA** of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anticapitalism and the Christian "good soul." In this schema, self-sacrifice is triumphant: The artist should renounce authorial presence in favor of allowing participants to speak through him or her. This self-sacrifice is accompanied by the idea that art should extract itself from the "useless" domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis. As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière has observed, this denigration of the aesthetic ignores the fact that the system of art as we understand it in the West—the "aesthetic regime of art" inaugurated by Friedrich Schiller and the Romantics and still operative to this day—is predicated precisely on a confusion between art's autonomy (its position at one remove from instrumental rationality) and heteronomy (its blurring of art and life). Untangling this knot—or ignoring it by seeking more concrete ends for art—is slightly to miss the point, since the aesthetic is, according to Rancière, the ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change, characterized precisely by that tension between faith in art's autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. For Rancière the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise.

The self-effacing implications of the artist/activist position bring to mind the character Grace in Lars von Trier's 2003 provocation, *Dogville*: Her desire to serve the local community is inseparable from her guilty position of privilege, and her exemplary gestures perturbingly provoke an evil eradicable only by further evil. Von Trier's film doesn't present a straightforward moral, but articulates—through a *reductio ad absurdum*—one terrifying implication of the self-sacrificial position. Some people will consider *Dogville* a harsh framework by which to express reservations about activist-oriented practice, but good intentions shouldn't render art immune to critical analysis. The best art manages (as *Dogville* itself does) to fulfill the promise of the antinomy that Schiller saw as the very root of aesthetic experience and not surrender itself to exemplary (but relatively ineffectual) gestures. The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work *and* in the conditions of its reception. It is to this art—however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear—that we must turn for an alternative to the well-intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration. These homilies unwittingly push us toward a Platonic regime in which art is valued for its truthfulness and educational efficacy rather than for inviting us—as *Dogville* did—to confront darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament.

Claire Bishop is a London-based critic

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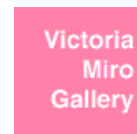
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## **Education for Socially Engaged Art**



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# **Education for Socially Engaged Art**

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## Note

Fragments of this work have appeared in a series of writings I have published on the subject. These include the essays “Open House/Closed House” (published online, 2006) “Alternative Audiences and Instant Spaces” (in *Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces*, ed. Steven Rand [New York: Apexart, 2010]), “Notes toward a Transpedagogy” (in *Art, Architecture, Pedagogy: Experiments in Learning*, ed. Ken Ehrlich [Valencia, Calif.: Center for Integrated Media at CalArts, 2009]), and “*Pedagogía y práctica social*” (in *Errata* [Bogotá], education special issue ed. Luis Camnitzer, June 2011).

# Introduction

This brief book is meant to serve as an introductory reference tool to art students and others interested in learning about the practice of socially engaged art. I was motivated to write it after being invited by Harrell Fletcher and Jen de los Reyes to teach a course at Portland State University on the subject, which prompted my search for adequate reading materials on the practice.

In the United States, socially engaged art is rooted in the late 1960s, in the seminal influence of Alan Kaprow, the incorporation of feminist education theory in art practice, the exploration of performance and pedagogy by Charles Garoian, and the work of Suzanne Lacy on the West Coast and elsewhere, among many other examples. The practice of socially engaged art today, often referred to as “social practice,” has been lately formalized and integrated into art schools, more or less along with academic literature that addresses the phenomenon. Over the last decade, several scholars have started to focus on the subject: Claire Bishop, Tom Finkelpearl, Grant Kester, Miwon Kwon, and Shannon Jackson, among others, have been key in providing interpretations and reflections on how the practice is being shaped, what historical background nourishes it, and the aesthetic issues it raises. The process of theorization of socially engaged art, however, has developed much faster than the more pedestrian discussion of the technical components that constitute it.

Other areas of art-making (painting, printmaking, photography) have nuts-and-bolts technical manuals that guide practitioners in understanding the elements of their practice and achieving the results they want. Those of us working in socially engaged art need our own reference book of “materials and techniques,” as it were. I thought it would be useful to make available a brief reference guide that is based on concrete knowledge, experience, and conclusions derived from specific applications of various interactive formats, from discursive and pedagogical methods to real-life situations. The goal of this small book is to serve not as a theoretical text nor a comprehensive set of references, but instead to offer a few examples of how to use art in the social realm, describing the debates around theory as well as some of the more familiar and successful applications of the ideas.

In setting a curriculum for socially engaged art, mere art history and theory won't do: while they are critical to providing a historical and contextual framework of the practice, socially engaged art is a form of performance in the expanded field, and as such it must break away, at least temporarily, from self-referentiality. One is better served by gathering knowledge from a combination of the disciplines—pedagogy, theater, ethnography, anthropology, and communication, among others—from which artists construct their vocabularies in different combinations depending on their interests and needs.

This book presents an introduction to socially engaged art primarily through the tools of education. Partially, this is due to a personal bias: I came to art and education



simultaneously, in 1991, when I first worked in an education department at a museum and initiated my experiments in performance. Gradually I noticed parallels between the processes of art and education. The experience has led me to believe that some of the greater challenges in creating socially engaged artworks can be successfully addressed by relying on the field of education, which historically has navigated similar territories. Today, it is no secret that standard education practices—such as engagement with audiences, inquiry-based methods, collaborative dialogues, and hands-on activities—provide an ideal framework for process-based and collaborative conceptual practices. It is no surprise that artists who work in this area feel at home in the education departments of museums, even if they would also like to be recognized by their curatorial departments.

One example of the usefulness of the tools of education to socially engaged art is the story of Reggio Emilia. Shortly after the end of World War II, in the Northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia, a group of parents led by an educator named Loris Malaguzzi started a school for early childhood education that incorporated the pedagogical thought of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and others. The goal was to reenvision the child not as an empty container to be filled with facts but as an individual with rights, great potential, and diversity (what Malaguzzi described as “the hundred languages of children.”\* Based on the curriculum

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\* See C. Edwards, L. Gandini and G. Form, *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach Advanced Reflections*, Elsevier Science, Amsterdam: 1998.

they developed, the Reggio Emilia Approach calls for sessions are spontaneous, creative, and collaborative in nature, and children play a critical role in deciding which activities they will focus on any given day. For the Reggio Emilia *pedagogisti*, “to participate is not to create homogeneity; to participate is to generate vitality.”\* The visual and the performative are central in Reggio Emilia activities. The *atelieristi*, or workshop teachers, play a key role in being attentive to the interests of the group but also in integrating those interests and activities into the curriculum. In this way, the learning experience of every group is different and it functions as a process of co-construction of knowledge. Collaboration with parents and the process of documentation of the child’s learning experience are also critical components of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

At first glance, there appears to be no connection between the early childhood pedagogy that emerged in the mid-twentieth century in a small northern Italian town and the kind of socially engaged artwork featured today in *kunsthallen*, biennials, and contemporary art magazines. Yet, in the debate and criticism around such artwork it is necessary to qualify the kind of participation or collaboration that takes place, to describe the experience, the role of the location, the instigator of the action, and the documentation process. All these subjects are carefully considered in the Reggio Emilia Approach, in sophisticated detail and with a nuanced understanding of the individual’s cognitive abilities and potential for learning through experience.

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\* “*Partecipare non é homogenità; partecipare é vitalità.*” Elena Giacomini, Reggio Emilia educator, in conversation with the author, June 2011.

Obviously, the work done in Reggio Emilia is not geared to the formation of visual artists, the creation of artworks, nor the insertion of ideas in the art discourse, yet an artist who wants to learn about collaborative dynamics and experimentation as well as the impact that a particular type of documentation may have on the work would be well served by following the roads traversed by these and other educators, roads outlined in this book.

The development of a materials and techniques handbook for socially engaged art might suggest the institution of an academic ideal for the practice that can be measured in scientific ways. In Europe, where art programs in universities are subject to extreme regulation and standardization so that they meet certain educational outcomes, a book like this might be assumed to subject art to cold numbers. Or the existence of a book like this might inspire a more troubling assumption: that a certain set of social-engineering formulas will be recommended, to be deployed to construct a given art experience. I am aware that the subject of influencing a group of people is, in itself, highly controversial, as the implementation of such ideas has created authoritarian cults, repressive regimes, and closed, intolerant societies.

Those who hold such troubling thoughts can rest assured that this book does not turn socially engaged art into a set of academic rules nor push it in the direction of, say, a sort of relational eugenics. Instead, I show that socially engaged art can't be produced inside a knowledge vacuum. Artists who wish to work with communities, for whatever reason, can greatly benefit from the knowledge

accumulated by various disciplines—such as sociology, education, linguistics, and ethnography—to make informed decisions about how to engage and construct meaningful exchanges and experiences. The objective is not to turn us into amateur ethnographers, sociologists, or educators but to understand the complexities of the fields that have come before us, learn some of their tools, and employ them in the fertile territory of art.\*

This book, in describing the equivalent of materials and techniques for socially engaged art, may appear to the reader to be a manifesto for best practices. But how can the concept of “best practices” relate to socially engaged art? Is it acceptable to articulate ideal practices, or would that be detrimental to the autonomy of art-making, which needs opacity and ambiguity to exist? While we need critical frameworks—such as those articulated in this book—to make art, they should not be understood as regulatory mandates that would impose moral or ethical demands on art-making. Unethical artistic actions, while crossing the line of acceptability and even legality in some cases, are part of the role that art plays in challenging assumptions in society, and for that reason freedom of expression must always be defended. In any case, to impose a sort of methodology, or “school of thought,” onto the practice would only create an interpretation of art-making that the next artist will inevitably challenge, as part of the natural dynamics of art.

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\* It must be noted that, because both subjective anthropology and performance art developed in the early 1970s, interdisciplinary experimentation and crossover was consciously explored—and exploited, in partnerships—in many notable artworks during that era.



For that reason this book does not assume, nor does it pretend to propose, a system of regulation or schooling of socially engaged art. It doesn't propose, either, a best practices approach for this kind of art. However, socially engaged art-making crosses overtly into other disciplines and tries to influence the public sphere in its language and processes, and it would be absurd to ignore the perfectly useful models that exist in those disciplines. As artists, we may walk blindly into a situation and instigate an action or experience. But unless we don't really care about the outcome, it is important to be aware of why we are acting and to learn how to act in an effective way. Learning how to moderate a conversation, negotiate among interests in a group, or assess the complexities of a given social situation does not curtail artistic liberty; these are skills that can be used to support our activities. Understanding the social processes we are engaging in doesn't oblige us to operate in any particular capacity; it only makes us more aware of the context and thus allows us to better influence and orchestrate desired outcomes.

I have also grappled with another question: Is possible to distinguish and define successful and unsuccessful socially engaged artworks? To argue, for instance, that good socially engaged art creates constructive personal relationships is wrong: an artist's successful project could consist of deliberate miscommunication, in upsetting social relations, or in simply being hostile to the public. This debate belongs to the field of art criticism, addressed by the scholars I have previously mentioned, and it lies outside the scope of this project. Instead, this book is about

understanding and working with audience engagement and response for an artistic purpose. My hope is that an understanding of the nuances of these dynamics will be useful for artists but also for those who are interested in understanding and commenting in a thoughtful and critical way on the projects that emerge in this field.

Porto Alegre/Bologna/Brooklyn,  
June 2011



## Definitions

What do we mean when we say “socially engaged art”? As the terminology around this practice is particularly porous, it is necessary to create a provisional definition of the kind of work that will be discussed here.

All art, inasmuch as it is created to be communicated to or experienced by others, is social. Yet to claim that all art is social does not take us very far in understanding the difference between a static work such as a painting and a social interaction that proclaims itself as art—that is, socially engaged art.

We can distinguish a subset of artworks that feature the experience of their own creation as a central element. An action painting is a record of the gestural brushstrokes that produced it, but the act of executing those brushstrokes is not the primary objective of its making (otherwise the painting would not be preserved). A Chinese water painting or a mandala, by contrast, is essentially *about*

the process of its making, and its eventual disappearance is consistent with its ephemeral identity. Conceptualism introduced the thought process as artwork; the materiality of the artwork is optional.

Socially engaged art falls within the tradition of conceptual process art. But it does not follow that all process-based art is also socially engaged: if this were so, a sculpture by Donald Judd would fall in the same category as, say, a performance by Thomas Hirshhorn. Minimalism, for instance, though conceptual and process based, depends on processes that ensure the removal of the artist from the production—eliminating the “engagement” that is a definitive element of socially engaged art.

While there is no complete agreement as to what constitutes a meaningful interaction or social engagement, what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence.

Socially engaged art, as a category of practice, is still a working construct. In many descriptions, however, it encompasses a genealogy that goes back to the avant-garde and expands significantly during the emergence of Post-Minimalism.\* The social movements of the 1960s led to greater social engagement in art and the emergence of performance art and installation art, centering on process and site-specificity, which all influence socially engaged art practice today. In previous decades, art based on social

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\* In this book it is not possible (nor is it the goal) to trace a history of socially engaged art; instead I focus mainly on the practice as it exists today, with reference to specific artists, movements, and events that have significantly informed it.



interaction has been identified as “relational aesthetics” and “community,” “collaborative,” “participatory,” “dialogic,” and “public” art, among many other titles. (Its redefinitions, like that of other kinds of art, have stemmed from the urge to draw lines between generations and unload historical baggage.) “Social practice” has emerged most prominently in recent publications, symposia, and exhibitions and is the most generally favored term for socially engaged art.

The new term excludes, for the first time, an explicit reference to art-making. Its immediate predecessor, “relational aesthetics,” preserves the term in its parent principle, aesthetics (which, ironically, refers more to traditional values—i.e., beauty—than does “art”). The exclusion of “art” coincides with a growing general discomfort with the connotations of the term. “Social practice” avoids evocations of both the modern role of the artist (as an illuminated visionary) and the postmodern version of the artist (as a self-conscious critical being). Instead the term democratizes the construct, making the artist into an individual whose specialty includes working with society in a professional capacity.

## Between Disciplines

The term “social practice” obscures the discipline from which socially engaged art has emerged (i.e., art). In this way it denotes the critical detachment from other forms of art-making (primarily centered and built on the personality of the artist) that is inherent to socially engaged art, which, almost by definition, is dependent on the involvement of

others besides the instigator of the artwork. It also thus raises the question of whether such activity belongs to the field of art at all. This is an important query; art students attracted to this form of art-making often find themselves wondering whether it would be more useful to abandon art altogether and instead become professional community organizers, activists, politicians, ethnographers, or sociologists. Indeed, in addition to sitting uncomfortably between and across these disciplines and downplaying the role of the individual artist, socially engaged art is specifically at odds with the capitalist market infrastructure of the art world: it does not fit well in the traditional collecting practices of contemporary art, and the prevailing cult of the individual artist is problematic for those whose goal is to work with others, generally in collaborative projects with democratic ideals. Many artists look for ways to renounce not only object-making but authorship altogether, in the kind of “stealth” art practice that philosopher Stephen Wright argues for, in which the artist is a secret agent in the real world, with an artistic agenda.\*

Yet the uncomfortable position of socially engaged art, identified as art yet located between more conventional art forms and the related disciplines of sociology, politics, and the like, is exactly the position it should inhabit. The practice’s direct links to and conflicts with both art and sociology must be overtly declared and the tension addressed,

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\* See “*Por un arte clandestino*,” the author’s conversation with Stephen Wright in 2006, <http://pablohelguera.net/2006/04/por-un-arte-clandestino-conversacion-con-stephen-wright-2006/>. Wright later wrote a text based on this exchange, [http://www.entrepreneur.com/tradejournals/article/153624936\\_2.html](http://www.entrepreneur.com/tradejournals/article/153624936_2.html).

but not resolved. Socially engaged artists can and should challenge the art market in attempts to redefine the notion of authorship, but to do so they must accept and affirm their existence in the realm of art, as artists. And the artist as social practitioner must also make peace with the common accusation that he or she is not an artist but an “amateur” anthropologist, sociologist, etc. Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines. For this reason, I believe that the best term for this kind of practice is what I have thus far been using as a generic descriptor—that is, “socially engaged art” (or SEA), a term that emerged in the mid-1970s, as it unambiguously acknowledges a connection to the practice of art.\*

## Symbolic and Actual Practice

To understand SEA, an important distinction must be made between two types of art practice: symbolic and actual. As I will show, SEA is an actual, not symbolic, practice.

A few examples:

Let’s say an artist or group of artists creates an “artist-run school,” proposing a radical new approach to teaching.

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\* From this point forward I will use this term to refer to the type of artwork that is the subject of this book.

The project is presented as an art project but also as a functioning school (a relevant example, given the recent emergence of similar projects). The “school,” however, in its course offerings, resembles a regular, if slightly unorthodox, city college. In content and format, the courses are not different in structure from most continuing education courses. Furthermore, the readings and course load encourage self-selectivity by virtue of the avenues through which it is promoted and by offering a sampling that is typical of a specific art world readership, to the point that the students taking the courses are not average adults but rather art students or art-world insiders. It is arguable, therefore, whether the project constitutes a radical approach to education; nor does it risk opening itself up to a public beyond the small sphere of the converted.

An artist organizes a political rally about a local issue. The project, which is supported by a local arts center in a medium-size city, fails to attract many local residents; only a couple dozen people show up, most of whom work at the arts center. The event is documented on video and presented as part of an exhibition. In truth, can the artist claim to have organized a rally?

These are two examples of works that are politically or socially motivated but act through the *representation* of ideas or issues. These are works that are designed to address social or political issues only in an allegorical, metaphorical, or symbolic level (for example, a painting about social issues is not very different from a public art project that claims to offer a social experience but only does so in a symbolic way such as the ones just described



above). The work does not control a social situation in an instrumental and strategic way in order to achieve a specific end.

This distinction is partially based on Jurgen Habermas's work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). In it Habermas argues that social action (an act constructed by the relations between individuals) is more than a mere manipulation of circumstances by an individual to obtain a desired goal (that is, more than just the use of strategic and instrumental reason). He instead favors what he describes as communicative action, a type of social action geared to communication and understanding between individuals that can have a lasting effect on the spheres of politics and culture as a true emancipatory force.

Most artists who produce socially engaged works are interested in creating a kind of collective art that impacts the public sphere in a deep and meaningful way, not in creating a representation—like a theatrical play—of a social issue. Certainly many SEA projects are in tune with the goals of deliberative democracy and discourse ethics, and most believe that art of any kind can't avoid taking a position in current political and social affairs. (The counter-argument is that art is largely a symbolic practice, and as such the impact it has on a society can't be measured directly; but then again, such hypothetical art, as symbolic, would not be considered socially engaged but rather would fall into the other familiar categories, such as installation, video, etc.) It is true that much SEA is composed of simple gestures and actions that may be perceived as symbolic. For example, Paul Ramirez-Jonas's

work *Key to the City* (2010) revolved around a symbolic act—giving a person a key as a symbol of the city. Yet although Ramirez-Jonas’s contains a symbolic act, it is not symbolic practice but rather communicative action (or “actual” practice)—that is, the symbolic act is part of a meaningful conceptual gesture.\*

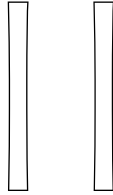
The difference between symbolic and actual practice is not hierarchical; rather, its importance lies in allowing a certain distinction to be made: it would be important, for example, to understand and identify the difference between a project in which I establish a health campaign for children in a war-torn country and a project in which I imagine a health campaign and fabricate documentation of it in Photoshop. Such a fabrication might result in a fascinating work, but it would be a symbolic action, relying on literary and public relations mechanisms to attain verisimilitude and credibility.

To summarize: social interaction occupies a central and inextricable part of any socially engaged artwork. SEA is a hybrid, multi-disciplinary activity that exists somewhere between art and non-art, and its state may be permanently unresolved. SEA depends on actual—not imagined or hypothetical—social action.

What will concern us next is how SEA can bring together, impact, and even critique a particular group of people.

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\* Paul Ramirez Jonas’s project, produced by Creative Time, took place in New York City in the Summer of 2010.



## **Community**

In this section I will consider some of the defining elements around group relationships created through SEA. They include, A: The construction of a community or temporary social group through a collective experience; B: The construction of multi-layered participatory structures; C: The role of social media in the construction of community; D: The role of time; E: Assumptions about audience.

### **A. The Construction of a Community**

“Community” is a word commonly associated with SEA. Not only does each SEA project depend on a community for its existence, but such projects are, most people agree, community-building mechanisms. But what kind of community does SEA aspire to create? The relationships that artists establish with the communities they work with

can vary widely; SEA projects may have nearly nothing in common.

Shannon Jackson compares and contrasts SEA projects in her study *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, juxtaposing the community art project Touchable Stories (begun 1996), by Shannon Flattery, which seeks to help “individual communities define their own voice,” the artist says, and the work of Santiago Sierra, who pays workers from disadvantaged and marginalized groups to do demeaning tasks.\* These projects are both accepted as SEA, yet they could not be more different.

The typical community art project (for instance, a children’s mural project) is able to fulfill its purpose of strengthening a community’s sense of self by lessening or suspending criticality regarding the form and content of the product and, often, promoting “feel-good” positive social values.† Sierra’s work, at the opposite end of the spectrum, exploits individuals with the goal of denouncing exploitation—a powerful conceptual gesture that openly embraces the ethical contradiction of denouncing that which one perpetrates. Sierra’s community of participants is financially contracted; they participate in order to get paid, not out of interest or for their love for art.

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\* Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 43.

† This is not meant to be a critique of community art, which, like all forms of art, exists in more and less successful iterations. Nor is it a critique of Sierra’s practice. The examples are presented merely to illustrate the spectrum along which collaboration and confrontation operate.



To further complicate matters, let's say that SEA is successful inasmuch as it builds community bonds. By this logic, Sierra's work would not be a successful one but the children's mural project would hold together, as it helps build community. This thinking would not hold true to art world standards, which consider Sierra's conceptual gestures—if objectionable—as more sophisticated and relevant to the debates around performance and art than the average community mural. Furthermore, is it still successful SEA if the community fostered by an art work is a racist hate group? This points to a larger, unresolved issue: Does SEA, by definition, have particular goals when it comes to impacting a community?

All art invites social interaction; yet in the case of SEA it is the process itself—the fabrication of the work—that is social. Furthermore, SEA is often characterized by the activation of members of the public in roles beyond that of passive receptor. While many artworks made over the last four decades have encouraged the participation of the viewer (Fluxus scores and instructions, installations by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and most works associated with relational aesthetics, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's shared meals), this participation mostly involves the execution of an idea (following a Fluxus instruction, for example) or the free partaking of the work in a open-ended social environment (such as sharing a meal).

SEA, as it is manifested today, continues in the spirit of these practices but often expands the depth of the social relationship, at times promoting ideas such as

empowerment, criticality, and sustainability among the participants. Like the political and activist art inspired by 1970s feminism and identity politics, SEA usually has an overt agenda, but its emphasis is less on the act of protest than on becoming a platform or a network for the participation of others, so that the effects of the project may outlast its ephemeral presentation.

Sierra's performance and the children's mural project exemplify the extremes of SEA because they adopt social interaction strategies of total confrontation and total harmony, respectively. Neither of these extremes leads easily to, or is the result of, a critically self-reflexive dialogue with an engaged community, which is, as I will try to argue, a key pursuit for the majority of works within this practice.

One factor of SEA that must be considered is its expansion to include participants from outside the regular circles of art and the art world. Most historical participatory art (thinking from the avant-gardes to the present) has been staged within the confines of an art environment, be it a gallery, museum, or event to which visitors arrive predisposed to have an art experience or already belonging to a set of values and interests that connect them to art. While many SEA projects still follow this more conservative or traditional approach, the more ambitious and risk-taking projects directly engage with the public realm—with the street, the open social space, the non-art community—a task that presents so many variables that only few artists can undertake it successfully.

Currently, perhaps the most accepted description of the community SEA creates is “emancipated”; that is, to use Jacques Rancière’s oft-quoted words, “a community of narrators and translators.”\* This means that its participants willingly engage in a dialogue from which they extract enough critical and experiential wealth to walk away feeling enriched, perhaps even claiming some ownership of the experience or ability to reproduce it with others.

To understand what this dialogue may consist of, it is important to understand what we mean by interaction. Like the division between insider and outsider art and the definition of community, there is no general, agreed-upon understanding of participation, engagement, or collaboration. As mentioned above, in some conceptual art, the role of the participant is nominal; he or she may be an instrument for the completion of the work (for Marcel Duchamp, for example) or a directed performer (in a Fluxus piece). There are as many kinds of participation as there are participatory projects, but nominal or symbolic interaction cannot be equated with an in-depth, long-term exchange of ideas, experiences, and collaborations, as their goals are different. To understand these different approaches allows for a sense of what each can accomplish.

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\* Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 22.

## B. Multi-Layered Participatory Structures

Participation, as a blanket term, can quickly lose its meaning around art. Do I participate by simply entering an exhibition gallery? Or am I only a participant when I am actively involved in the making of a work? If I find myself in the middle of the creation of an artwork but I decline to get involved, have I participated or not?

Participation shares the same problem as SEA, as previously discussed. Arguably, all art is participatory because it requires the presence of a spectator; the basic act of being there in front of an artwork is a form of participation. The conditions of participation for SEA are often more specific, and it is important to understand it in the time frame during which it happens.

Some of the most sophisticated SEA offers rich layers of participation, manifested in accordance with the level of engagement a viewer displays. We can establish a very tentative taxonomy:\*

**1. Nominal participation.** The visitor or viewer contemplates the work in a reflective manner, in passive detachment that is nonetheless a form of participation. The artist Muntadas posted this warning for one of his exhibitions: “Attention: Perception Requires Participation.”

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\* Suzanne Lacy sketches out participatory structures in another form in her book *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p. 178.



**2. Directed participation.** The visitor completes a simple task to contribute to the creation of the work (for example, Yoko Ono's *Wish Tree* [1996] in which visitors are encouraged to write a wish on a piece of paper and hang it on a tree).

**3. Creative participation.** The visitor provides content for a component of the work within a structure established by the artist (for example, Allison Smith's work *The Muster* [2005], in which fifty volunteers in Civil War uniforms engaged in a reenactment, declaring the causes for which they, personally, were fighting).

**4. Collaborative participation.** The visitor shares responsibility for developing the structure and content of the work in collaboration and direct dialogue with the artist (Caroline Woolard's ongoing project "Our Goods", where participants offer goods or services on the basis of interest and need, is an example of this way of working).

Usually, nominal and directed participation take place in a single encounter, while creative and collaborative participation tend to develop over longer periods of time (from a single day to months or years).

A work incorporating participation at a nominal or directed level is not necessarily more or less successful or desirable than one featuring creative or collaborative

participation. However, it is important to keep the distinctions in mind, for at least three reasons: first, they help us in outlining the range of possible goals for a participatory framework; second, as I will show later, they can create a useful frame of reference in evaluating a work's intention in relation to its actualization; third, a consideration of the degree of participation a work entails is intimately related to any evaluation of the way in which it constructs a community experience.

In addition to their degree of participation, it is equally important to recognize the predisposition toward participation that individuals may have in a particular project. In social work, individuals or communities (often referred to as “clients”) with whom the social worker interacts are divided into three groups: those who actively and willingly engage in an activity, or *voluntary* (such as “Flash mob” type of action, which will be discussed further); those who are coerced or mandated to engage, or *nonvoluntary* (for example, a high school class collaborating in the activist project) and those who encounter a project in a public space or engage in a situation without having full knowledge that it is an art project, or *involuntary*.<sup>\*</sup> An awareness of the voluntary, nonvoluntary, or involuntary predisposition of participants in a given project allows for the formulation of a successful approach to an individual or community, as approaches for participants with different predispositions vary widely. For example, if a participant is willingly and actively engaged as a volunteer, it may be

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<sup>\*</sup> See John Pulin and contributors, *Strengths-Based Generalist Practice: A Collaborative Approach* (Belmont:Thomson Brooks/Cole, 2000), p. 15.

in the interest of the artist to make gestures to encourage that involvement. If a participant has been forced to be part of the project for external reasons, it may be beneficial for the artist to acknowledge that fact and, if the objective is engagement, take measures to create a greater sense of ownership for that person. In the case of involuntary participants, the artist may decide to hide the action from them or to make them aware at a certain point of their participation in the art project.

Institutions such as Machine Project in Los Angeles, Morgan J. Puett's and Mark Dion's Mildred's Lane in Pennsylvania, or Caroline Woolard's Trade School in New York offer environments in which visitors gradually develop sets of relationships that allow them to contribute meaningfully in the construction of new situations, effectively becoming not only interlocutors but collaborators in a joint enterprise.

### **C. Virtual Participation: Social Media**

This book does not aim to encompass the online world, but a word should be said about the relationship between face-to-face and virtual sociality. It is relevant that the use of "social practice" as a term rose almost in perfect synch with new, online social media. This parallelism can be interpreted in many ways: perhaps the new iteration of SEA was inspired by the new fluidity of communication, or, alternatively, perhaps it was a reaction against the ethereal nature of virtual encounters, an affirmation of the personal and the local. The likelihood is that recent

forms of SEA are both a response to the interconnectivity of today's world and the result of a desire to make those connections more direct and less dependent on a virtual interface. In any case, social networks have proven to be very effective forms for instigating social action.

In a flash mob, a group of people, usually of strangers, suddenly congregates, directed to the same spot via communication from a leader over an online social network. While flash mobs usually don't proclaim themselves as artworks, they do fall neatly into the category of directed participation outlined above. In addition, online social networks have proven to be useful platforms for the organization of carefully planned political actions. Much has been made recently of the ways in which Twitter and Facebook helped bring large groups of people together in events connected with the so-called Arab Spring of 2011, and the social significance of these gatherings can't be considered merely symbolic. Art projects that, in a much more humble way, offer a time and space for congregation and developing relationships also can serve an important role in helping diverse groups of people—neighbors, students, a group of artists—find commonalities through activities.

Social networks and other online platforms can be very beneficial vehicles for continuing work that has been started in person. Online learning platforms like Blackboard and Haiku provide spaces in which community members can interact, commenting and exchanging information on the production of a project. These platforms have their own idiosyncrasies and etiquette, but for the most part the general rules of social interaction apply.



## D. Time and Effort

If there is something common to every pedagogical approach, it is an emphasis on the necessity of investing time to achieve a goal. Some educational goals simply can't be achieved if one is not willing to invest time: you can't learn a language in a day; you can't become an expert in martial arts at a weekend workshop. In fact, according to Malcolm Gladwell, it takes about ten thousand hours of practice to become expert at anything.\* A museum can hold an art workshop for a school, but the school must commit to a time frame of, say, at least three hours if the experience is to be successful. Even very limited time periods of engagement can be productive when goals are clearly set: a one-hour gallery conversation at a museum for a non-specialized audience can't turn visitors into art specialists, but it can be effective in inspiring interest in a subject and making a focused point about a particular kind of art or artist.

Many problems in community projects are due to unrealistic goals in relation to the expected time investment. An SEA project can make particularly great demands of time and effort on an artist—demands that are usually at odds with the time constraints posed by biennials and other international art events, let alone the pressure for product and near-immediate gratification from the art market. This may be the single biggest reason why SEA projects

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\* See chapter two of Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers* (New York: Little Brown & Co., 2008).

fail to succeed. An artist may be invited by a biennial a few months in advance of the event to do a site-specific community collaboration. By the time the artist has found a group of people to work with (which is not always easy or even possible), it is likely that the time for developing the project is limited, and the end result may be rushed. Most successful SEA projects are developed by artists who have worked in a particular community for a long time and have an in-depth understanding of those participants. This is also why SEA projects, like exotic fruit, usually travel poorly when “exported” to other locations to be replicated.

In rare instances, artists or curators have the luxury of spending a long time in a particular location, with very rich results. A prime example is France Morin’s ongoing project *The Quiet in the Land*, a series of SEA projects that have each taken several years to accomplish. Morin’s remarkable determination has allowed her (and teams of artists) to successfully engage with communities as disparate as the Shakers of Sabbathday Lake, Maine, and the monks and novices, artisans, and students of Luang Prabang, Laos. Morin acts as catalyst for the development of artists’ projects, moving into the regions where she is interested in working several years in advance of the work period to gain the trust of the community. Her interest lies in creating projects that “strive to activate the ‘space between’ groups and individuals as a zone of potentiality, in which the relationship between contemporary art and life may be renegotiated.”\* Morin’s projects are key references

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\* Quote from *The Quiet in the Land*’s website:  
<http://www.thequietintheland.org/description.php>.

for understanding the great demands—and great potential—of artists deeply engaging in a social environment.

## E. Audience Questions

“Who is your audience?” This is commonly the first question educators ask about any pedagogical activity in the planning. In art, by contrast, to preestablish an audience is seen by some to restrict a work’s possible impact, which is why many artists are usually reluctant to answer that question about their work. Common responses are, “I don’t have any audience in mind” and “My audience is whoever is interested.”

To some, the idea of an audience for an artwork-in-progress is a contradiction: If the artwork is new, how can an audience for it already exist? By this logic, new ideas—and new types of art—create their own audiences after they are made. I would argue, however, that ideas and artworks have implicit audiences, and this is especially true in the case of SEA, where the audience is often inextricable from the work.

In the movie *Field of Dreams* (1989), an Iowa farmer (played by Kevin Costner) walking through a cornfield suddenly hears a voice saying, “If you build it, he will come.” He envisions a baseball field and is strongly compelled to build it. The phrase has entered the English language in the variation of “build it and they will come” as if it is an adage of ancient wisdom and not from the pen of a Hollywood screenwriter. The implied message is that building comes first, audiences second. Yet the

opposite is true. We build *because* audiences exist. We build because we seek to reach out to others, and they will come initially because they recognize themselves in what we have built. After that initial interaction, spaces enter a process of self-identification, ownership, and evolution based on group interests and ideas. They are not static spaces for static viewers but ever-evolving, growing, or decaying communities that build themselves, develop, and eventually dismantle.

Various sociologists have argued—David Berreby most notably—that as humans we are predisposed express a tribal mindset of “us” versus “them,” and each statement we make is oriented in relation to a set of preexisting social codes that include or exclude sectors of people.\* The contemporary art milieu is most distinctively about exclusion, not inclusion, because the structure of social interactions within its confines are based on a repertoire of cultural codes, or passwords, that provide status and a role within a given conversation. Radical, countercultural, or alternative practices employ exclusionary passwords as well, to maintain a distance from the mainstream.

Many participatory projects that are open, in theory, to the broad public, in fact serve very specific audiences. It could be said that a SEA project operates within three registers: one is its immediate circle of participants and supporters; the second is the critical art world, toward which it usually looks for validation; and the third is

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\* David Berreby, *Us and Them: The Science of Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

society at large, through governmental structures, the media, and other organizations or systems that may absorb and assimilate the ideas or other aspects of the project. In some cases—in residency programs, for example—visual artists are commissioned to work with a predetermined audience. While these initiatives often result in interesting and successful art projects, they run the risk of limiting the support they can provide to the artist by prescribing set parameters for audiences and spaces, possibly trying to fulfill quotas set by grant makers.\* Spaces and institutions in this situation often find themselves between a rock and a hard place, trying to sell a very hermetic product—very self-referential, cutting-edge art—to (often non-art) communities with very different interests and concerns.

Audiences are never “others”—they are always very concrete selves. In other words, it is impossible to plan a participatory experience and take steps to make it public without also making some assumption about those who will eventually partake in it. Do they read *Artforum*? Do they watch CNN? Do they speak English? Do they live in Idaho? Do they vote Democrat? When we organize and promote an exhibition or create a public program, we make decisions regarding its hypothetical audience or audiences, even if intuitively. Sociolinguist Allan Bell coined the term “audience design” in 1984, referring to the ways in which the media addresses different types of

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\* One stipulation of a project I was once invited to create for a neighborhood museum was the engagement of ten adult students of English as a second language as collaborators in the making of the work, which was expected to be of museum quality.



audiences through “style shifts” in speech.\* Since that time, the discipline of sociolinguistics has defined structures by which we can recognize the patterns speakers use to engage with audiences in multiple social and linguistic environments through register and social dialect variations. So if an arts organization is to be thought of as a “speaker,” it is possible to conceive of it as operating—through its programs and activities—in multiple social registers that may or may not include an art “intelligentsia,” a more immediate contemporary-art audience with its inner codes and references, and the larger public.

Most curators and artists, when I have articulated this view to them, have expressed wariness about the notion of a preconceived audience. To them, it sounds reductive and prone to mistakes. They feel that to identify a certain demographic or social group as the audience for a work may be to oversimplify their individuality and idiosyncrasies—an attitude that may perhaps have grown from critiques of “essentialism” in the early 1980s. I usually turn the question the other way around: Is it possible to *not* conceive of an audience for your work, to create an experience that is intended to be public without the slightest bias toward a particular kind of interlocutor, be it a rice farmer in Laos or a professor of philosophy at Columbia University? The debate may boil down to art practice itself and to the common statement by artists that they don’t have a viewer in mind while making their work—in

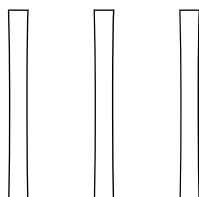
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\* Allan Bell, (1984) *Language Style as Audience Design*. In Coupland, N. and A. Jaworski (1997, eds.) *Sociolinguistics: a Reader and Coursebook*, pp. 240–50. New York: St Martin’s Press Inc.

other words, that they only produce for themselves. What is usually not questioned, however, is how one's notion of one's self is created. It is the construct of a vast collectivity of people who have influenced one's thoughts and one's values, and to speak to one's self is more than a solipsistic exercise—it is, rather, a silent way of speaking to the portion of civilization that is summarized in our minds. It is true that no audience construct is absolute—they all are, in fact, fictional groupings that we make based on biased assumptions. Nonetheless, they are what we have to go by, and experience in a variety of fields has proven that, as inexact as audience constructs may be, it is more productive to work with one than by no presuppositions whatsoever.

The problem doesn't lie in the decision whether or not to reach for large or selective audiences but rather in understanding and defining which groups we wish to speak to and in making conscious steps to reach out to them in a constructive, methodical way: for example, an artist attempting to find an audience may not benefit by trying experimental methods—he or she could be better served by traditional marketing. To get the results they desire, artists must be clear with themselves in articulating the audiences to whom they wish to speak and in understanding the context from which they are addressing them.





## Situations

In chapter one I described SEA as acting in the social realm—as carrying out a series of social actions. In chapter two I provided a general list of considerations that are useful to think about when making the decision to go out into the world to engage with people. In this chapter I will address a topic that is much more slippery: how to identify a variety of particular social scenarios and navigate the realm of shifting expectations and perceptions in a given community.

An artist—let's call her Joanna—is invited by the local arts council of a small American town—we'll call it Row Creek—to do an art project. Joanna wants to do a socially engaged project that will help empower the town's citizens and gain visibility for the area. She arranges for artist friends of hers to perform/install site-specific pieces in different storefronts and public spaces in the town over one weekend and calls the event the Row Creek Show.

The projects are conceptually intricate and many appear to be aimed more at an art world public than the townspeople, but the event acquires a big buzz, including reviews in the mainstream press. The residents, at first bewildered by the artworks, become excited by the media attention. The next year, the town wants to do another Row Creek Show. Joanna has moved on to other things and is not interested in reprising the project, and she tells the town leaders so. Very well, they say, we'll do it on our own, but this time we will have local artisans and craftspeople show their work. Joanna now has a conflict: barring returning to Row Creek and organizing the year's event herself, she must either entirely give up her authorship of the weekend and ask the town to disassociate her name with the project, losing credit for the original work, or become tangentially involved and endorse something that, to her, lacks artistic integrity. She can't make a strong case against extending the invitation to the craftspeople because the conceptual aspect of the original project was never discussed. What kind of miscommunication took place? Should Joanna have proceeded differently in the conception of the piece?

A second scenario: an international curator creates a series of artist residencies in an isolated indigenous community in Peru. He convinces the town to allow the artists to present a variety of projects there, and gives the artists free rein to respond to the local environment. The community members, who have a very distant or nonexistent relationship with art, find it hard to see the artists as more than crazy tourists or missionaries. The artists gradually decide to take an altruistic approach and start



doing things for the community: fixing roads, volunteering in social services, etc. The community is very appreciative, and the artist's projects, in varied degrees, help improve the life of the town. However, the curator and the artists share a sense that the experience, as beneficial as it was to the town, did not really create interesting or relevant artworks, which was the implicit goal. Did the artists sacrifice too much in the process?

A third scenario: an artist collective from New York City embarks on a road trip project, seeking to instigate a new revolutionary art movement. It plans to hold rallies in different American towns, inviting local artists to discuss and share ideas. Each stop will include a pep talk in the form of a manifesto reading and a discussion with the local artists about how they can effect change in their communities. The collective receives lots of institutional support for the project and secures a variety of spaces in which to do the presentations. It has no problem finding audiences; in most places, local artists are willing to attend the event and engage in a discussion. However, once the collective starts reading its inspirational manifesto, the local art communities view it with suspicion. The collective did not account for the possibility that New York is not necessarily viewed positively in a place like Tulsa and that artists in Tulsa, for example, may not necessarily wish to adhere to the New York art world's ideals nor appreciate being told what to do. In fact, most of the artists the collective encounters are perfectly happy working for themselves and in their own communities—so why create a revolution, for whom, and for what purpose? The artist

collective finds itself with lots of questions, uncertain as to how to proceed.

In these three scenarios—typical situations generated by SEA projects—artists inserted themselves in social environments with populations that usually had not called for their presence and are not expecting intervention via an art project. The key to a successful project lies in understanding the social context in which it will take place and how it will be negotiated with the participants or audience in question. When an artist enters one of these contexts, he or she is suddenly faced with complex and unfamiliar social dynamics expressed in terms and cultural codes different from the ones he or she is accustomed to. If any of these codes are misinterpreted, underestimated, or ignored, things can unfold in such a way that the artist soon feels lost or uncertain about how to proceed, and in some cases it can result in a very unproductive or negative experience for both participants and artist. So while it is not possible to predict the behavior of every individual or community, it is nonetheless essential to have a certain awareness of how interpersonal scenarios emerge and how some of them can be negotiated by developing a better understanding of the needs and interests of the parties involved.

SEA is concerned with situations, but not usually the kind in which a single individual interacts with an inert object. Rather, it concerns itself with situations that lead to a mode of social exchange—that is, interpersonal situations. The relation of individuals with each other through gains or confrontation is covered by social exchange

theory, a product of 1950s psychology and sociology that sees individual relations as based on a sort of social economy.\* While it is not possible to perfectly translate human relationships into a set of economic parameters of supply and demand, social exchange theory does help us understand the complex underpinnings of a wide variety of types of social intercourse, and how outcomes are negotiated (known as outcome interdependence). As complex as individuals are, sociology and psychology have taught us that the vast majority of social situations conform to identifiable patterns. In 2003 a team of sociologists including Harold H. Kelley, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, and others published *An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations*, a theoretical account that describes twenty-one of the most typical social situations and how we behave in negotiating them.† The diagrams in the book are very helpful in understanding the forces that shape the conflicts and potentialities in every social encounter. It is not possible here to discuss the many interpersonal scenarios introduced in the *Atlas*, but the artists' scenarios previously discussed can be best understood by using some of its parameters:

**1. Corresponding versus conflicting interests.** In the three examples, the interaction between artist(s) and community began as an enthusiastic encounter with what appeared to be a common goal: having

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\* See John W. Thibaut and Harold H. Kelley, *The Social Psychology of Groups* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1956).

† Harold Kelley, John G. Holmes, et al. *An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

a conversation, making a collaborative project, and improving a town. Very soon, however, the interests of the parties commenced to bifurcate: the people of Row Creek didn't care about the distinction between high and low art; the Peruvian villagers couldn't care less about art and have other, more practical needs; the local artists had no need for a revolution. In each one of those situations, the artists working on SEA were challenged with responding to emerging conflicting interests. They could choose to bend, to the point of sacrificing their own agendas, but it would mean abandoning their original plans.

**2. Exchange problems.** Either party initiates the project by offering something desirable for the other. For example, the New York City art collective offered an opportunity to each community it visited—a chance to improve its living conditions or its visibility or just simply a chance to have a discussion and a new set of experiences. In most instances, the artists did themselves have very clear expectations—they did not articulate what they wanted to get in exchange.

**3. Information conditions.** Conflict will often result if the parties each have different information or ideas about the situation and, therefore, different motivations; because information is not shared, the parties' actions are not necessarily welcome or echoed. For example, the curator in Peru was secretly hoping that the artists would create antagonistic work; because

he didn't share this with the artists instead he saw them making work that serviced the community in uncritical ways.

A common problem with SEA is that most communities don't understand what a conceptual artist does or the complex demands our profession makes on our activities—for example, documentation and its legal implications: if we videotape an activity, do the participants understand that their images may wind up in a museum collection? Also, more generally, most people don't consider social interaction to be part of the realm of art, and this can cause miscommunication. Part of the frustration felt by the organizers of the Peruvian residency program and the Row Creek Show was that they were unable to communicate the importance of regarding their activities as artwork and what that meant in terms of the engagement they were anticipating. While it is perhaps not possible or appropriate to explain the history of conceptual art to someone who is new to it, honesty and directness are important in establishing relationships of trust, and trust is key in engaging in productive activities with others.

Understanding new interpersonal situations and knowing how to operate within different scenarios is extremely difficult. Those who are professionally trained to deal with social situational variables (social workers, educators, psychologists, etc.) typically do so in constrained environments: a sixth-grade school teacher will be familiar with the variables of reactions and situations of a sixth-grade classroom; a museum educator will be familiar with an



audience's range of reactions in front of a particular painting; and so forth. In contrast, in SEA the variables are as multiple as the social environments and scenarios that an artist may decide to embark on, be it at a café in Vienna or a correctional facility in New Jersey. Yet this is precisely the value of SEA: artists—free agents—insert themselves into the most unexpected social environments in ways that break away from disciplinary boundaries, hoping to discover something in the process. It may take many years of this kind of work to find a true method to the madness of intruding upon and affecting environments whose populations do not always expect us; yet it is reassuring to know that, regardless of which country or space we are working in, human nature is universal, and social scenarios will begin to resonate in our memories for future reference. In the meantime, it is useful to recur to social work as a general reference, as long as it is understood that its tools are meant for a different kind of work. The contrast between the two is complex and must be analyzed carefully.

## **Social Work vs. Social Practice**

A common inquiry I receive from art students regarding the relationship between social work and social practice often takes this form: “If I just want to help people, why should I call it art?” Conversely, a non-artist at a recent SEA conference I attended said to the speaker, “I have been unsuccessfully trying to create a business that supports sustainability. If I call it art, might I have a greater chance of success?”

These questions emerge from the perception that social work and social engaged art are interchangeable or at least that an action in one area may successfully become meaningful in another. It is true that in some cases a social work project that effects change in a positive manner in a community could also fall under the rubric of artwork. Similarly, an artist may share the same or similar values with a social worker—making some forms of SEA appear indistinguishable from social work, which further complicates the blurring between the two areas.

However, social work and SEA, while they operate in the same social ecosystems and can look strikingly similar, differ widely in their goals. Social work is a value-based profession based on a tradition of beliefs and systems that aim for the betterment of humanity and support ideals such as social justice, the defense of human dignity and worth, and the strengthening of human relationships. An artist, in contrast, may subscribe to the same values but make work that ironizes, problematizes, and even enhances tensions around those subjects, in order to provoke reflection.

The traditional argument against equating SEA with social work is that to do so would subject art to direct instrumentalization, relinquishing a crucial aspect of art-making that demands self-reflexivity and criticality (remember the hypothetical children's community mural from the previous chapter). This argument, however, is weak; it precludes the possibility that art can be deliberately instrumental and intentionally abandon any hopes of self-reflexivity, ideas that some artists are interested in.

The stronger argument is that SEA has a double function that social work lacks. When we make a socially engaged artwork, we are not just offering a service to a community (assuming it is a service-oriented piece); we are proposing our action as a symbolic statement in the context of our cultural history (and/or art history) and entering into a larger artistic debate. Artist Paul Chan explicitly articulated his project *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* (2007) as one that aimed to service the local community while also servicing the art world, in a quest to find a symbolic action that would reflect on issues raised by Hurricane Katrina—such as the social invisibility of a substantial segment of American society.\* While SEA works do not have to be that explicit in their purpose, there is always a clear desire by their authors to engage a second interlocutor (or “client,” to use social work terminology), other than the community of participants—that is, the art world, which evaluates the project not just for what it has accomplished, but also as a symbolic action.

Some artists are adamant that their work blurs the boundaries between social work and art work, and others are not concerned whether their work is defined as art or non-art, thus taking a strictly noncommittal position. But in cases like the latter, the simple referencing of the possible dichotomy between art and non-art is already an acceptance that the activity is operating to a degree within the realm of art. Similarly, where the work appears, where the story is told, and if, whether, and how the artist

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\* See Paul Chan, *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide*. New York: Creative Time, 2010.

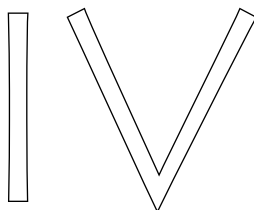
“profits” from the work (whether just in the reputational economy or by selling objects related to the project as artworks) are telling signs of the work’s relationship to art and the art world.

Having established the distinction between social work and SEA, it is useful to now turn to the similarities between the forms. When an artist or a social worker enters in communication with an individual or a community, he or she will be confronted with the history (or lack thereof) of the individual or community with art or social issues, which will color the kind of experiences he or she will have as well as the initial nature of the exchange. Both social work and art practice are based on the postmodern perspective that it is the *perception* of facts, not facts in themselves, that matters. As such, the awareness by artists or social workers of the public’s perception of them and of the situation is what should inform their way to approach a situation. In art, the awareness of others’ perceptions is valuable in that it gives the artist tools to upset expectations either in positive or negative ways. Artists can benefit from learning how social workers inform themselves about a social environment and record local problems, hopes, and beliefs. Particularly in situations where artists need to earn the trust of a community, it is important to understand the mutual respect, inclusivity, and collaborative involvement that are main tenets of social work.

The next challenge is how to manage those scenarios once one has recognized them. In the examples given above, the projects, not unfolding as anticipated, have a

commonality: at some point in the exchange, there was a break in communication. In the following section, I will address a central medium of SEA: dialogue.





## Conversation

In 1992, at the Café des Phares on place de la Bastille, Paris, a French philosopher named Marc Sautet started a series of two-hour Sunday gatherings during which anyone could join in philosophical discussion. Known as *cafés philosophiques* or *cafés philos*, they were meant to revive the Socratic dialogue by asking questions such as, “Is life worth living?” People from all walks of life participated, not just philosophers, and attendance reached two hundred. Despite Sautet’s death in 1998, the concept has proliferated, and similar café events continue to take place in cities throughout the world, some under the name Socrates Café.

In Sautet’s approach, as described by Christopher Phillips, who popularized the Socrates Café in the United States, the discussion structure differed from the Socratic method of dialogue, which is not truly horizontal.\* A

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\* Christopher Phillips, *Socrates Café: A Fresh Taste of Philosophy*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001.

reader of the Platonic dialogues knows the hoops through which Socrates puts each one of his interlocutors, asking questions that suggest their own answers and cornering the perplexed student until the grand conclusion—apparently in Socrates’s mind all along—emerges. Instead, a Socrates Café conversation is less a well-paved road to a predetermined conclusion and more of a meandering exchange that hopefully will lead to a somewhat satisfactory consensus.

Sautet’s project was not meant to be SEA, but it could have been. Today hundreds of artists throughout the world use the process of conversation as their medium, for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the hopeful search for a collective conclusion around a particular issue.

Conversation is the center of sociality, of collective understanding and organization. Organized talks allow people to engage with others, create community, learn together, or simply share experiences without going any farther.

Grant Kester’s book *Conversation Pieces* (2004) is a pivotal contribution to the recognition and validation of the existence and relevance of a dialogical art, which today is largely seen as a form of SEA. Further historical and theoretical grounding for dialogic practices has been addressed by scholars I have mentioned in previous sections of this book.

Nonetheless, there is not a lot of literature studying the dynamics of conversations taking place in contemporary art contexts. When a project based on conversational approaches is discussed, more emphasis is usually placed on the *fact* of that basis than on the content or structure of

the conversation or what the conversation *does*. (This is not to devalue work that is about creating the semblance of a conversation, which in itself may be interesting.) However, as I have emphasized in other sections of this book, in order to arrive at an intelligent, critical understanding of any practice or project, we must be able to evaluate the claims it makes against its actual operations, especially in the case of SEA. The need to reach greater clarity about the process of these works is necessary due to the fact that most projects that focus on conversation as a central component of the work tend to be subsumed with the generic and rather unhelpful umbrella label of “dialogic practices.” If our intention is to truly understand verbal exchange with others as a tool, we must gain a nuanced understanding of the relationship between art and speech and reflect on the way in which one affects the other.

In my work in museums and in following the critical and curatorial discourses of contemporary art, I have always been struck by how little attention is given to dialogue or debate; instead, the exposition of theses through curatorial essays, public events, and art magazines is favored. (The closest thing to discussion in the art world is the interview, although this mechanism is used primarily to facilitate a monologue by an artist or other influential figure.) Real debates on issues of aesthetics are rare and are surprising when they occur. This indifference to the value of dialogue can possibly be explained by the influence of French postmodern philosophy (that of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, etc.) on contemporary art theory, since these thinkers consider dialogue to be a flawed method

of communication, limited by power structures and logocentrism. The tradition of education, in contrast, grew out of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, John Dewey's pragmatism, the neo-pragmatism of Jurgen Habermas and Richard Rorty, the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, and the work of others for whom the act of discussion is a process of emancipation. This thinking gives a clearer picture of the problems and potential of discussion in SEA.

Conversation is conveniently placed between pedagogy and art; historically, it has been seen not only as a key educational tool but also as a form of individual enrichment that requires as much expertise as any delicate craft. When people refer to the "lost art of conversation," they are affirming that verbal exchange requires expertise, imagination, creativity, wit, and knowledge. In a famous 1847 essay on the subject, Thomas de Quincey describes conversation as emerging from a need for a "colloquial commerce of thought" that would complement the power created by the "great commerce": "a power separate and *sui generis*." It was apparent, he wrote, "that a great art must exist somewhere applicable to this power—not in the Pyramids, or in the tombs of Thebes, but in the unwrought quarries of men's minds, so many and so dark."<sup>\*</sup> In other words, the art of conversation, when skillfully performed, is a form of enrichment.

The educated conversation described by de Quincey and the existential exchanges of the Socrates Café are

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<sup>\*</sup> Thomas de Quincey, "Conversation," in Horatio S. Krans, ed., *The Lost Art of Conversation: Selected Essays* (New York: Sturgis & Walton Company, 1910), p. 20.

but two examples of the myriad of ways in which verbal exchange takes form, described variously as dialogue, conversation, speech, talk, chat, or debate, depending on its level of formality. Yet, one could argue that, in the end, all forms of speech aim (explicitly or not) for the two basic goals of the Socrates Café and de Quincey's "art of conversation": truth and insight garnered through process.

It is fairly well established that formal modes of speech (such as the political speech or the educational lecture) are the least sociable approaches.\* While these can have a powerful effect on audiences, their main goal is conversion rather than exchange. This is why formal modes of presentation are employed by contemporary artists mainly for parody or as critique of the forms themselves (the performance lecture, for example), and as such the uses veer closer to the theatrical or performative. They are expositional formats.

SEA artists who seek to create a more convivial environment tend to favor less formal conversational structures. An artist may create a community space in which people are invited to discuss books; another may propose a town hall meeting; another makes himself available to have conversations on the street; yet another conducts a series of interviews among local residents. The objective in many cases is to eliminate formality and protocol, encourage participants to give, and, hopefully, arrive at interesting exchanges. (If, instead, boredom is the objective, it is an easy task to accomplish.) Yet in the vast majority of my

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\* See Donald Bligh, *What's the use of lectures*, 1971.



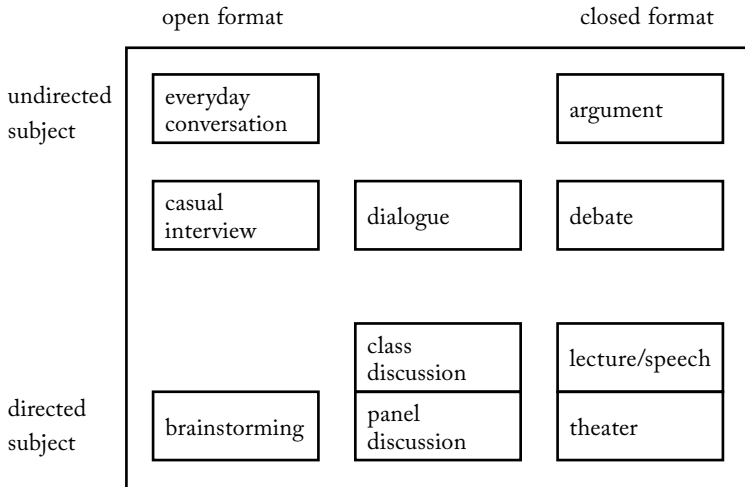
conversations with artists, both established and emerging, I have found that their approaches to conducting such conversations are, for the most part, intuitive and based on trial and error.

Open structures rely on spontaneity, which is hard to achieve. At a party we may have great conversations, or not—we don't know what we will encounter. Usually we try to gather with people we look forward to interacting with, and hope we will have good conversations. Informal exchanges can be unpredictable: they can be interesting, or they can lead nowhere.

The goal of an artwork may be to create a space in which *any* conversation can take place. In other cases, a work may exist simply to present the *semblance* of a meaningful conversation—where the idea of conversing, but not the conversation itself, matters. These latter works do not concern us here, as they are equivalent to the symbolic actions I discussed earlier, providing only illustrations of interaction.

In most dialogic art projects, however, artists are not satisfied with having just *any* conversation. Whether or not the conversation is the center of the work, the objectives usually are to arrive at a common understanding on a given subject, to raise awareness about a subject or problem, to debate a particular issue, or to collaborate on a final product. For better or worse, an artist must adhere to certain structures to attain a certain result. While experimentation can be positive, it is not necessary to blindly reinvent in art practice what is already an established practice in education.

Conversation has two variables: specificity of content and specificity of format. The following diagram outlines their interrelation:



Depending on the structure of the subject and the format of a speech act, it can fall within recognizable formats, including the lecture, the debate, traditional theater, and casual conversation.

A greater level of direction and restriction of format in a speech act necessarily reduces the possibilities of interaction with an audience—participants in this situation are the most passive, as at a traditional theatrical production or a straightforward academic lecture, for example. In contrast, speech in open formats and about undirected subjects is, basically, most of our communication in everyday life: small talk and casual exchanges with people in

the street, for example. A brainstorming session is a fairly open format of exchange, usually with a directive or an objective: a group usually brainstorms to solve a problem, to come up with a new idea, or the like.

The conjunctions of format and content outlined above result in familiar discursive models, none of which may suffice for an art project. In fact, many discursive art projects rely on shifting formats, oscillating between the formal presentation, the vivid debate, and the free-form conversation. However, the provisional divisions between formats may help in gaining a critical understanding of a particular project, different, perhaps, from what it appears to be at face value: it is fairly common for an art project to be described as a conversation or debate when it actually is more of a monologue or an unstructured chat. If one utilizes this general overview in analysis of art projects, it becomes fairly clear which discursive art projects operate under more or less conventional constraints.

Needless to say, if the objective is to have *any* conversation or to allow a verbal exchange to go off on a random tangent, not much is needed to accomplish the goal: the artist may basically let live events take over. However, when a project calls for a discussion centering on a particular goal or tries to arrive at a particular core consensus or agreement, the demand on the conversation leader is infinitely more complex, and—I would argue—far more rewarding. A well-conducted directed conversation relies on dialogic structure to arrive at mutual understanding and learning without losing the balance between interlocutors. For this to succeed, it is important for the instigator of

the discussion to know about the depth of engagement he or she is achieving with the audience.

Discussion-based teaching practices can be very helpful in determining the level of engagement among a group of interlocutors. One of the most popular means of gauging students' levels of engagement is the taxonomy developed by a large group of educators in the mid-twentieth century led by Benjamin Bloom. Bloom's taxonomy involves the following levels of understanding: 1. Knowledge; 2. Comprehension; 3. Application; 4. Analysis; 5. Synthesis; 6. Evaluation.\* The first level (knowledge) is the stage at which students absorb facts or information. At higher levels, students are capable of assimilating knowledge and applying it to new situations and new problems. At the highest level, students are capable of understanding complex problems and collectively addressing them by providing possible solutions.

Bloom's taxonomy was developed for the classroom, which is different from the scenarios faced by an artist who works with a community, an activist group, or a random group of individuals. However, SEA places value on the depth of its intellectual impact on individuals, and so this taxonomy is relevant for artists, because it can help indicate the level at which our interlocutors are engaged in the project, what we can expect of them, and the significance of the impact we are having on their thinking and the impact they are having on ours.

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\* See John E. Henning, *The Art of Discussion-Based Teaching* (2008). New York:Routledge (pp. 18–21).

## Participatory Dialogue and Mutual Interest

Opening a discursive space gives others the opportunity to insert their contents into the structure we have built. As this structure becomes more open, more freedom is given to the group to shape the exchange. The main challenge is to find the balance between the investment of the participants and the freedom provided. This means that when we open a structure of conversation, we should be prepared to accept participant input.

When SEA projects do not meet their objectives, it is often because the artist has not been attentive to the interests of the community and thus is unable to see the ways in which its members can contribute to an exchange. Many times, artists who are inexperienced in working with communities see them in a utilitarian capacity—that is, as opportunities by which they may develop their art practices—but they are ultimately uninterested in immersing themselves in the universe of the community, with all its interests and concerns.

This detachment of the artist may make the participants feel as if they are being used instead of like true partners in a dialogue or collaboration. In other words, the openness of the format and content of the project must be directly proportional to the level of genuine interest that the artist shows toward the experiences of the community and his or her desire to learn from these experiences. These are not traits that can be created artificially, and their existence is a true indicator of whether an artist is

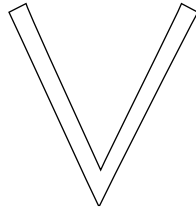


suited to working with communities: it may be impossible to truly learn from others without having true curiosity about their lives and ideas.

If, however, the artist acts solely as agent and completely obeys the decisions and follows the interests of the community, he or she not only gives up the responsibility of creating a critical dialogue, but also proposes a dependent situation, in which the artist's job is only to solve a problem, as a professional technician—a common issue in social work as well. Ironically, although such gestures of service are usually well intentioned, they are in essence paternalistic and reflect the same lack of interest in open exchange as an artist who imposes his or her vision on a community. Artist and community must find the right balance of openness and mutual interest through direct communication.

This delicate negotiation is similar to the one between educator and student: artists and teachers both must demonstrate respect and a sincere interest in their interlocutors, but at the same time they need to construct relationships in which the exchanges are mutual and both parties offer help and contribute new insights, while still challenging their interlocutors' assumptions and demanding their investment in the exchange.





## Collaboration

The notion of collaboration presupposes the sharing of responsibilities between parties in the creation of something new. In SEA, the tone of the collaboration is generally set by the artist, even when a community invites him or her to work with its members, because the artist is expected to be the conceptual director of the project. Collaboration in SEA is thus defined largely by the role the artist assumes. There are two main issues to consider in setting up that role: accountability and expertise. In both respects, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy proves very helpful.

In working with Brazilian farmers in his successful literacy program in 1961 in Pernambuco, where Freire taught 300 sugarcane workers to read and write in 45 days,\* Freire directly acknowledged the differences in knowledge and

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\* A useful reflection of this period is in Paulo Freire's 1994 book *Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Continuum Books, 2004.

experience between himself and the farmers: he created a game in which he asked them a question about something they probably wouldn't know about, and vice versa. He first asked them if they knew, for example, who Plato was (they did not). Then the farmers asked him a question about agriculture, of which Freire knew nothing. In this way, Freire brought home the point that the differences in knowledge between the parties did not denote superior intelligence on either side but instead was connected to the difference in their environments, interests, and access to various opportunities.

In conversation with Freire, American educator Myles Horton once remarked: "my expertise is in knowing *not* to be an expert."<sup>\*</sup> He meant that his role in his work consisted not in telling his students what they didn't know, but instead in helping them discover their own expertise and then decide for themselves what they needed to know. To simply provide them with information would, he felt, be patronizing and would create a pattern of dependency.

Certainly, the goal of critical pedagogy is not to create an artwork, but collaborative art also requires modes of communication that recognize the limitations and potentials of a collective relationship. Freire's approach provides a path to thinking about how an artist can engage with a community in a productive collaborative capacity.

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<sup>\*</sup> Paulo Freire and Myles Horton: *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (p. 128). Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.

## Accountability

For a collaboration to be successful, the distribution of accountability between the artist and his or her collaborators must be articulated.

Collaboration in SEA can range widely, from projects in which all decision making is done by the group to those in which the artist alone has complete control (a range exemplified by our hypothetical community mural project and the work of Santiago Sierra). Sierra's work is hardly a collaboration at all, as the product is highly controlled by the artist. In the case of the children's mural, at the other end of spectrum, the artist has very little accountability for the final product.

A false assumption that I have often encountered in discussions about SEA is that the artist can act as a neutral entity, an invisible catalyst of experiences. When a professional artist or arts educator interacts or collaborates with community with little previous involvement with art, the community has an undeniable disadvantage in experience and knowledge, as long as the relationship unfolds primarily in the art terrain. In this case, the artist is a teacher, leader, artistic director, boss, instigator, and benefactor, and these roles must be assumed fully. There are artists who try to be merely facilitators, to the point of denying that they are using any individual initiative at all. Claire Bishop characterizes this as an attempt at the "elimination of authorship," grounded in anticapitalist premises and in



a sort of Catholic altruism, a way to redeem the guilt of social privilege.\*

But the artist cannot disappear. As I have shown in previous sections, while authorship in SEA may be different than in other forms of art, it cannot be altogether eliminated.

## Expertise

The tendency to try to act as mere facilitator is connected to another source of confusion about the role of the artist in a collaborative relationship: that of not understanding where one's expertise lies. These doubts generally emerge from a sincere puzzlement among artists, who feel that in SEA they are merely "playing" among various disciplines. This leads to the question, from students, "Should I dedicate myself to a useful social profession instead of making art?"

The expertise of the artist lies, like Freire's, in being a non-expert, a provider of frameworks on which experiences can form and sometimes be directed and channeled to generate new insights around a particular issue.

## Frameworks of Collaboration

In every SEA project, the level of input expected from the community must be defined. As discussed above, it should be proportionate to the community's investment in the

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\* Claire Bishop, *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*. Artforum, February 2006 pp. 179–185.

project and to the responsibility it is assigned in it. It is unrealistic to demand a lot of participation or work from collaborators who are not also part of the decision-making process, without creating other incentives to make them feel ownership of the project. While a group overall may be eager to participate for the sake of the experience, it is not likely that all participants will be willing to truly invest without a clear incentive.

However, if the community makes all the decisions, the artist is operating merely as a service agent. This relationship reduces art practice to yet another form of social welfare, similar to that of the above-mentioned children's mural—a feel-good action that doesn't truly create a meaningful framework for reflection or critical exchange.

Thus, to enter a collaborative process with a community requires a reflection on the terms under which the artist and the group will interact. This is a difficult task, and it tends to generate anxiety for the artist, who is under pressure to provide a strong framework for interaction while making a work that is conceptually original, provocative, and distinctive. Both goals are hard to accomplish by themselves, and the complication escalates once we bring more people into the picture, with their own ideas and interests.

What must be recognized, first, is the value that individuals bring to a collaboration. Each individual has his or her own expertise and interests, and when these are put to service in the collaboration, the collective motivation can be contagious. Second, we need to create frameworks that are not completely predetermined in theme or structure,

as an overly predetermined plan will likely not allow for the input of potential collaborators; they may feel that they can't put their own expertise and interests to use.

Open Space Technology (OST), a form of collective brainstorming, can prove very beneficial in understanding the needs and interests of a group. This approach for managing a collective meeting was invented by consultant Harrison Owen in the mid-1980s. OST is designed to address a real and tangible problem with a group that is invested in solving it. After an initial brainstorming session, in which an overall agenda is created, a variety of breakout sessions are formed, composed of those most invested in individual topics (with the option to move to another conversation if they wish to do so). Although OST was developed for situations common in the corporate world, it can prove very useful where an artist is trying to understand the issues that concern a group of people and to develop a project around them. Owen's self-explanatory statements about the process may be particularly helpful: "Whoever shows up is the right person," and "When it's over, it's over."

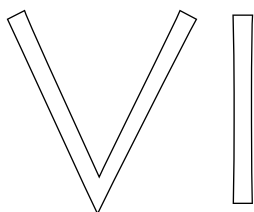
## **Collaborative Environment**

Reggio Emilia schools are famous for the beauty of their surroundings and the multisensorial appeal of their classrooms. The philosophy is that a stimulating learning environment (visually and in other respects) promotes creativity. Of the components of SEA, the collaborative environment may receive the least attention. Usually

because of lack of resources or similar constraints, meetings or workshops tend to be conducted in whatever space is available. Today it is a cliché to see the barren space of a kunsthalle gallery filled with wooden tables, chairs, and publications, presumably for the visitor to peruse; this is considered an “activation” of the space.

Most of us in our SEA projects are unable to recreate the idyllic environment of a beautiful house in northern Italy. However, small gestures (such as providing food and a comfortable space) can go a long way in encouraging conviviality. The challenge for an artist is how to adapt successful models—such as that of Reggio Emilia—to the realities and possibilities of the environment he or she is working in.





## **Antagonism**

So far in this book I have addressed approaches and strategies that favor congenial experiences: dialogue and collaboration are, for the most part, activities of agreement. However, the antisocial or antagonistic social action is a fundamental area of activity in SEA.

Some artworks are particularly obvious in their confrontational nature, but the fact is that all art that seeks to advance the dialogue on an issue features a degree of disagreement or a critical stance. It is wrong, therefore, to create a division between controversial or confrontational works and non-controversial ones. Antagonism is not a genre but rather a quality of art-making that is simply more exacerbated in some practices than in others.

Confrontation implies taking a critical position on a given issue without necessarily proposing an alternative. Its greatest strength is in raising questions, not in providing answers. Many confrontational strategies adopted



by SEA artists today are historically indebted to artists associated with institutional critique, such as Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Andrea Fraser, Hans Haacke, and Fred Wilson. Focusing mostly on the institutional frameworks of art, these artists exposed power structures in their works, adopting at times ironic, humorous, provocative, or openly antagonistic stances.

In the case of Santiago Sierra, the contemporary art world recognizes his actions as significant conceptual statements because, as much as some may object to his work, confrontation, as a mode of operation, is instinctively recognized by those familiar with the vocabulary of art. Sierra's works are at home in a long history of antagonism in art. They make direct reference to Minimalism and performance art and also align with the rebellious and at times antisocial actions that have propelled the avant-garde.

In some ways a confrontational artwork is easier to orchestrate than one that requires many hours of negotiation, consensus building, and collaboration with a community. After all, it is expedient to pay someone to do a task or to subject a group of people to an experience without their consent than to hold a series of long meetings, as often happens in collaborative community art projects. However, a negative approach faces its own series of hurdles: for example, an antagonistic action might be regarded as so alienating that it is dismissed as hostile for no good reason. This is why it is useful to understand the general ways in which a confrontational approach may be taken and how it may impact a group of people.

Antagonistic approaches engage audiences under the same categories of participation outlined previously:

**Voluntary.** Participants willingly submit themselves to the action, out of their own interest or because there is an ulterior purpose for doing so. (In Sierra's work the interaction is based on a financial transaction, bringing the project closer to a directed performance.)

**Nonvoluntary.** Participants find themselves in the middle of the action without having previously consented to it. Activist groups, protest art and other guerrilla practices would fit within this category. An example would be the work *The Couple in the Cage* (1992) by Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco, where they exhibited themselves inside a cage at natural history museums as recently "discovered" Amerindians, providing an aura of interpretive authenticity that disguised the artwork as a real exhibition, and provoked audiences to react to the piece as if this exhibition of human beings was a real situation.

**Involuntary.** The participant unexpectedly finds herself in the middle of a situation after being initially enticed to engage in some activity. For example, in 1968 Argentinean artist Graciela Carnevale made a work that consisted of locking visitors to an opening reception inside the gallery. Visitors willingly attended the event but were not aware that they would be locked inside the space.

The greatest difference in these scenarios is the kind of relationship between the artist and the participants and the discussion that takes place between them concerning the action to take place. In the case of the simple imposition of an experience (nonvoluntary), no negotiation is allowed. In a voluntary relationship, there is a clear-cut agreement (such as a contract) between the parties. With involuntary participation, negotiation is the most subtle and difficult to do, because in these cases deceit or seduction plays a central role in the work. In these instances, participants (be they the unwitting audience of an event or direct collaborators) at first willingly engage but later become involuntary participants or actors in a SEA experience. Involuntary confrontational tactics closely simulate culture jamming, a practice of anti-consumerist activists. The Yes Men, a duo of activists who trick the media and corporations into participating in fictional schemes that expose their questionable practices, are a well-known example of culture jamming. The enticement approach is a bit of a mind game, in which audiences and participants are placed in environments that compel them to engage in a particular way, not realizing until later that they are inside an artwork of which they are the subjects.

In May of 2003 a group of artists—to which I belonged—conducted such an experiment in Mexico City, in response to the increasingly conservative climate of government-run cultural policy (or lack thereof) in Mexico.\*

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\* *Primer Congreso de Purificación Cultural Urbana de la ciudad de México* (First Mexico City Congress of Urban Purification). Done in collaboration with artist Ilana Boltvinik as part of the X Teresa performance festival, Mexico City, 2003.



**CULTURA**  
JUEVES 13 JULIO 2003 4a

■ **Sugieren en encuentro promover taller de sensibilización para políticos**

## Proponen artistas independientes remedios para *sanar* a la cultura

■ **Asumen su responsabilidad en la desvinculación entre creadores e instituciones gubernamentales**

Cuando se creó el consejo consultivo que veta a la cultura como una forma creativa, educar a los políticos en cuestiones culturales, dejar el arte en manos del Estado y de sus comités administrativos, y desaparecer instituciones ligadas al arte y la cultura son las cuatro propuestas que se presentaron en el primer Congreso Internacional de Perifoneas Culturales Urbanas de la Ciudad de México, organizado por creadores independientes, que se realizó este sábado y al que asistieron artistas, críticos de arte e investigadores.

Uno de los propósitos que se planteó en el congreso, es el que se denunció la falta de diálogo entre las autoridades y los artistas como una responsabilidad compartida, en la creación del concepto nacional para la creación de la cultura y en la creación de una política cultural.

Los participantes, entre otros, fueron: Natalia Delgado, Amanda Ortiz-Gutiérrez, Gabriel Macoilla y Beatriz de la Sosa, entre otros.

El nuevo concepto parte de la idea "de que la cultura es una fuerza creativa", desde donde se propone, de acuerdo con un manifiesto de consenso: "La cultura, promovida y difundida de todas aquellas expresiones culturales que propicien la evolución de la sociedad así como la creación, fortaleciendo acciones de

Martín Bides, Sara Beltrán, Néstor Guillón, Rafael Delviera, María Inés Rosado, Pablo Velasco, Alberto Ríos Miranda y Ryan Hill, participantes en el primer Congreso Internacional de Perifoneas Culturales Urbanas de la Ciudad de México.

*La Jornada* newspaper, July 13, 2003

The project took the form of a daylong conference in the Gran Hotel Ciudad de México. The event was publicized not as an art project but as a real conference, with a call for papers about cultural policy. Of the submissions received, six were selected for the conference; six others were scripted by the artists and read by actors, unbeknownst to the audience. The six scripted presentations formulated points of view that are rarely expressed in academic or public forums. One called for the complete elimination of national arts funding, arguing that too much goes to support the bureaucratic apparatus and too little to actual art-making. Another paper—read by performance artist Ryan Hill, who was introduced as director of a conservative American organization—proposed a U.S.-run cultural

policy program for Mexico. It generated an outraged media blitz in various Mexican newspapers, which in turn led to a public debate on cultural policy, as originally intended by the organizers. After a few days it emerged that the event may have been a performance, but it remained unclear what elements had been fabricated. When pressed, we released a statement to the effect that whether or not the views in the symposium had been expressed by actors or real-life people didn't alter the substance of the debate. In our view, to have declared the event or part of it a performance would have allowed some people to dismiss it as "just art."

The implicit logic of the confrontational approach is that certain statements cannot be negotiated openly or directly with the public, and so people have to be forced into the experience through a series of steps that are firmly in control of the artist. Many of the works in this category are politically motivated and comment on issues through bold actions.

The approach has some distinctive qualities:

1. Antagonistic SEA rarely aspires for complete alienation but rather aims to create a line of discussion around a relevant issue, provoking reflection and debate and therefore justifying its extreme measures.
2. To make a statement that is not altogether alienating, such works must find a balance between means and ends. A very violent and aggressive approach is more likely to be tolerated when the point is equally grave; otherwise it may be regarded as arbitrary and

unnecessary. This is why many of the memorable artworks made in this way make a direct reference to a very serious political or social issue. Cildo Meireles's controversial 1971 performance *Tiradentes: Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner* consisted in tying ten live chickens to a spike and setting them on fire. If the piece had not been a direct comment on the brutal military regime in Brazil, the action may not have allowed some to oversee the moral implications of slaughtering the animals. Cuban artist Tania Bruguera creates similar confrontational scenarios in her work—such as having served cocaine during a lecture in Bogotá in 2009.\*

3. It is clear that the impact, perception, and assimilation (or rejection) of these kinds of actions are dependent on the time and place in which they occur; what pushes the envelope just enough in one context may not do so in another.

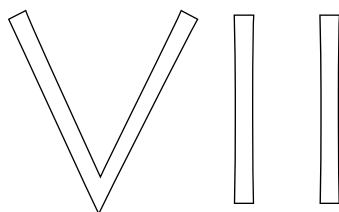
4. Finally, antagonism can also manifest itself in the self-representation of the action. Many SEA projects that proclaim themselves to be collaborations but actually are symbolic actions (as previously discussed) are antagonistic in essence, as they present themselves as something they are not. This slight manipulation is another vehicle for confrontation, for whatever purposes it may serve.

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\* See article *Tania Bruguera, que sirvió cocaína en un performance, suele hacer montajes polémicos*. *Diario El Tiempo*, Bogotá, September 11, 2009.







## Performance

In medieval France, a popular celebration known as the Feast of the Ass was held on January 14 to celebrate the flight of Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus into Egypt as related in the Bible. A donkey was led into the church to preside in the mass. Similar in nature to the Feast of Fools, the Feast of the Ass incorporated a temporary change in social roles, in which those in subordinate positions could act as authorities, the old could act young, men could act as women, and so forth, culminating with the lowly beast becoming the highest power. In contemporary art theory—and usually in describing relational works—the most familiar articulation of this idea is that of literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who described this cultural inversion as “the carnivalesque,” in which social hierarchies are temporarily broken through satire, celebration, and chaos.\*

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\* See Mikhail Bakhtin [1941, 1965], *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Performance is embedded in SEA, not only because SEA is performative but because it borrows from several conceptual mechanisms and strategies that are derived from the history of performance art. As such, SEA confronts many of the issues that also belong to performance art, including the role of documentation (which will be discussed in the following chapter) and the relationship to spectacle and to entertainment. It is useful to ascertain what strategies of performance art are at play in SEA in order to get a better understanding of them.

Many SEA projects are activist in spirit or seek to make strong social or political statements, making their agenda unambiguous. However, some SEA projects don't have declared aspirations other than to engage audiences in unexpected experiences. Many museums have jumped on the bandwagon of SEA, bringing artists in to enliven their mostly unlively galleries and offer activities that may engage their visitors. These efforts, while almost always valuable to a degree, blur the boundaries between an artist's gesture and a face-painting event for members. It raises a question: How can we determine the point at which a socially engaged work becomes subservient to a particular cause to the point of being purely entertaining? What is our goal when we engage playfully with an audience? Is it enough to create ephemeral, entertaining, or confrontational gestures, regardless of whether or to what degree they reach the consciousness of individuals or communities?

The problem is difficult to address because each artwork presents a different situation, but it may be helpful to look

at performance art's relationship with spectacle and art education, which has its own familiar dilemma in this respect, often referred to as the problem of *edutainment*.

As has been observed in the recent emergence of performance art festivals, the definition of the genre is so fluid that it is nearly impossible to restrict it to a particular form of live presentation. Performance can be a spectacle and still be consistent in its relationship with the history of art, which is arguably the reason why it should be connected to the practice. However, the spectacle presented in performance art is usually the means, not the end, of the activity. This is to say that when a performance appears to be merely a great spectacle, there is usually more than meets the eye—namely, a critique of spectacle embedded in the spectacle itself.

In education, spectacle is also meant to be the means, not the end, of an activity. We all recognize the attraction of theater, music, and dance, and audiences are usually comfortable with assuming the role of spectators. The critique that education-generated spectacles often receive—when they are pejoratively called “edutainment”—is that the supposed critical substance of the event has been diluted into an essentially commonplace spectacle far removed from the goals of education.

The same principles that apply to both performance and education apply to SEA. Magicians, clowns, and mimes are not usually considered contemporary artists, yet they are wonderful sources of entertainment to audiences. If, as artists, the aspiration of an SEA project is merely to entertain the public, even through less orthodox means,

it is hard to make a case for it as a meaningful artistic exploration.

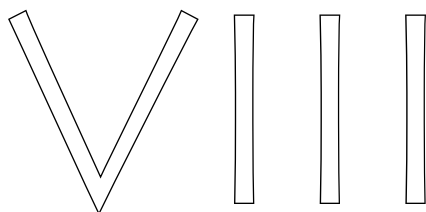
Yet, it is important to retain an aspect of play in SEA and be aware of its performative function in social interactions. However, it is only when play upsets, even if temporarily, the existing social values (Bakhtin's "carnivalesque") that room is created for reflection, escaping the merely hedonistic experience of spectacle.

Because of the strengths of the communities created through such performative experiments, in them authorship is tenuous at best and the process of exchange is so important that an outcome visible to an outside observer—"the product," in an art market sense—may not be that relevant or even materialize. Finally, the boundaries between artwork and experience are blurred, in the same way that authorship and collectivity are blended, documentation and literature are one, and fiction is turned into real experience and vice versa. All components of a traditional structure of production and interpretation are turned around and resignified. Nonetheless, this resignification rarely is done for its own sake—we could call it a Feast of the Ass with an agenda. Because of the insertion of the pedagogical element, the exchanges that take place in these experiences are constructive, in a direct or indirect fashion. Artists take their tactics from the replication of institutional structures, but allowing carnivalesque interactions both validates the experience as an artwork and still manages to remain constructive. The Feast of the Ass is not only an inversion of social roles but of meanings and interpretations within a discipline, conflating them,

at times letting them cancel each other out, and at times joining them in progressive ways, constructing models of interactions that other disciplines are too shy or reluctant to try. What art-making has to offer is not accurate representation but rather the complication of readings so that we can discover new questions. It is when we position ourselves in those tentative locations, and when we persist in making them into concrete experiences, that interstices become locations of meaning.







## Documentation

Authorship hinges on the existence of a recognizable product. It is hard to claim to be an author of any kind if there is no tangible product to claim as one's own. Yet that is precisely what lies at the center of SEA: the idea that an intangible social interaction between a group of people can constitute the core of an artwork. Documentation, often taking the place of an end product, helps reinforce the presence of an authorial hand—for example, the copyright of a photograph of a collective action belongs, usually, to the artist. But what happens when the artist is the sole author of the documentation of a collective action?

In contemporary art and in art history in general, the voice of the public is generally missing; it is the voice of the artists, the curators, and the critics that appears to matter. Yet in projects where the experience of a group of participants lies at the core of the work, it seems incongruous not to record their responses. If these individuals

were the primary recipients of a transformative experience, it should reside within them to describe it, not the artist, critic, or curator. The critic, in exchange, should function as an interpreter of those accounts but not the primary reporter of them, unless he or she has been an active participant.

In SEA, it is important to address the role that documentation plays in the work by thinking both about its relationship with the parent form—performance art—and with the participatory public. In their own descriptions, artists commonly blur the line between what actually happened and what he or she wished had happened (defined previously as actual versus symbolic action). Whether the blurring gesture is a claim for autonomy or a response to the fear of being pinned down and called to task for what he or she has done is of little relevance: the bottom line is that a work that shows little concern for verifiable documentation can't be considered to be more than a work of fiction—a symbolic piece.

The tendency to use documentation as proof of a practice and as the relic of a work may be related to the legacy of the action-based art of the 1970s. Documentation of those performance actions generally consists of a film or video or a series of photographs of what happened as well as word-of-mouth accounts, written descriptions, and interviews. We know—or at least are sufficiently persuaded—by images and personal accounts that Chris Burden did have himself shot, and the reality of the event is important to us. The photographs and films may become relics, artworks in themselves, or surrogates for

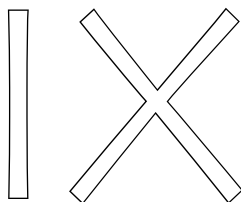
the original work, but in all three cases they retain some aspect of “product” and, as such, a direct connection to a product maker—that is, an author.

Documentation in SEA, if the goal is to be objective and verifiable, should not be an exclusive extension of the author for a number of reasons. To bring Jürgen Habermas one more time into the discussion: if we accept that SEA is a type of communicative action—the result of an intersubjective dynamic—it is incongruous that its documentation be only the one-sided account of the artist. If I organize a collective action and then describe and illustrate it on my own, however I want, I am taking an instrumentalizing approach to what in theory was a collective experience. Habermas would argue that, as someone who was embedded in the action, an artist—even if acting in good faith and making efforts to be objective in representing what happened—is a subject of the action, and as such we can’t rely on his or her descriptions: they may be delusional about the artist, the project, and its relationship with the world. Most performance historians take this as a given, even art historians who try to reconstruct performances, exhibitions, and other ephemeral events, recognizing that the memories or perspective of an artist may be skewed for a great variety of reasons.

Similarly, documentation should be regarded as an inextricable component of an action, one which, ideally, becomes a quotidian and evolving component of the event, not an element of postproduction but a coproduction of viewers, interpreters, and narrators. Multiple witness accounts, different modes of documentation, and, most

importantly, a public record of the evolution of the project in real time are ways to present an event in its multiple angles and allow for multiple interpretations.

SEA documentation must be understood and utilized in full recognition of its inadequacy as a surrogate for the actual experience (unless it is meant to be the final product, in which case the work would not be SEA). Documentation of a particular action or activity is usually displayed in a traditional exhibition format, in which it is allowed to narrate the experience. While it may be informative, this approach is frustrating to the gallery visitor, who is exposed to a representation of the experience and not to the experience itself. In this regard, criticisms of SEA as presented in conventional exhibitions are well founded. SEA can't evoke the immediacy of a collective experience in gallery goers by presenting a video recording of it. Whatever they end up experiencing in such a case is just that—a video or a set of photographs; if such documents are presented as artworks then they may be scrutinized as a video installation or conceptual photograph but not as the social experience they may have intended to communicate.



## Transpedagogy

In this book I have discussed SEA primarily through the lens of pedagogy. For that reason, it is particularly relevant to acknowledge that a substantial portion of SEA projects explicitly describe themselves as pedagogical. In 2006 I proposed the term “Transpedagogy” to refer to projects by artists and collectives that blend educational processes and art-making in works that offer an experience that is clearly different from conventional art academies or formal art education.\* The term emerged out of the necessity to describe a common denominator in the work of a number of artists that escaped the usual definitions used around participatory art.

In contrast to the discipline of art education, which traditionally focuses on the interpretation of art or teaching

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\* See Helguera, “Notes Toward a Transpedagogy,” in *Art, Architecture and Pedagogy: Experiments in Learning*, Ken Erlich, Editor. Los Angeles: Viralnet.net, 2010.



art-making skills, in Transpedagogy the pedagogical process is the core of the artwork. Such works create their own autonomous environment, mostly outside of any academic or institutional framework.

It is important to set aside, as I have done in previous sections, the symbolic practices of education and those practices that propose a rethinking of education through art only in theory but not in practice.

Education-as-art projects may appear contradictory through the lens of strict pedagogy. They often aim to democratize viewers, making them partners, participants, or collaborators in the construction of the work, yet also retain the opacity of meaning common in contemporary art vocabularies. It goes against the nature of an artwork to explain itself, and yet this is precisely what educators do in lessons or curriculum—thus the clash of disciplinary goals. In other words, artists, curators, and critics liberally employ the term “pedagogy” when speaking of these kinds of projects, but they are reluctant to subject the work to the standard evaluative structures of education science. Where this dichotomy is accepted, we are contenting ourselves with mimesis or simulacra—we pretend that we use education or pedagogy, but we do not actually use them—returning to the differentiation of symbolic and actual action discussed in previous chapters. When an art project presents itself as a school or a workshop, we must ask what, specifically, is being taught or learned, and how. Conversely, if the experience is meant to be a simulation or illustration of education, it is inappropriate to discuss it as an actual educational project.

Second, it is necessary to ask whether a project of this nature offers new pedagogical approaches in art. If an educational project purports to critique conventional notions of pedagogy, as it is often claimed or desired, we must ask in what terms this critique is being articulated. This is particularly important, because artists often work from a series of misperceptions around education that prevent the development of truly thoughtful or critical contributions.

The field of education has the misfortune, perhaps well earned, of being represented by the mainstream as restrictive, controlling, and homogenizing. And it is true that there are plenty of places where old-fashioned forms of education still operate, where art history is recitation, where biographical anecdotes are presented as evidence to reveal the meaning of a work, and where educators seem to condescend to, patronize, or infantilize their audience. This is the kind of education that thinker Ivan Illich critiqued in his 1971 book *Deschooling Society*. In it Illich argues for a radical dismantling of the school system in all its institutionalized forms, which he considers an oppressive regime. Forty years after its publication, what was a progressive leftist idea has, ironically, become appealing to neoliberals and the conservative right. The dismantling of the structures of education is today allied with the principles of deregulation and a free market, a disavowal of the civic responsibility to provide learning structures to those who need them the most and a reinforcement of elitism. To turn education into a self-selective process in contemporary art only reinforces the elitist tendencies of the art world.

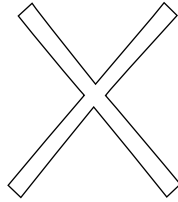
In reality, education today is fueled by the progressive ideas discussed above, ranging from critical pedagogy and inquiry-based learning to the exploration of creativity in early childhood. For this reason it is important to understand the existing structures of education and to learn how to innovate with them. To critique, for example, the old-fashioned boarding school system of memorization today would be equivalent, in the art world, to mounting a fierce attack on a nineteenth-century art movement; a project that offers an alternative to an old model is in dialogue with the past and not with the future.

Once we set aside these all-too-common pitfalls in SEA's embrace of education, we encounter myriad art projects that engage with pedagogy in a deep and creative way, proposing potentially exciting directions.

I think of the somewhat recent fascination in contemporary art with education as "pedagogy in the expanded field," to adapt Rosalind Krauss's famous description of postmodern sculpture. In the expanded field of pedagogy in art, the practice of education is no longer restricted to its traditional activities, namely art instruction (for artists), connoisseurship (for art historians and curators), and interpretation (for the general public). Traditional pedagogy fails to recognize three things: first, the creative performativity of the act of education; second, the fact that the collective construction of an art milieu, with artworks and ideas, is a collective construction of knowledge; and third, the fact that knowledge of art does not end in knowing the artwork but is a tool for understanding the world.

Organizations like the Center for Land Use Interpretation, in Los Angeles, which straddle art practice, education, and research, utilize art formats and processes as pedagogical vehicles. The very distancing that some collectives take from art and the blurring of boundaries between disciplines indicate an emerging form of art-making in which art does not point at itself but instead focuses on the social process of exchange. This is a powerful and positive reenvisioning of education that can only happen in art, as it depends on art's unique patterns of performativity, experience, and exploration of ambiguity.





## **Deskilling**

Assuming that socially engaged art requires a new set of skills and knowledge, art programs engaged in supporting the practice have quickly begun to dismantle the old art school curriculum, which is based on craft and skills—ranging from what remained of the academic model (figure drawing, casting, and the like) to the legacy of the Bauhaus (such as color theory and graphic design). What is replacing it is tenuous at best, and the process often creates a vacuum in which the possibilities are so endless that it can be paralyzing for a beginning practitioner. The social realm is as vast as the human world, and every artistic approach to it requires knowledge that can't be attained in a short period of time. This is, perhaps, the main reason why students often wonder whether an SEA practitioner can be any kind of expert. Disenchanted with poor guidance and with no sense of purpose, students



may turn to a social work discipline instead, leaving the conventional tools of art behind. Some believe that it is the future role of art to dissolve into other disciplines; I think such a dissolution would be the product of poor education about what the dialogue between art and the world can be.

The underlying issue is, of course, the crisis of higher education in the visual arts, which involves far more complex problems than what we can address here. I will, however, point out some problems in the traditional curriculum that should be taken into consideration in a discussion about teaching and learning SEA.

In a traditional art school, the emphasis on craft and the subdivision of departments (sculpture, painting, ceramics, etc.) promotes the development of specialties that each bases its discursivity in a discussion about itself. In this framework, artworks are judged by how they question or push notions intrinsic to the craft, an approach that enters into conflict with the direction Post-Minimalist practices have taken, including SEA. In them, craft is placed at the service of the concept, not the other way around. Furthermore, the promotion of a craft specialty makes it difficult for an artist to achieve a critical distance from his or her work.

The disconnect between art programs and art practice is another problem. In an art school, the school itself is the primary context in which the art will be produced and analyzed. This artificial environment, while necessary and positive in some aspects—such as the social environment

it creates for artists of the same generation and interests—too often is not challenging enough or does not provide students with a clear understanding of the world in which professional art activity takes place.\*

The lack of distance from craft, the use of historical forms of art as the guidelines for future art-making, and the absence of practical experience may inspire an impulse to dispense with historical art disciplines completely and instead give the students an open field in which to play. However, this dismantling, deskilling, or “deschooling” (to use Ivan Illich’s term) soon can become chaotic and aimless. Something must take its place.

It may take years to establish the best way to nourish SEA practices. In this book I have made a case for education processes as the most beneficial tools for furthering the understanding and execution of SEA projects. However, any new art curriculum for SEA needs to be multidisciplinary in its reach and creative in its individual development.

Christine Hill is an artist whose work ranges from small editions to the exploration of social transactions through her project Volksboutique. She chairs the new media program at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar where

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\* In 2005, I wrote *The Pablo Helguera Manual of Contemporary Art Style* (Tumbona Ediciones, Mexico City) a critique of the social dynamics of the art world. I hoped it would serve as a practical guide for art students in understanding the underlying social system in which art is evaluated and supported. Little effort has been made in schools to prepare art students to engage in the social terms of the art scene and thus lessen the great anxiety of a young artist facing the world at large for the first time.

she has created a course entitled “Skill Set” in which students learn a series of non-art skills for which they also transform our studio/classroom space into a suitable environment for the task. The skills taught have included 50s hair styling, Alexander technique, stenography, and Japanese tea ceremony, amongst many others, as they change every year. While the program retains the idea that artmaking requires technical knowledge, it emphasizes the value that any non-art specialty may bring to the art and design practice. In Hill’s own words about the objective of the course: “The notion is for them to rely on their own resources (i.e., not to just spend money to recreate something) and [develop the] ability to innovate as designers, and involves a tight enough deadline system so that they are pretty much working non-stop on these installation rotations . . . like flexing a muscle repeatedly.”\*

The new art school curriculum (or a self-guided program for someone interested in SEA) should contain these four components:

1. A comprehensive understanding of the methodological approaches of socially centered disciplines, including sociology, theater, education, ethnography, and communication;
2. The possibility of reconstructing and reconfiguring itself according to the needs and interest of the students;

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\* Correspondence with Christine Hill, July 12, 2011.

3. An experiential approach toward art in the world that offers a stimulating challenge to the student;
4. A refunctioned curriculum of art history and art technique, including a history of the way these things have been taught in the past.

Implementing these four components would require a significant rethinking of how curriculum is constructed in a university or art school (particularly the bureaucratic process). As in the Reggio Emilia Approach, the curriculum would not be a monolithic schedule of subjects but the result of an organic exchange between professors and students, in which the former listen to the interests of the latter and use their expertise to construct a pedagogical structure that will serve their needs. Some basic tenets must be maintained, which would form part of the third objective, providing the student with a sense of the real world so that he or she understands that contexts are not always under the artist's control.

It may seem counterintuitive to seek a reintroduction of the traditional components of studio art and art history, and it definitely is contrary to the direction of social practice programs today, which are severing their links to studio programs. Yet that division is, I believe, unnecessary and limiting. As I have argued throughout this book, the disavowal of art in SEA to the extent that it is even possible, at best weakens the practice and brings it closer to simulating other disciplines. If we understand the history

of the forms of art, the ideas that fueled them, and the ways these ideas were communicated to others, we can transpose and repurpose them to build more complex, thoughtful, and enduring experiences.

## Acknowledgments

I wrote this book in 2010–11 while developing two socially engaged art projects, one in Bologna (*Ælia Media*) and the other in Porto Alegre, Brazil (the pedagogical project of the 8th Mercosul Biennial). Working back and forth between two countries that gave so much to the field of education (the work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal in Brazil and the Reggio Emilia school system in Italy, just to name a few) certainly colored some of the thoughts presented here. But, most importantly, it was the teams of collaborators with whom I developed those projects (Julia Draganovic and Claudia Loeffelholz in Bologna, and Mónica Hoff and Gabriela Silva in Porto Alegre), that taught me the most and helped me to articulate my thoughts.

This book is also the result of many conversations, debates, and exchanges over the course of several years with artist and educator colleagues, curators, and writers. I am particularly grateful to Claire Bishop, Tom Finkelpearl, Shannon Jackson, and Suzanne Lacy, who, with great generosity, agreed to read this book in its different drafts and provide their feedback and comments. I am certain that this book is better because of them; any shortcomings of the text reflect my inability to fully understand or implement their wise and expert observations.

I can only mention a few of the many others with whom I had exchanges that informed my thinking for this



book: Mark Allen, Tania Bruguera, Rika Burnham, Luis Camnitzer, Mark Dion, James Elkins, Harrell Fletcher, Kate Fowle, Hope Ginsburg, Sam Gould, Fritz Haeg, Christine Hill, Michelle Jubin, Sofía Olascoaga, Morgan J. Puett, Ted Purves, Paul Ramirez-Jonas, John Spiak, and Sally Tallant. I am always indebted to Wendy Woon and my colleagues in the Department of Education at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, with whom I share an ongoing dialogue about many of these issues. I also want to thank my students at Portland State University, Oregon, who were my main interlocutors in the development of some of these ideas: Dillon de Give, Aysha Shaw, Travis Souza, and Transformazium, a collective composed of Dana Bishop-Root, Callie Currie, Leslie Stem, and Ruthie Stringer.

## About the Author

Pablo Helguera (born in Mexico City in 1971) is a visual and performance artist. Past art projects have included a phonographic archive of dying languages, a memory theater, fourteen visual artist “heteronyms,” and four fictional opera composers. Helguera is the author of nine previous books, including *The Pablo Helguera Manual of Contemporary Art Style* (2005, English version 2007), *The Witches of Tepoztlán (and Other Unpublished Operas)* (2007), the novel *The Boy Inside the Letter* (2008), *Artoons I and II* (2009), the play *The Juvenal Players* (2009), the anthology of performance texts *Theatrum Anatomicum (and other Performance Lectures)* (2009), *What in the World* (2010)—a “subjective biography” of the Penn Museum in Philadelphia—and the novella *Urjõnstelaii* (2010). In 2006 he drove from Anchorage to Tierra del Fuego with a collapsible schoolhouse, organizing discussions, activist happenings, and civic ceremonies along the way (*The School of Panamerican Unrest*). He has been the recipient of Creative Capital, Guggenheim, and Franklin Furnace fellowships, and in 2011 he was the first recipient of the International Award for Participatory Art, given by the Assembly of Emilia-Romagna, in Italy. In 2011 he was pedagogical curator of the 8th Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Since 2007 Helguera has been Director of Adult and Academic Programs in the Department of Education at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He is married to artist Dannielle Tegeder, and they live in Brooklyn with their daughter, Estela.

## **Where who we are matters: Through Art to Our More Social Selves**

Chloë Bass

### **I. REALIZATION**

Over the course of the Fall 2016 semester, I began to see how little school works for, or fits into, the majority of my students' schedules. Students were late for or missed class consistently because of work, gaps in childcare, and health issues that seemed overly challenging for a college-age population. My students were not necessarily robust late-teenagers and early-twenty-somethings for whom college is the most fun time in their lives. For them, college is an obligation alongside a string of other commitments and struggles. In this context, what is the use of a socially engaged art elective?

I've grown weary of and disinterested in the *art class is the only place for self-expression* narrative. Although I believe there's some validity in it, what I really want to know is whether teaching socially engaged art provides some ability to think critically about the interpersonal environments we find ourselves in. How can teaching differently, both in terms of subject matter and style, help us to live better outside the realm of art school? My students at Queens College are already fundamentally and inescapably in the world. To give them better tools for navigating that world, rather than simply the tools for succeeding at the business of school, feels essential. It might be different if I were a rogue activist, giving cold water reality baths to students in the Ivory Tower. But I'm not.

In the same way that sculpture departments historically became the first place within art schools to explore interdisciplinary, time-based, or non-traditional creative fields, it is my hope that socially engaged programs can be the space where art impacts our actual lives: the exploding out of the university into the streets. We need to step beyond the rigorous and uninteresting *life-as-art* phenomenon. When I asked my students, after we visited the Mierle Laderman Ukeles retrospective at the Queens Museum, if they thought their jobs are art, the answer was, almost unanimously, no. This is not because they don't understand the question. It's because calling something art contextualized their struggles as special – a Pollyannaish attitude that, for them, deeply missed the point. What they appreciated about Ukeles' work was not that she allowed sanitation workers a moment of glory in a radically different context. They appreciated, instead, the time she took, how hard she worked, even for something they weren't totally sure was art. They saw, in that commitment, something worthy of recognition. My goal is to harness the power of my students' everyday(s) and give them better ways to

connect through and around that. My classroom is socially engaged because I am teaching people to be social. I use the relative safety of school to demonstrate the ways in which the world can go better if you bring your whole self to the table.

## **II. ARRIVAL**

In one of my recent classrooms (undergraduate students from various majors, ethnically “majority-minority,” and ranging in age from 19 to 31), it often took at least 45 minutes for a good discussion to develop. There are a number of reasons for this: students are afraid of being wrong. They are, perhaps, more comfortable in, or familiar with, the type of classes where answers are concrete rather than interpretive. Fields of study with standardized textbooks and testing. Classrooms where power dynamics, both between the students and the teachers, and between different student groups, are more based on traditional forms of success: good grades, quick answers, extroversion. Outside of our time together, I learned that my students were not asked to be present. They were expected to be well-behaved, and asked to be right. I was asking, instead, scarier and more honest questions like, “what do you see?”

The development of discussion as a practice required a very different set of behaviors that are perhaps more akin to team-building than to school. The best days we had were not necessarily artistic. They were days when we argued for two hours about soccer as choreography, or shared stories about the impact of debt on our lives. Of their own volition, one group of students investigated the funding streams of our college, and why public universities in New York State are no longer free. Sharing the affective and intellectual labor of four hours between sixteen committed people made time pass quickly. We were socially engaged because we understood the value of our own lives. We wanted to know more about where we were because we cared about who we are.

Thirteen weeks into my first semester at Social Practice Queens, I asked my undergraduate students how the course was going for them. An outgoing athletic business major raised his hand, and said to all of us, directly, “This is the only class I have where who I am as a person actually matters.”

## **III. OUTCOMES**

What does it mean to engage in intimate education? I believe intimacy offers possibilities for expansion. I tell my students -- and in some ways, even force them to acknowledge -- that they are each other’s primary resources because I will not always be there with them. I want them to know that the power we have in the room, even if each individual person feels quite small, usually give us almost everything that we need to know. At the very worst, a strong knowledge of our group can reveal the essential gaps of who we need to invite to join us.

I have centered my own teaching, as well as my understanding for the potential of

social practice as a field, around the following thought questions:

- What happens if we take the same care with our relationships as we invest in our practice?
- What happens if we take the same care with our practice that we demonstrate in our relationships?

As artists and educators, development of the practice and of the person are unavoidable: we do/make our work, and we also exist as people in a world with fundamental connections to other human beings. Yet somehow we most often address personhood only in the moment of critique (this produces its own negative side effects, for example: only discussing the racial lens when evaluating the work of students of color, rather than also interrogating normative Whiteness as providing its own specific aesthetics). I am interested in an evaluation of how personhood impact aspects of process, not just of product. How does the way that we are in the world affect the craft of how we do things?

I believe that lessons focusing on personal difference, background, preferences, belief, and modes of function have application at every level, and find it odd that they're most likely to be implemented only during primary education. It's as if our development of self as a fundamental tenet of our intellectual understanding stops at puberty. I refuse a world that so limits my ability to grow.

Centering on the sociality of social practice provides the space that we need to better understand ourselves and others. Whether the goal is harmony, antagonism, or any of the myriad outcomes that fall outside of those two somewhat unrealistic poles, the labor of self-discovery is worthy of both our time and our brainpower. This is work that asks us to interrogate *who we are* as an essential element of progress: intellectual, pragmatic, political, and aesthetic.

#### IV. WORK

Lesson plans in this volume address many concepts related to social practice art, but also essential to navigating the world as a whole person. BFAMFAPhD focuses on *support*: the other people, places, and practices we need in order to produce the kind of work that matters in the world. Fiona Whelan discusses *listening*: the relational skills required for social practitioners, and an acknowledgment of the deep time labor required for both learning and engaging in those relational practices productively. Gretchen Coombs and The Black School address *language*: from developing a better sense of our internal narratives (where else do we have space to understand rant, or obsession, as educationally productive?) to unpacking how we write about others. Brian Rosa and Dillon De Give explore *sharing*, and the undeniably social aspects of making a place together, whether by accident or intent.

In the excellent essay that follows, Mary Jane Jacob reminds us that art is always

social. The lessons in this book, then, allow us to expand our sense of what that sociality means, how we engage it, and the best practices for its use. In a field that allows us to be our whole selves, we can embrace complexity, remain responsive, and continue to learn from our own mistakes as we work to repair the world.

## **Pedagogy as Art**

Mary Jane Jacob

In this essay I take a look back to John Dewey as a complement to the practices envisioned in this book. Dewey's identity and ideas are built into this book's very title. Art: as a proponent of the transformative power of art, Dewey viewed the aesthetic experience as fundamental to cultivating and maintaining our very humanity. Social: at once a spokesperson for and critic of American democracy, Dewey participated in the co-founding the American Civil Liberties Union (to name just one of scores of organizations he helped launch), for his support of the cause of social justice was as unbounded as it was lifelong. Action: as a philosopher for whom theory was meaningless if uncoupled from practical application, he acted upon his beliefs, while knowing that action needed to be guided by democratic principles. Thus, Dewey turned to education to build a democratic and just society, and it is in that arena that he is well remembered as the father of modern, progressive, and public education in America.

To Dewey, education is always socially engaged, an essential component of democracy, and the way democratic values are communicated. He knew this does not happen by rote allegiance or blind patriotism, but by living and practicing these principles as we make them a way of life. Importantly, an education that includes the arts, he realized, promotes critical thinking. It is the arts that can create among a wider population a discriminating mind – which he characterized as possessing “the habit of suspended judgment, of skepticism, of desire for evidence, of appeal to observation rather than sentiment, discussion rather than bias, inquiry rather than conventional idealizations.”<sup>2</sup> Therein he saw the potential to change society. He wrote: “When this happens, schools will be dangerous outposts of a humane civilization. But they will also begin to be supremely interesting places. For it will then come about that education and politics are one and the same thing, because politics will have to be in fact what it now pretends to be, the intelligent management of social affairs.”<sup>3</sup>

With socially engaged art practice, learning transfers from the classroom to the street

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John Dewey, “Education as Politics,” in *The Collected Works of John Dewey: Middle Works Volume 13: 1921-1922, Essays*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 335. First published in *The New Republic* (October 4, 1922): 141.

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John Dewey, *Ibid.*



and, with books like this one, back to the classroom so that it can do its work in the world. And here it is significant, and not just a turn of phrase, that Dewey also thought education was an art. All things done consciously and with care he dubbed so, but he added: “I believe that the art of thus giving shape to human powers and adapting them to social service, is the supreme art; one calling into its service the best of artists; that no insight, sympathy, tact, executive power, is too great for such service.”<sup>4</sup> Pedagogy is an art when it becomes a life’s work. Social practice, too, is that kind of holistic practice, not a style taken on, but a way of working that emerges from one’s life’s interests and needs, one’s observations and actions. There is a knowingness that it is not a method learned and then applied, but a way of being, always in motion, subject to change and reconsideration. Social practice demands a discriminating mind. And it gives rise to the same in others touched by this work.

On a personal note, I am a product of Dewey’s pedagogy, having come up through public schools in and around Queens at a time when art was well supported and seemed a human right. It was a foundational subject within a well-rounded curriculum. Over time I became cognizant of the origins and the real mission of those who fought for quality and equality in education. Dewey saw it this way: “Do we want to build up and strengthen a class division by means of schools for the masses that confine education to a few simple and mechanical skills, while the well-to-do send their children to schools where they get exactly the things that are branded as frills when they are given at public expense to the children of the masses?”<sup>5</sup> I thank Dewey for the “frills” that made all the difference in my public school education—like regular visits to museums—and the valuable lessons learned with intrinsic social values. Those elements enabled me to imagine a natural and necessary connection between art and social justice.

Decades later, when I walked away from working in museums seeking a more participatory engagement, I was propelled by a belief in the potential of art as experience, not out of some Deweyan read (that came later still), but out of my own experience shaped by those offered by the artists and audiences with whom I had shared my work. The question that lay at the threshold at that time was: could the transformative power of aesthetic experience be made available to those from the lesser ranks of society who cared and not just be reserved for individuals privileged by wealth, reputation, or art knowledge? It took full expression in a program in the early nineties called *Culture in Action* (a title suggested by one of the participating artists, Daniel J. Martinez, with an affinity to that of this volume) which

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John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” in *The Collected Works of John Dewey: Early Works Volume 5: 1895–1898, Essays*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 95. First published in *School Journal* LIV, (January 1897): 80.

5

Dewey, “Shall We Abolish School ‘Frills’? No,” 145. First published in *Rotarian* 42 (May 1933): 49.

brought together artists whose social interests aligned with the life issues of a segment of the public in order to undertake an invested, shared process focused on concerns vital to them both.

When values are held in common, could collective hope spark problem solving? And, if solutions did not proceed in linear fashion, might they unfold circuitously like life itself. But bafflement ensued. As funders sought demonstrable outcomes and replicable models, I relied on organic processes. While making positive change was posited, likewise was whether art mattered in everyday experience. But critics worried about where the art was. Dewey had his answer: *in the experience*. His understanding of art as lived experience – embodied so that it becomes part of our own being – allows us to appreciate just what social practice works do. Like all art for Dewey, they allow us to breathe in life's experiences fully, making meaning for ourselves and gaining a deeper sense of the consequences of our actions on others and on the planet. Then, breathing out, to act more consciously in the world.

To Dewey art is always social. "In it a body of matters and meanings, not in themselves aesthetic, *become* aesthetic as they enter into an ordered rhythmic movement toward communication. The material of aesthetic experience is widely human.... [and] in being human... is social," he wrote.<sup>6</sup> So art is a likely medium for pressing the case of justice that itself defines and defends human relations, while it strikes at the core of Dewey's definition of democracy. "The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy," was how the philosopher put it. And if democracy is grounded in beloved democratic principles of equality and fairness, then diversity must also be valued and tolerance advocated. Moreover, if we are privileged to possess liberty as well as the pursue happiness, then Dewey knew we must understand that freedom is a collective and not just an individual right.

While we think and feel these times as exceptional ("unprecedented" is a word that keeps crops up daily these days in regard to the Trump Administration), it might be prudent to remember that Dewey saw and felt the tides of vast cultural change and upheaval, as he was on this earth from before the American Civil War to after World War II. And as this nation contended with a changed world, all the while Dewey stayed the course. He helped move it from the nineteenth into the twentieth century, never forgetting that what we make is not whole cloth but accrues onto the social intelligence we have inherited. On one occasion, looking back, he recalled Thomas Jefferson's concept of democracy as a great "practical experiment,"<sup>7</sup> understanding that the social justices it claims are not accomplished once and

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John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin, [1934] 2005), 339.

7

John Dewey, "Presenting Thomas Jefferson," in *The Collected Works of John Dewey: Later Works Volume 14*:

for all but must be continually renewed, for democracy is never done. It is a process in which we all participate.

Social practice projects prime that process. Thus, we can be grateful for the past three decades of assertive and committed community-based, new genre public art, dialogic, and other-named practical experiments by artists that have readied us for the challenges we face today. These works are part of an even longer lineage that has brought us to a place where pedagogy can be written and offered as a road map for the future. In addition, I'd suggest reading Dewey, too.

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## **Lesson plans I. Art as Social Research / Listening / Self-care.**

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### **Transactions, Roles and Research**

**Marilyn Lennon, Julie Griffiths, and Maeve Collins** (Limerick Institute of Technology, Ireland.)

### **A description of the assignment**

In this module ten visiting lecturers from different disciplines are invited to The Masters in Art and Design, Social Practice and the Creative Environment (MA SPACE). Once the assignment (below) is handed out, the entire postgraduate group thoroughly questions, and reflects upon the scope of their response.

### **The Assignment**

Each week a guest speaker delivers a one-hour lecture about their current work, a topic of interest, their research field, modes of research, or elements of their field of practice. But the visiting lecturer is not typically a visual arts specialist. The following week students create three-element collaborative responses to the lecture: academic, practical, and reflective, working in pairs to develop a research focus related to the content of the lecture or inspired by the topic presented. Each pair has a three-hour time slot to present their response.

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*1939–1941, Essays*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 213. First published in *The Living Thoughts of Thomas Jefferson* (New York and Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1940), 15.

~~Grenier, Catherine (ed.). *Catalog L.A.: Birth of an Art Capital 1955-1985*. California: Chronicle Books, 2007.~~

~~Jones, Kellie. *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.~~

~~Lippard, Lucy R. *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990.~~

~~Wallace, Michele. *Dark Designs and Visual Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004~~

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## Interviews

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### **What We Produce: Social Models that can be Re-purposed and Reapplied, an interview of Pablo Helguera**

Jeff Kasper and Alix Camacho Vargas, SPQ, NYC.

**Jeff Kasper:** Let me start by introducing myself: I am Jeff Kasper, artist, educator, and MFA student at Queens College studying Social Practice.

**Alix Camacho Vargas:** And my name is Alix Camacho Vargas, I am also an MFA student at Queens College concentrating in Social Practice Art.

**Pablo Helguera:** Well, thank you so much. It is such a pleasure to be here, I am Pablo Helguera, artist and educator, and happy to be in this conversation.

**JK:** Right now we are at Museum of Modern Art in New York City on October 2016. Pablo, I am interested to know what you think about the different types of spaces within which we learn about social practice—and what that means to you.

**PH:** You know social practice as a genre or discipline shares a similar relationship to other process based practices, most specifically performance art. Because in contrast to, let's say the more established art disciplines like painting, sculpture or printmaking, which have hundreds if not thousands of years of history, as well as a very established genealogy of forms of teaching, social practice and socially engaged art are the inheritors of a post-minimalist rebellion that questioned traditional artistic aesthetics at the end of the 20th century, and the beginning of this century. This puts these practices in unscripted territory. Performance art is maybe the closest to social practice because while it comes from the visual arts it also borrows from the theater without really becoming theater. And, at the same time, it is not really the traditional visual art we see in galleries.

With that in mind, it's interesting to know how, for example, performance art has been developed as a practice and taught in schools because initially it was a way of liberating yourself from the constraints of the gallery space, the white wall, and the time constraints of experiencing art. Sometime in the late 1950's and early 1960's, what became known as performance could be almost anything such as one gesture, or something that lasts for one hundred years, or just one pose, or a word, or something else altogether. It did not fit any of the traditional art categories. I would say that socially engaged art emerged from this revolutionary break of performance art.

Admittedly, the problem with performance art is that the moment it became a known and identified discipline, it also posed the challenge of how does one teach such rebellion. How do you teach a revolutionary attitude that seeks to break with every pattern? What we have seen is that while performance art remains a very liberating outlet for many artists, it has also become academic in many ways. I am from Mexico City, where there was an important performance art movement that nonetheless became very fossilized.

I feel very lucky to be of one the artists who started making socially engaged art before it really had a name. Which I believe is really the best place to be: when you are exploring this terra-incognita where you don't really know where you are, where you identify and feel that there is a problem out there that you want to solve, and you know that the solutions out there are insufficient and that you are trying to think about something else, all the while responding to the ways that other people around you are doing something similar. But what I think has happened over the last few years has been precisely this process of academicization similar to what I described in terms of performance art and artists' books. So we are now entering into the social practice academic world. Even museums understand what that means right now, even if they are not able to fully embrace it yet. Ten years from now it will be impossible for museums to ignore this tendency.

So these are the problems that we are about to face, or that we are facing currently. What I have done as an instructor of these practices is to primarily think of it as a pedagogical exercise that uses elements of listening, discussion, conversation, evaluation, etc. Much of this is described in my book *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, which is essentially what I like to call a Materials and Techniques Handbook. By way of illustration, if you are learning photography you need to learn about the techniques and materials of photographic processes including what film is, and what different kinds of lenses do, and what setting the exposure is about, and so on. My thinking at the time I wrote the book was to similarly try to pull apart or deconstruct the elements of socially engaged art, in order to understand its components so as to teach how to incorporate them successfully into one's practice, or to consciously modify or truly transform them going forwards.

**AC:** How is the academy preparing social practice artists for the challenges that s/he is going to face in the real world? For instance: learning how to obtain grants. Because in order to impact audiences and transform society, some essential values are not coming from the artistic field, they come from other fields. How is the academy preparing artists for this type of challenge?

**PH:** That is a good question, and honestly I don't run a program that teaches social practice, but I do think we are terrible in our schools by failing to help artists navigate the systems of support that can assist social practice projects. Art schools generally have been very detached from the art market. The greatest trauma of an artist after you graduate is that you are screwed financially. Not only do you owe a lot of money to the school, but at the same time you don't really have a clear path as to how to make it professionally speaking. You need a gallery, but getting a gallery doesn't mean anything. Why? Because you can still have a gallery and be completely broke. The reason why it's helpful to look at all of this is because in a way the social practice artist is not dissimilar from that anthropologist and sociologist, that urban planner, who joins government, who starts working on other people's projects to start supporting themselves. So that is one thing.

The other thing is that the art market does not know how to make sense of socially engaged art. For the art market, art is only art inasmuch as it is something you can acquire, that you can collect, and that you can sell to others. But the art market right now is very much unable to support the experience industry. So what social practice provides is more of a program, or an experience involving a group of people. A collector can't help you with this, or a collector does not see the value of helping you. Yes, the world of philanthropy supports things that are intangible. What I think is missing in social practice programs is supporting the possibility to conduct research work that is fundable. Consider a project like Marisa Jahn's *Nanny Van*, which supports and defends the rights of caretakers. She gets money and support from arts organizations, but she can also go to other agencies that support her social justice agenda. So the advantage social practice has is that we don't necessarily need to fund our projects exclusively through the art world; we can actually go to city councils and social service organizations that protect and advocate for the types of social justice issues we are interested in. Does that make sense?

**AC:** Yes, but I feel that there is a tension, and I don't know how you perceive this, but: is this practice ethical, or not, or it is good for society, or is it not?

**JK:** And I also am curious about how this work is measured by us, as artists, and by funders.

**PH:** I think the issue of ethics at this particular moment is not particularly useful when you speak about value because it goes without saying that a project that is socially engaged in general is focused on the betterment of society, even if it is a confrontational project and has an antagonistic aesthetic as Claire Bishop likes to describe it. When I think such art becomes



more of an ethical issue, and this is really a problem involving funders, is when we try to evaluate the quantitative value of a given project. In other words, for foundations, as well as museums, there is a clear bottom-line: how many people came to the event? How much revenue did you achieve?

To shift this to academia: sure, I can teach a class to three people, and this may change their lives; these three people can go on to become really meaningful artists or whatever, but it was only three people. So was it a bad class or was it a good class? It only affected three people's lives, but it was a profound and meaningful experience. Or I create a website and three million people saw it; yet, well: who cares? The quantitative issue becomes very important and also very misleading when you place a lot of emphasis on just numbers. This is also where the artistic nature of the social practice projects come into play. Because art, whether we like it or not, is a symbolic activity. And in social practice we are very adamant to stress that we are not about representation, that we are not about simply talking about an issue, but what we are doing is something that is in the world. The break therefore with conventional art thinking is that we are not making a piece about politics, we are instead doing politics within the piece itself. This brings value to an issue. But at the same time we are still engaged in symbolic representation.

I have a bookstore project in Spanish that has traveled around the country. You can easily look at the bookstore and ask: how many books have you sold? But I have no idea how many books I have sold. I am sure that in comparison to Barnes and Noble it's like nothing. However, we are not about selling books. I mean, the sales process is important, but we are really about being a type of social space. And yet, how do you quantify that? Well, it's very difficult. Still, one way you can do it is to interview individuals who have visited the bookstore, and who have had an experience. Or find people who have donated books. This is the qualitative dimension of the work that nonetheless connects with the symbolic dimension of the project.

In other words: what we produce are models, social models that can be reapplied. One of the things that is very gratifying to me is that the bookstore actually first existed in Phoenix, Arizona, and when it moved on to San Francisco, it inspired a group of people to open their own bookstore in Phoenix. Now there is a bookstore in Phoenix called *Palabras*, which is actually directly inspired on the *Radio Gonzales* in Phoenix. And to me that is already a huge wonderful outcome of an object like this one.

## **Fail Better: An interview with the Center for Artistic Activism**

Alix Camacho interviews Steve Duncombe and Steve Lambert

**Alix Camacho:** I'm Alix Camacho, an MFA student in Social Practice at Queens College. Today we are at the Queens Museum with Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert, the founders and directors for the Center for Artistic Activism. To start I would like to ask you to introduce yourselves and describe what Center for Artistic Activism is.

**Steve Duncombe:** Hi, we're "The Steves." I am Steve Duncombe, and my background is as an activist and an academic.

**Steve Lambert:** And I'm Steve Lambert, and I have degrees in Fine Art stuff, but also had an activism background. I came to Steve because I thought he might know more than me about sociology and how I could measure whether or not the stuff I was doing was actually doing anything.

**SD:** And I found the other Steve because I was seeing diminishing returns in the type of regular activism that I was doing, and was really interested in the power of culture and the arts in bringing about social change. I was convinced that the other Steve had the answer.

**SL:** And neither of us did.

**SD:** So we started interviewing artists and activists, folks who combined the practices that we were really interested in. And through those interviews we built a body of knowledge about practices of artistic activists. Once we had that, we figured, well this is really interesting, and we did more reading and research, into cognitive science, social marketing, cultural theory, and put it all together so we could share it with other folks. At this point we have been doing it for about seven years, we have trained more than 1000 activists and artists across the US and in twelve or thirteen countries in four continents. We worked on everything from the legalization of sex work in South Africa, to working with undocumented youth in South Texas on immigration issues, to anti-war organizing with U.S. Iraq and Afghanistan war vets, to working with Scottish pro-democracy activists.

**AC:** So what are your ideas about academic programs focused on social practice, socially engaged art, or art and activism?

**SL:** We are for them, because we made one... just not in a college. My experience was not taught in art school. I had to get out of the art department in order to learn that stuff, so I am glad that this is being acknowledged as a way of making art, but I think it is still under-represented. Steve and I, the program we have made, is uncompromised. We do it exactly how

we want to do it. It's based on both first hand interviews, but also a lot of research, and it's designed for pretty specific kind of practice that I think social practice would overlap with, but it doesn't encompass it entirely. The goals of this work are affecting power, and thinking in terms of real outcomes, instead of *raising awareness* or *starting a conversation*. That is an important difference, and I don't see that taught in schools as much.

**SD:** I've been a university professor now for about twenty-five years, and the type of teaching I do in the university is very different than the teaching that I do in the Center for Artistic Activism. Steve put his finger on it: *what is the outcome?* In a college classroom my objective is to do things like start discussions, raise awareness, get people to think critically about a series of texts and answer the questions. My role is to facilitate the discussion, make sure it is rigorous, and is as expansive as possible. When we work in the Center, our goal is to change the world.

**SL:** We also don't work with students that often. We work with professional activists and artists, and it really changes the tone and ambition, and what happens as a result. They are immediately applying those ideas to an organization or institution that they go back to, and the ideas are getting integrated into how they do things. That has an impact on how successful they are. This changes how we teach and how we think about how effective the workshop is.

**SD:** We do a lot of research on a very direct question: does the practice work? And how can it work better? A lot of writing on artistic activism, you know, Boris Groys, Claire Bishop, Grant Kester, all of whom I have an immense amount of respect for, is theoretical. I am trained as a social scientist. We do empirical research, which means going out and interviewing people, artists and practitioners: *how are you measuring the success of your work?* Going out and talking to audiences and figuring out: *how are you affected?*

**SL:** I got into the politics part because I was trying to defend my house from an illegal eviction. I had two different illegal evictions when I was in college, so I would go to art school, and then I would leave and go to San Francisco Superior Court to file papers to defend myself against these two awful landlords. I felt this huge disconnect between what was presented to me as art and the ideas that informed art, and the harsh reality that I would be homeless in a few days if I didn't win this case. If you want to make artwork about it, that is, like, fascinating to look at, great – but it's not helping fight illegal evictions.

**SD:** We have a derogatory term for that: *political expressionism*. It's art which is *about* politics, but doesn't actually do any political work. We cribbed that distinction from Walter

Benjamin. There is a way that the university operates; it takes the most critical and radical ideas, and it turns them into sort of a commodity of knowledge to be consumed, perhaps displayed, but thoroughly contained. I am very cynical about the university as a site for radical struggle. It has amazing recuperative powers – the university can take almost anything radical: feminism, class analysis, critical race theory, and just turn it into a seminar.

**AC:** So are you saying that universities neutralize political actions or ways of thinking?

**SD:** That is probably too strong, but let's just argue that point. Radical academics would like to think in terms of, you know, they tell me I can't teach that but I'm gonna teach it anyway. I'm a rebel! But it's actually repressive tolerance, where radicalism is accepted on this equal plane with English and Biology. "Oh, it's 3 o'clock, I'm going to my Overthrow The State class. See you at the pub later." Knowledge becomes an exchangeable, universalized commodity. I got four credits in this, four credits in that, it's all going towards a degree, boom.

**SL:** I think that maybe I am less skeptical, because to me this should be taught in schools, and when I have control over it, I teach it the way I want to, and it's nice spreading it out over thirteen weeks and having students leave the university with these ideas, and this perspective, although it is by no means where I focus this kind of work.

**SD:** You're right. And there is this one course I teach to academic-track graduate students on activist art and artistic activism. One of the things I do is have the students come together in groups and stage a creative action on their own. And it has been really transformative for some of them, and I think that what is transformative has nothing to do with me or what I am teaching in the classroom, it has everything to do with them getting out of the classroom, working together, creating an action, seeing the impact that it has in the community, and then reflecting upon that impact, and thinking about what they would do next. It's the one time the knowledge they are learning actually escapes the classroom and goes into the world and runs about causing mayhem.

**SL:** Yes, that's just how I run a class, mayhem.

**AC:** My question now is about social practice and ethics and how you find that relationship between what we try to do as artists and what we accomplish.

**SL:** This is a pet peeve of mine. I hate talking about social practice and ethics.

**SD:** You're gonna wind Steve up and let him go now.

**SL:** Yeah, because it is often brought up by people who don't do the practice. They are outsiders, or critics, or funders, or people who want to start doing it and actually don't have a lot of experience doing the work. "Oh you're trying to do these good things" (This is my critic voice), "you're trying to do these good things, but look, maybe you're not, and I see it and you don't right, and maybe you're hurting people, have you ever thought of that?" And it's like, yeah, there are those problems to consider, and also I am trying to get something done. By all means you should interrogate that, you should if people are unethical and they don't know it, it needs to be called out, but the way it affects the people that are making the work is they then they begin to doubt themselves, especially newcomers. You have to take some kind of risk in order to get the great benefit you can out of artistic activism. If you wanted to have a practice where you were sure that every single time you hurt no one and you were of the maximum benefit, you can go and feed children. You can work with Doctors Without Borders, and give them vaccines. You will know in each of those cases that that person doesn't have a disease, that person is fed. But you're not going to end hunger, you're not going to end disease. Anyone who makes art as a way to change the world is a risk-taker. In order to take risks you have to think about ethics, but you also need to make those decisions as part of the practice. There is no *right* answer...you are probably going to screw up a few times in order to figure out how to do it well.

**SD:** The power of art is actually it's own predictability. The fact that it has consequences which are often unintended. It moves us in ways we are not quite sure of, and that means the practice can't be boiled down to a simple series of, as Steve said, steps of ethical behavior. That takes away the magic of art, takes away the power of art, and if we are going to do that, then why are we engaged in artistic activism in the first place? An unintended consequence of dwelling on the problem of ethics is that it makes us so cautious that in the end the only ethical act one can do is to do nothing.

**SL:** And that has ethical consequences too...

**SD:** You need to be self-reflective about what you are doing, you need to know why you're doing what you're doing, you need to think "what is your ethical code?", and "are the practices that you are engaged in actually adhering to a set of ethics which you have?"

**SL:** But our approach to it is really individual and project based. I mean there are really vague and unsatisfying sort of general guidelines, like: "don't do anything that your

grandmother would be upset about.” That's a guideline, you know? It might be true unless your grandmother is an awful person, but it's a way of checking in. We have things like that. But it's really much more about within each project, within your practice, a constant practice of self-reflection, checking in with yourself and figuring out if you are conscious about what you are doing and why.

**SD:** The problem with abstract ethical principles is that there's really no such thing. Ethical principles always relate back to a project, a philosophy, a worldview. What the Nazis did was absolutely ethical according to their own set of ethics.

**SL:** They believed they were a superior race that were meant to take over Europe. And so everything that they did was within those ethics.

**SD:** Advertisers believe that what they do is ethical because they believe in a world where the market should rule, and that choice is something which can be expressed best through consuming products. According to this, it's ethical what they do. What we have to think about is what's important to the values that you hold dear, your way of understanding the world, and then actually make work which conforms to that set of principles.

**SL:** Again, there is not *an* answer to the ethics of artistic activism. It's like you just have to go out and take risks and do the best thing you can and be self-reflective on a kind of regular basis, and then even then it's not a guarantee, you might get caught up in something where you're cover, or where you actually accidentally harmed another community without realizing it. Reflect upon it, make corrections, and do another project.

**SD:** To quote Samuel Beckett, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

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### **Lesson Plans III: Art As Social Injustice**

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### **NYU Flash Collective: An Art Intervention in the Public Sphere**

Dipti Desai and Avram Finkelstein (New York City)

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### **Lesson Plans III: Art As Social Injustice**

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### **NYU Flash Collective: An Art Intervention in the Public Sphere**

Dipti Desai and Avram Finkelstein (New York City)



## **Description of Assignment**

In this lesson, my students and I designed and implement a tactical art intervention based on a current social issue in the public realm. Our group, called the NYU Flash Collective, was part of the Flash Collective social practice project by artist Avram Finkelstein, a new paradigm for rethinking activist art and social engagement within the public sphere. This exercise is based on collaborative decision-making processes mirroring the experiences encountered when forming and working within art and political collectives: a surgical and fast-paced format intended to break through the overwhelming nature of communicating complex ideas. It employs result-oriented exercises aimed at the core of social engagement: collective action.

## **Steps We Took to Fulfill the Assignment**

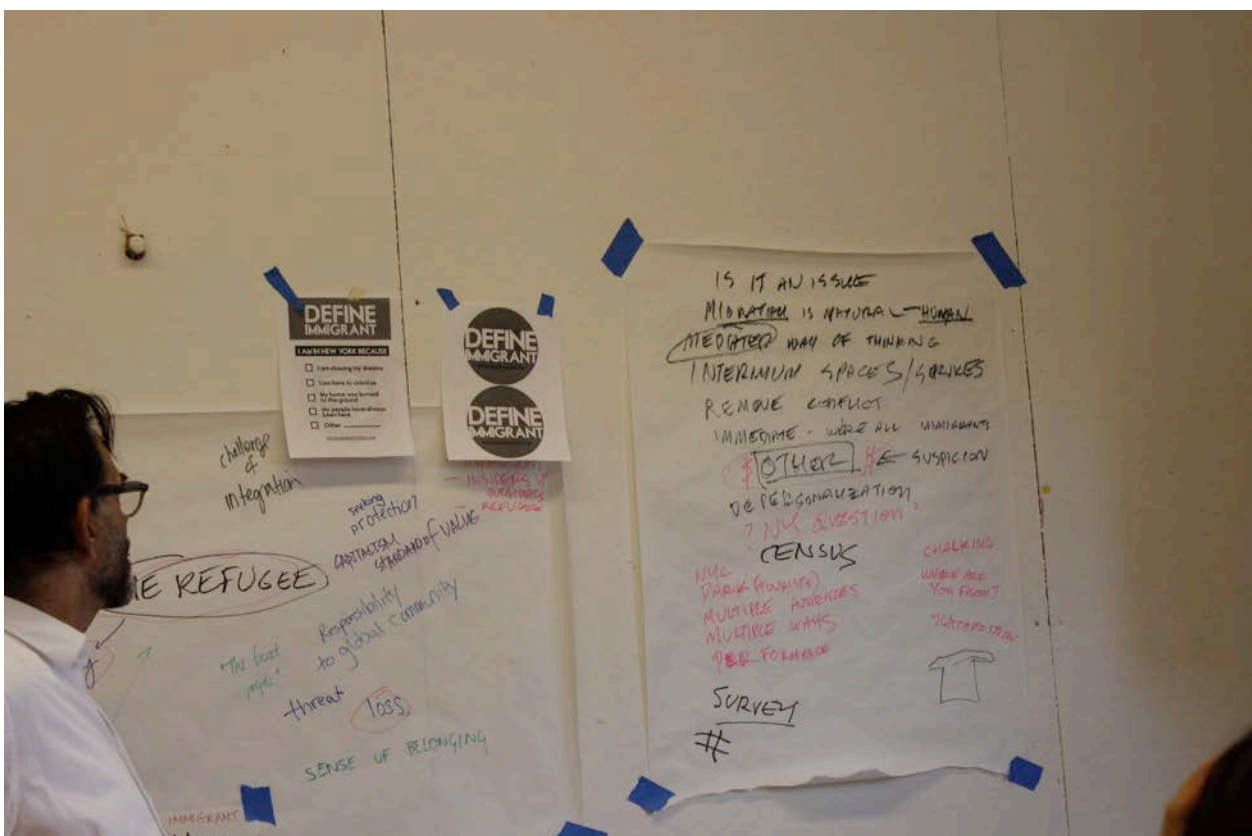
Prior to a four hour-long workshop facilitated by Avram, we worked on issues of immigration and displacement. Avram emailed us several aspects and documents to consider. We were asked to read the United Nations 1951 *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, to understand the legal parameters of displacement from a historical perspective and the social intricacies immigrants face when they relocate, seek asylum, are displaced, or are forced to flee. We were also given the following preparatory questions to answer collectively: “What are the commonalities and contrasts between how Germany approached the Syrian refugee crisis and debates about immigration in America, particularly during our election cycles?”; “Can we draw parallels between these types of conversations and the economic displacement we see happening right here in New York’s Lower East Side?”; “Are the social realities of immigration and displacement grounded in cultural *othering*, or are they simply about economic opportunity?” Also, given time constraints, we followed a decisive voting process rather than an informal, *family style* content negotiation frequent in grass-roots organizing.

## **Description of What Actually Unfolded and Outcomes**

The workshop began with a history of collective art practices that informed Avram’s work as an artist and activist during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s: first, the Silence=Death collective; later, Gran Fury. Avram addressed the need to identify our audience, offering guidelines for effective communication in mixed-use public spaces and strategies for collective cultural production. An initial exercise helped map out the larger questions of immigration and displacement identifying key areas of concern for participants. Using markers on a paper scroll, each of us wrote responses to prompts by Avram, plus each other’s reactions to them. He then drew arrows to connect concepts and ideas while asking probative questions to further draw out ideas, stimulate collaboration, and highlight bridges between our points of view, thus promoting a collective environment. With big themes identified, we worked through

a questioning process aimed at segueing from brainstorming into editing, prioritizing and narrowing down messages, and combining these with images. The main for the poster became “Define Immigrant.” Below that, we added “I am in New York Because,” followed by four survey-like questions, each representing an unique aspect of displacement we agreed was significant or commonly shared during our brainstorming sessions: “I am chasing my dreams”; “I am here to colonize”; “My home burnt to the ground”; “My people have always been here”; “Other \_\_\_\_”.

Working together we created a poster with a link to a Tumblr site to provide information about this project and other relevant resources. We also planned a performative intervention in a public space. Breaking into sub-groups helped carry out these tasks. Of the multiple alternatives offered by the poster design group, the collective selected an image that superimposed the text over a ghosted background mimicking the *official* look of U.S. Census Bureau. Posters would be printed on crack and peel paper. For our social media presence we would photograph the posters in the public sphere, and return a few weeks later to re-photograph them if people commented on them with graffiti.



[Figure 1: Brainstorming session with Avram Finkelstein as part of NYU Flash Collective, 2015]

Subgroups continued meeting on the website and public performance as we reconvened all-together to share what they had done and make suggestions, edit texts, and/or endorse what

subgroup proposals. The Tumblr went live when students spread through the city to post the stickers. For many this was their first time posting in public space; therefore, we needed to establish a stickering protocol, since it is not technically a legal activity in New York. We urged them to go in groups of three with two students scouting for police in order to alert one another if it became necessary to leave a site fast. Because we live in a racialized world, this protocol was particularly important for students of color. A discussion arose from those uneasy with the plan. We discussed tactical interventions and relationships between socially engaged art and activist practices, both of which frequently involve putting one's body on the line. Not all were convinced by these alleged commonalities, and not all felt comfortable navigating their own privilege (or lack thereof), nonetheless all agreed to explore the challenge collectively.





[Figure 2: Define Immigrant Posters on the street of NYC]

Following this phase we discussed their feelings about stickering the street, as well as the locations they chose to poster. Many expressed feeling simultaneously anxious, fearful, and exhilarated. They also shared the dilemmas faced while surveying spaces to determine what constituted a compelling public site for capturing audiences' attention in a visually saturated environment.

The performance component took place in Washington Square Park, replicating the poster questions. A group of students held red boxes with openings for responses, each with a survey question posted on it. A few of us walked around carrying clipboards with the questions. Passersby filled out our survey, defining what the word “immigrant” meant to them. Although the questions were atypical people were still reluctant to participate, and most walked away. Then, one of our students discovered that explaining this was an art project provoked a positive response. Following her lead, the rest of the collective succeeded with the survey. People dropped responses into the corresponding box held by some collective members as others marked the number of responses each question received with chalk in front of the person holding the box.





[Figure 3: Define Immigrant Performative Intervention at Washington Square Park, 2015]

### Overview of Discussion and Reflection

After the public performance, we met to discuss what had just happened. The collective considered it noteworthy that no one was willing to answer the survey until we called it an art project. This raised the question of whether referring to it as art defanged our chosen strategy for addressing immigration from a political perspective, or if it was indeed useful. We questioned whether calling it art because we were near an academic setting (NYU), and whether we would have to change this performance completely to stage it in an immigrant community, especially given the *official* look of the materials, or in contexts where art practices are a less common feature of everyday life. From our perspective, the success of the performance was dependent on helping our students think through the issues presented by their collective direct action, and their evaluation. The collective's original concept of the performance — opening a dialogue with the audience and participating in a political consciousness raising opportunity — appeared to be neutralized by the survey approach. But in fact, political consciousness raising simply shifted back to the collective: it became clear that we needed to examine why and how to get the public to address the issue of immigration and the role of dialogue in this kind of tactical intervention. The intervention left us with valid questions about how can tactical interventions effectively create dialogue aimed at social change in public spaces. Still, we developed a concrete understanding of collective work, and of how to design and enact a tactical intervention. As a consequence, we learned as much about ourselves as we did about the spaces that surround us. We believe that developing a dynamic pedagogy based on collectivity is critical to helping translate cultural activism into ways of thinking and being, into social engagement and political agency. This has the potential to also activate social spaces within academia in much the same way as outside its walls.

# DEFINE IMMIGRANT

**I AM IN NEW YORK BECAUSE**

- ☐ I am chasing my dreams
- ☐ I am here to colonize
- ☐ My home was burned to the ground
- ☐ My people have always been here
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

[DEFINEIMMGRANT.TUMBLR.COM](http://DEFINEIMMGRANT.TUMBLR.COM)

Oct 17th, 2015

...  

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## Future IDs: reframing the narrative of re-entry

Gregory Sale with Aaron Mercado, Dominique Bell, Dr. Luis García, José González, Ryan Lo, and Kirn Kim with Anti-Recidivism Coalition (A.R.C.), Los Angeles-based community partner (Los Angeles, California)

[Figure 1]

[Figure 1: Aaron Mercado. Photo Gregory Sale]

*"Listen, you don't have a lot of time. I just want to show you something." And I reached into my pocket and pulled out my old prison ID. He looked at it, and then I went in my other pocket and showed him this college ID. And I said, "This is the different side. That is the difference." And [the Senator] responded, "Enough said." — Dominique Bell, core-project participant.*

*Future IDs* Art Workshop combined future planning, art making, and writing exercises for individuals with conviction histories. It was an essential component in a developing collaborative art project about individual stories of transformation and how to collectively reframe the narrative of re-entry.

The workshop provided a structured environment for participants to engage in a creative process. The central idea was to artistically re-create past or current inmate IDs, and to imagine and make new identification cards for future selves – perhaps for a dream job, a role in society, or a continuing role with family, such as father or mother. Participants wrote a





Noah Fischer (New York City)

### **A description of the assignment**

This multi-stage hands-on art investigation aims to facilitate direct encounters with the complexities of economic inequality. The project revolves around two sites: a luxury or ultra-luxury retail store, and a store that sells similar but much cheaper products. Students work in groups to engage a process of observation, interview, and design that investigates how class division is built into retail experience, while reflecting on their relationship to this picture. The assignment concludes by attempting to create a social link between retail sites across opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum. Here is one description of luxury buying as a class separator:

*Mass brands define groups or segments of consumers and push products towards*

*them. For luxury brands the roles are reversed: consumers are pulled towards the brand with the promise of belonging to the exclusive community. (...) In addition to using pricing or distribution to naturally segment customers, luxury brands create other artificial barriers or initiation rituals to select which consumers gain admittance.*<sup>1</sup>

*Luxury Low-End Link* re-imagines these “artificial barriers” and casts the design process as a potential tool for investigating over them, beginning with a personal interaction. The key themes for this lesson plan including, mapping cities, contrasting the economic and social realities they contain, observing how the presentation and display of retail products shapes notions of luxury and authenticity that are central to both retail and fine art, and problematizes our contemporary notions of citizenship in hyper-capitalist nations and cities centered on consumers, while decentering labor and targeting immigrants and other precarious populations. Engaging with design means imagining alternative social and economic pathways at small but practical scale.

### **Actual steps taken to fulfill the assignment**

We began with a common definition of terms. Students brought five images to class that they thought defined high-end and low-end products. Pinning these to a wall, we initiated a group discussion about the larger economic picture of the city seen through the lens of consumption. On a large map, we collectively plotted out zones of contrasting economic realities, supplementing gaps in knowledge with research. Breaking into groups, students reflected on their journals by writing about their personal economic reality in relation to shopping, which kinds of stores they felt more comfortable in, where they and/or their family could afford shopping, etc. In preparation for fieldwork, the class divided into teams of three to five as each group member took on a role: visual documenter, note-taker, interviewer, map maker, etc. Locations were instructor assigned or chosen by students, time and knowledge

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Vadim Grigorian and Francine Espinoza Petersen, ‘Designing Luxury Experience’ The European Business Review, 2016. Available at <http://www.europeanbusinessreview.com/designing-luxury-experience/> (Accessed 5/31/2017)

permitting. Finally, students prepared participatory action research interview questions.<sup>2</sup>

Later, we visited both zones. On the first site visit, instructors demonstrated techniques of observation, respectfully taking pictures in public, conducting short interviews with strangers, etc. Students then split up into smaller groups visiting specific stores and retail sites. If wristwatches was the focus of product research, then locations in New York would be discount venues on Canal Street in Manhattan or Fulton Street in Brooklyn vs. luxury shops on Fifth Avenue. Paying attention to contrasts in store design, students noticed that some stores hang watches in tight clumps, while high-end shops displays use eloquent minimalist cases. They also notice contrasts in surveillance systems and the approach used by salespeople. Where do the workers and shoppers come from in each store? At which location do students feel more comfortable in and why?

After that, students picked locations to speak with workers and shoppers, finding people willing to become short-term *partners* in the project and meet students again on a second site visit. Students drew sketches, took notes, made photographs and audio recordings.

After these initial steps research was refined. Observations processed in class discussion, store designs compared to demographics, technological and social systems used to attract some customers and repel others.



Groups were given a week to create a redesign proposal for each store -- or to display an element within a store—in which embedded “invisible barriers” were broken-down. They were then asked to merge elements from both stores at opposite ends of the spectrum.

After this stage, groups revisited stores on their own, showing their re-designs to their *on-site partners* and asked for feedback using printouts for marking up. They also informed *partners* they were creating redesigns for a store on the opposite economic end of the retail spectrum, showing these plans as well.

Taking this feedback into account students finished their redesign modeling using a variety of media depending on their skill set. On their final site visit they brought copies of their collaborative design as gifts to their partners, discussed process with them, and showed how elements of the other store design was incorporated into the model in order to break-down social barriers per-designed into store architecture.

In our final class discussion, the entire class broke out in new groups, sharing

successes, challenges, and discoveries, and considered how their work could be further developed.

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### **Images**

[Figure 1: filename]

[Figure 1: Ultra wealthy can more than afford luxury even though its cost is increasing. CLEWI = Forbes cost of living well index. CPI = Consumer Price Index.]

[Figure 2: filename]

[Figure 2: Surveillance Footage in Luxury retail.]

[Figure 3: filename]

[Figure 3: Protest against Race/Class Profiling at Barneys, NYC in 2014.]

[Figure 4: filename]

[Figure 4: First Year Display Model.]

[Figure 5: filename]

[Figure 5: Detail.]

[Figure 6: filename]

[Figure 6: Student research sketches of store layout with contrast lists.]

## Sensing Social Space

Bo Zheng, School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong

The goal of this activity is to help students become more sensitive to how social spaces are constructed. It is a warm-up exercise, usually done in the first or second week of an introduction to socially engaged art course. No props are needed.

Duration: two to three hours. The workshop's basic idea is to pick a street and visit several spaces on this street: a *café*, a bank, a subway station, an ethnic restaurant, a government building, a military base, a museum, and so on. We ask students to perform actions that deviate from the usual behaviors in these spaces. This renders social mechanisms visible.

An Example:



[Figure 1: 1.jpg]

[Figure 1: Map of Nanshan Road, showing the six spaces we visited.]

When I taught at China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, China, from 2010 to 2013, we conducted this activity on Nanshan Road, where the art school is located. This street offers a range of social spaces. Although students had some familiarity with these spaces, they had not paid close attention to them.



[Figure 2: 2.jpg]

[Figure 2: Discussing in front of *café* Puliou.]

Our first stop was at a bakery and *café* called Puliou, right in front of the art school. Most students had been to Puliou. I asked them to go in and spend five minutes observing how the physical space was organized, an easy task for art students. Afterwards, we gathered outside to discuss what we saw. I then asked them to go in again, this time to observe how people behaved. I also asked them to each perform an action deviating from the norm, not something dramatically disruptive. For example, one student noticed that here people paid first and then consumed, whereas in restaurants people eat first and pay later, so she ate a small tart before paying. Once outside students compiled sets of rules that people follow when they enter the space. We discussed where these rules come from and what purposes they serve.





[Figure 3: 3.jpg]

[Figure 3: Entering the car dealership.]

Our second stop was a high-end car dealership, across the street. Although this dealership is next to the art school, students had never gone inside. We went in. Our mere presence rattled the staff. Clearly we were not the type of people normally visiting this shop. Students enjoyed provoking the staff. They touched the cars and sat in them. Later we discussed the issue of class in Chinese society, and how different social spaces cater to different classes.



[Figure 4: 4.jpg]

[Figure 4: Cramming into a 24-hour self-service banking center.]

Our third stop was at a 24-hour self-service banking center down the street. We crammed into the small space. After one minute, we heard a voice via a speaker. Someone on the other end of the video surveillance system was monitoring us. They asked what were we doing, telling us to leave. We stayed for a while and discussed what was visible and invisible in a bank.



[Figure 5: 5.jpg]

[Figure 5: Discussing in front of a Muslim noodle shop.]

Our fourth stop was a noodle shop run by Muslim's who migrated to Hangzhou from Northwestern China. We compared this noodle shop with the *café* we visited earlier. One student pointed out that while we were fascinated by the *café*'s "European-ness," we showed little interest in the noodle shop's "Muslim-ness." The owner of the noodle shop talked to us and gave us a printed sheet instructing on how to eat noodles according to Muslim practice. We followed the instructions: washing our hands, saying a prayer, and eating slowly, not picking up the next bite until we had fully finished eating the food in our mouth.



[Figure 6: 6.jpg]

[Figure 6: Facing the entrance of a military base.]

Our fifth stop was in front of a military base. In previous stops, people working in the *café*, the car dealership, the bank, and the noodle shop had all tolerated our provocation. But the soldiers guarding the military base showed no tolerance, telling us that we could not even stand there to observe the base from outside. We moved away, not willing to challenge the paramount state-party-military power. We discussed how it is usually easier for socially engaged artists to work with dis-empowered communities than to confront power directly.

[Figure 7: 7.jpg]

[Figure 7: Sitting in the main hall of Zhejiang Art Museum.]

The last stop was the Zhejiang Art Museum, the provincial art museum at the end of Nanshan Road. I asked students to observe how artworks were framed, lit, and labeled, and how visitors and museum guards behaved. Having studied other social spaces along the way, students could now recognize the museum also as a social space, similarly structured by and in turn structuring class and power. They each devised a small action to break away from the usual social practice.

This activity was inspired by Henri Lefebvre's writings (see bibliography). It was essential to pick a street considered ordinary by students; ideally a street they visit often. Through a combination of observation, performance, and discussion, students developed skills to perceive some basic social structures. Students, being young, usually take enjoyment in being 'troublemakers.' In this activity, the instructor was able to push them to articulate the deeper social structures that their actions upset.

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# Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art

## Grant Kester

### Introduction: Socially Engaged Practice Forum

There is pressure through the public funding system for the arts in the UK to create at least the allusion of engaging a broader demographic of the population. The reasoning for this is explained away as public funding shifts to an indirect yet local and media promoted form of taxation through the Lottery, so Government wishes to see—as much for its own PR as continuing Lottery sales—a publicly visible correlation between where the income is generated and on what it is being spent—‘good causes’. This can be seen to be having not dissimilar conservative repercussions on what receives public funding as happened with the National Endowment for the Arts in the U.S.

One outcome has been the supporting of art that adheres to promoting and cultivating ‘Social Inclusion’. This has placed the emphasis on artistic engagement as educational, or pedagogic, in a way that attests to inclusion within society as an integrated whole. At least superficially, this is espousing a shift in the terms of engagement between artists and what were traditionally regarded as audiences, to a more therapeutic or correctional interaction with an underscored group of people.

However, expectations and shifts in artistic practice are not a ‘given’ with legislative changes to government funding priorities, but performative. If a shift is to occur at the point of social engagement then it does not ‘happen’ coercively or in isolation but as a direct effect of an informed choice shift in formations of artistic practice in partnership with the people with which they work.

Within socially engaged approaches to arts prac-

tices there are widely differing dispositions, from what can be seen to be broadly in line with the Government’s agenda—uni-directional activity of cultivating what are effectively better ‘citizens’/ consumers where ‘collaboration’ is largely symbolic—to attempts at an equality of engagement, where art is seen as “a medium for discussion with social reality”, as artist Jay Koh puts it.

One description of the latter has been ‘Littoral’ practice. “Littoral—adj. of or on the shore. —n. a region lying along the shore.” From its description it can be taken to express a point of complimentary meeting, an inbetween space.

The UK Government’s take and emphasis on ‘self-help’ programmes has generated much scepticism with regard to socially engaged art practices. While there may have been many managerial conferences, effectively bolstering the position the Government is adopting, there has been little to no in-depth and critical discussion.

One conference that was established to address issues of socially engaged practice was *Critical Sites: Issues in Critical Art Practice and Pedagogy* held in the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, September ‘98, organised by Critical Access and Littoral in Ireland. At the conference Grant Kester, assistant professor of contemporary art history and theory at Arizona State University, delivered a paper: *Socially Engaged Practice—Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art*.

To raise and debate some of the related issues Variant is hosting an on-line forum on Socially Engaged Practice, commencing with the launch of this issue. Given his commitment and work done to date in these areas, to initiate this dialogue we asked Grant Kester to re-present his paper from the conference.

The Socially Engaged Art Practice on-line forum—held in collaboration with the Environmental Art Department of Glasgow School of Art—is at:

**<http://sepf.listbot.com/>**

This includes an archive of all messages, available to all list members, you can subscribe (at no cost) to the list also from the above site.

Grant Kester’s paper *Socially Engaged Practice—Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art* is also available as a downloadable PDF file at the Variant site:

**[www.ndirect.co.uk/~variant/](http://www.ndirect.co.uk/~variant/)**

If you do not have access to e-mail but wish to respond to Grant Kester’s paper, or any issues related to socially engaged practice, please post them to:

**Variant, 1a Shamrock Street, Glasgow, G4 9JZ**

The resulting exchanges will be subsequently documented at the Variant site and are intended to appear as a dedicated supplement within the ensuing issue, Variant #10 (Spring/Summer 2000).



# Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art

## Grant Kester

### I. Defining Littoral Art

In this paper I'm going to outline a framework for the critical analysis of "Littoral" or engaged art practices. I start with two related caveats. First, my analysis is based primarily on work that I am familiar with in the US and the UK. Thus, it is very much a selective framework. And second, even within this geographically limited context it is focused on a single aspect of these works which I feel is of particular importance. Given the time and space limitations there will be a number of complex questions which I will be unable to elaborate sufficiently and others which I will be forced to bypass altogether. I begin with the assumption that Littoral projects make very different demands on the practitioner than do typical gallery or museum-based art works and that they challenge on many levels the normative assumptions of conventional art works. By the same token I would contend that Littoralist art requires the development of a new critical framework and a new aesthetic paradigm. There are aspects of Littoralist practice that simply can't be grasped as relevant (or in some cases identified at all) by conventional art critical methodologies.

Mainstream art criticism is organized around two key elements. First, it is primarily concerned with the formal appearance of physical objects, which are understood to possess an immanent meaning. These meanings are then actualized as the object comes into contact with a viewer. The object here remains the primary carrier of aesthetic significance, whether in terms of a formal analysis or in terms of a speculative phenomenology that attempts to re-construct a postulated viewer's interactions with it. Second, the judgments produced through the critic's interaction with the physical object are authorized by the writer's individual, pleasure-based response. In *The Scandal of*

*Pleasure* the American critic Wendy Steiner argues that the primary organizing principle of criticism should be "subjective preference" or what she terms the "I like" response.<sup>1</sup>

When contemporary critics confront Littoral projects they often lack the analytic tools necessary to understand the work on its own terms and instead simply project onto it a formal, pleasure-based methodology that is entirely inappropriate.<sup>2</sup> The results are not surprising: Littoral works are criticized for being "unaesthetic" or are attacked for needlessly suppressing "visual gratification". Because the critic is unable to gain any sensory stimulation or fails to find the material in the work personally engaging it is dismissed as "failed" art. This was the reaction of a number of U.S. critics to the most recent *Dokumenta* exhibition. Ken Johnson of *Art in America* coined the term "post-retinal" to describe much of the work in the show.<sup>3</sup> Although Johnson intended this term as a mild pejorative, I feel it is quite useful in capturing the ways in which many Littoral projects challenge the tendency of contemporary visual art to function primarily on the level of sensation. The reliance of contemporary criticism on the writer's personal response also has the effect of treating subjectivity as an unquestioned, *a priori* principle, rather than recognizing the extent to which the critic's "personal" taste is structured by forms of identification and power based on class, race, gender and sexuality. I would argue that the critic has a responsibility to interrogate their own individuality; to ask how their identity functions in relationship to other subjects and other social formations.

#### 1. The Problem of Definition and Indeterminance

The concept of a Littoral criticism is important because it forces upon us the question of what Littoral "art" might be, which in turn requires

that we differentiate Littoral art from other kinds of art (or other forms of cultural politics or activism for that matter). I know that for myself most of these differences have remained relatively intuitive or unconscious. The act of criticism requires that we make these intuitive judgments more concrete and subject them to some conceptual elaboration. The positive dimension of this activity is that it can deepen our understanding of what makes Littoralist art effective. The negative dimension is that it can lead to a hardening of categorical definitions and distinctions. This brings us to a central question. There is a long tradition of defining modernist art through its difference from dominant cultural forms. Thus, Clive Bell and Roger Fry defined avant-garde painting (and in particular, Postimpressionism) through its active suppression of representation, which they associated with the populist realism of Victorian genre painting; Greenberg, of course, contrasted authentic art with vulgar "kitsch". In the 1970s critic Michael Fried differentiated the truly avant-garde art of Anthony Caro and Frank Stella from the inauthentic "Literalist" art of Donald Judd or Robert Smithson, based on its resistance to "theater". That is, Caro's work was judged to be superior because it refused to incorporate formal cues that would acknowledge the presence of a viewer.

This resistance to fixity can be traced to the function of the aesthetic in early modern philosophy as a force that is intended to absorb antagonisms created elsewhere in society. Typically, as in the writings of Schiller, the aesthetic is conceived of as therapeutic; its job is to ameliorate the fragmenting effects of a market-driven society. This compensatory function needs to be understood within the context of liberalism. The aesthetic provides us with a unique power to comprehend and represent the totality of forces operating within society, and to envision more progressive or

humane alternatives, but this epistemological insight is always joined with the requirement that the artist must never attempt to realize these alternatives through direct action. The “poet”, according to Schiller, possesses a sovereign right only in the limitless domain of the imagination. In a parallel manner, for Hegel, in *The Philosophy of Right*, the “aesthetic state” can comprehend the deleterious social effects of private property but it is prevented from intervening in the ostensibly “natural” operations of the market. The resulting social tensions (poverty, a growing gap between rich and poor, environmental destruction) will be relieved, rather, by the *expansion* of the market and by the colonization of what he terms “backwards” lands. These as yet unclaimed colonies are defined, like the aesthetic imagination itself, as potentially boundless and conceptually indeterminate. For Kant the destructive impact of social stratification will be healed by the unfettered circulation of commerce and knowledge (or “books and money”), leading to the gradual diffusion of a spirit of harmonious Enlightenment. The aesthetic can thus be understood as one of several related mechanisms that were developed within liberalism to simultaneously regulate the threat posed by systematic forms of critique and to compensate for the dysfunctional effects of the emergent capitalist system. It must remain highly elastic and unregulated, precisely because it is being called upon to absorb a potentially infinite range of divisive social effects.

Under the influence of late nineteenth-century critics such as Robert Vischer and Heinrich Wölfflin, this principle of indeterminateness was transferred from a general condition of aesthetic knowledge to a trait primarily associated with the experience of artworks. Specifically, the capacity of the modernist work to continually complicate or modify its own formal condition became an expression of its refusal of determinant boundaries. Critics like Bell, Fry, and Greenberg then endowed this idea of formal innovation with the specific motivation that modernist art must constantly transform itself to avoid co-optation by popular culture. This principle of indeterminateness remains with us today in the concept of the art work that refuses the economic exchange of the market or that resists translation into other forms of discourse or meaning (Adorno) or, for that matter, in the belief that art schools should be experimental and open-ended institutions.

In my remarks here I am, thus, working somewhat against the grain of a long tradition that says we must not attempt to limit or define art’s potential meaning. In fact, I would argue that one of the strengths of Littoral practice lies in its capacity to transgress existing categories of knowledge. At the same time I want to stress the importance of understanding indeterminateness in specific social and historical contexts. Clearly we aren’t talking about a generalized refusal of all ontological boundaries. The question is, how has indeterminacy functioned strategically over time? I would contend that, within the modernist tradition, it has been constructed through a dialogue that oscillates between the form of the work of art and its communicative function. And it is in this question of discursivity that I will locate the basis for my definition of Littoral art. It is necessary to consider the Littoralist work as a process as well as a physical product, and specifically as a process rooted in a discursively-mediated encounter in which the subject positions of artist and viewer or artist and subject are openly thematized and can potentially be challenged and transformed. I am particularly interested in a discursive aesthetic based on the possibility of a dialogical relationship that breaks down the conventional distinction between artist, art work and audience—a relationship that allows the viewer to “speak back” to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the “work” itself.

## 2. Modern and Postmodern Anti-Discursivity

This approach is significant, I think, because it stands in opposition to a long tradition of anti-discursivity in modern art that associates communicability or discourse with fixity—the generalized belief that art must define itself as different from other forms of culture (popular culture, kitsch, Fried’s theater) precisely by being difficult to understand, shocking or disruptive (except now, *contra* Schiller’s return to “wholeness”, a Lyotardian “ontological dislocation” becomes the therapeutic antidote to a centered Cartesian subjectivity). I would contend that the anti-discursive tendency in modern art hypostatizes discourse and communication as inherently oppressive. It can’t conceive of a discursive form that is not contaminated by the problematic model of “communication” embodied in advertising and mass-media.<sup>4</sup>

Notably, this attitude runs across the historical and theoretical divide of modernism and postmodernism. Thus Lyotard writes with real disdain of art which is based on the assumption that the public “will recognize. . . will understand, what is signified.”<sup>5</sup> And both Greenberg and Lyotard postulate avant-garde art practice as the antidote to kitsch. If kitsch traffics in reductive or simple concepts and sensations then avant-garde art will be difficult and complex; if kitsch’s preferred mode is a viewer-friendly “realism” then avant-garde art will be abstract, “opaque” and “unpresentable”. In each case the anti-discursive orientation of the avant-garde artwork, its inscrutability and resistance to interpretation, is juxtaposed to a cultural form that is perceived as easy or facile (advertising, kitsch, “theatrical” art, etc.). The condition of this degraded cultural form is then seen as entirely exhausting the possibilities of a populist art, thus forcing the artist to withdraw completely from the field of discursive engagement.

What I am calling an “anti-discursive” tradition in the modern avant-garde is defined by two seemingly opposed moments. The first, which I have described elsewhere as an “orthopedic” aesthetic, seeks to aggressively transform the viewer’s consciousness (implicitly defined as flawed or dulled) through an overwhelming encounter with the work of art.<sup>6</sup> This perspective is more accurately thought of as counter-discursive in that it argues that the work of art has the ability to operate on the viewer through a unique, non-discursive, somatic power. Examples would include the “alienation” effect of the 1930’s Russian and German avant-garde and Walter Benjamin’s concept of a “shock” of critical awareness produced through the “dialectical” juxtaposition of images. Although ambivalently positioned relative to discursive forms of knowledge, these approaches provide an important framework for thinking through a communicative aesthetic model. The positive recognition that everyday language is always/already ideologically prepared to interrupt the formation of a critical consciousness, is combined with what I view as a negative dimension: the positioning of the viewer as a passive subject whose epistemological orientation to the world will be adjusted by the work of art. The extent to which the commitment to shock (what we might call the “naughty artist” paradigm) remains an almost unconscious reflex can be seen in the recent controversy over the English art students who claimed to use a grant to vacation at Costa del Sol while actually staying in Leeds. Like some kind of dated Baudrillardian scenario the various characters (the outraged press, the spluttering conservatives, and the clever art students) played their roles almost as though they were working from a script, and in a way they were.

The second view contends that the artist, and the work of art, must remain entirely unconcerned with the viewer. This is the basis of Michael Fried’s distinction between authentic and “theatrical”

art. Fried insists that the artwork is under no obligation whatsoever to acknowledge the viewer’s presence—that is, to anticipate or play off of the viewer’s physical response, movement, or expectations relative to a given piece.<sup>7</sup> In its extreme state this can take the form of the position that art is not a mode of communication at all. In a classic expression of this view, we find the painter Barnett Newman projecting an anti-discursive tendency into the very mists of time: “Man’s first expression, like his first dream,” Newman writes in 1947, “was an aesthetic one. Speech was a poetic outcry rather than a demand for communication. . . an address to the unknowable.”<sup>8</sup> (Or to an ideal but currently unrealizable *Sensus Communis*.)

## 3. Modern Aesthetics and the Problem of Universality

Greenberg’s citation of Kant in his “Modernist Painting” essay is widely taken as proof of the neo-Kantian lineage of formalist art criticism. I would argue that we can draw very different lessons about the meaning of art from early modern aesthetics. The concept of the aesthetic that emerged in the work of philosophers such as Kant, Schiller, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson was centered on the relationship between the individual (defined by sense-based or somatic knowledge) and the social. This relationship was constructed through concepts such as “taste” (which marks the fortuitous harmony between the autonomous individual and a more objective standard of judgment). This work was only nominally concerned with the form of the art object *per se*. A primary term of reference was the concept of a *sensus communis* or *Gemeinsinn*, a common sense or knowledge that marked a horizon of shared communicability. This opens out into a whole area of debate in contemporary theory between Habermas, Foucault and Lyotard, among others. Lyotard goes so far as to link the concept of discourse and communicability in art with what he ominously terms a “call to order” and the cultures of fascism and Stalinism. Habermas’ claim that art might expand from “questions of taste” to the exploration of “living historical situations” is linked for Lyotard with a naive, nostalgic and politically reactionary yearning after “unity” and the misguided attempt to reconcile art and society into a mythic “organic whole”.

Of course Lyotard’s fears of a universalizing discourse are well-founded. One does not have to look very far in the current cultural landscape to find concrete examples, such as recent attacks on the teaching of Spanish in California public schools (Proposition 227) under the guise of a resurgent one-language Americanism that attempts to define American identity through the negation of the complex cultures that actually constitute that country today. Clearly, any model of discourse or cultural identity that is founded on the violent suppression of difference is oppressive. At the same time the vehemently anti-discursive tradition within the modernist avant-garde has led to another kind of negation—an indifference and in some cases an outright contempt towards the viewer. “The artist,” as sculptor David Smith insisted in 1952, “deserves to be belligerent to the majority”.<sup>9</sup> I would argue, however, that we don’t have to choose between fascism and withdrawal into a mute, monadic isolation. Littoralist art is concerned precisely with exploring and negotiating the complexities of discursive inter-relationships, with trying to create a discourse which minimizes negation.

## 4. Implications for the Analysis of Art

I now want to outline three related components of a discursive or dialogical art practice.

### 1. Interdisciplinarity

First, Littoral art is interdisciplinary. It operates “between” discourses (art and activism, for example) and between institutions (the gallery and the community center or the housing block). This is



opposed to traditional art that operates within both the discursive presuppositions and the institutional sites of the “art world” and art audiences and that is, moreover, often even further defined by its identification with a specific art medium. Ian Hunter of Projects Environment uses the term “interface” practices which I understand in two ways—first, the interface between practitioners and other individuals or groups and second, the interface that is created in Littoral works across disciplinary routines or bodies of knowledge. (This relates to the argument that the formation of disciplinary knowledge is both an empowering and a limiting activity, and that breakthroughs occur in the disciplinary interstices, while consolidation occurs within the disciplines themselves.)

Along with this interdisciplinarity comes the need to learn as much as possible about the ways in which meaning is produced in and through these other contexts. This interdisciplinarity, the ability to draw on analytic resources from other areas such as critical theory, social history or environmental science, and the ability to work through alternative institutional sites, allows Littoral art to develop a systematic critique that can be actualized through specific political or social struggles. The Littoral artist, by “interfacing” with existing sites of political and cultural resistance can challenge the disabling political quietism of liberal aesthetics.

## 2. Multiple registers of meaning vs. formal immanence

In Littoral art the “meaning” of a given work is not centered in the physical locus of the object, or in the imaginative capacity of the single viewer. Rather, it is dispersed through multiple registers. These include a spatial-temporal register, in which the work “means” differently in different locations and times, as opposed to the immanence that is characteristic of modernist formalism. The work also produces multiple levels of information at a given time and space as it interacts with a myriad of other discursive systems (existing belief systems, ideologies, the psychological make up of particular viewers or participants, etc.). There is thus no single “work” to be judged in a Littoralist criticism. This is what differentiates Littoral criticism from conventional art criticism. The “work” is constituted as an ensemble of effects and forces, which operate in numerous registers of signification and discursive interaction.

## 3. Dialogical indeterminance vs. formal indeterminance

The recognition that Littoral works operate on multiple levels of meaning doesn’t imply that meaning is entirely indeterminate, however. It can be clearly analyzed at specific points, and this capacity to ascertain meaning effects among particular viewers or co-participants is an important part of the process of dialogical “feedback” (e.g., Stephen Willats projects with housing estate residents). At the same time, this doesn’t make the work entirely fixed. Rather, the principle of indeterminance that is registered in conventional art through formal innovation is expressed in Littoral art through the open-ended process of dialogical engagement, which produces new and unanticipated forms of collaborative knowledge. I’m not saying that Littoral art works can’t be formally innovative, but that they don’t depend on the principle of immanent formal differentiation as the primary engine for their development.

## II. Current Political and Cultural Context

In the second half of this talk I want to use the concept of a dialogical aesthetic to outline some specific conditions for the analysis and criticism of Littoral art. As I’ve argued, one of the defining characteristics of Littoral art is its capacity for interaction with other areas of social practice. The

“interface” includes more than just the “conversation” that takes place between practitioners and their co-participants. It also encompasses the broader discursive context within which a given Littoral project operates—for example, relevant public policies and debates, corporate ideologies, images and narratives promulgated by the mass media and numerous other sites which structure the political and cultural meaning that a specific work is capable of producing, and which are susceptible to being transformed by the work in turn. Two related tendencies in contemporary cultural politics are particularly salient. The first is the growing privatization of social life, linked with a corollary embrace of the individual as the primary locus of political and cultural authority. The second is the resistance to both theoretical and systematic forms of analysis. These tendencies, although differentially articulated, operate across a broad spectrum of cultural and political positions.

### 1. Individualism/ Privatization

In the U.S. we are witnessing the widespread privatization of those domains of social life which were based on the ideals (if not always the reality) of a shared commitment to a general public good and a willingness to sacrifice some portion of one’s self-interest for the benefit of others. What might be termed the re-segregation of American life is occurring at numerous points: public education is being replaced by a system of selective “voucher” schools which often violate the separation of church and state; fortified “gated communities” are proliferating among the wealthy as a way to simultaneously express class privilege (and paranoia) and to opt out of shared municipal services;<sup>10</sup> with declining state and federal moneys “public” universities are becoming research fiefdoms for major corporations; under the Republican congress industry lobbyists are being invited to re-draft federal regulatory legislation intended to protect the public from their own companies; and forms of collectively-financed health care and social services are under attack by proposals to restrict benefits to those least likely to need them.

Everywhere we see a retreat into privatized enclaves along with a refusal to acknowledge the relationship between economic privilege and consumption patterns here and lack of resources and opportunity elsewhere. The withdrawal from a public commitment to these programs is justified by the claim that they are inherently flawed. But rather than recognizing the problems experienced by, for example, urban high schools, as a result of an interconnected set of social and economic forces (declining tax bases due to white flight, lack of job opportunities as a result of a deliberate program of industrial disinvestment leading to the proliferation of a drug-based economy, etc.) their problems are attributed entirely to the failure of the poor as individuals; their lack of moral fiber and personal initiative. The implication is clear: the only effective public policies are those that function to transform the (failed) individual; to provide them with a work ethic and a capacity for self-sacrifice.

### 2. Anti-Systematic

The second, and related, tendency I noted was an opposition to systematic forms of analysis. Conservatives in the U.S. have undertaken a concerted effort to discredit any form of political analysis that seek to explain poverty or criminality as the result of economic and social inequality. This has involved in turn the adoption of a triumphalist view of recent American history.<sup>11</sup> In this view the last few decades have seen the elimination of all forms of organized racism, classism or sexism in America such that women, the poor and working class, and people of color have no impediments whatsoever to competing in a fair and open way with economically privileged white men in

what Dinesh D’Souza calls the “foot race” of modern life.<sup>12</sup> Having realized this liberal ideal through past political struggles over civil rights, society is now understood to be composed of free individuals whose success or failure is due solely to their personal efforts.<sup>13</sup> If, in this meritocratic utopia, white upper-class men still seem to dominate the most powerful positions in corporate and political life this certainly can’t be attributed to the fact that society continues to systematically impede or limit the opportunities of women, the poor, or people of color. Rather, we must seek some internal cause, located in the individual rather than the social. Thus we have the pseudoscience of the *Bell Curve*, attributing a genetic inferiority to blacks, and conservative attacks on the immorality of the poor.<sup>14</sup> I suspect that there are rough corollaries for these views in the UK today as well.

In place of flawed public institutions we find conservatives championing private philanthropy in which members of the upper class choose to disperse some portion of their accumulated wealth as a reflection of their own humanity and moral excellence. Social programs are to be viewed as a form of *noblesse oblige*, rather than as a collective recognition of inequalities that operate elsewhere in the social order. The result is a neo-Victorian discourse that locates the causes of poverty in personal failure. In line with the roots of early reform in Evangelical Christianity, the act of dispensing charity is itself intended to facilitate the moral transcendence of the giver, to demonstrate their own capacity to reach across the boundaries of class and race privilege on the basis of some putatively universal spiritual essence which they are able to recognize and activate through their elevated capacity for empathetic identification.<sup>15</sup> There have been numerous books published during the last several years (e.g., Marvin Olasky’s *The Tragedy of American Compassion*) in which conservatives argue that the real problem in the U.S. today is a lack of moral character among individuals, and that existing social problems can best be solved not by the state, but by the efforts of private individuals and organizations that develop programs focused on building the character of the poor.

### 3. Relationship to Art

In this brief outline I’ve discussed the conservative world view in terms of a resistance to systematic or holistic forms of analysis and a (fictive) construction of the subject as a radically autonomous individual whose desires must be either unimpeded (as a middle-class consumer) or rigorously policed (as a working-class producer). In general terms both the anti-systematic orientation and the rampant individualism of conservative thinking seek to detach a given subject, event or condition from its imbeddedness within a network of causal factors; to abstract the individual, as a product of social forces and discursive interrelationships into an entirely self-contained and generative entity.

Two interconnected tendencies in contemporary art critical discourse are of particular relevance here—the widespread interest in the role of visual pleasure in aesthetic experience and the consequent attack on theoretical or systematic analyses of art. These tendencies first emerged as a reaction to the perceived didacticism and theoretical excess of 1980’s postmodernism. For critics in the U.S. such as Mark van Proyen and David Hickey “theory” marks a retreat from the unique somatic knowledge that is the special province of the artist.<sup>16</sup> Theory is abstract and distanced; art is immediate and experiential. The iron heel of mind-driven theory has attempted to quash the subtle but necessary truths of the body over which the artist has a proprietary authority. Here mind and body, dominative reason and a spiritually cultivated intuition are juxtaposed in classic binary fashion. The assertion of “beauty” and personal

The OTHER X / change is a project aiming to explore cultural diversity through critical contemporary interactive art practices. Bettina Buck, Roland Kerstein and Jay Koh were in Beijing in May/June 1999 and set up a temporary project space that functioned as a forum to facilitate dialogue and exchange with local artists.

<http://www.geocities.com/~gintra/index.htm>



**Xu Tan**  
Interactive CD ROM *Made in China*, 1997/8



**Li Yongbin**  
*Visitor*, digital print 99

pleasure as the only legitimate basis of an art experience and the reaction against “theory” (which is seen as contaminating the purity of that experience) coalesce around the troubled figure of the “individual”. The artist (as an exemplary individual) becomes the final bunkered outpost of resistant subjectivity against a whole array of “objective” and abstract cognitive forces. The somatic or sensual experience that they register through their works is understood as having an inherently progressive political power, constituting a pre-social domain of personal autonomy and self-expression.

The “individual” marks an important point of congruence with the conservative views I’ve already outlined. The concept of the (bourgeois) individual constructed in conservative discourse bears a striking resemblance to conventional notions of the artist, virulently resisting any threat to the autonomy of personal expression or desire. This is not to say that any artistic position on individual autonomy is necessarily conservative. Further, it is clearly the case that the individual body and the right of expression mark an important domain of political struggle today. But the politics of the individual are not necessarily a given; they have to be established in and through specific contexts—a process that requires some form of analytic thinking.

The attack on theory in the arts is part of a more general reaction against analytic systems of thought that has been taken up across a range of cultural sites. The political implications of the anti-theory stance are particularly evident in recent debates in left journals such as *The Nation*. In an opinion column in May of 1998 *Nation* editor Eric Alterman castigated what he called the “radical/academic” left (a.k.a. the “Foucaultian” left) for its focus on theory (“theory and identity are everything”) at the expense of “real” politics.<sup>17</sup> Wallowing in its own elitism and irrelevance the “cultural left” blithely assumes that “the higher the level of its abstraction the more subversive it is.” Where many contemporary critics bemoan the irrelevance of theory to the actuality of art-making, Alterman contends that contemporary left academics are out of touch with the average worker and incapable of “translating theory into praxis in the real world of U.S. politics.” In each case the attack on “theory” is generated out of the claimed authenticity of “experience”.

Although these debates, in art and in contemporary political discourse, are being staged on very different terrains they share some tendencies. First, they express a common desire to bypass what is seen as the extraneous, abstract, or irrelevant discourse of theory in order to regain contact with the “empirical” basis of a given discipline or activity. They urge us to move closer to the object of study or engagement, to collapse the distance (critical, physical, emotional) between object and interlocutor, at the same time that they express a demand to recover the “essence” of politics or art in response to the dangerous forces of conservative attack and anarchic inter-disciplinary transgression. This is a perspective that makes it increasingly difficult to recognize the inter-connections among and between these various cultural and political fields. It marks a retreat from the possibilities of a cultural politics and from the possibility of a shared discourse among activists, artists, critics, and others, and specifically, from the kinds of processes that lie at the heart of Littoral practice.

### III. Littoral Practice—Dialogical Aesthetics

If, as I am suggesting, the evaluative framework for Littoral art is no longer centered on the physical object then what is the new locus of judgment? I would contend that it can be found in the condition and character of dialogical exchange itself. I would define this as a pragmatic form of

criticism to the extent that it is concerned with the specific effects produced by these exchanges in a given context. At the same time, it retains a nominal teleological orientation in that it preserves some concept of an ideal discursive process that can act as a benchmark against which to evaluate actual projects. It is necessary to consider two conditions that are specific to the subject position of the contemporary “artist”, and which bear directly on the artist’s capacity for discursive engagement.

The first condition is ideological—the tendency of artists to identify themselves with a highly individualized concept of personal autonomy on the one hand, and with the capacity to transcend self through their mastery of a universal aesthetic knowledge on the other. The result is an often problematic mixture of traits: a failure to engage in critical self-reflection (due to the belief that one’s individuality constitutes a redemptive, pre-ideological enclave) combined with the perceived authority to heedlessly transgress boundaries of class, race, and privilege, and to engage in discursive acts “on behalf of” any number of disenfranchised “others”. The potential correspondence between this view and the concepts of privatized philanthropy that I outlined earlier is clear. The corollary to the philanthropic middle-class subject who is able to make contact with, and spiritually “improve”, the racial or class Other is found in the long tradition of regarding the artist or intellectual as a trans-cultural agent. Thus we have St. Simon’s “avant-garde”, Coleridge’s “Clerisy”, and more recently, descriptions of the artist as a Shamanistic healer which engage in a problematic projection of archaic notions of “tribal” spirituality onto a society that is highly stratified, even if not especially within the arts. To the extent that Littoral projects involve this kind of cross-cultural or cross-class negotiation (and when they do it is almost always the case that the transgression is moving from a position of greater to lesser privilege), this will remain a persistent area of tension.

The second condition that poses a challenge to discursivity is institutional and logistical. It is what we might call the problem of itinerancy. Discourse, and the trust necessary for discursive interaction and identification, grow out of a sustained relationship in time and space, the co-participation in specific material conditions of existence. But the nature of contemporary art patronage and production mitigates against this kind of sustained commitment. Artists have to earn a living which may require regular re-location due to teaching or other jobs, foundation grants are often oriented around singular projects over a fixed time frame, and the art institutions that provide support for Littoral work are accustomed to inviting a practitioner in from “the outside” for a limited period of time. Many of the mechanisms of engaged arts patronage function to reinforce the view of a given “community” or constituency as an instrumentalized and fictively monolithic entity to be “served” by the visiting artist. The British artist Stephen Willats has negotiated the problem of itinerancy by returning to the same sites, often tower blocks, over a period of several years. Another solution is found in arts organizations that are located in, and build ongoing relationships with, specific neighborhoods, as in the East Bay Institute for Urban Arts in Oakland, California.

#### 1. Discursive Determinism

Turning from the condition of the artist to the concept of discourse itself I would identify two areas of critical analysis. The first relates to the problem of discursive determinism—that is, the replacement of a vulgar Marxist concept of economic determinism by the equally reductive belief that “discourse” or dialogue in and of itself has the power to radically transform social relations. This is problematic for two reasons. First, because it overlooks the manifest differential in power rela-

The **Saját Szemmel/Inside out** project began in July 1997. Between then and February 1998, around 40 homeless people living in Budapest were given simple colour disposable cameras and invited to take photographs of whatever they felt to be important or interesting in their everyday experience, in the knowledge that their pictures would later be viewed publicly. The participants were approached on a fairly random basis in the city's metro stations and homeless shelters. Afterwards, we recorded an interview with each photographer about their pictures. *Dominic Hislop/Miklós Erhardt*  
<http://www.c3.hu/collection/homeless/>



#### László Hudák

This bread-beating man shows that there are people in this life- because the bread itself, man is bread as well- so, there are people who still have value. You see he took this bread out, he beat it and he increased it's value. In the same way there are people who at some stage, will take us out of the bin (because we are in a bin, we are thrown out of society), and they're going to take us out and increase our value.



#### Péter Vásárhelyi

I am like a bin. However you don't have to move me out from a bin. There's a pair of glasses beside the bin. Now, if I see a bin and I see a pair of glasses then I am trying to solve something. To here or to here. The glasses symbolize the meaning, the bin...this is the lift, going down. There is a poster in front of me which is advertising glasses, I've got bad eyesight, there is a bin beside it. Now, if I think about whether to choose the bin or the glasses, so I should look optimistically to the future, to choose the bin? I have two possibilities: I would choose the glasses in this case.



#### Deszõ Pavicska

It was pretty tricky really, because first of all you had to ask everybody for permission but afterwards the person still had to look natural. Luckily they know me. I just said that they should do everything as normal and I'll photograph them in the meantime and that not that many people are going to see it, they shouldn't let it bother them. I'm sure that not that many people that we know are going to attend exhibitions. I would have been able to take better ones. However it's possible that I would have got a few smacks for it. So, it was better to ask. With this one, I gave the guy a sandwich, went a bit away...and it came out really well with the Coke advertisement. I like this one the best, it's very accurate, it hit the nail on the head. The opportunity had to be taken. It was such a good chance that I had to take it. If I wanted to be really ideological, I'd say that it's symbolic, but in the end I just liked the picture.

tions that pre-conditions participation in discourse long before we get to the gallery, community center or meeting room. We can attempt to minimize the effect of power on discourse, to point to its effects, but we can't expect to eliminate it. Discursive determinism also overlooks the extent to which political change takes place through forms of "discourse" (such as violence or economic manipulation of the electoral system) that are far from open and ideal. This tendency treats discourse as an abstract and autonomous entity, but the essential mediating relationship between discourse and mechanisms of political or social change is left undeveloped. We might call this the "argue but obey" criticism of discourse, taken from Kant's famous citation of Frederick the Great, who had no problem with Prussia's intellectual class expressing any number of radical ideals in written form so long as they did nothing to directly challenge his political authority—"argue as much as you want, and about whatever you want, but obey" (in "What is Enlightenment?"). "Discourse" becomes aesthetic, in the sense that I have used the term previously, to the extent that it becomes detached from mechanisms of political change and instead takes on a compensatory or primarily symbolic role.

#### 2. Empathy and Negation

The second axis of a discursive aesthetic revolves around the related concepts of "empathy" and "negation". The specific function of conventional aesthetic perception is to treat the perceived object as an ensemble of stimuli to be registered on the conscious mind of the artist. Everything that is outside of the perceiving subject thus becomes a kind of raw material to be processed by the senses and the mind in order to produce what we might call a "transcendence effect". This process allows the subject to reflectively perceive the operations of their own consciousness, and by extension to glimpse the potential cognitive ground of a universal basis of communication. The transcendence effect is most pronounced when the material being experienced is treated as a mere representation, thus insulating the meditative perceiver from any direct contact with the viewed object which might distract them from the process of self-reflection. This is typically expressed in the early to mid-twentieth century concept of a formalist, self-referential art practice.

The effect, then, is to negate the specific identity of those objects around you (and people can easily function as objects), and instead to treat them as instrumentalized material. In contrast, a dialogical aesthetic would locate meaning "outside" the self; in the exchange that takes place, via discourse, between two subjects. Moreover, the identities of these subjects are not entirely set, but rather, are formed and transformed through the process of dialogical exchange. In the traditional view I've just outlined aesthetic experience prepares the subject to participate in intersubjective exchange by giving them mastery over a universal discursive form. They function as an already fixed enunciative agent who merely makes use of discourse to express the *a priori* "content" of their internal being. In the model that I'm outlining the subject is literally produced in and through dialogical exchange.

One way in which the instrumentalizing tendency of traditional aesthetic experience has been negotiated is through the concept of empathy (e.g., Burke and Lessing). Empathy is a relationship to others that at least potentially allows us to experience the world not as a transcendent eye-ball searching out aesthetic stimulation, but as a discursively integrated subject willing to sacrifice some sense of autonomy in order to imaginatively inhabit, learn from (and be transformed by) another subject's material condition and world view. Politically resistant communities are typically formed by people who share lived experience and interests in ways that a Littoral practitioner may

not. Yet, the problems of universality notwithstanding, we must retain some concept of an intersubjective common ground that would allow for the possibility of shared discourse, and that would allow the practitioner to bridge the gap of difference between themselves and their co-participants.

At the same time, empathy is susceptible to a kind of ethical/ epistemological abuse in which the very act of empathetic identification is used to negate the specific identity of the other subject. It is simply not the case that "we" are all "the same"—we are differentially positioned relative to material, cultural, and economic interests. And, historically, it is precisely in crossing these kind of objective divisions that "empathy" is most often evoked. Empathy can become an excuse to deny our own privilege and the real differences between ourselves and others, and to subject them instead to an instrumentalizing aestheticization. It is notable that in philosophical terms empathy has been constructed as non-discursive relationship. In Lessing's *Laocoön* essay he defines empathy in part through the restrained silence of *Laocoön* himself, even as he is attacked by poisonous snakes. The empathized subject is not expected to answer back, only to bear the marks of their suffering and to thereby elicit our emotive identification. Moreover, empathy is the product of distance, which guarantees that we cannot be "existentially implicated in the tragic event".<sup>18</sup> Thus both Lessing and Burke associate empathy with pity and with a quasi-pleasurable aesthetic response. I'm reminded here of a friend who worked developing art-based therapy in an Alzheimer's care facility. After some time she grew to be rather unpopular with the regular caregivers who resented what they saw as her tendency to romanticize dementia as liberating the creative child within. There is of course a long history of artists tortured by the desire to "do good" or be useful. Van Gogh's transition from Evangelical minister to the miners of Belgium, where he even began to physically mimic their impoverished lifestyle, to painting solemn scenes of peasant culture is exemplary of the tendency to treat the other as a material to be converted by the well-intentioned artist, or as a "representational" resource.

To make this point somewhat clearer relative to Littoral practice I want to briefly re-visit a project that I discussed in some detail at the Salford Littoral conference in 1994. The project is called *Soul Shadows: Urban Warrior Myths* and was produced by an artist from New Orleans named Dawn Dedeaux in 1993. It began as part of an "art in the prisons" program in Louisiana and eventually mushroomed into a travelling multi-media installation with sculptural elements, multiple video monitors, fabricated rooms, large photo-based images, a sound track and so on. In this form it toured from New Orleans to a number of major cities including Baltimore and Los Angeles. The project was subject to some criticism, especially by African American writers, because it presented provocative images of one of Dedeaux's chief subjects, a convicted crack dealer and gang leader named Wayne Hardy, half dressed, holding a spear, a shield and in one case a target. Although there are many "voices" in the installation, in fact a cacophony of audio and video tapes ran constantly, the dominant narrative "voice" of the piece was that of Dedeaux herself, who planned and orchestrated the project with some minimal "collaboration" from Wayne Hardy regarding the staging of his life size portraits. Dedeaux sought to help white viewers "empathize" with the conditions faced by young black men, at the same time that she hoped the piece would act as a kind of moral prophylactic for young black men who came to see it, who would presumably mend their ways after witnessing the contrition expressed by a number of imprisoned figures.

Dedeaux, who is from a white, upper-class New

Orleans family, spoke of the project as a way to overcome her fear of young black men after being mugged in the French quarter. The young black men she worked with thus served as the vehicle for a kind of immersion therapy that allowed her to transcend her own painfully self-conscious whiteness. At the same time, Dedeaux's project positioned her subjects as ciphers of black criminality (they are always viewed in the context of prison and of discussions about their crimes) by failing to locate their relentlessly foregrounded "criminality" in the broader context of the current urban political economy. Images of young black men in prison circulate widely in U.S. culture and their interpretation is heavily influenced by a broad network of presuppositions largely dominated by conservative policy statements, books, op-ed pieces and so on. These images cannot simply be re-circulated in an art context without taking that *a priori* discursive network into consideration, and without taking the artist's own position vis-a-vis these images into account. I certainly don't hold Dedeaux accountable for conservative policies on race and crime, but they constituted one of the most significant discursive interfaces for this project and, assuming that she didn't find herself in agreement with them, she should have devised some representational strategy to resist the assimilation of her project to these views.

Since this project was widely covered several years ago there have been two interesting addenda. First, in 1996 one of Dedeaux's subjects, Paul Hardy, was arrested for the murder of a police witness and, in order to build its case against him the FBI raided Dedeaux's studio, seizing interviews and videotapes. These images, which Dedeaux had collected and catalogued in her studio, are not simply a representational resource, they are in a very real way linked to the lives of her subjects, with immediate and profound consequences. The second addendum is provided by Dedeaux herself, who presented a mocking "self-portrait" (*Self-Portrait, Rome*) in a 1997 issue of the journal *Art Papers* which featured her in smiling black-face make-up with the phrase "Do You Like Me Better Now?" written on the palm of her hand. It is probably safe to assume that this image was intended as a response to those critics (possibly including myself) who raised questions about the position she took up in the *Soul Shadows* project. She seems to be suggesting here that the only reason she was criticized was because she was white.

Of course Dedeaux's easy accommodation to conservative views about black crime and poverty is not simply a matter of her race. At the same time, if she was black herself it is unlikely that the experience of being mugged would have made her fearful of all black men, and led her to produce a piece that is so problematically related to questions of difference, access, and mastery. Dedeaux's whiteness is not simply a question of skin color but of her imaginative orientation to racial identity and Otherness itself. While her class and racial background and her resulting isolation relative to poor and working class black communities might predispose her to reinforce these views, it doesn't predetermine it. This image is made more problematic by the fact that it is, presumably, meant as an indirect citation of David Hammons' billboard "How You like me Now?" which was installed on the streets of Washington, D.C. as part of the Blues Aesthetic exhibition in 1989. The billboard featured Jackson in whiteface and was meant as a critique of those Democrats who feared that Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" would split the black vote. As the billboard was being installed several black passersby found the image of a white-faced Jackson, being erected by an all-white crew, insulting. They returned with sledge-hammers and destroyed the piece.

This project provides an instructive example of the ways in which a discursively-based Littoral practice differs from gallery-based strategies, which assume that the physical object "in and of

itself" carries sufficient meaning. There was no attempt by the sponsoring institution at discursive interaction with the "public" on whom this billboard would be imposed. Part of the difficulty lies in the ambiguity of Hammons' piece. "How you like me now?" could be a way of saying that Jackson was an "Uncle Tom" who was willing to play white to gain Democratic support just as easily as it could be taken as a criticism of Democrats who feared Jackson's blackness. On the streets of a formerly black DC neighborhood which was undergoing gentrification (in part encouraged by the activities of white artists and arts institutions), the fact that it was perceived as a provocation is hardly surprising. This makes Dedeaux's citation of the work in her image all the more questionable. Dedeaux displays an almost instinctive affinity for conservative views on race. Here she transforms Hammons' image, which was intended as an indictment of the suppressed racism of the Democratic party, into a caustic lamentation on the effects of reverse racism, in which she portrays herself as the oppressed victim of mean-spirited critics who attacked her solely on the basis of her skin color.

### 3. Critical Pedagogy and the Politically Coherent Community

As I've suggested, the antinomy between empathy and negation can be at least partially resolved by recourse to a discursive aesthetic which conceives of the artist primarily as a collaborator in dialogue rather than an expressive agent. Here the artist's identity is tested and transformed by intersubjective experience, rather than being fortified against it. The "artist" occupies a socially constructed position of privileged subjectivity, reinforced by both institutional sponsorship and deeply imbedded cultural connotations. It is the achievement of Littoral practitioners to work to mitigate the effects of these associations as much as possible, and to open up and equalize the process of dialogical exchange. This process is most easily facilitated in those cases in which the artist collaborates with a politically coherent community, that is, with a community or collectivity that has, through its own internal processes, achieved some degree of coherence, and a sense of its own political interests, and is able to enter into a discursive collaboration on more equal footing. This is perhaps the most effective way in which to avoid the problems posed by the "salvage" paradigm in which the artist takes on the task of "improving" the implicitly flawed subject. My intention here is not to idealize "community" per se. As I have written elsewhere, any process of community formation is based on some degree of violence and negation (of those individual characteristics that are seen as extraneous to a given community's common values or ideals).<sup>19</sup> Further, it is by now something of a commonplace to define "community" as an ongoing process, rather than a fixed and closed entity. But my question here is less theoretical than strategic; what role does the artist, as a singularly privileged cultural figure, play relative to this process? It is precisely the belief that the artist can somehow "create" community through a superior aesthetic power or relate to a given social or cultural collective from a transcendent or aesthetically autonomous position, which I would want to question.

Although artists can clearly function as co-participants in the formation of specific communities, they are also limited by the historical moment in which they live, and the extent to which existing social and political circumstances favor or preclude this formation. An exemplary case in this regard would be Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson's work during the 1980s with the Docklands Community Poster Project, which they developed in direct consultation and collaboration with tenants action groups, local councils and so on. This work was produced during a period of widespread political mobilization in response to Thatcherite

programs for economic "redevelopment" that posed a serious threat to poor and working class neighborhoods in East London. This period also coincided, fortuitously, with the development of extremely innovative forms of arts patronage through the Greater London Council. The fact that the larger battle against Docklands development failed is less relevant here than the fact that the structural conditions for an activist cultural practice existed at the time that made it possible for Dunn and Leeson to produce works through a process of ongoing collaborative dialogue with a wide range of community groups.

Unfortunately the last fifteen years have seen a drastic change in activist politics in the U.S. and England. We live in a period of diminishing expectations, in which left organizations have in many cases taken up an accommodationist relationship to conservative policies, and in which the imaginative reach of activist politics has been severely restricted. The system of public support for activist work has been seriously eroded in the U.S., and a growing number of artists interested in Littoralist practices have to rely on private foundation support, or alliances with private sector institutions. It is difficult, if not impossible, to survive as an artist working primarily through grassroots political organizations. Increasingly artists are forced to develop strategic relationships with ancillary institutions such as public schools, prisons, and economic redevelopment agencies. Obviously these institutions are far more ambivalently positioned relative to the collective interests of poor or working class communities. Specifically, they function by defining community members through regulatory categories such as "at risk youth", "drug addicts", or "the homeless" which implicate the artist in a highly problematic chain of associations about their culpability as political and cultural agents.

A typical example of this tendency is seen in Jim Hubbard's peripatetic *Shooting Back* project, which began in 1988 with ex-UPI photographer Hubbard working with homeless children in the Washington, D.C. area to "document their lived experience as a means of personal empowerment." The project has been transported into a variety of other sites, including, in 1994, the *Shooting Back From the Reservation* series produced with Native American children in the west and southwest. Hubbard's press release for this project begins with a series of shocking statistics regarding unemployment rates among Native Americans and ends with a reference to the high incidence of alcoholism and suicide among reservations populations. Lurking just beneath the surface of Hubbard's description is the assumption that Native Americans exist in a classic "culture of poverty" in which the most significant barrier to their advancement isn't the absence of jobs, sub-standard schools or poor housing, but their lack of self-esteem, evidenced by their recourse to suicide and alcoholism. Hubbard himself substantiates this view. When he asked why he teaches children how to use cameras when what they really need is shelter his response was: "Housing won't be enough. Self-esteem is a big issue, particularly with children. Mastering the camera and seeing their own images in print have boosted their confidence." The project's effects are consistently described in terms of its remedial effect on truant youth. Thus, according to a press release: "children who experienced problems in regular school classrooms. . . are showing improvement in school work habits" due to the *Shooting Back* program. Or alternately, "children have been motivated to be productive in other school activities" because the *Shooting Back* program "contributes to their sense of self-confidence and accomplishment." Instead of addressing the structural conditions of Native American poverty Hubbard will "empower" them with the "self-esteem" necessary to succeed in the work-place by allowing them to temporarily inhabit the privileged subjectivity of the artist docu-



menting the world around them.

It is necessary to bear in mind here the increasingly conflictive role played by the public school system in the U.S. as a training ground for service sector and low-level technology employers. In northern Idaho, where I lived for the last two years, plans are under way to eliminate world history, geography, reading and even computer class requirements from the high school curriculum so that students can have more “flexibility for career-oriented electives.” According to curriculum director Hazel Bauman, “What we are hearing from business and industry is that the large majority of kids who do not get baccalaureate degrees need to come out of high school with a good basis in technical skills.” A plan currently being developed by the Coeur d’Alene Chamber of Commerce involves having local public school teachers spend their summer vacations working as “interns” at local businesses, like fast food restaurants or mines, in order to help them understand what these businesses need in students. According to band teacher Kevin Cope, “We’re getting our students ready to go out and work for these corporations. We need to know what to teach them.”

The *Shooting Back* project takes for granted the fatalistic political horizons of current conservative rhetoric; the best that can be hoped is to give Native American children the “self esteem” needed to stay sober and get to MacDonalds on time in the morning. Clearly there is nothing wrong with teaching kids how to use a camera. But why can’t these technical skills be joined with some form of pedagogy which would help to encourage the formation of a critical consciousness of their situation within the current political economy? One of the most important characteristics of the aesthetic lies in its power to critically comprehend a cultural or social totality, and to think beyond its limitations. There is no sense of this kind of vision in Hubbard’s project—no sense that he is conscious of working in and through an ideological apparatus that is precisely intended to circumvent the formation of a collective political identity among young Native Americans. Hubbard’s decision to work with children is justified on the basis that they represent the “future” of Native American culture, but children are also far less likely to challenge Hubbard’s own presuppositions regarding their own poverty. Children are typically selected by artists such as Dedeaux and Hubbard because they present themselves as more malleable subjects, less resistant to the impress of the artists’ transformative power. But this is hardly a relationship that is likely to encourage any significant discursive equity or exchange.

We see this same failure of self-reflection in the recent National Endowment for the Arts’ “American Canvas” report which attempts to insulate the NEA from future conservative attack by aligning it with programs designed to improve the poor and working class. In some of the more unintentionally amusing passages in the report Richard Deasy, director of the “Goals 2000 Arts Education Partnership”, evokes the image of a rigorous, hard-headed art that isn’t afraid to roll up its shirt sleeves and get things done. Deasy calls for an art based on “mastery” and “substantive, disciplined study.” This “muscular” art can provide America’s disadvantaged with the “self-esteem” that they are so obviously lacking, and can help them build the “workplace skills needed to ensure their own employability and their ability to make solid economic contributions to their communities.” Having jettisoned its sissified ways on the cultural Nordic Track this manly art will “suffuse” itself “throughout the civic structure,” according to Olson, “finding a home in a variety of community service and economic development activities.”

These calls for a socially-engaged art are combined with a palpable fear among many of the contributors of calling too much attention to the political implications of this stance. In this con-

text, the un-self-consciousness with which a number of participants in the public “American Canvas Forums” spoke of establishing friendly “partnerships” with the criminal justice system, urban renewal and economic redevelopment agencies, Enterprise Zones, and proponents of “cultural tourism” was truly astounding. The compromised function of these various institutions, relative to the interests of the poor, the working class, and people of color has, one would think, been well established, yet they are here viewed as nothing more than politically neutral vehicles for a pragmatic and non-ideological form of cultural activism.

In addition to their widely advertised positive effects, projects such as Hubbard’s have the effect of encouraging children to believe that self-motivation and determination are the necessary conditions for progress; that it is “up to them” to succeed through the personal spark of creativity that will be unleashed by the art-making experience. When Hubbard’s students are unable to start careers as UPI photographers who will be at fault? The project doesn’t give them a way to understand the contradictory nature of their own status as “underprivileged” subjects in the first place—the very status that the artist depends on, and takes for granted, in choosing to work with them. It does little to help them develop a political critique of their own condition as “at risk youth” which might lead them to ask why the reservation has to fight for the crumbs of philanthropy and depend on well-intentioned artists to favor them with their projects in the first place. There is, in short, little space left open in these projects for the kind of emancipatory political vision that is a central feature of Littoral practice.

This criticism brings us back to the questions of individualism and anti-systematic thought that I outlined earlier as part of the current political and cultural context. For me the “indeterminate-ness” of a discursive aesthetic is not simply the condition of open-ended dialog, it also refers to the ability to think beyond or outside of the existing, constrained horizons of neo-liberal discourse which takes global capitalism, economic inequality, an individualized moral economy, “sustainable” levels of environmental destruction and so on as given conditions. When compared to the political climate of the 1920’s, or even the 1960’s this represents a deplorably impoverished range of options—the “end of ideology” real politik of NAFTA and the IMF. The demise of the USSR and the Berlin Wall is widely taken as a justification to dismiss any form of systematic critique as inherently “Stalinist”. Yet I would contend that this is precisely where the transgressive powers of Littoral practice, and of a dialogical aesthetic, are most needed today.

## Notes

- 1 Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.7.
- 2 There are a few exceptions here, including writings by Carol Becker, Hal Foster, Suzi Gablik, Suzanne Lacy and Lucy Lippard, among others.
- 3 Ken Johnson, “A post-retinal documenta,” *Art in America*, vol.85, no.10 (October 1997), pp.80-88.
- 4 Some of the ideas presented here are taken from a forthcoming book project, *Words that Hear: Discourse and Counter-Discourse in Modern Art*.
- 5 Jean-François Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?,” *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.76.
- 6 Grant Kester, “Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public” in *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, edited by Grant Kester (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998).
- 7 See “Art and Objecthood” in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University

of Chicago Press, 1998), pp.148-172.

- 8 Barnett Newman, “The First Man was an Artist” (1947) reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, editors (Blackwell: London, 1992), p.568.
- 9 David Smith, “Aesthetics, the Artist and the Audience” (1952), reprinted in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, p.578.
- 10 According to David Dillon, in the June 1994 issue of *Planning*, one-third of all new communities being built in Southern California, Phoenix, Florida and the suburbs of Washington, D.C. are “gated.” Along with the gates come surveillance cameras, infrared sensors, guard dogs, private police patrols and even barbed wire. These communities frequently privatize many of the functions previously performed by a local or municipal governments, such as trash collection, the provision of utilities, and even education.
- 11 For a particularly egregious example of this see a recent op-ed. piece by James K. Glassman a “fellow” at the Conservative American Enterprise Institute. In “From War to Art” (*Washington Post*, January 6, 1998), Glassman makes a virtue out of low voter turn-outs and the media’s failure to report on domestic policy (in favor of stories such as Princess Diana’s death and the “little girl in Texas” who fell into a well), which he attributes to the fact that “lots of people are happy” and thus don’t really care about government anymore. Although “poverty, ignorance and pathology” still exist (the latter perhaps being a reference to arguments about the depraved or criminalized poor), the majority of Americans are using their new-found happiness to “read, listen to music and look at pictures”. He cites as evidence the presence of “enthusiastic crowds” at a recent Richard Diebenkorn exhibition at the Whitney, praising Diebenkorn’s “beautiful, sane and rhythmic” paintings.
- 12 Dinesh D’Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society*, (New York: Free Press, 1995).
- 13 The institutional expression of this ethos is found in the privileged legal status granted to private corporations in the U.S. as fictive “individuals”, which was first established by railroad monopolies in an 1886 Supreme Court decision (Santa Clara County vs. Southern Pacific Railroad).
- 14 Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, (New York: Free Press, 1994).
- 15 On the relationship between this view and contemporary community-based art practices see Grant Kester, “Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Art,” *Afterimage* 22:6 (January 1995), pp.5-11.
- 16 See Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993).
- 17 Eric Alterman, “Making One and One Equal Two,” *The Nation*, May 25, 1998, p.10.
- 18 David Wellbery, *Lessing’s Laocoön: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.165.
- 19 See the “Rhetorical Questions” essay cited above (note 5).

# Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics

CLAIRE BISHOP

*The Palais de Tokyo*

On the occasion of its opening in 2002, the Palais de Tokyo immediately struck the visitor as different from other contemporary art venues that had recently opened in Europe. Although a budget of 4.75 million euros was spent on converting the former Japanese pavilion for the 1937 World's Fair into a "site for contemporary creation," most of this money had been used to reinforce (rather than renovate) the existing structure.<sup>1</sup> Instead of clean white walls, discreetly installed lighting, and wooden floors, the interior was left bare and unfinished. This decision was important, as it reflected a key aspect of the venue's curatorial ethos under its codirectorship by Jérôme Sans, an art critic and curator, and Nicolas Bourriaud, former curator at CAPC Bordeaux and editor of the journal *Documents sur l'art*. The Palais de Tokyo's improvised relationship to its surroundings has subsequently become paradigmatic of a visible tendency among European art venues to reconceptualize the "white cube" model of displaying contemporary art as a studio or experimental "laboratory."<sup>2</sup> It is therefore in the tradition of what

1. Palais de Tokyo promotional and Website, "site de création contemporaine," <<http://www.palais-detokyo.com>>

2. For example, Nicolas Bourriaud on the Palais de Tokyo: "We want to be a sort of interdisciplinary *kunstverein*—more laboratory than museum" (quoted in "Public Relations: Bennett Simpson Talks with Nicolas Bourriaud," *Artforum* [April 2001], p. 48); Hans Ulrich Obrist: "The truly contemporary exhibition should express connective possibilities and make propositions. And, perhaps surprisingly, such an exhibition should reconnect with the laboratory years of twentieth-century exhibition practice. . . . The truly contemporary exhibition with its striking quality of unfinishedness and incompleteness would trigger *pars pro toto* participation" (Obrist, "Battery, Kraftwerk and Laboratory," in *Words of Wisdom: A Curator's Vade Mecum on Contemporary Art*, ed. Carin Kuoni [New York: Independent Curators International, 2001], p. 129); in a telesymposium discussing Barbara van der Linden and Hans Ulrich Obrist's *Laboratorium* project (Antwerp, 2000), the curators describe their preference for the word "laboratory" because it is "neutral" and "still untouched, untouched by science" ("Laboratorium is the answer, what is the question?," *TRANS* 8 [2000], p. 114). Laboratory metaphors also arise in artists' conceptions of their own exhibitions. For example, Liam Gillick, speaking about his one-man show at the Arnolfini, Bristol, remarks that it "is a laboratory or workshop situation where there is the opportunity to test out some ideas in combination, to exercise relational and comparative critical processes" (Gillick quoted in *Liam Gillick: Renovation Filter: Recent Past and Near Future* [Bristol: Arnolfini, 2000], p. 16). Rirkrit Tiravanija's

Lewis Kachur has described as the “ideological exhibitions” of the historical avant-garde: in these exhibitions (such as the 1920 International Dada Fair and the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition), the hang sought to reinforce or epitomize the ideas contained within the work.<sup>3</sup>

The curators promoting this “laboratory” paradigm—including Maria Lind, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Barbara van der Linden, Hou Hanru, and Nicolas Bourriaud—have to a large extent been encouraged to adopt this curatorial *modus operandi* as a direct reaction to the type of art produced in the 1990s: work that is open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure, often appearing to be “work-in-progress” rather than a completed object. Such work seems to derive from a creative misreading of poststructuralist theory: rather than the *interpretations* of a work of art being open to continual reassessment, the work of art *itself* is argued to be in perpetual flux. There are many problems with this idea, not least of which is the difficulty of discerning a work whose identity is willfully unstable. Another problem is the ease with which the “laboratory” becomes marketable as a space of leisure and entertainment. Venues such as the Baltic in Gateshead, the Kunstverein Munich, and the Palais de Tokyo have used metaphors like “laboratory,” “construction site,” and “art factory” to differentiate themselves from bureaucracy-encumbered collection-based museums; their dedicated project spaces create a buzz of creativity and the aura of being at the vanguard of contemporary production.<sup>4</sup> One could argue that in this context, project-based works-in-progress and artists-in-residence begin to dovetail with an “experience economy,” the marketing strategy that seeks to replace goods and services with scripted and staged personal experiences.<sup>5</sup> Yet what the viewer is supposed to garner from such an “experience” of creativity, which is essentially institutionalized studio activity, is often unclear.

Related to the project-based “laboratory” tendency is the trend toward inviting contemporary artists to design or troubleshoot amenities within the museum,

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work is frequently described in similar terms: it is “like a laboratory for human contact” (Jerry Saltz, “Resident Alien,” *The Village Voice*, July 7–14, 1999, n.p.), or “psycho-social experiments where situations are made for meetings, exchange, etc.” (Maria Lind, “Letter and Event,” *Paletten* 223 [April 1995], p. 41). It should be noted that “laboratory” in this context does not denote psychological or behavioral experiments on the viewer, but refers instead to creative experimentation with exhibition conventions.

3. Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvelous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali and the Surrealist Exhibition* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

4. Under Sune Nordgren, the Baltic in Gateshead had three “AIR” (Artist-in-Residence) spaces for artists’ studios, but these were only open to the public when the resident artist chose; often the audience had to take the Baltic’s claim to be an “art factory” on trust. The Palais de Tokyo, by contrast, has up to ten artists in residence at any one time. The Munich Kunstverein, under Maria Lind, sought a different type of visible productivity: Apolonia Sustersic’s conversion of the gallery entrance featured a “work console,” where members of the curatorial staff (including Lind) could take turns manning the gallery’s front desk, continuing their work in public.

5. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999). The Baltic presents itself as “a site for the production, presentation, and experience of contemporary art” through “a heavy emphasis on commissions, invitations to artists, and the work of artists-in-residence” ([www.balticmill.com](http://www.balticmill.com)).



such as the bar (Jorge Pardo at K21, Düsseldorf; Michael Lin at the Palais de Tokyo; Liam Gillick at the Whitechapel Art Gallery) or reading lounge (Apolonia Sustersic at Kunstverein Munich, or the changing “Le Salon” program at the Palais de Tokyo), and in turn present these as works of art.<sup>6</sup> An effect of this insistent promotion of these ideas of artist-as-designer, function over contemplation, and open-endedness over aesthetic resolution is often ultimately to enhance the status of the curator, who gains credit for stage-managing the overall laboratory experience. As Hal Foster warned in the mid-1990s, “the institution may overshadow the work that it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star.”<sup>7</sup> It is with this situation in mind that I focus on the Palais de Tokyo as my starting point for a closer inspection of some of the claims made for “open-ended,” semifunctional art works, since one of the Palais’ codirectors, Nicolas Bourriaud, is also their leading theorist.

### *Relational Aesthetics*

*Esthétique Relationnel* is the title of Bourriaud’s 1997 collection of essays in which he attempts to characterize artistic practice of the 1990s. Since there have been very few attempts to provide an overview of 1990s art, particularly in Britain where discussion has myopically revolved around the Young British Artists (YBA) phenomenon, Bourriaud’s book is an important first step in identifying recent tendencies in contemporary art. It also comes at a time when many academics in Britain and the U.S. seem reluctant to move on from the politicized agendas and intellectual battles of 1980s art (indeed, for many, of 1960s art), and condemn everything from installation art to ironic painting as a depoliticized celebration of surface, complicitous with consumer spectacle. Bourriaud’s book—written with the hands-on insight of a curator—promises to redefine the agenda of contemporary art criticism, since his starting point is that we can no longer approach these works from behind the “shelter” of sixties art history and its values. Bourriaud seeks to offer new criteria by which to approach these often rather opaque works of art, while also claiming that they are no less politicized than their sixties precursors.<sup>8</sup>

For instance, Bourriaud argues that art of the 1990s takes as its theoretical horizon “the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the

6. “Every six months, an artist is invited by the Palais de Tokyo to design and decorate a small space located under the main staircase but placed at the heart of the exhibition spaces: Le Salon. Both a space of relaxation and a work of art, Le Salon offers comfortable armchairs, games, reading material, a piano, a video, or a TV program to those who visit it” (Palais de Tokyo Website [<http://www.palaisdetokyo.com>], my translation). The current premises of Portikus Gallery in Frankfurt feature an office, reading room, and gallery space designed by the artist Tobias Rehberger.

7. Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), p. 198.

8. “Contemporary art is definitely developing a political project when it endeavors to move into the relational realm by turning it into an issue” (Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* [Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002], p. 17). Hereafter cited in the text as RA.

assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space" (RA, p. 14). In other words, relational art works seek to establish intersubjective encounters (be these literal or potential) in which meaning is elaborated *collectively* (RA, p. 18) rather than in the privatized space of individual consumption. The implication is that this work inverts the goals of Greenbergian modernism.<sup>9</sup> Rather than a discrete, portable, autonomous work of art that transcends its context, relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience. Moreover, this audience is envisaged as a community: rather than a one-to-one relationship between work of art and viewer, relational art sets up situations in which viewers are not just addressed as a collective, social entity, but are actually given the wherewithal to create a community, however temporary or utopian this may be.

It is important to emphasize, however, that Bourriaud does not regard relational aesthetics to be simply a theory of interactive art. He considers it to be a means of locating contemporary practice within the culture at large: relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy.<sup>10</sup> It is also seen as a response to the virtual relationships of the Internet and globalization, which on the one hand have prompted a desire for more physical and face-to-face interaction between people, while on the other have inspired artists to adopt a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach and model their own "possible universes" (RA, p. 13). This emphasis on immediacy is familiar to us from the 1960s, recalling the premium placed by performance art on the authenticity of our first-hand encounter with the artist's body. But Bourriaud is at pains to distance contemporary work from that of previous generations. The main difference, as he sees it, is the shift in attitude toward social change: instead of a "utopian" agenda, today's artists seek only to find provisional solutions in the here and now; instead of trying to change their environment, artists today are simply "learning to inhabit the world in a better way"; instead of looking forward to a future utopia, this art sets up functioning "microtopias" in the present (RA, p. 13). Bourriaud summarizes this new attitude vividly in one sentence: "It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbors in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows" (RA, p. 45). This DIY, microtopian ethos is what Bourriaud perceives to be the core political significance of relational aesthetics.

Bourriaud names many artists in his book, most of whom are European, and many of whom were featured in his seminal exhibition *Traffic* at CAPC Bordeaux

9. This change in mode of address from "private" to "public" has for some time been associated with a decisive break with modernism; see Rosalind Krauss, "Sense and Sensibility," *Artforum* (November 1973), pp. 43–53, and "Double Negative: A New Syntax for Sculpture," in *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977).

10. This is reflected in the number of artists whose practice takes the form of offering a "service," such as the Berlin-based U.S. artist Christine Hill, who offered back and shoulder massages to exhibition visitors, and who later went on to set up a fully functioning secondhand clothes shop, the Volksboutique, in Berlin and at *Documenta X* (1997).

in 1993. Certain artists are mentioned with metronomic regularity: Liam Gillick, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Phillippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Carsten Höller, Christine Hill, Vanessa Beecroft, Maurizio Cattelan, and Jorge Pardo, all of whom will be familiar to anyone who has attended the international biennials, triennials, and *Manifestas* that have proliferated over the last decade. The work of these artists differs from that of their better known YBA contemporaries in several respects. Unlike the self-contained (and formally conservative) work of the British, with its accessible references to mass culture, European work is rather low-impact in appearance, including photography, video, wall texts, books, objects to be used, and leftovers from the aftermath of an opening event. It is basically installation art in format, but this is a term that many of its practitioners would resist; rather than forming a coherent and distinctive transformation of space (in the manner of Ilya Kabakov's "total installation," a theatrical mise-en-scène), relational art works insist upon *use* rather than contemplation.<sup>11</sup> And unlike the distinctively branded personalities of young British art, it is often hard to identify who has made a particular piece of "relational" art, since it tends to make use of existing cultural forms—including other works of art—and remixes them in the manner of a DJ or programmer.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, many of the artists Bourriaud discusses have collaborated with one another, further blurring the imprint of individual authorial status. Several have also curated each others' work in exhibitions—such as Gillick's "filtering" of Maria Lind's curatorship in *What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design* (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2000) and Tiravanija's *Utopia Station* for the 2003 Venice Biennale (co-curated with Hans Ulrich Obrist and Molly Nesbit).<sup>13</sup> I now wish to focus on the work of two artists in particular, Tiravanija and Gillick, since Bourriaud deems them both to be paradigmatic of "relational aesthetics."

Rirkrit Tiravanija is a New York-based artist, born in Buenos Aires in 1961 to Thai parents and raised in Thailand, Ethiopia, and Canada. He is best known for

11. For example, Jorge Pardo's *Pier* for *Skulptur. Projekte Münster* (1997). *Pier* comprised a 50-meter-long jetty of California redwood with a small pavilion at the end. The work was a functional pier, providing mooring for boats, while a cigarette machine attached to the wall of the pavilion encouraged people to stop and look at the view.

12. This strategy is referred to by Bourriaud as "postproduction," and is elaborated in his follow-up book to *Relational Aesthetics*: "Since the early nineties, an ever-increasing number of art works have been created on the basis of preexisting works; more and more artists interpret, reproduce, reexhibit, or use works made by others or available cultural products. . . . These artists who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work. The material they manipulate is no longer primary." Bourriaud argues that postproduction differs from the ready-made, which questions authorship and the institution of art, because its emphasis is on recombining existing cultural artifacts in order to imbue them with new meaning. See Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002).

13. The best example of this current obsession with collaboration as a model is found in *No Ghost Just a Shell*, an ongoing project by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, who have invited Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, M/M, Francois Curlet, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Pierre Joseph, Joe Scanlan, and others to collaborate with them in creating work around the defunct Japanese *manga* character AnnLee.

hybrid installation performances, in which he cooks vegetable curry or pad thai for people attending the museum or gallery where he has been invited to work. In *Untitled (Still)* (1992) at 303 Gallery, New York, Tiravanija moved everything he found in the gallery office and storeroom into the main exhibition space, including the director, who was obliged to work in public, among cooking smells and diners. In the storeroom he set up what was described by one critic as a “makeshift refugee kitchen,” with paper plates, plastic knives and forks, gas burners, kitchen utensils, two folding tables, and some folding stools.<sup>14</sup> In the gallery he cooked curries for visitors, and the detritus, utensils, and food packets became the art



Rirkrit Tiravanija. *Untitled (Free)*. 303 Gallery, New York, 1992. Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.

exhibit whenever the artist wasn't there. Several critics, and Tiravanija himself, have observed that this involvement of the audience is the main focus of his work: the food is but a means to allow a convivial relationship between audience and artist to develop.<sup>15</sup>

Underlying much of Tiravanija's practice is a desire not just to erode the distinction between institutional and social space, but between artist and viewer; the phrase “lots of people” regularly appears on his lists of materials. In the late 1990s, Tiravanija focused increasingly on creating situations where the audience could produce its own work. A more elaborate version of the 303 Gallery installa-

14. Jerry Saltz, “A Short History of Rirkrit Tiravanija,” *Art in America* (February 1996), p. 106.

15. If one wanted to identify historical precursors for this type of art, there are ample names to cite: Michael Asher's untitled installation at the Clare Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1974, in which he removed the partition between exhibition space and gallery office, or Gordon Matta-Clark's restaurant Food, opened with his artist colleagues in the early 1970s. Food was a collective project that enabled artists to earn a small living and fund their art practice without succumbing to the ideologically compromising demands of the art market. Other artists who presented the consumption of food and drink as art in the 1960s and early '70s include Allan Ruppersberg, Tom Marioni, Daniel Spoerri, and the Fluxus group.

tion/performance was undertaken in *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* (1996) at the Kölnischer Kunstverein. Here, Tiravanija built a wooden reconstruction of his New York apartment, which was made open to the public twenty-four hours a day. People could use the kitchen to make food, wash themselves in his bathroom, sleep in the bedroom, or hang out and chat in the living room. The catalog accompanying the Kunstverein project quotes a selection of newspaper articles and reviews, all of which reiterate the curator's assertion that "this unique combination of art and life offered an impressive experience of togetherness to everybody."<sup>16</sup> Although the materials of Tiravanija's work have become more diverse,



*Tiravanija. Untitled 1996 (Tomorrow Is Another Day). Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany, 1996. Courtesy Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York.*

the emphasis remains on use over contemplation. For *Pad Thai*, a project at De Appel, Amsterdam, in 1996, he made available a room of amplified electric guitars and a drumset, allowing visitors to take up the instruments and generate their own music. *Pad Thai* initially incorporated a projection of Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) and subsequent incarnations included a film by Marcel Broodthaers at Speaker's Corner, Hyde Park, London (in which the artist writes on a blackboard "you are all artists"). In a project in Glasgow, *Cinema Liberté* (1999), Tiravanija asked the local audience to nominate their favorite films, which were then screened outdoors at the intersection of two streets in Glasgow. As Janet Kraynak has written, although Tiravanija's

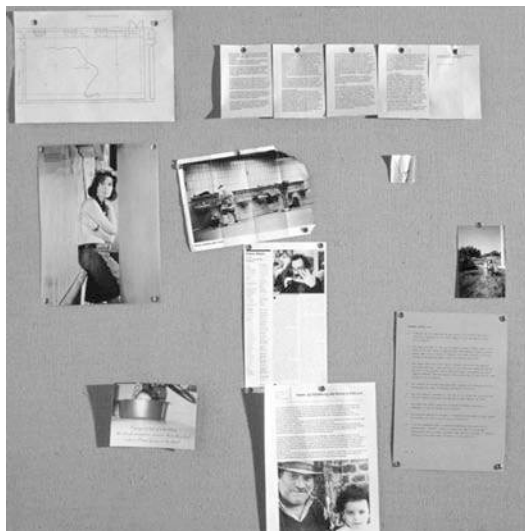
16. Udo Kittelmann, "Preface," in *Rirkrit Tiravanija: Untitled, 1996 (Tomorrow Is Another Day)* (Cologne: Salon Verlag and Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1996), n.p. As Janet Kraynak has noted, Tiravanija's work has occasioned some of the most idealized and euphoric art criticism of recent times: his work is heralded not just as an emancipatory site, free of constraints, but also as a critique of commodification and as a celebration of cultural identity—to the point where these imperatives ultimately collapse, in the institutional embrace of Tiravanija's persona as commodity. See Janet Kraynak, "Tiravanija's Liability," *Documents* 13 (Fall 1998), pp. 26–40. It is worth quoting Kraynak in full: "While Tiravanija's art compels or provokes a host of concerns relevant to the larger domain of contemporary art

dematerialized projects revive strategies of critique from the 1960s and '70s, it is arguable that in the context of today's dominant economic model of globalization, Tiravanija's itinerant ubiquity does not self-reflexively question this logic, but merely reproduces it.<sup>17</sup> He is one of the most established, influential, and omnipresent figures on the international art circuit, and his work has been crucial to both the emergence of relational aesthetics as a theory, and to the curatorial desire for "opened," "laboratory" exhibitions.

My second example is the British artist Liam Gillick, born in 1964. Gillick's output is interdisciplinary: his heavily theorized interests are disseminated in sculpture, installation, graphic design, curating, art criticism, and novellas. A prevailing theme throughout his work in all media is the production of relationships (particularly social relationships) through our environment. His early work investigated the space between sculpture and functional design. Examples include his *Pinboard Project* (1992), a bulletin board containing instructions for use, potential items for inclusion on the board, and a recommendation to subscribe to a limited number of specialist

practices, its unique status in the public imagination derives in part from a certain naturalizing of the critical readings that have accompanied and, to an extent, constructed it. Unlike previous pairings of avant-garde utopianism, in which art merges happily with life, and anti-institutional criticality, in which art objects are constituted in, and as, social spaces, what putatively guarantees the production of uncontaminated social praxis in Tiravanija's work is the unique imprint of the artist, whose generosity both animates the installations and unifies them stylistically. A host of articles have focused on the familial atmosphere of the gallery where he is represented, and other biographical details of his life, rendering a covert equivalence between Tiravanija's work and self. This idealized projection seems to derive from the work itself, as the artist has thematized details of his ethnic background in his installations through references to Thai culture. . . . The artist, repositioned as both the source and arbiter of meaning, is embraced as the pure embodiment of his/her sexual, cultural, or ethnic identity, guaranteeing both the authenticity and political efficacy of his/her work" (pp. 28–29).

17. Ibid., pp. 39–40.



Liam Gillick. *Pinboard Project* (Grey). 1992.  
Courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London.



journals; and *Prototype Erasmus Table #2* (1994), a table “designed to nearly fill a room” and conceived as “a working place where it might be possible to finish working on the book *Erasmus Is Late*” (Gillick’s publication of 1995), but which is also available for use by other people “for the storage and exhibition of work on, under or around it.”<sup>18</sup>

Since the mid-1990s, Gillick has become best known for his three-dimensional design work: screens and suspended platforms made of aluminum and colored Plexiglas, which are often displayed alongside texts and geometrical designs painted directly onto a wall. Gillick’s descriptions of these works emphasize their potential use value, but in a way that carefully denies them any specific agency: each object’s meaning is so overdetermined that it seems to parody both claims made for modernist design and the language of management consulting. His 120 x 120 cm open-topped Plexiglas cube *Discussion Island: Projected Think Tank* (1997) is described as “a work that may be used as an object that might signify an enclosed zone for the consideration of exchange, information transfer and strategy,” while the *Big Conference Centre Legislation Screen* (1998), a 3 x 2 meter colored Plexiglas screen, “helps to define a location where individual actions are limited by rules imposed by the community as a whole.”<sup>19</sup>

Gillick’s design structures have been described as constructions having “a spatial resemblance to office spaces, bus shelters, meeting rooms and canteens,” but they also take up the legacy of Minimalist sculpture and post-Minimalist installation art (Donald Judd and Dan Graham immediately come to mind).<sup>20</sup> Yet

18. Gillick, quoted in *Liam Gillick*, ed. Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhausen (Cologne: Oktagon, 2000), p. 36.

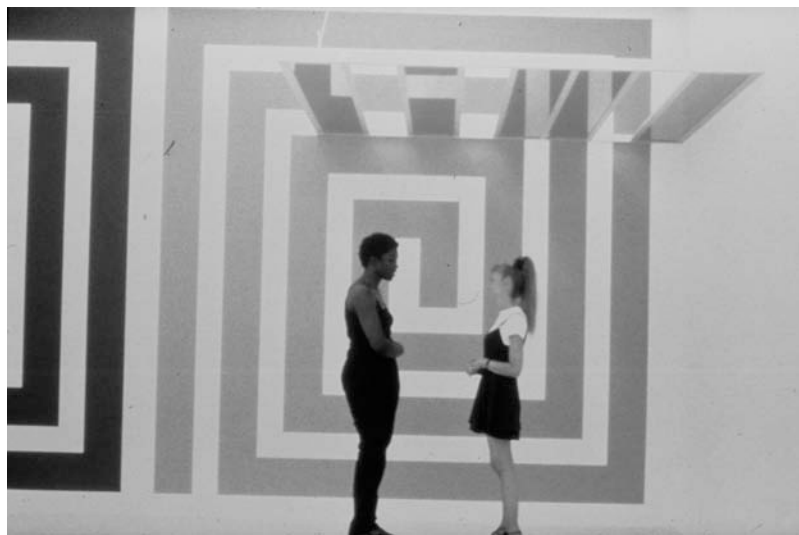
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 81.

20. Mike Dawson, “Liam Gillick,” *Flux* (August–September 2002), p. 63.

*Gillick.*  
Revision/22nd  
Floor Wall  
Design. 1998.  
Courtesy the artist  
and Corvi-Mora,  
London.



Gillick's work differs from that of his art historical predecessors: whereas Judd's modular boxes made the viewer aware of his/her physical movement around the work, while also drawing attention to the space in which these were exhibited, Gillick is happy for viewers to "just stand with their backs to the work and talk to each other."<sup>21</sup> Rather than having the viewer "complete" the work, in the manner of Bruce Nauman's corridors or Graham's video installations of the 1970s, Gillick seeks a perpetual open-endedness in which his art is a backdrop to activity. "It doesn't necessarily function best as an object for consideration alone," he says. "It is sometimes a



Gillick. Big  
Conference Centre  
Limitation Screen.  
1998. Courtesy the  
artist and Corvi-  
Mora, London.

backdrop or decor rather than a pure content provider."<sup>22</sup> Gillick's titles reflect this movement away from the directness of 1970s critique in their use of ironically bland management jargon: *Discussion Island*, *Arrival Rig*, *Dialogue Platform*, *Regulation Screen*, *Delay Screen*, and *Twinned Renegotiation Platform*.<sup>23</sup> These corporate allusions clearly distance the work from that of Graham, who exposed how apparently neutral architectural materials (such as glass, mirror, and steel) are used by the state and commerce to exercise political control. For Gillick, the task is not to rail against such institutions, but to negotiate ways of improving them.<sup>24</sup> A word that he frequently

21. Gillick, *Renovation Filter*, p. 16.

22. Gillick, *The Wood Way* (London: Whitechapel, 2002), p. 84.

23. All of these works were shown in *The Wood Way*, an exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery in 2002.

24. However, it is arguable from Gillick's examples that "improvement" connotes change on just a formal level. In 1997 he was invited to produce work for a Munich bank and described the project as follows: "I identified a problematic dead zone in the building—an oversight by the architects—which I proposed to solve with these screens. These would subtly change the way the space worked. Interestingly, however, my proposal made the architects rethink that part of the building . . . the architects came to a better conclusion about how to resolve their designs, without the need for any art" (Gillick,

uses is “scenario,” and to an extent his entire output is governed by an idea of “scenario thinking” as a way to envisage change in the world—not as a targeted critique of the present order, but “to examine the extent to which critical access is possible at all.”<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that although Gillick’s writing is frustratingly intangible—full of deferral and possibility, rather than the present and actual—he has been invited to troubleshoot practical projects, such as a traffic system for Porsche in Stuttgart, and to design intercom systems for a housing project in Brussels. Gillick is typical of his generation in finding no conflict between this type of work and conventional “white cube” exhibitions; both are seen as ways to continue his investigation into hypothetical future “scenarios.” Rather than determining a specific outcome, Gillick is keen to trigger open-ended alternatives to which others may contribute. The middle ground, the compromise, is what interests him most.

I have chosen to discuss the examples of Gillick and Tiravanija because they seem to me the clearest expression of Bourriaud’s argument that relational art privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality. Tiravanija insists that the viewer be physically present in a particular situation at a particular time—eating the food that he cooks, alongside other visitors in a communal situation. Gillick alludes to more hypothetical relations, which in many cases don’t even need to exist, but he still insists that the presence of an audience is an essential component of his art: “My work is like the light in the fridge,” he says, “it only works when there are people there to open the fridge door. Without people, it’s not art—it’s something else—stuff in a room.”<sup>26</sup> This interest in the contingencies of a “relationship between”—rather than the object itself—is a hallmark of Gillick’s work and of his interest in collaborative practice as a whole.

This idea of considering the work of art as a potential trigger for participation is hardly new—think of Happenings, Fluxus instructions, 1970s performance art, and Joseph Beuys’s declaration that “everyone is an artist.” Each was accompanied by a rhetoric of democracy and emancipation that is very similar to Bourriaud’s

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*Renovation Filter*, p. 21). One critic has dismissed this mode of working as “corporate feng shui” (Max Andrews, “Liam Gillick,” *Contemporary* 32, p. 73), drawing attention to the ways in which the proposed changes were primarily cosmetic rather than structural. Gillick would reply that the appearance of our environment conditions our behavior, and so the two are indivisible.

25. Liam Gillick, “A Guide to Video Conferencing Systems and the Role of the Building Worker in Relation to the Contemporary Art Exhibition (Backstage),” in Gillick, *Five or Six* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2000), p. 9. As Gillick notes, scenario thinking is a tool to propose change, even while it is “inherently linked to capitalism and the strategizing that goes with it.” This is because it comprises “one of the key components required in order to maintain the level of mobility and reinvention required to provide the dynamic aura of so-called free-market economies” (Gillick, “Prevision: Should the Future Help the Past?,” *Five or Six*, p. 27).

26. Gillick in *Renovation Filter*, p. 16. As Alex Farquharson has noted, “The operative phrase here is ‘might be possible.’ Whereas Rirkrit can reasonably expect his visitors to eat his Thai noodles, it is unlikely that Liam’s audience will do his reassessing. Instead of real activity, the viewer is offered a fictional role, an approach shared by Gonzalez-Foerster and Parreno” (Alex Farquharson, “Curator and Artist,” *Art Monthly* 270 [October 2003], p. 14).

defense of relational aesthetics.<sup>27</sup> The theoretical underpinnings of this desire to activate the viewer are easy to reel off: Walter Benjamin's "Author as Producer" (1934), Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author" and "birth of the reader" (1968) and—most important for this context—Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (1962). Writing on what he perceived to be the open and aleatory character of modernist literature, music, and art, Eco summarizes his discussion of James Joyce, Luciano Berio, and Alexander Calder in terms that cannot help but evoke Bourriaud's optimism:

The poetics of the "work in movement" (and partly that of the "open" work) sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society. It opens a new page in sociology and in pedagogy, as well as a new chapter in the history of art. It poses new practical problems by organizing new communicative situations. In short, it installs a new relationship between the *contemplation* and the *utilization* of a work of art.<sup>28</sup>

Analogies with Tiravanija and Gillick are evident in Eco's privileging of use value and the development of "communicative situations." However, it is Eco's contention that *every* work of art is potentially "open," since it may produce an unlimited range of possible readings; it is simply the achievement of contemporary art, music, and literature to have foregrounded this fact.<sup>29</sup> Bourriaud misinterprets these arguments by applying them to a specific type of work (those that require literal interaction) and thereby redirects the argument back to artistic intentionality rather than issues of reception.<sup>30</sup> His position also differs from Eco in one other important respect: Eco regarded the work of art as a *reflection* of the conditions of our existence in a fragmented modern culture, while Bourriaud sees the work of art *producing* these conditions. The interactivity of relational art is therefore superior to optical contemplation of an object, which is assumed to be passive and disengaged, because the work of art is a "social form" capable of producing positive human relationships. As a consequence, the work is automatically political in implication and emancipatory in effect.

27. Beuys is mentioned infrequently in *Relational Aesthetics*, and on one occasion is specifically invoked to sever any connection between "social sculpture" and relational aesthetics (p. 30).

28. Umberto Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work" (1962), in Eco, *The Open Work* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 22–23.

29. Eco cites Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*: "How can anything ever *present itself* truly to us since its synthesis is never completed? How could I gain the experience of the world, as I would of an individual actuating his own existence, since none of the views or perceptions I have of it can exhaust it and the horizons remain forever *open*? . . . This ambiguousness does not represent an imperfection in the nature of existence or in that of consciousness; it is its very definition" (Eco, "The Poetics of the Open Work," p. 17).

30. It could be argued that this approach actually forecloses "open-ended" readings, since the meaning of the work becomes so synonymous with the fact that its meaning is open.

## Aesthetic Judgment

To anyone acquainted with Althusser's 1969 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," this description of social forms *producing* human relationships will sound familiar. Bourriaud's defense of relational aesthetics is indebted to Althusser's idea that culture—as an "ideological state apparatus"—does not *reflect* society, but *produces* it. As taken up by feminist artists and film critics in the 1970s, Althusser's essay permitted a more nuanced expression of the political in art. As Lucy Lippard has noted, it was in form (rather than content) that much art of the late 1960s aspired to a democratic outreach; the insight of Althusser's essay heralded recognition that a critique of institutions by circumventing them had to be refined.<sup>31</sup> It was not enough to show that art work's meaning is subordinate to its framing (be this in a museum or magazine); the viewer's own *identification* with the image was deemed to be equally important. Rosalyn Deutsche usefully summarizes this shift in her book *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (1996) when she compares Hans Haacke to the subsequent generation of artists that included Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Sherrie Levine. Haacke's work, she writes, "invited viewers to decipher relations and find content already inscribed in images but did not ask them to examine their *own role and investments* in producing images."<sup>32</sup> By contrast, the subsequent generation of artists "*treated the image itself as a social relationship* and the viewer as a subject constructed by the very object from which it formerly claimed detachment."<sup>33</sup>

I will return later to the question of identification that Deutsche raises. In the meantime it is necessary to observe that it is only a short step from regarding the *image* as a social relationship to Bourriaud's argument that the *structure* of an art work produces a social relationship. However, identifying what the structure of a relational art work *is* is no easy task, precisely because the work claims to be open-ended. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that relational art works are an outgrowth of installation art, a form that has from its inception solicited the literal presence of the viewer. Unlike the "Public Vision" generation of artists, whose achievements—largely in photography—have been unproblematically assimilated into art-historical orthodoxy, installation art has been frequently denigrated as just one more form of postmodern spectacle. For some critics, notably Rosalind Krauss, installation art's use of diverse media divorces it from a medium-specific tradition; it therefore has no inherent conventions against which it may self-reflexively operate, nor criteria against which we may evaluate its success. Without a sense of what the *medium* of installation art *is*, the work cannot attain

31. I am thinking here of much Conceptual art, video, performance, installation, and site-specific work that expressed its politics by refusing to gratify or collude with the art market, but which remained self-referential on the level of content. See Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object 1966–1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. vii–xxii.

32. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 295–96. Italics mine.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

the holy grail of self-reflexive criticality.<sup>34</sup> I have suggested elsewhere that the viewer's presence might be one way to envisage the medium of installation art, but Bourriaud complicates this assertion.<sup>35</sup> He argues that the criteria we should use to evaluate open-ended, participatory art works are not just aesthetic, but political and even ethical: we must judge the "relations" that are produced by relational art works.

When confronted by a relational art work, Bourriaud suggests that we ask the following questions: "does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?" (*RA*, p. 109). He refers to these questions, which we should ask in front of any aesthetic product, as "criteria of co-existence" (*RA*, p. 109). Theoretically, in front of any work of art, we can ask what kind of social model the piece produces; could I live, for instance, in a world structured by the organizing principles of a Mondrian painting? Or, what "social form" is produced by a Surrealist object? The problem that arises with Bourriaud's notion of "structure" is that it has an erratic relationship to the work's ostensible subject matter, or content. For example, do we value the fact that Surrealist objects recycle outmoded commodities—or the fact that their imagery and disconcerting juxtapositions explore the unconscious desires and anxieties of their makers? With the hybrid installation/performances of relational aesthetics, which rely so heavily on context and the viewer's literal engagement, these questions are even more difficult to answer. For example, *what* Tiravanija cooks, *how* and *for whom*, are less important to Bourriaud than the fact that he gives away the results of his cooking for free. Gillick's bulletin boards can be similarly questioned: Bourriaud does not discuss the texts or images referred to on the individual clippings pinned to the boards, nor the formal arrangement and juxtaposition of these clippings, but only Gillick's democratization of material and flexible format. (The owner is at liberty to modify these various elements at any given time according to personal tastes and current events.) For Bourriaud, the structure is the subject matter—and in this he is far more formalist than he acknowledges.<sup>36</sup> Unhinged both from artistic intentionality and consideration of the broader context in which they operate, relational art works become, like Gillick's pinboards, just "a constantly changing

34. Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 56. Elsewhere, Krauss suggests that after the late 1960s, it was to a "conceptual-cum-architectural site that art practice would become 'specific,' rather than to any aesthetic medium"—as best exemplified in the work of Marcel Broodthaers (Krauss, "Performing Art," *London Review of Books*, November 12, 1998, p. 18). While I agree to an extent with Krauss on the point of self-reflexive criticality, I am troubled by her reluctance to countenance other ways in which contemporary installation art might successfully operate.

35. See the conclusion to my forthcoming book, *Installation Art and the Viewer* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).

36. This is reflected in Bourriaud's discussion of Felix Gonzales-Torres, an artist whose work he considers to be a crucial forerunner of relational aesthetics. Before his death from AIDS in 1996, Gonzales-Torres gained recognition for his emotive reworkings of Minimalist sculpture using piles of sweets and stacks of paper, to which visitors are encouraged to help themselves. Through this work, Gonzales-Torres made subtle allusions to politically charged issues such as the AIDS crisis (a pile of sweets matched the weight of his partner Ross, who died in 1991), urban violence (handgun laws in *Untitled [NRA]* [1991]), and homosexuality (*Perfect Lovers* [1991]). Bourriaud, however, demotes this aspect of Gonzales-Torres's practice in favor of its "structure"—its literal generosity toward the viewer.



portrait of the heterogeneity of everyday life,” and do not examine their relationship to it.<sup>37</sup> In other words, although the works claim to defer to their context, they do not question their imbrication within it. Gillick’s pinboards are embraced as democratic in structure—but only those who own them may interact with their arrangement. We need to ask, as Group Material did in the 1980s, “Who is the public? How is a culture made, and who is it for?”

I am not suggesting that relational art works need to develop a greater social conscience—by making pinboard works about international terrorism, for example, or giving free curries to refugees. I am simply wondering how we decide what the “structure” of a relational art work comprises, and whether this is so detachable from the work’s ostensible subject matter or permeable with its context. Bourriaud wants to equate aesthetic judgment with an ethicopolitical judgment of the relationships produced by a work of art. But how do we measure or compare these relationships? The *quality* of the relationships in “relational aesthetics” are never examined or called into question. When Bourriaud argues that “encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them,” I sense that this question is (for him) unnecessary; all relations that permit “dialogue” are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. But what does “democracy” really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?

### *Antagonism*

Rosalyn Deutsche has argued that the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its naturalized exclusions are taken into account and made open to contestation: “Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are conditions of its existence.” Deutsche takes her lead from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Published in 1985, Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony* is one of the first books to reconsider Leftist political theory through the lens of post-structuralism, following what the authors perceived to be an impasse of Marxist theorization in the 1970s. Their text is a rereading of Marx through Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and Lacan’s understanding of subjectivity as split and decentered. Several of the ideas that Laclau and Mouffe put forward allow us to reconsider Bourriaud’s claims for the politics of relational aesthetics in a more critical light.

The first of these ideas is the concept of antagonism. Laclau and Mouffe argue that a fully functioning democratic society is not one in which all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly

37. Eric Troncy, “London Calling,” *Flash Art* (Summer 1992), p. 89.

being drawn and brought into debate—in other words, a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are *sustained*, not erased. Without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order—a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy. It is important to stress right away that the idea of antagonism is not understood by Laclau and Mouffe to be a pessimistic acceptance of political deadlock; antagonism does not signal “the expulsion of utopia from the field of the political.” On the contrary, they maintain that without the concept of utopia there is no possibility of a radical imaginary. The task is to balance the tension between imaginary ideal and pragmatic management of a social positivity without lapsing into the totalitarian.

This understanding of antagonism is grounded in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of subjectivity. Following Lacan, they argue that subjectivity is not a self-transparent, rational, and pure presence, but is irremediably decentered and incomplete.<sup>38</sup> However, surely there is a conflict between a concept of the subject as decentered and the idea of political agency? “Decentering” implies the lack of a unified subject, while “agency” implies a fully present, autonomous subject of political will and self-determination. Laclau argues that this conflict is false, because the subject is neither entirely decentered (which would imply psychosis) nor entirely unified (i.e., the absolute subject). Following Lacan, he argues that we have a *failed* structural identity, and are therefore dependent on *identification* in order to proceed.<sup>39</sup> Because subjectivity *is* this process of identification, we are necessarily incomplete entities. Antagonism, therefore, is the relationship that emerges between such incomplete entities. Laclau contrasts this to the relationships that emerge between complete entities, such as contradiction (A-not A) or “real difference” (A-B). We all hold mutually contradictory beliefs (for example, there are materialists who read horoscopes and psychoanalysts who send Christmas cards) but this does not result in antagonism. Nor is “real difference” (A-B) equal to antagonism; because it concerns full identities, it results in collision—like a car crash or “the war against terrorism.” In the case of antagonism, argue Laclau and Mouffe, “we are confronted with a different situation: the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, the presence of what is not me renders my identity precarious and vulnerable, and the threat that the other represents transforms my *own* sense of self into something questionable. When played out on a social level, antagonism can be

38. For Lacan, the subject is not equivalent to a conscious sense of agency: “Lacan’s ‘subject’ is the subject of the unconscious . . . inescapably divided, castrated, split” as a result of his/her entry into language (Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* [London: Routledge, 1996], pp. 195–96).

39. “. . . the subject is partially self-determined. However, as this self-determination is not the expression of what the subject *already* is but the result of its lack of being instead, self-determination can only proceed through processes of *identification*” (Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), quoted in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe [London: Routledge, 1996], p. 55).

40. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 125.

viewed as the limits of society's ability to fully constitute itself. Whatever is at the boundary of the social (and of identity), seeking to *define* it also *destroys* its ambition to constitute a full presence: "As conditions of possibility for the existence of a pluralist democracy, conflicts and antagonisms constitute at the same time the condition of impossibility of its final achievement."<sup>41</sup>

I dwell on this theory in order to suggest that the relations set up by relational aesthetics are not intrinsically democratic, as Bourriaud suggests, since they rest too comfortably within an ideal of subjectivity as whole and of community as immanent togetherness. There is debate and dialogue in a Tiravanija cooking piece, to be sure, but there is no inherent friction since the situation is what Bourriaud calls "microtopian": it produces a community whose members identify with each other, because they have something in common. The only substantial account that I can find of Tiravanija's first solo exhibition at 303 Gallery is by Jerry Saltz in *Art in America*, and it runs as follows:

At 303 Gallery I regularly sat with or was joined by a stranger, and it was nice. The gallery became a place for sharing, jocularly and frank talk. I had an amazing run of meals with art dealers. Once I ate with Paula Cooper who recounted a long, complicated bit of professional gossip. Another day, Lisa Spellman related in hilarious detail a story of intrigue about a fellow dealer trying, unsuccessfully, to woo one of her artists. About a week later I ate with David Zwirner. I bumped into him on the street, and he said, "nothing's going right today, let's go to Rirkrit's." We did, and he talked about a lack of excitement in the New York art world. Another time I ate with Gavin Brown, the artist and dealer . . . who talked about the collapse of SoHo—only he welcomed it, felt it was about time, that the galleries had been showing too much mediocre art. Later in the show's run, I was joined by an unidentified woman and a curious flirtation filled the air. Another time I chatted with a young artist who lived in Brooklyn who had real insights about the shows he'd just seen.<sup>42</sup>

The informal chattiness of this account clearly indicates what kind of problems face those who wish to know more about such work: the review only tells us that Tiravanija's intervention is considered good because it permits networking among a group of art dealers and like-minded art lovers, and because it evokes the atmosphere of a late-night bar. Everyone has a common interest in art, and the result is art-world gossip, exhibition reviews, and flirtation. Such communication is fine to an extent, but it is not in and of itself emblematic of "democracy." To be fair, I think that Bourriaud recognizes this problem—but he does not raise it in relation to the artists he promotes: "Connecting people, creating interactive,

41. Mouffe, "Introduction," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, p. 11.

42. Saltz, "A Short History of Rirkrit Tiravanija," p. 107.

communicative experience,” he says, “What for? If you forget the ‘what for?’ I’m afraid you’re left with simple Nokia art—producing interpersonal relations for their own sake and never addressing their political aspects.”<sup>43</sup> I would argue that Tiravanija’s art, at least as presented by Bourriaud, falls short of addressing the political aspect of communication—even while certain of his projects do at first glance appear to address it in a dissonant fashion. Let us return to accounts of Tiravanija’s Cologne project, *Untitled (Tomorrow Is Another Day)*. I have already quoted curator Udo Kittelman’s comment that the installation offered “an impressive experience of togetherness to everybody.” He continues: “Groups of people prepared meals and talked, took a bath or occupied the bed. Our fear that the art-living-space might be vandalized did not come true. . . . The art space lost its institutional function and finally turned into a free social space.”<sup>44</sup> The *Kölnischer Stadt-Anzeiger* concurred that the work offered “a kind of ‘asylum’ for everyone.”<sup>45</sup> But who is the “everyone” here? This may be a microtopia, but—like utopia—it is still predicated on the exclusion of those who hinder or prevent its realization. (It is tempting to consider what might have happened if Tiravanija’s space had been invaded by those seeking genuine “asylum.”)<sup>46</sup> His installations reflect Bourriaud’s understanding of the relations produced by relational art works as fundamentally harmonious, because they are addressed to a community of viewing subjects with *something in common*.<sup>47</sup> This is why Tiravanija’s works are political only in the loosest sense of advocating dialogue over monologue (the one-way communication equated with spectacle by the Situationists). The content of this dialogue is not in itself democratic, since all questions return to the hackneyed nonissue of “is it art?”<sup>48</sup> Despite Tiravanija’s rhetoric of open-endedness and viewer emancipation,

43. Bourriaud quoted in “Public Relations: Bennett Simpson Talks with Nicolas Bourriaud,” p. 48.

44. Udo Kittelmann, “Preface,” in *Rirkrit Tiravanija*, n.p.

45. *Kölnischer Stadt-Anzeiger* quoted in *Rirkrit Tiravanija*, n.p.

46. Saltz muses on this question in a wonderfully blinkered fashion: “. . . theoretically anyone can come in [to an art gallery]. How come they don’t? Somehow the art world seems to secrete an invisible enzyme that repels outsiders. What would happen if the next time Tiravanija set up a kitchen in an art gallery, a bunch of homeless people turned up daily for lunch? What would the Walker Art Center do if a certain homeless man scraped up the price of admission to the museum, and chose to sleep on Tiravanija’s cot all day, every day? . . . In his own quiet way, Tiravanija forces these questions to the forefront, and jimmies the lock (so efficiently left bolted by much so-called political art) on the door that separates the art world from everything else.” The “invisible enzyme” that Saltz refers to should alert him precisely to the limitations of Tiravanija’s work and its nonantagonistic approach to issues of public space (Saltz, “A Short History of Rirkrit Tiravanija,” p. 106).

47. Jean-Luc Nancy’s critique of the Marxist idea of community as communion in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) has been crucial to my consideration of a counter-model to relational aesthetics. Since the mid-1990s, Nancy’s text has become an increasingly important reference point for writers on contemporary art, as seen in Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions*; chapter 4 of Pamela M. Lee’s *Object to Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000); George Baker, “Relations and Counter-Relations: An Open Letter to Nicolas Bourriaud,” in *Zusammenhänge herstellen/Contextualise*, ed. Yilmaz Dziewior (Cologne: Dumont, 2002); and Jessica Morgan, *Common Wealth* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003).

48. As the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported, “No subject is given, yet the artistic context automatically leads all discussions back to the question about the function of art.” Christophe Blase,

the structure of his work circumscribes the outcome in advance, and relies on its presence within a gallery to differentiate it from entertainment. Tiravanija's microtopia gives up on the idea of transformation in public culture and reduces its scope to the pleasures of a private group who identify with one another as gallery-goers.<sup>49</sup>

Gillick's position on the question of dialogue and democracy is more ambiguous. At first glance he appears to support Laclau and Mouffe's antagonism thesis:

While I admire artists who construct "better" visions of how things might be, the middle-ground, negotiated territories I am interested in always carry the possibility of moments where idealism is unclear. There are as many demonstrations of compromise, strategy, and collapse in my work as there are clear recipes for how our environment can be better.<sup>50</sup>

However, when one looks for "clear recipes" in Gillick's work, few if any are to be found. "I'm working in a nebulous cloud of ideas," he says, "which are somewhat partial or parallel rather than didactic."<sup>51</sup> Unwilling to state what ideals are to be compromised, Gillick trades on the credibility of referencing architecture (its engagement with concrete social situations) while remaining abstract on the issue of articulating a specific position. The *Discussion Platforms*, for example, do not point to any particular change, just change in general—a "scenario" in which potential "narratives" may or may not emerge. Gillick's position is slippery, and ultimately he seems to argue for compromise and negotiation *as* recipes for improvement. Logically, this pragmatism is tantamount to an abandonment or failure of ideals; his work is the demonstration of a compromise, rather than an articulation of a problem.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of democracy as antagonism can be seen in the work of two artists conspicuously ignored by Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* and *Postproduction*: the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn and the Spanish

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*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 19, 1996, quoted in *Rirkrit Tiravanija*, n.p. He continues: "Whether this discourse is read on a naïve or a context-educated level—the intermediate level would be the obligatory reference to Duchamp—is a matter of chance and depends on the respective participants. Anyway, the fact that communication in general and a discussion on art in particular takes place, gains a positive value as smallest denominator."

49. Essentially, there is no difference between utopia (societal perfection) and the microtopia, which is just personal perfection to the power of ten (or twenty, or however many participants are present). Both are predicated on exclusion of that which hinders or threatens the harmonious order. This is seen throughout Thomas More's description of Utopia. Describing a troublesome Christian zealot who condemned other religions, the traveler Raphael recounts: "When he'd been going on like this for some time, he was arrested and charged, not with blasphemy, but with disturbance of the peace. He was duly convicted and sentenced to exile—for one of the most ancient principles of their constitution is religious toleration" (Thomas More, *Utopia* [London: Penguin Books, 1965], p. 119).

50. Gillick, *The Wood Way*, pp. 81–82.

51. Gillick, *Renovation Filter*, p. 20.

52. We could even say that in Gillick's microtopia, devotion to compromise *is* the ideal: an intriguing but untenable hypothesis, and ultimately less a democratic microtopia than a form of "third way" politics.

artist Santiago Sierra.<sup>53</sup> These artists set up “relationships” that emphasize the role of dialogue and negotiation in their art, but do so without collapsing these relationships into the work’s content. The relations produced by their performances and installations are marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibility of a “microtopia” and instead *sustains* a tension among viewers, participants, and context. An integral part of this tension is the introduction of collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds, which in turn serves to challenge contemporary art’s self-perception as a domain that embraces other social and political structures.

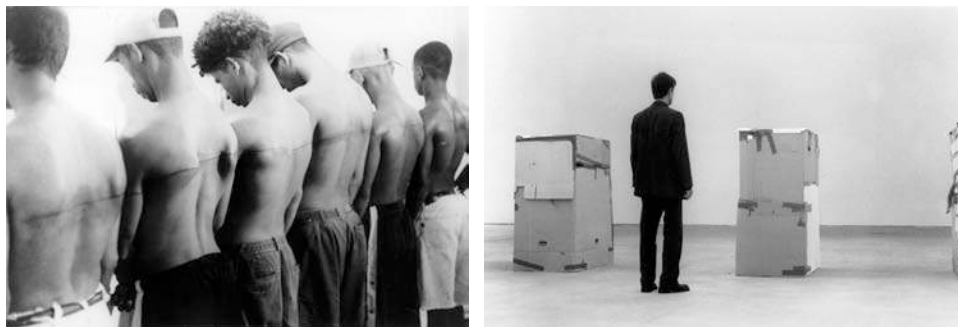
### *Nonidentification and Autonomy*

The work of Santiago Sierra (born in 1966), like that of Tiravanija, involves the literal setting-up of relations among people: the artist, the participants in his work, and the audience. But since the late 1990s Sierra’s “actions” have been organized around relations that are more complicated—and more controversial—than those produced by the artists associated with relational aesthetics. Sierra has attracted tabloid attention and belligerent criticism for some of his more extreme actions, such as *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People* (2000), *A Person Paid for 360 Continuous Working Hours* (2000), and *Ten People Paid to Masturbate* (2000). These ephemeral actions are documented in casual black-and-white photographs, a short text, and occasionally video. This mode of documentation appears to be a legacy of 1970s Conceptual and body art—Chris Burden and Marina Abramovic spring to mind—but Sierra’s work significantly develops this tradition in its use of other people as performers and in the emphasis on their remuneration. While Tiravanija celebrates the gift, Sierra knows that there’s no such thing as a free meal: everything and everyone has a price. His work can be seen as a grim meditation on the social and political conditions that permit disparities in people’s “prices” to emerge. Now regularly commissioned to make work in galleries throughout Europe and the Americas, Sierra creates a kind of ethnographic realism, in which the outcome or unfolding of his action forms an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works.<sup>54</sup>

53. However, Hirschhorn was included in the exhibition *GNS* and Sierra in *Hardcore*, both held at the Palais de Tokyo in 2003. See also Bourriaud’s discussion of Sierra in “Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?,” *Beaux Arts* 228 (May 2003), p. 41.

54. Since Sierra moved to Mexico in 1996, the majority of his actions have taken place in Latin America, and the “realism” of their outcome is usually a savage indictment of globalization—but this is not always the case. In *Elevation of Six Benches* (2001) at the Kunsthalle in Munich, Sierra paid workers to hold up all the leather benches in the museum galleries for set periods of time. The project was a compromise, since the Kunsthalle would not let Sierra tear out a wall of their new Herzog & de Meuron gallery for workers to hold up, but Sierra still considered the outcome to be successful “since it reflected the reality of labor relations in Munich. Munich is a clean and prosperous city, and consequently the only people we could find to perform the task at hand were unemployed actors and bodybuilders who wanted to show off their physical prowess” (Sierra, “A Thousand Words,” *Artforum* [October 2002], p. 131).





*Santiago Sierra. Left: 250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Paid People. Espacio Aglutinador, Havana, December 1999. Right: Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes. Kunst-Werke Berlin, September 2000. Courtesy Lisson Gallery and the artist.*

Interpreting Sierra's practice in this way runs counter to dominant readings of his work, which present it as a nihilistic reflection on Marx's theory of the exchange value of labor. (Marx argued that the worker's labor time is worth less to the capitalist than its subsequent exchange value in the form of a commodity produced by this labor.) The tasks that Sierra requires of his collaborators—which are invariably useless, physically demanding, and on occasion leave permanent scars—are seen as amplifications of the status quo in order to expose its ready abuse of those who will do even the most humiliating or pointless job in return for money. Because Sierra receives payment for his actions—as an artist—and is the first to admit the contradictions of his situation, his detractors argue that he is stating the pessimistic obvious: capitalism exploits. Moreover, this is a system from which nobody is exempt. Sierra pays others to do work for which he gets paid, and in turn he is exploited by galleries, dealers, and collectors. Sierra himself does little to contradict this view when he opines,

I can't change anything. There is no possibility that we can change anything with our artistic work. We do our work because we are making art, and because we believe art should be something, something that follows reality. But I don't believe in the possibility of change.<sup>55</sup>

Sierra's apparent complicity with the status quo does raise the question of how his work differs from that of Tiravanija. It is worth bearing in mind that, since the 1970s, older avant-garde rhetorics of opposition and transformation have been frequently replaced by strategies of complicity; what matters is not the complicity, but how we receive it. If Tiravanija's work is experienced in a major key, then Sierra's is most definitely minor. What follows is an attempt to read the latter's

55. Sierra, quoted in *Santiago Sierra: Works 2002–1990* (Birmingham, England: Ikon Gallery, 2002), p. 15.

work through the dual lenses of *Relational Aesthetics* and *Hegemony* in order to tease out these differences further.

It has already been noted that Sierra documents his actions and thereby ensures that we know what he considers their “structure” to be. Take, for example, *The Wall of a Gallery Pulled Out, Inclined Sixty Degrees from the Ground and Sustained by Five People*, Mexico City (2000). Unlike Tiravanija and Gillick, who embrace an idea of open-endedness, Sierra delimits from the outset his choice of invited participants and the context in which the event takes place. “Context” is a key word for Gillick and Tiravanija, yet their work does little to address the problem of what a context actually comprises. (One has the impression that it exists as undifferentiated infinity, like cyberspace.) Laclau and Mouffe argue that for a context to be constituted and identified as such, it must demarcate certain limits; it is from the exclusions engendered by this demarcation that antagonism occurs. It is precisely this act of exclusion that is disavowed in relational art’s preference for “open-endedness.”<sup>56</sup> Sierra’s actions, by contrast, embed themselves into other “institutions” (e.g., immigration, the minimum wage, traffic congestion, illegal street commerce, homelessness) in order to highlight the divisions enforced by these contexts. Crucially, however, Sierra neither presents these divisions as reconciled (in the way Tiravanija elides the museum with the café or apartment), nor as entirely separate spheres: the fact that his works are realized moves them into the terrain of antagonism (rather than the “car crash” model of collision between full identities) and hints that their boundaries are both unstable and open to change.

56. As Laclau argues, it is this “radical undecidability,” and the decision that has to be taken within this, that is constitutive of a political society. See Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 52–53.



Sierra. *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond*. *Arsenale, Venice Biennale, 2001*.  
Courtesy Lisson Gallery and the artist.

In a work for the 2001 Venice Biennale, *Persons Paid to Have Their Hair Dyed Blond*, Sierra invited illegal street vendors, most of whom came from southern Italy or were immigrants from Senegal, China, and Bangladesh, to have their hair dyed blond in return for 120,000 lire (\$60). The only condition to their participation was that their hair be naturally dark. Sierra's description of the work does not document the impact of his action on the days that followed the mass bleaching, but this aftermath was an integral aspect of the work.<sup>57</sup> During the Venice Biennale, the street vendors—who hover on street corners selling fake designer handbags—are usually the social group most obviously excluded from the glitzy opening; in 2001, however, their newly bleached hair literally highlighted their presence in the city. This was coupled by a gesture inside the Biennale proper, where Sierra gave over his allocated exhibition space in the Arsenale to a handful of the vendors, who used it to sell their fake Fendi handbags on a groundsheet, just as they did on the street. Sierra's gesture prompted a wry analogy between art and commerce, in the style of 1970s institutional critique, but moved substantially beyond this, since vendors and exhibition were mutually estranged by the confrontation. Instead of aggressively hailing passersby with their trade, as they did on the street, the vendors were subdued. This made my own encounter with them disarming in a way that only subsequently revealed to me my own anxieties about feeling “included” in the Biennale. Surely these guys were actors? Had they crept in here for a joke? Foregrounding a moment of mutual nonidentification, Sierra's action disrupted the art audience's sense of identity, which is founded precisely on unspoken racial and class exclusions, as well as veiling blatant commerce. It is important that Sierra's work did not achieve a harmonious reconciliation between the two systems, but sustained the tension between them.

Sierra's return to the Venice Biennale in 2003 comprised a major performance/installation for the Spanish pavilion. *Wall Enclosing a Space* involved sealing off the pavilion's interior with concrete blocks from floor to ceiling. On entering the building, viewers were confronted by a hastily constructed yet impregnable wall that rendered the galleries inaccessible. Visitors carrying a Spanish passport were invited to enter the space via the back of the building, where two immigration officers were inspecting passports. All non-Spanish nationals, however, were denied entry to the pavilion, whose interior contained nothing but gray paint peeling from the walls, left over from the previous year's exhibition. The work was “relational” in Bourriaud's sense, but it problematized any idea of these relations

57. “The procedure was done in a collective manner inside the closed doors of a warehouse situated in the Arsenale, during the inauguration of that year's Venice Biennale. Although the number of people programmed to take part in this operation was originally 200, it was finally down to 133 due to the increasing arrival of immigrants, making it difficult to calculate with precision how many had already entered the hall. It was then decided to shut down the entrance and calculate the number by a rough count. This caused numerous problems at the door, due to the never-ending flow of people that left or entered” (Sierra, quoted in *Santiago Sierra*, p. 46).



*Sierra. Wall Enclosing a Space. Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2003. Left photo: Pablo Leon de la Barra. Right photo: Charles LaBelle.*

being fluid and unconstrained by exposing how all our interactions are, like public space, riven with social and legal exclusions.<sup>58</sup>

The work of Thomas Hirschhorn (born in 1957) often addresses similar issues. His practice is conventionally read in terms of its contribution to sculptural tradition—his work is said to reinvent the monument, the pavilion, and the altar by immersing the viewer among found images, videos, and photocopies, bound together in cheap, perishable materials such as cardboard, brown tape, and tin-foil. Beyond occasional references to the tendency of his work to get vandalized or looted when situated outside the gallery, the role of the viewer is rarely addressed in writing on his art.<sup>59</sup> Hirschhorn is well-known for his assertion that he does not make political art, but makes art politically. Significantly, this political commitment does not take the form of literally activating the viewer in a space:

I do not want to invite or oblige viewers to become interactive with what I do; I do not want to activate the public. I want to give of myself, to engage myself to such a degree that viewers confronted with the work can take part and become involved, but not as actors.<sup>60</sup>

Hirschhorn's work represents an important shift in the way that contemporary art conceives of its viewer, one that is matched by his assertion of art's autonomy. One

58. As Laclau and Mouffe conclude, politics should not found itself on postulating an "essence of the social" but, on the contrary, on affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every "essence" and on the constitutive character of social division and antagonism. See Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 193.

59. The most substantial example of this approach is Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Cargo and Cult: The Displays of Thomas Hirschhorn," *Artforum* (November 2001). The peripheral location of Hirschhorn's sculptures has on occasion meant that their contents have been stolen, most notably in Glasgow, 2000, before the exhibition had even opened.

60. Hirschhorn, interview with Okwui Enwezor, in *Thomas Hirschhorn: Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), p. 27.

of the presumptions underlying *Relational Aesthetics* is the idea—introduced by the historical avant-garde and reiterated ever since—that art should not be a privileged and independent sphere but instead fused with “life.” Today, when art has become all too subsumed into everyday life—as leisure, entertainment, and business—artists such as Hirschhorn are reasserting the autonomy of artistic activity. As a consequence, Hirschhorn does not regard his work to be “open-ended” or to require completion by the viewer, since the politics of his practice derive instead from *how* the work is made:

To make art politically means to choose materials that do not intimidate, a format that doesn’t dominate, a device that does not seduce. To make art politically is not to submit to an ideology or to denounce the system, in opposition to so-called “political art.” It is to work with the fullest energy against the principle of “quality.”<sup>61</sup>

A rhetoric of democracy pervades Hirschhorn’s work, but it is not manifested in the viewer’s literal activation; rather, it appears in decisions regarding format, materials, and location, such as his “altars,” which emulate ad hoc memorials of flowers and toys at accident sites, and which are located in peripheral locations around a city. In these works—as in the installations *Pole-Self* and *Laundrette*, both 2001—found images, texts, advertisements, and photocopies are juxtaposed to contextualize consumer banality with political and military atrocities.

Many of Hirschhorn’s concerns came together in the *Bataille Monument* (2002), made for *Documenta XI*. Located in Nordstadt, a suburb of Kassel several miles away from the main *Documenta* venues, the *Monument* comprised three installations in large makeshift shacks, a bar run by a local family, and a sculpture of a tree, all erected on a lawn surrounded by two housing projects. The shacks were constructed from Hirschhorn’s signature materials: cheap timber, foil, plastic sheeting, and brown tape. The first housed a library of books and videos grouped around five Bataillean themes: word, image, art, sex, and sport. Several worn sofas, a television, and video were also provided, and the whole installation was designed to facilitate familiarization with the philosopher, of whom Hirschhorn claims to be a “fan.” The two other shacks housed a television studio and an installation of information about Bataille’s life and work. To reach the *Bataille Monument*, visitors had to participate in a further aspect of the work: securing a lift from a Turkish cab company which was contracted to ferry *Documenta* visitors to and from the site. Viewers were then stranded at the *Monument* until a return cab became available, during which time they would inevitably make use of the bar.

In locating the *Monument* in the middle of a community whose ethnic and economic status did not mark it as a target audience for *Documenta*, Hirschhorn

61. Ibid., p. 29. Hirschhorn is here referring to the idea of quality espoused by Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, and other critics as a criterion of aesthetic judgment. I should like to distance my use of “quality” (as in “the *quality* of the relationships in relational aesthetics”) from that alluded to by Hirschhorn.

Thomas Hirschhorn. *Right and facing page*: Bataille Monument, Documenta XI, 2002. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.



contrived a curious rapprochement between the influx of art tourists and the area's residents. Rather than make the local populace subject to what he calls the "zoo effect," Hirschhorn's project made visitors feel like hapless intruders. Even more disruptively, in light of the international art world's intellectual pretensions, Hirschhorn's *Monument* took the local inhabitants seriously as potential Bataille readers. This gesture induced a range of emotive responses among visitors, including accusations that Hirschhorn's gesture was inappropriate and patronizing. This unease revealed the fragile conditioning of the art world's self-constructed identity. The complicated play of identificatory and dis-identificatory mechanisms at work in the content, construction, and location of the *Bataille Monument* were radically and disruptively thought-provoking: the "zoo effect" worked two ways. Rather than offering, as the *Documenta* handbook claims, a reflection on "communal commitment," the *Bataille Monument* served to destabilize (and therefore potentially liberate) any notion of community identity or what it might mean to be a "fan" of art and philosophy.

A work like the *Bataille Monument* depends on its context for impact, but it could theoretically be restaged elsewhere, in comparable circumstances. Significantly, the viewer is no longer required to participate literally (i.e., to eat noodles, or to activate a sculpture), but is asked only to be a thoughtful and reflective visitor:

I do not want to do an interactive work. I want to do an active work. To me, the most important activity that an art work can provoke is the activity of thinking. Andy Warhol's *Big Electric Chair* (1967) makes me think, but it is a painting on a museum wall. An active work requires that I first give of myself.<sup>62</sup>

62. Thomas Hirschhorn, in *Common Wealth*, ed. Morgan, p. 63.



The independent stance that Hirschhorn asserts in his work—though produced collaboratively, his art is the product of a single artist’s vision—implies the readmittance of a degree of autonomy to art. Likewise, the viewer is no longer coerced into fulfilling the artist’s interactive requirements, but is presupposed as a subject of independent thought, which is the essential prerequisite for political action: “having reflections and critical thoughts is to get active, posing questions is to come to life.”<sup>63</sup> The *Bataille Monument* shows that installation and performance art now find themselves at a significant distance from the historic avant-garde calls to collapse art and life.

### *Relational Antagonism*

My interest in the work of Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra derives not only from their tougher, more disruptive approach to “relations” than that proposed by Bourriaud, but also from their remoteness from the socially engaged public art projects that have sprung up since the 1980s under the aegis of “new genre public art.” But does the fact that the work of Sierra and Hirschhorn demonstrates better democracy make it better art? For many critics, the answer would be obvious: of course it does! But the fact that this question arises is itself symptomatic of wider trends in contemporary art criticism: today, political, moral, and ethical judgments have come to fill the vacuum of aesthetic judgment in a way that was unthinkable forty years ago. This is partly because postmodernism has attacked the very notion of aesthetic judgment, and partly because contemporary art solicits the viewer’s literal interaction in ever more elaborate ways. Yet the “birth of the viewer”

63. Ibid., p. 62.



(and the ecstatic promises of emancipation that accompany it) has not halted appeals to higher criteria, which have simply returned in other guises.

This is not an issue that can be adequately dealt with here. I wish to point out only that if the work Bourriaud considers exemplary of “relational aesthetics” wishes to be considered politically, then we must address this proposition seriously. There is now a long tradition of viewer participation and activated spectatorship in works of art across many media—from experimental German theater of the 1920s to new-wave film and the *nouveau roman* of the 1960s, from Minimalist sculpture to post-Minimalist installation art in the 1970s, from Beuys’s social sculpture to 1980s socially engaged performance art. It is no longer enough to say that activating the viewer *tout court* is a democratic act, for every art work—even the most “open-ended”—determines in advance the depth of participation that the viewer may have with it.<sup>64</sup> Hirschhorn would argue that such pretenses to emancipation are no longer necessary: all art—whether immersive or not—can be a critical force that appropriates and reassigns value, distancing our thoughts from the predominant and preexisting consensus. The tasks facing us today are to analyze *how* contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the *quality* of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work.

It can be argued that the works of Hirschhorn and Sierra, as I have presented them, are no longer tied to the direct activation of the viewer, or to their literal participation in the work. This is not to say that this work signifies a return to the kind of high-modernist autonomy advocated by Clement Greenberg, but rather to a more complicated imbrication of the social and the aesthetic. In this model, the kernel of impossible resolution on which antagonism depends is mirrored in the tension between art and society conceived of as mutually exclusive spheres—a self-reflexive tension that the work of Sierra and Hirschhorn fully acknowledges.<sup>65</sup>

In this light, the motif of obstruction or blockade so frequently found in Sierra’s works is less a return to modernist refusal as advocated by Theodor Adorno than an expression of the boundaries of both the social and the aesthetic after a century of attempts to fuse them.<sup>66</sup> In his exhibition at Kunst-Werke in Berlin, viewers were confronted with a series of makeshift cardboard boxes, each of which

64. I am reminded of Walter Benjamin’s praise of newspapers because they solicit opinions from their reader (via the letters page) and thereby elevate him/her to the status of a collaborator: “The reader is at all times ready to become a writer,” he says, “that is, a describer, but also a prescriber . . . he gains access to authorship” (Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in Benjamin, *Reflections* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978], p. 225). Even so, the newspaper retains an editor, and the letters page is but one among many other authored pages beneath the remit of this editor.

65. “As the social is penetrated by negativity—that is, by antagonism—it does not attain the status of transparency, of full presence, and the objectivity of its identities is permanently subverted. From here onward, the impossible relation between objectivity and negativity has become constitutive of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, p. 129).

66. The blockade or impasse is a recurrent motif in Sierra’s work, such as *68 People Paid to Block the Entrance to Pusan’s Museum of Contemporary Art, Korea* (2000) or *465 People Paid to Stand in a Room at the Museo Rufino Tamaya, Mexico City* (1999).

concealed a Chechnyan refugee seeking asylum in Germany.<sup>67</sup> The boxes were an Arte Povera take on Tony Smith's celebrated 6 x 6 foot sculpture *Die* (1962), the work that Michael Fried famously described as exerting the same effect on the viewer as "the silent presence of another person."<sup>68</sup> In Sierra's piece, this silent presence was literal: since it is against the law in Germany for illegal immigrants to be paid for work, the refugees' status could not be announced by the gallery. Their silence was exaggerated and exacerbated by their literal invisibility beneath the cardboard boxes. In such works, Sierra seems to argue that the phenomenological body of Minimalism is politicized precisely through the *quality* of its relationship—or lack of relationship—to other people. Our response to witnessing the participants in Sierra's actions—be they facing the wall, sitting under boxes, or tattooed with a line—is quite different from the "togetherness" of relational aesthetics. The work does not offer an experience of transcendent human empathy that smooths over the awkward situation before us, but a pointed racial and economic nonidentification: "this is not me." The persistence of this friction, its awkwardness and discomfort, alerts us to the relational antagonism of Sierra's work.

The works of Hirschhorn and Sierra stand against Bourriaud's claims for relational aesthetics, the microtopian communities of Tiravanija, and the scenario formalism of Gillick. The feel-good positions adopted by Tiravanija and Gillick are reflected in their ubiquitous presence on the international art scene, and their status as perennial favorites of a few curators who have become known for promoting their preferred selection of artists (and thereby becoming touring stars in their own right). In such a cozy situation, art does not feel the need to defend itself, and it collapses into compensatory (and self-congratulatory) entertainment. The work of Hirschhorn and Sierra is better art not simply for being better politics (although both of these artists now have equally high visibility on the blockbuster art circuit). Their work acknowledges the limitations of what is possible as art ("I am not an animator, teacher or social-worker," says Hirschhorn) and subjects to scrutiny all easy claims for a transitive relationship between art and society. The model of subjectivity that underpins their practice is not the fictitious whole subject of harmonious community, but a divided subject of partial identifications open to constant flux. If relational aesthetics requires a unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as-togetherness, then Hirschhorn and Sierra provide a mode of artistic experience more adequate to the divided and incomplete subject of today. This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other.

67. *Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes*, Kunst-Werke, Berlin, (September 2000). Six workers remained inside the boxes for four hours a day for six weeks.

68. Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (Summer 1967), reprinted in *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 128.



*Pierre Huyghe. Streamside Day Follies. Dia Art Foundation, New York, 2003. Photo: Pierre Huyghe. All images courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris and New York, unless otherwise indicated.*

## Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn

Gregory Sholette

*To a degree unprecedented in any other social system, capitalism both feeds on and reproduces the moods of populations. Without delirium and confidence, capital could not function.*

Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009)<sup>1</sup>

*Art and art-related practices that are oriented toward usership rather than spectatorship are characterized more than anything else by their scale of operations: they operate on the 1:1 scale... They don't look like anything other than what they also are; nor are they something to be looked at and they certainly don't look like art.*

Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (2013)<sup>2</sup>

In just a few short years the emerging field of social practice has gained a considerable following thanks to the way it successfully links an ever-expanding definition of visual art to a broad array of disciplines and procedures, including sustainable design, urban studies, environmental research, performance art, and community advocacy, but also such commonplace activities as walking, talking and even cooking.<sup>3</sup> Not just another cultural field or artistic genre, social practice is evolving into a comprehensive sphere of life encompassing over a half dozen academic programs, concentrations, or minors at the graduate and undergraduate levels already dedicated to turning out engaged artists, and

still more programs in the pipeline (and full disclosure I am part of this pedagogical trend evolving at the City University of New York). Philanthropic foundations, meanwhile, are hurriedly adding community arts related grants to their programming, and major museums are setting aside part of their budgets (primarily from education departments although that seems about to change) in order to produce ephemeral, participatory projects that have the added benefit in a crash-strapped financial environment of being relatively low in cost, of not requiring storage or maintenance, and of generating audience interest in ways that static exhibitions no longer seem to provide.<sup>4</sup> “Art,” writes Peter Weibel, “is emerging as a public space in which the individual can claim the promises of constitutional and state democracy. Activism may be the first new art form of the twenty-first century.”<sup>5</sup>

And yet all of this ferment is also taking place at a moment when basic human rights are considered a state security risk, when sweeping economic restructuring converts the global majority into a precarious surplus, and when a widespread hostility to the very notion of society has become commonplace rhetoric within mainstream politics. In truth, the public sphere, as both concept and reality, lies in tatters. It is as much a casualty of unchecked economic privatization, as it is of anti-government sentiments and failed states. Counter-intuitively, the rise in the number of Non-Governmental Agencies (NGO) does not reveal a healthy social sphere, but more of a desperate attempt at triage aimed at resolving such complex issues as global labor exploitation, environmental pollution, and political misconduct all of which no longer seem manageable within the framework of democratically elected state governance. The contrast and similarity between socially engaged art collectives and NGOs has been noted by Grant Kester, who cites criticisms by the Dutch architectural collective BAVO regarding “accommodationist” practices that only aim to fix local social problems without questioning the system that gave rise to these problems in the first place.<sup>6</sup> My concerns fall along similar lines, except that here in the United States the situation is less easy to parse. A lack of public





**Illustration 1.** March 25, 2014 interventionist street projection by Gulf Labor Coalition, Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.), and OWS Illuminator “rebranding” the façade of the Guggenheim Museum in New York City to protest appalling migrant labor conditions in Abu Dhabi where the museum is planning to build a new facility designed by Frank Gehry. Image courtesy of Noah Fischer.

funding for art, as well as the absence of an actual Left discourse or parties makes it difficult to avoid some level of dependency on the institutional art world.

That a relationship exists therefore between the rise of social practice art and the fall of social infrastructures there can be no doubt. And it begs the question, why art has taken a so-called “social turn,” as Claire Bishop proposes, just at this particular historical juncture?<sup>7</sup> I raise this paradox now, as engaged art practices appear poised to exit the periphery of the mainstream art world where it has resided for decades, often in the nascent form of “community arts,” in order to be embraced today by a degree of institutional legitimacy. The stakes are becoming significantly elevated, and not only for artists, but also for political activists. This is not a simple

matter of good intentions being coopted by evil institutions. We are well beyond that point. The co-dependence of periphery and center, along with the widespread reliance on social networks, and the near-global hegemony of capitalist markets makes fantasies of compartmentalizing social practice from the mainstream as dubious as any blanket vilification of the art world. As Fischer puts it, a delirious confidence permeates our reality under Capitalism 2.0, and I would add that contemporary art is simultaneously its avant-garde and its social realism. My response is to propose a *détournement* of this state affairs by rerouting capital's deranged affectivity in order to counter its very interests. I would like to say that this is the goal of my re-examination here, which aims to make trouble for the increasingly normalized theory, history and practice of socially engaged art and its political horizon, or lack thereof. I would like to insist that this is an attempt to bring about a system-wide reboot. Realistically though, I hope to at least present an outline for future research, discussion and debate regarding the paradoxical ascent of social practice art in a socially bankrupt world.

Capital and art, two seemingly discrete, even antithetical categories, appear to be converging everywhere we look, from the barren sands of Abu Dhabi where western museum's help brand patriarchal monarchies propped up by a surplus of petrodollars and impoverished migrant workers, to online subscriber-driven services like the Mei Moses Fine Art Index, which promotes itself as the "Beautiful Assets Advisor" faithfully keeping track of financial returns on art for the .01% super-rich, much as the Stock Exchange does for other types of investors.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it is no coincidence then that both the Mei Moses Index and the future Louvre Abu Dhabi were rolled out in 2007, just as key economic indicators were falling like dominos across the world banking system. It was also the year Apple announced the iPhone, so that by the end of 2007 some 700 Billion SMS text messages had been sent, setting the stage some would argue for a series of "twitter revolutions," starting in Iran and Moldavia in 2009, and then later across the Arab world.<sup>9</sup> Books such as Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster*



**Illustration 2.** Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) poster “What Would an Ethical Museum Look Like?” in a NYC subway station nearby the Guggenheim Museum, 2014. Image courtesy of Noah Fischer.

*Capitalism* (2007) launched a salvo against Milton Friedman style laissez-faire capitalism, while Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s re-theorization of imperialism in their best-selling volume *Empire* (2001), followed by *Multitude* (2005), continued to inspire anti-globalization activists in the Global Justice Movement.<sup>10</sup> Still, at this very same moment a combination of dark derivatives, toxic assets, and subprime mortgage tainted hedge-funds were beginning to tank as virtually the entire planet was about learn to speak the “grammar of finance.”<sup>11</sup> “The financialization of capitalism—the shift

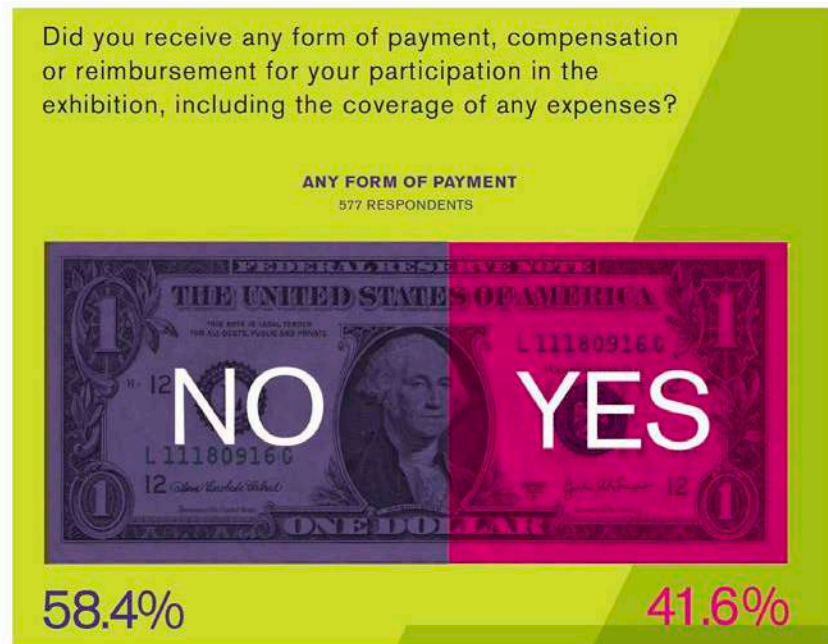
in gravity of economic activity from production (and even from much of the growing service sector) to finance—is thus one of the key issues of our time,” wrote John Bellamy Foster in a 2007 *Monthly Review* article, adding prophetically “rather than advancing in a fundamental way, capital is trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of stagnation and financial explosion.”<sup>12</sup> As the journal containing his essay went to print the entire global economy began plunging into a massive, prolonged contraction that is still crippling indebted nations and individual workers today.

Astonishingly, one of the few markets to not only weather the crisis, but which also subsequently exploded in aggregate value, even as the rest of the economy remained in deep recession, was that of fine art. On May 9th, 2008 Sotheby’s sold 362 million dollars worth of modern and contemporary painting including a record breaking Francis Bacon painting triptych. And the sales have not weakened since.<sup>13</sup> It was the same day Fitch Ratings announced they were awarding a subsidiary of Lehman Brothers Holding Inc. an ‘A,’ for a positive financial outlook. Four months later Lehman initiated the largest bankruptcy filing in U.S. history, sending the stock market into a sustained sequence of unprecedented capital losses.<sup>14</sup> Expectations were high that the art market would follow this downward trend, just as it did after the 1987 “Black Monday” crash. And initially, the art market did indeed take a hit, with prices for such seemingly stable assets as Impressionist and post-Impressionist painting dropping as much as much as 30% in value by the end of 2008.<sup>15</sup> Then something unexpected took place. Sales of art stabilized and began to rise again, so that by 2013 the global art market grossed €47.42 billion in sales, the second most prosperous year on record since 2007.<sup>16</sup> Since then art sales have continued their dramatic and unprecedented boom even as the economic crisis continues to plague most of the world’s nations. One result of art’s cultural potency has been the mutation of works of art themselves, a process in which a relatively fixed capital asset such as a Jackson Pollock painting owned by a well-heeled society elite a few decades ago has today morphed into an investment

instrument capable of being bundled together with other assets by clever hedge fund managers. This goes well beyond the merely entrepreneurial marriage between art and commerce exemplified by, say, Jeff Koons who has licensed his metallic, balloon dog brand for use on H&M handbags. This financialization zeitgeist is shifting art all the way down to what might be thought of as its ontological level. Artist and theorist Melanie Gilligan goes so far as to suggest that even the production of artistic work is beginning to resemble a type of finance derivative, which rather than seeking to generate new forms or new values instead depends “on the reorganization of something already existing.”<sup>17</sup>

Pervasive financialization has also led to the *un-concealing* of art’s political economy. Eyes wide open, the legions of largely invisible artists and cultural workers so fundamental to reproducing what Julian Stallabrass sardonically dubbed Art Incorporated as far back as 2004 are starting to doubt their professional allegiances. We now see in high relief what has always been right in front of us all along: the thousands of invisible, yet professionally trained artist service workers –fabricators, assistants, registrars, shippers, handlers, installers, subscribers, adjunct instructors– who are necessary for reproducing the established hierarchies of the art world. This socialized dark matter is now impossible to *unsee*, as criticism of the top-heavy distribution of compensation endemic to the field of artistic production intensifies. Some artists are even beginning to organize.

The business-as-usual art world is now facing not one, but two mutinous tendencies. The first involves demands that the art industry be regulated in order to assure a more equitable allocation of resources for all concerned. The other involves escape. Examples of the first tendency include recently formed artists’ organizations such as Working Artists for the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), BFAMFAPHD, ArtLeaks, Gulf Labor Coalition, Debtfair, Art & Labor (both offshoots of Occupy Wall Street), and a new Artist’s Union being organized in Newcastle, England. These micro-institutions collectively assert moral and sometimes also legal pressure on the



**Illustration 3.** Downloadable graphic visualization of a 2011 survey focused on the working conditions of artists by W.A.G.E. (Working Artists & The Greater Economy). Available on the website: [www.wageforwork.com/](http://www.wageforwork.com/).

art industry demanding that it become an all around better citizen.<sup>18</sup> Redressing economic injustice in the art world, including the 52,035 average dollars of debt owed by art school graduates has also been the topic of recent conferences including “Artist as Debtor,” the 2015 College Art Association panel entitled “Public Art Dialogue Student Debt, Real Estate, and the Arts, and “Art Field As Social Factory” sponsored by the Free/Slow University in Warsaw Poland in order to address the “division of labor, forms of capital and systems of exploitation in the contemporary cultural production.”<sup>19</sup>

The second reaction by artists to the current crisis involves exiting the art world altogether, or at least attempting to put its hierarchical pecking order and cynical winner-takes-all tournament culture at a safe distance.<sup>20</sup> For many artists the primary means of





**Illustration 4.** *Shattering the Developers' Illusions*, The seventh image from the first sequence of photo-murals each 18' x 12' (5.49m x 3.66m) from series "The Changing Picture of Docklands." exploring issues surrounding the re-development of the London Docklands from the viewpoint of local communities. © Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson, Docklands Community Poster Project, 1982-5. Photograph courtesy of artist Lorraine Leeson.

achieving this is withdrawal, or partial withdrawal, which sometimes involves turning to social and political engagement outside of art.<sup>21</sup> In theory, not only is it difficult to monetize acts of, say, artistic gift giving or dialogical conversation, two commonly practiced operations that typify socially engaged art, but also by forming links to non-art professionals in the “real” world one establishes a sense of embodied community quite apart from and affectively far richer than anything possible within the hopelessly compromised relations of the mainstream art world.

In truth, collectively produced art and community-based art have been around for decades. Beginning in the 1970s the British Arts Council began to funnel support to muralists, photographers, theatre troupes and other cultural and media workers operating

outside the studio in urban and rural public settings. A similar dissemination of government resources took place in the US under the US Department of Labor's Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) as well as through National Endowment for the Arts funding. Some of this public support gave rise to artist's run alternative spaces. It also helped establish artists working within labor unions, impoverished inner city neighborhoods, prisons, geriatric facilities and other non-art settings. Exactly what makes current, more celebrated forms of social practice art distinct from these previous incarnations of community art is hard to pinpoint, although two things do stand out.

One difference is the move away from producing an artistic "work," such as a mural, exhibition, book, video, or some tangible outcome or object, and towards the choreographing of social experiences itself as a form of socially engaged art practice. In other words, activities such as collaborative programming, performance, documentation, protest, publishing, shopping, mutual learning, discussion, as well as walking, eating, or some other typically ephemeral pursuit is all that social practice sometimes results in. It's not that traditional community-based art generated no social relations, but rather that social practice *treats the social itself as a medium and material of expression*. Blake Stimson and I put began to intuit this shift in 2004. Writing about what we then perceived to be an emerging form of post-war collectivism after modernism,

*This [new collectivism] means neither picturing social form, nor doing battle in the realm of representation but instead engaging with social life as production, engaging with social life itself as the medium of expression. This new collectivism carries with it the spectral power of collectivisms past just as it is realized fully within the hegemonic power of global capitalism.<sup>22</sup>*

Theorist Stephen Wright similarly insists in his recent book *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* that contemporary art is moving beyond the realm of representation altogether and into a 1:1 correspondence with the world that both we, and it, occupy.<sup>23</sup> Before returning to these provocative claims, let me offer one other, less sensational

contrast between social practice art and community-based arts. The mainstream critical establishment of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s treated community-based art either with indifference or derision. It was a level of scorn that community artists returned in spades. Driven by populist ideals as much as contempt for art world glitterati, community artists frequently turned their backs to the established art world, and still do. On those rare occasions when a “serious” critic did “stoop” to address this “unsophisticated” art four issues typically arose.

First, while community artists who were, as often as not, white, middle-class and college educated, might collaborate with inmates to make “prison art,” or choreograph dances with geriatric patients, or train inner-city kids to make paintings and sculpture, thereby bringing pleasure and culture to the underserved, they were also, it was argued, undermining art’s historically established autonomy from the everyday world. As far as “highbrow” art historians go, this is akin to wearing a large target on your back at a shooting range. Art’s allegedly unique state of independence from life has, at least since the time of Schiller and Kant, permitted artists a singular type of freedom from useful labor. It is this *purposeless purpose* that allows artists to operate in opposition to the banality of the everyday as well as what Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse later designated as monopoly capitalism’s “totally administered society.” That is to say, artistic work retains an ability to withdraw from the everyday world’s profaned, degraded routines only by keeping a measured, critical distance from it. By attempting to narrow the gap between art and society, community artists do exactly the opposite. Sin number one.

Second, community arts appear to substitute artist-generated services for genuine public services, thus reforming rather than fundamentally transforming offensive political inequalities that have only grown more extreme over the past thirty years, thanks to the anti-government policies of neoliberal, deregulated capitalism. Following the collapse of the world financial market this “replacement strategy” of artist service providers for actual social

services seems to have accelerated in the US and UK in particular as governments look for ways to cut public spending. As we well know, artists work cheap. Unionized social workers, educators, therapists do not. In addition, point three, community-based art practices run the risk of ensconcing the contemporary artist as some sort of profound, revelatory change agent, or as Grant Kester perceptively wrote, an aesthetic evangelical.<sup>24</sup> And finally, who says community is a good thing? Of course this depends on your definition of community but the world is full of tyrannical “communities,” where difference, mental, physical, sexual, leads to expulsion or worse. *Profano Numerus Quattuor*. Nevertheless, all of these charges can just as easily be applied to social practice art today, and yet it seems to be the unconfirmed major contender for an *avant-garde redux*. What has changed?

Maybe it was Nicholas Bourriaud’s promotion of Relational Aesthetics in the 1990s that began the rehabilitation of community art? Recall that the celebrity curator insisted artist Rirkrit Tiravanija’s gallery-centered meal sharing established a new, socially participatory paradigm for post-studio artistic practices. It was a claim the art world uncritically devoured. Or perhaps it was the expanding network of artists developing ephemeral actions, research-based public projects, and impermanent installations as a response to an ever-shrinking stock of large urban studio spaces? There is still a third possibility: the loss of no-strings-attached public funding for art institutions after the 1980s may have ironically brought about a popularization of museum programming by forcing institutions to seek out more interactive, spectacular public events. None of these scenarios disregards the sincerity of artists who seek communal experiences or socially useful applications for their work. The question here is what accounts for the positive reception of social practice art today, as opposed to the negative reception of its close kin, community art, only a decade or so ago? One way or the other, it seems that by the early 2000s we find previously widespread art world resistance to socially engaged art practices eroding, though

always selectively, so that now in 2015 the social turn is spinning full-throttle.

It is an inversion of artistic taste so abrupt that it reminds me of the late 1970s when painters still earnestly grappling with Greenbergian “flatness” discovered a decade later that it was an artistic “problem” that had simply vanished as a jubilant, and often juvenile 1980s art scene embraced figurative painting, decorative crafts, and even low-brow kitsch, all of which were the bane of most modernist aestheticians. Likewise, drawbacks once dismissively associated with community-based art are just as fugitive today, vanishing in a puff of smoke like the undead at sunrise. Aside from an occasional critic like Ben Davis who insists that “the genre of “social practice” art raises questions that it cannot by itself answer,” most graduating MFA students today feel obliged to join an art collective and attempt to connect themselves to communities which are not traditionally part of the fine art world.<sup>25</sup> If anything, the focus on socially engaged art by the mainstream art world has actually eclipsed, rather than illuminated the many individuals still active in community arts, turning long simmering resentments once directed at the art world establishment into charges of appropriation and colonization.<sup>26</sup>

Davis may be right about the blindness of social practice art to its own preconceptions. Still, the fact that so many young people today are desperately seeking to redefine the way they live from the point of view of both environmental and social justice adds an impressive robustness to this cultural phenomenon. Art seems to be the one field of recognized, professional activity where a multitude of interests ranging from the aesthetic to the pragmatically everyday co-exist, a state of exception that led to artist Chris Kraus’s musings on what she calls the ambiguous virtues of art school,

*Why would young people enter a studio art program to become teachers and translators, novelists, archivists, and small business owners? Clearly, it’s because these activities have become so degraded and negligible within the culture that the only chance*

*for them to appear is within contemporary art's coded yet infinitely malleable discourse.*<sup>27</sup>

Socially engaged art practice is becoming such an attractive and paradigmatic model for younger artists that it seems to fulfil Fredric Jameson's proposition that particular historical art forms express a social narrative that paradoxically, "brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction."<sup>28</sup> At first glance, this seems like the answer to my initial question: why is socially engaged art advancing at a moment when society is bankrupted? Because, with due respect to Jameson, it resolves intolerable contradictions in the actual world. But while this explanation may have been applicable to Relational Aesthetics, it seems inadequate just a decade or so later with regard to social practice. For Jameson, the work of art remains a categorically discrete entity, a novel, building, performance or film framed within a specific historic, cultural and institutional context. It is, in other words, the privileged site where the work of hermeneutic textual interpretation takes place. What if social practice art has already successfully inverted normative representational framing as art, flipping inside out our spectator-based distance from the world so that now *everything* is outside the frame and nothing remains inside?

In Wright's 1:1 thesis, the practice of socially engaged art would then simply constitute the social itself, emerging into the everyday world as a set of actual social relations or commonplace activities, and not as a deep critical reflection or aesthetic representation of society or its flaws. This is different from a Kaprow/Beuys/Fluxus tactic of inserting anti-art into the everyday world. 1:1 art just becomes redundant by providing "a function already fulfilled by something else."<sup>29</sup> Neither does Wright's model conform to Shannon Jackson's notion that such heteronomous social activities might be folded into a neat, academic framework via performance studies.<sup>30</sup> If these emerging practices interact with social life by producing the social itself, then they are neither an experimental trial, nor a



performance, nor even a rehearsal for some ideal society. In fact the term practice would be a misnomer. Leading to several complicated consequences.<sup>31</sup> First, redundant, 1:1 social practices are subject to all of the legal, economic, and practical consequences of any other real-world activity. Take Pittsburgh-based Conflict Kitchen that specializes in serving food from countries that the United States is in conflict with including North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela. When they presented a Palestinian menu last year someone sent the artists a death threat, forcing them to shut down under police protection for several days. Yes, paintings and other artistic projects have drawn hostility to themselves or their authors due to what or how they represent someone or some nation or idea, but in this instance, does it really make sense to defend Conflict Kitchen as an art project with a guaranteed first amendment right to free speech when the laws protecting commercial business, which is from a legal perspective CK is, are already enough? Conversely, first amendment rights would not prevent this culinary art project from becoming liable for, say, a food born illness, should one be accidentally transmitted to a customer.<sup>32</sup> Operating in the real world also presents learning challenges for socially engaged practitioners trained by artists who paint, and draw, and make installation art in the isolation of their studio. Commenting on the challenge of this autodidactic learning curve, artist Theaster Gates explains with genuine surprise that while working on his Dorchester housing restoration projects in Chicago “I never learned so much about zoning law in my life.” To anyone other than an artist trained to deal with the representations of things, but not things themselves, gaining practical knowledge about zoning laws would have been self-evident.<sup>33</sup>

Second, by working with human affect and experience as an artistic medium social practice draws directly upon the state of society that we actually find ourselves in today: fragmented and alienated by decades of privatization, monetization, and ultra-deregulation. In the absence of any truly democratic governance, works of socially engaged art seem to be filling in a lost social by enacting community participation and horizontal collaboration, and

by seeking to create micro-collectives and intentional communities. On the surface, it's as if they were making a performative proposition about a truant social sphere they hope will return once the grown-ups notice it's gone missing. If however they are instead incarnating the remains of society as I am suggesting, then the stakes are radically different, for better and for worse. It is for better when social practice and community-based artists engage with the political, fantastic, or even resentful impulses of people, a process that can lead to class awareness or even utopian imaginings much as we saw with Occupy Wall Street. It is for the worse when the social body becomes prime quarry for mainstream cultural institutions and their corporate benefactors who thrive on deep-mining networks of "prosumers" bristling with profitable data.<sup>34</sup> Even the normally optimistic theorist Brian Holmes gloomily warns us that "the myriad forms of contemporary electronic surveillance now constitute a proactive force, the irremediably multiple feedback loops of a cybernetic society, devoted to controlling the future."<sup>35</sup>

One way to grapple with the present paradox of social practice art's predicament is to turn to the archive of past projects and proposals -including those that succeeded and those that failed- in order to reappraise certain moments within the genealogy of socially engaged art that might have unfolded differently. To find vestiges and sparks suggesting unanticipated historical branches that may have sprouted off into directions that would possibly be less vulnerable to the pressures for normalization, institutionalization and administration. One of these significant junctures took place shortly before two world-altering historical occurrences-the global financial crash of 2007/2008 with its devastating economic effects and the widespread surveillance, even criminalization of the electronic commons. The year 2004-2005 sits at a point where the counter-globalization movement was invisibly beginning to falter, and immediately after unprecedented global peace demonstrations distressingly failed to stop the illegal, US-led invasion of Iraq. It precedes the full disclosure of the emerging national security state complex of today. Nevertheless, these realities had yet to fully



**Illustration 5.** *com\_muni\_port* (2003) a mobile radio broadcasting unit, and “The Low Power to High Power Broadcast Media Tour,” a 2004 tactical media project, both by neuroTransmitter (Valerie Tevere, Angel Nevarez). Image courtesy of neuroTransmitter.

sink in as artists, activists and intellectuals remained captivated by the utopian potential of new communications technologies and the “people-power” that seems to have led to the downfall of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European empire. Coming into focus was a group of tech-savvy, cultural activists who’s bold hit and run interventions sought to undermine established authority by literally upending public spaces and turning the mainstream media’s resources against itself.

Artists Angel Nevarez and Valerie Tevere of the group neuroTransmitter put it this way:

*For us this a was moment of heightened media art and activism. Artist were extending the possibilities of new technologies and re-inscribing the use of old media forms. It was a time of innovations in technology and communications media,*

*yet we were interacting in physical space rather than through social media... where we both interacted on the street level as well as in the air.*<sup>36</sup>

Decidedly non-ideological in outlook (other than an occasional nod of approval towards the Left-libertarian Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) of Chiapas Mexico) tactical media interventionists dismissed organized politics.<sup>37</sup> Some went so far as to castigate past efforts at achieving progressive political change describing the utopian aims of the New Left and May 68 as “vaporware”—a derogatory term used for a software product that while announced with much fanfare, never actually materializes. Geert Lovink and David Garcia argued that tactical media activism sought to hold no ground of its own; instead merely seeking to creatively interrupt the status quo with determined, short-term acts of public sensationalism and cultural sabotage.

*Our hybrid forms are always provisional. What counts are the temporary connections you are able to make. Here and now, not some vaporware promised for the future. But what we can do on the spot with the media we have access to.*<sup>38</sup>

In truth, Tactical Media benefitted from a particular historical opening, a quasi-legal loophole that existed before the heavily policed, privatized public sphere emerged full-blown, with its round-the-clock electronic surveillance closing down outlets for resistance, including the kind of critical gaps exploited by more militantly engaged political artists such as Critical Art Ensemble as I will discuss below. In other words, the illegal status of distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks clandestinely carried out by hacktivist groups such as Anonymous in recent years were still in a gray zone into the early 2000s. In 1998 Ricardo Dominquez and Electronic Disturbance Theater designed a pro-Zapatista virtual sit-in platform aimed at overloading and crashing websites belonging to the Mexican Government.<sup>39</sup> But in 2010, University of California Campus Police investigated Dominquez for a tactical media type application he devised that would assist undocumented immigrants



**Illustration 6.** *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, interior installation view at MASS MoCA, Spring 2004.

crossing the Southern US border.<sup>40</sup> This was also before some forms of social practice art began to attract the attention of mainstream cultural institutions.

The second half of this essay focuses on this tactical media moment as it was presented in the 2004 exhibition *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, organized for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) by their recently hired curator Nato Thompson. The show was dedicated to artists or artists' collectives who explicitly conceived of art not as an object of contemplation for a passive spectator but as a sharable set of tools for bringing about actual social change. It also reflected a certain optimism that pivoted on the idea of tactics could be adopted by anyone, not just artists, to improve life conditions. What follows is not intended to serve as a diverting tale of speculative nostalgia. Instead, I hope to put this exhibition forward as one wrinkle in the archive of socially

engaged art worthy of re-reading, and possibly rebooting its history. Endeavoring to leverage the euphoric concoction of delirium and confidence Mark Fisher attributes to Capitalism 2.0 for a project of archival redemption, I am reminded of a phrase used by Russian Avant-Garde theorist Viktor Shklovsky. I proceed therefore with the “optimism of delusion.”<sup>41</sup>

## II. After the Interventionists

Conceived of and produced for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA), curator Nato Thompson’s 2004 exhibition *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, drew on two precedents: Mary Jane Jacob’s 1992-1993 Chicago-based public art project *Culture in Action*, and the *Détournement* or creative “hijacking” of daily life proposed by the Situationist International in the 1960s. It also sought to make a self-conscious break with past attempts to exhibit politically charged contemporary art in a museum setting. Thompson’s curatorial statement compares “the sometimes heavy-handed political art of the 1980s” with his selection of interventionist practitioners who he insists had begun to carve out compelling new paths for artistic practice, coupling hardheaded politics with a light-handed approach, while embracing anarchist Emma Goldman’s dictum that revolutions and dancing should never be separated from each other.<sup>42</sup>

This was no gray on gray presentation of “message art” intended to dutifully instruct its audience about political realities, any more than its content pointed to some romantic socialist *vaporworld*. Instead a visitor to MASS MoCA was confronted with a zoo-like menagerie of “magic tricks, faux fashion and jacked-up lawn mowers,” packed into the museum’s plaintive post-industrial expanse like a sideshow for activists. Rather than didactic lecturing these projects agitated for social change through ironic critiques, overt lampooning, and subtle co-optations of mainstream media and culture cunningly disguised as *the real thing*. Artist Alex Villar leaps over fences, scales

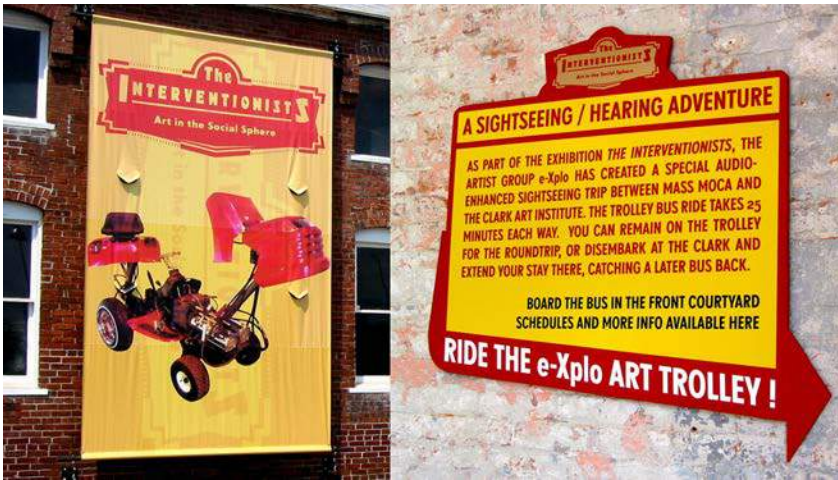


brick facades and squeezes himself into cracks between tenement buildings, temporarily occupying overlooked urban spaces while performing his own Situationist-inspired version of Parkour, the Spanish collective YOMANGO display fashion accessories for magically making “objects disappear,” (i.e. shoplifting with style), and a member of the Danish group N55 rolls a mobile floating unit down a city street demonstrating the Snail Shell System, a low-cost mobile dwelling useful for transportation and providing “protection from violence during demonstrations.”<sup>43</sup> Something subversive pervaded all of these varied works, though exactly what direction this dissidence pointed towards was fuzzy at best.

If the political identity of these *interventionist* activists was intentionally difficult to pin-down, the exhibition certainly proved something else, something that most previous displays of socially engaged art had not attempted: it returned a sense of wonder and surprise to oppositional culture. Subterfuge could be fun. Unfortunately, this aspect of the exhibition’s message was easier to take-away as a sound bite than its critical intent. Despite being on view for over a year (May 2004 to March of 2005) *The Interventionists* received no in-depth reviews, though a one-sentence recommendation for holiday travelers did appear in the *New York Times*, in which the show was cheerfully described as full of “pranksters and fun politically motivated meddlers.”<sup>44</sup> The absence of serious, critical response cannot be blamed entirely on the lack of familiarity with Nato Thompson, still an untested curator, or with the exhibition’s off-the-grid location in rural New England. Nor was the carnivalesque enthusiasm that unapologetically permeated *The Interventionists* a reason for this dismissal. After all, a substantial theoretical discourse already existed for this kind of art, online and in Europe, but its authors, including Gene Ray, Brian Holmes, Rozalinda Borcila, Geert Lovink, Marcelo Exposito, Gerald Raunig, Marc James Léger and Stephen Wright among others, then, as now, have limited impact on cultural discourse in the US. The failure of any critic to develop a substantial political and aesthetic analysis of *The Interventionists* is unquestionably a lost opportunity, especially

when one considers the impoverished state of such criticism even up to today. Still, the exhibition managed to demonstrate two things above all. First that a thriving group of contemporary artists in 2004 considered social, political and environmental issues paramount to their practice, and second, that their critique could be delivered through the kind of stimulating visual format audiences of contemporary art had come to expect. Even so, there are two overlooked dimensions of *The Interventionists* more relevant to my argument still in need of excavation.

MASS MoCA's sprawling labyrinth of rooms and obsolete industrial apparatus appealed then, as it does today, to vacationers grown tired of Happy Meals and theme parks and searching for that off-beat family experience, but one that promised at least a modicum of educational nourishment. On the occasion of *The Interventionists* a trip to the museum delivered something extra, a spectacle of imaginative dissidence whose quintessential onlooker was not the art world elite, but instead these same "holiday travelers," whose demoralized collective *unconsciousness* theorist



**Illustration 7.** Detail of MASS MoCA exterior advertising *The Interventionists* including Ruben Ortiz's low-rider lawn mower and e-Xplo's local sight-seeing Art Trolley.

Michel De Certeau would call *the murmur of the everyday*. This was no coincidence. Thompson cut his curatorial teeth co-producing a weekend of guerilla-style street actions in Chicago under the rubric *The Department of Space and Land Reclamation* or DSLR. Gleefully bringing together graffiti, agit-prop posters, hip-hop, illegal street art and impromptu public actions, DSLR's bottom-up informality simultaneously paid homage to and deconstructed Mary Jane Jacob's landmark 1993 public exhibition *Culture in Action*, all the while turning a blind-eye towards the city's more art savvy neighborhoods. From gigantic balls of trash rolled down Michigan Avenue at lunch hour by men and women dressed up as sanitation workers to anonymous public sculptures attached to traffic signs and absurd performances including a sofa tagged "Please Loiter" plopped down casually on the sidewalk, DSLR was about as disconnected from the gaze of the art world as one could get in 2001.<sup>45</sup>

No one would argue that MASS MoCA was then or is now disconnected from the contemporary art world, though there is a definite allure generated, even perhaps cultivated, through the museum's measurable distance from the mainstream art world that is quite unlike that of Dia Beacon's manageable proximity to New York City.<sup>46</sup> This slightly offbeat appeal extends to the type of administered culture found within MASS MoCA, bringing me to my second point. *The Interventionists* and its venue benefitted from a symbiotic tension that drew on the exhibition's rebellious, Situationist-inspired references, as much as it did from the unusual institutional history of MASS MoCA itself. It was self-made cultural entrepreneur Thomas Krens who conceived of MASS MoCA during the economic upturn of 1984. By sidestepping traditional models of *noblesse oblige* in which those who "own" high culture generously lend their artistic property to public institutions in order to enlighten the masses, Krens developed a business model that linked a growing interest in contemporary art with the economic resuscitation of North Adams, a former manufacturing town that had fallen into economic decline along with other industrial centers

in North America. Strategically located in the bucolic border region where Massachusetts meets Vermont, but also relatively close to New York City with its surplus of sophisticated art consumers and art producers, Krens saw his vision as altogether win-win. Then came the collapse of the savings and loan bubble in 1987. Plans for MASS MoCA were put on hold for over a decade. In 1999, the museum finally opened its doors just one year before the next bubble, the so-called dot.com bubble, also exploded sending a pre-Occupy generation of creative workers into states of resentment and near-desperate panic.

At this point Krenns had been appointed director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in New York City, and soon became the architect of an expanding cultural franchise. Branch museums were established in Berlin, Spain, and Las Vegas, with the latest expansion planned for 2017 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, an undertaking that has generated substantial public controversy due to the poor labor conditions of the UAE. Krens was also the first director of a major art museum to hold a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) rather than a degree in art historical scholarship. This last detail becomes more interesting when one considers the nature of Mass MoCA. Lacking a substantial collection of officially sanctioned art objects the museum plays host to relatively long-term, temporary exhibitions and shorter-term performance events that situate it somewhere between a European Kunsthalle and a Cineplex. Given Krens's background it is not surprising that the orthodox concept of an art museum has been partially deconstructed at Mass MoCA. Nor is it unusual to find the traditional role of the curator as one who cares for the well being of cultural treasures reinterpreted as someone who selects, cultivates and produces projects that combine artistic seriousness with visual pageantry. Notably, Nato Thompson himself was hired by the museum without an advanced degree in art history, but instead with a Masters in Arts Administration from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Though, what would have proven a professional deficit for a curator at other large cultural institutions,



**Illustration 8.** Page spread from the “User’s Manual” for The Interventionists exhibition graphically emphasizing the usefulness of tactical art projects as publicly accessible tools for the “interruption of everyday life.” Design by Arjen Noordeman, image courtesy Greg Sholette.

likely afforded Thompson certain tactical advantages within the hybridized institutional geography of MASS MoCA. There is also an amusing irony here when one considers the intersection of these two incongruous, though equally unorthodox, models of cultural programming: MASS MoCA’s dedication to “deconstructing” the classical idea of the art museum so as to rebrand it a sensational destination for tourists, and *The Interventionists* unapologetic rejection of institutional critique in favor of an eye-popping primer showcasing the subversive possibilities of Tactical Media as “useful” art.

In the decade following *The Interventionists* numerous academic conferences, publications, and programs began to engage similar, Situationist-inspired themes, as debates about short-term tactics versus strategic sustainability and artistic instrumentality versus aesthetic value emerged, or rather re-emerged, often recapitulating similar or even identical artistic passions from key moments in

avant-garde art history. Meanwhile, the exuberantly designed exhibition catalog—which I co-edited with Thompson—rapidly went into multiple reprints, most likely keeping pace with a renewed interest in conceiving of art as an instrument for social change. And while the counter-globalization movement began to lose energy after 2004, the World Social Forum, an international policy initiative dedicated to countermanding neo-liberal hegemony, drew thousands of participants to Porto Alegre, Brazil and other locations in the “Global South.” In 2004 the forum’s host city was Mumbai, India, and those who gathered collectively asserted: “another world is possible.” As if echoing back from a reconverted electronics plant in the winding hills of New England half a world away *The Interventionists* seemed to respond yes, and by the way, “another *art* world is also possible!”<sup>47</sup>

Viewed in this context *The Interventionists* coincided with a broader sea change already under way within contemporary art. Not only were many privileged cultural practitioners beginning to raise questions about the social purpose of their professional activities, but the mainstream art world itself was poised to embrace a more performative, participatory, and at times ephemeral artistic experience prefigured by watershed moments such as Okwui Enwezor’s Documenta 11 in 2002. Arguably it is this very shift away from displaying art objects towards generating experimental platforms for discourse and research-based practices that have opened up a legitimatizing space for social practice art today. Nevertheless, there was nothing predetermined about the path leading from an exhibition of tactical media troublemakers at MASS MoCA, into the white walls of MoMA or the Tate Modern.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, if we construe Thompson’s own tactics as being at least in part a pointed response to Nicolas Bourriaud’s incipient concept of Relational Aesthetics, which similarly celebrated everyday social activity but explicitly rejected overt political content or any self-awareness of artistic privilege, then at least one alternative trajectory for social practice art suggests itself. In this scenario art would still engender social interaction, but it would do so without severing





**Illustration 9.** Free Range Grain demonstration in Graz, Austria with Beatrice de Costa and Critical Art Ensemble's Steve Kurtz testing store bought food for genetically modified organism markers (2003).

such experimentation from a radical critique of either post-Fordism or the deregulated micro-economy of the contemporary art situated within it. But there is another, darker reason *The Interventionists* might be a significant nodal point for re-thinking the archive of social practice art and its genealogy.

Just prior to the exhibition opening and thanks to sweeping legislation made available by the post-911 Patriot Act, a Federal Grand Jury began delivering subpoenas to the friends, colleagues and members of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) as FBI agents confiscated materials the group planned to use for its MASS MoCA installation *Free Range Grains*. The project involved a DNA sampling apparatus that CAE hacked in such a way as to allow visitors to “home-test” for genetically mutated fruit and vegetable genes already circulating within the US food supply. Typical of CAE’s practice the goal of *Free Range Grains* was to focus public attention on the intentionally inconspicuous proliferation of government and corporate control

over a commons fast disappearing thanks to unfettered privatization. Consider for example, a previous CAE installation in which the artists tried to deploy counter-biological agents against Monsanto's genetically modified Roundup Ready seed stock in an attempt—mostly symbolic—to deprive the agricultural giant of its near-total monopoly over US corn, flax, and soybean production.<sup>49</sup> When CAE co-founder Steve Kurtz was falsely accused by a secretive Grand Jury of bio-terrorism in the weeks leading up to the exhibition the groups MASS MoCA installation materials were seized by the FBI as evidence. Undaunted, curator Nato Thompson and museum director Joe Thompson (no relation) arranged for a facsimile of the project to be placed on display along with a set of informational text panels outlining both the events that had just taken place, as well as the sequestration of CAE's equipment by the government. In fact this incident and the subsequent public ordeal of Kurtz and his co-defendant Robert Farrell received more press attention from the art world and mainstream media than did the exhibition itself.<sup>50</sup>

CAE's predicament also provided a singular opportunity for socially engaged artists to reconsider what the stakes of their practice were within a broader conception of politics. Sometime around 9PM on May 29th, 2004, about fifty people, many of them engaged artists who were attending the opening of *The Interventionists*, gathered behind the museum's main entrance hall. Spread by word of mouth, the objective of the emergency meeting was to develop a coordinated, collective response in Kurtz's defense. Several of those present had already been issued subpoenas to testify before the Grand Jury, or face imprisonment. However, the discussion that ensued quickly divided into two camps: Kurtz supporters who argued for a pragmatic vindication of the artist based his defense on the artist's right to free speech under the first amendment, and those hoping to spotlight the investigation's underlying agenda, which, hinged it was asserted, on George W. Bush's government's efforts to stifle political criticism and criminalize "amateur" scientific research carried out by artists, activists, and environmentalists. The late and gifted Beatrice De Costa who was had already been



**Illustration 10.** Critical Art Ensemble's mostly empty installation at MASS MoCA following the confiscation of their project by the FBI. An explanatory panel by the museum is visible to the right of the image (2004).

subpoenaed, articulated support for the second, long-range view pointing out that a collective response to accusations should focus on a broader set of rights. Nevertheless, the constitutional defense won out.<sup>51</sup> Four years later after much effort and expense Kurtz was finally exonerated when a federal judge refused to allow the government's case to go to trial for lack of evidence.

Which brings me to a final point regarding these archival musings. With so many practitioners of tactical media and activist art present for the opening of *The Interventionists* there was an exceptional organizational opportunity opened up for envisioning a broadly conceived and theoretically nuanced genus of socially engaged art. Ironically, CAE's misfortune might have jump-started a social practice future in which the proven effectiveness of tactical media complimented, rather than eclipsed, a strategic, long-range vision of political transformation. If another art world was possible in the Spring of 2004, ignition failed. Maybe that was inevitable. And yet, it begs the question. Did the CAE incident inadvertently

scrub clean more militant forms of art leaving a more manageable strain of socially engaged art behind?<sup>52</sup> Or was the very lack of a broader, strategic political view also to blame? To put this differently, is vaporware really such a bad thing? After all, some version of collectivism operates within even the most battered social terrain. The question is: what does that collective project look like. Stimson puts it this way,

*there are only two root forms of collectivist practice—one based in political life and the state and another in economic life and the market—and our time is marked by a historical shift from a greater degree of predominance for the first to an increasingly influential role for the second.*<sup>53</sup>

How might our narrative about social practice art collectivism be imagined differently, or perhaps better yet, how can it be shifted away from the market-based notion of “community as consumer-based demographic” that often, surreptitiously dominates it? And yes, we are talking about conscious political resistance, which may ultimately come from any number of unlikely places. It might, for example, involve a process of engagement as disengagement, something akin to Wright’s notion of escaping through a trap door.<sup>54</sup> Or perhaps it will emerge as John Roberts’s proposes in the form of artistic communization?<sup>55</sup> The recent national demonstrations focusing on police violence against people of color and the unexpected success of the Leftwing Syriza party in Greece, also suggest possible pathways to politicized collectivism. But it could also involve less savory outcomes such as the mobilization of Nietzschean *ressentiment*, something that we can see already visible in Greece’s far right wing party Golden Dawn, Ukraine’s Svoboda, France’s National Front, or even some factions of the United State’s Tea Party Patriots. It would also be a mistake to overlook the fact that these same political, technological, and economic shifts that gave rise to neoliberal enterprise culture also played midwife to numerous process-oriented, self-organized, collective art organizations as previously stalwart barriers between artist and

audience, artist and curator, and artist and administrator began to blur and blend.



**Illustration 11.** A monumental tower constructed in Kieve's Maidan Square with posters from a range of Ukrainian political factions, including the ultra-right wing Svoboda Party (April 2014). Photograph courtesy of Greg Sholette.

One result is that cultural institutions now resemble components of a “system” that swap and amplify cultural capital, rather than spaces where rare things are collected, guarded and cared for. It’s no surprise therefore, that Thompson’s approach to *The Interventionists* embodied many of these same unresolved contradictions, or that historical contingencies determined which of these threads would prevail and which would be suppressed. Writing about the Museums Quartier in Vienna at about the time as *The Interventionists* Brian Holmes observed that, “the welfare states may be shrinking, but certainly not the museum. The latter is rather fragmenting, penetrating ever more deeply and organically into the complex mesh of semiotic production [outside of its walls].” The stage was being set for the current phase of post-Fordist administration and the transformation of cultural institutions into modifiable platforms for staging temporary, project-based installations, spectacles and events. This administrative turn seems to keep pace with a modified neoliberalism in which both risk and regimentation operate side by side, or as Jan Rehmann summarizes “neoliberal ideology is continuously permuted by its opposite: its criticism of the state, which is in fact only directed against the welfare state, flows into an undemocratic despotism, its ‘freedom’ reveals to signify the virtue of submission to pre-given rules.” Either way, the question remains: What loopholes of resistance were lost in and around 2004? Which might still remain? And how will we usefully uncover those that might still be present?<sup>56</sup>

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In the decade that followed 2004/2005, the massive private appropriation of public capital by self-damaged investment corporations marked a return, already under way since the 1980s, to forms of worker exploitation and precarious inequality typical of capitalism prior to the banking reforms and collective pushback orchestrated by organized labor in the aftermath of the catastrophic 1929 stock market crash. Following the recent financial collapse an optimistic army of young “knowledge workers,” including many



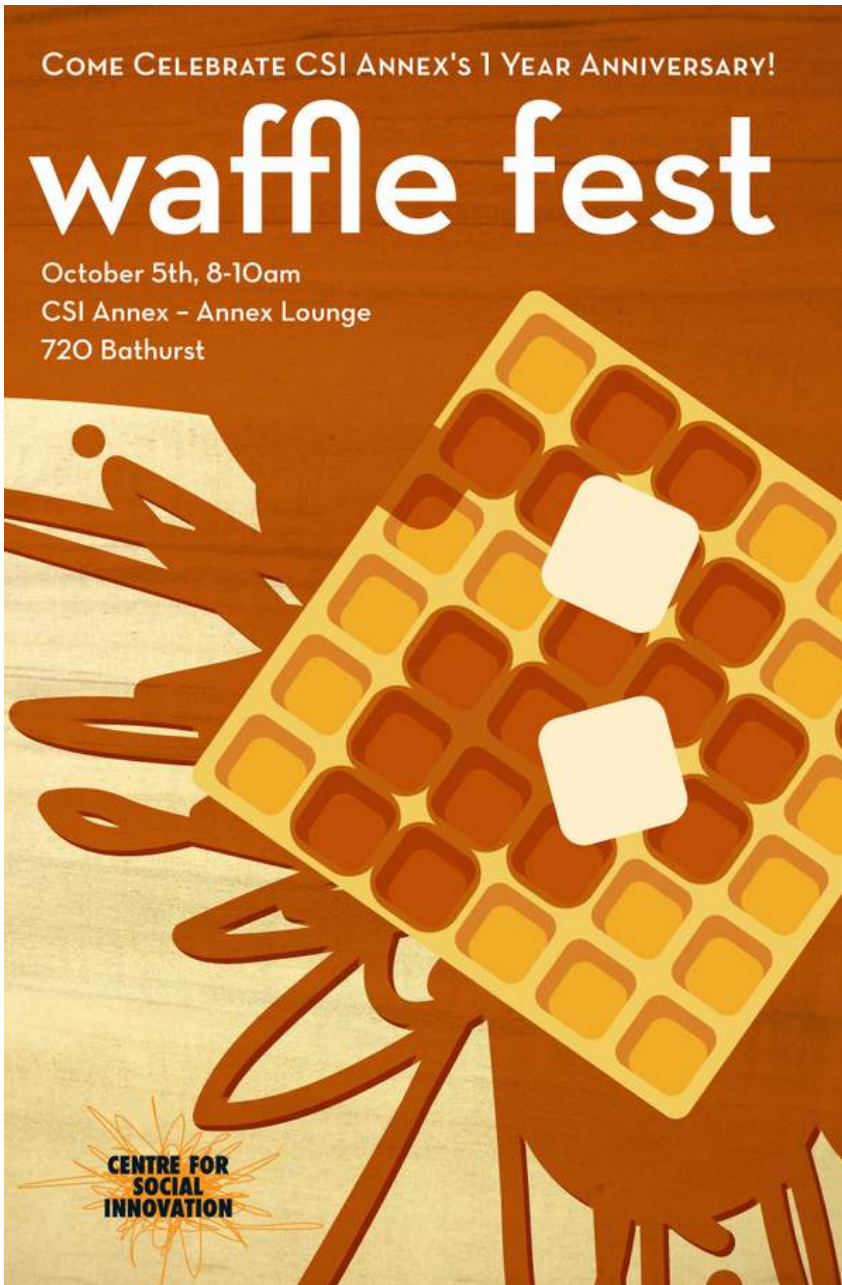
artists, probably experienced shock rivaling that of middle class homeowners with foreclosed property. These privileged “creatives” had been assured that Capitalism 2.0 needed their non-stop, 24/7 yield of “out-of-the-box” productivity. Well, apparently not. Then came the high-profile prosecutions of Chelsea (Bradley) Manning, the government targeting of WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange, and revelations about National Security Administration spying by whistleblower Edward Snowden. Even the realm of non-market, digital democracy was clearly becoming a target of government regulators, to which we can add the increasing move away from fair use World Wide Web content, and towards the private, corporatization of intellectual property in both physical and http-coded binary form. Nor did the art world provide a refuge for the most challenging forms of tactical media. CAE for example stopped experimenting with bio-art after 2007, and the group has found little purchase in the US art world, traveling to Europe for most of its ongoing research projects.

Today, social practice artists are busy planting herb gardens, mending clothes, repairing bicycles, and giving out assorted life-coaching advice free of charge. Groups of professional designers are improving the “quality and function of the built environment,” in run-down inner-city corridors, categorizing what they do with the avant-gardeish rubric “Tactical Urbanism.”<sup>57</sup> In the Bronx, working class tenants are asked to invite a couple of artists into their homes for dinner. In exchange the artists paint their hosts a still life. Sitting on a sofa everyone is photographed with the painting hanging in the background like a commentary on social values that are too often absent from the skeptical art world.<sup>58</sup> In New York City’s East Village, a funky storefront installation of assembled, found materials highlights the street culture of a gentrifying neighborhood. One artist collaborates with passerby to turn used paper cups into art, as another encourages residents to engage in “critical dialogue” about their precarious future.<sup>59</sup> Artists distribute free beer, hand picked fruit, glasses of ice tea, and home-made waffles to participating members of the public. These gifts are offered up like a sacrifice to

some missing deity whose flock has been abandoned.<sup>60</sup> The absent god is of course society itself, defined as a project of collective good, from each according to her ability, to each according to his need. Instead, the community Capitalism 2.0 offers is based on the gospel of mutually shared selfishness, and certainly any attempt at countering such a credo is justified, even participatory waffle sharing, though it must be said here that hell is undoubtedly paved with many good interventions.

To be sure, the argument put forward here does not deny that artists earnestly struggle to change society, even if the art they produce frequently serves, for better and for worse, as a symbolic ameliorative to irresolvable social contradictions. And yet what has changed is the phenomenal aggregation of networked social productivity and cultural labor made available today as an artistic medium, and at a time when society is intellectually, culturally and constitutively destitute. Art, along with virtually everything else, has been sublated by capital, resulting in the socialization of all production.<sup>61</sup> One outcome is that artists are becoming social managers, curators are becoming arts administrators, and academics are becoming *tactical urbanistas*. Meanwhile, social practice artists collect the bits and pieces of what was once society like a drawer of mismatched socks. Is it any surprise that these social artifacts only seem to feel alive in a space dedicated to collecting and maintaining historical objects (and I am speaking, of course, of the museum)? But in a field that is weakly theorized even in the best of circumstances, art's "social turn" makes the passage of engaged art out of the margins and into some measure of legitimacy all the more compelling as a matter for urgent debate. Because if art has finally merged with life as the early 20th Century avant-garde once enthusiastically anticipated, it has done so *not* at a moment of triumphant communal utopia, but at a time when life, at least for the 99.1%, sucks.<sup>62</sup>

What is called for is imaginative, critical engagement aimed at distancing socially engaged art from both the turbo-charged, contemporary art world, as well as from what Fischer calls capitalist



**Illustration 12.** Poster for "Waffle Fest," designed by Gil Martinez for The Center for Social Imagination, Toronto, CA. (October 5, 2011), <https://www.behance.net/gallery/2400988/Centre-for-Social-Innovation-Waffle-Fest>

realism in the post-Fordist, society of control, a world where “‘Flexibility’, ‘nomadism’ and ‘spontaneity’ are the hallmarks of management.” As nearly impossible as that struggle seems today, if we do not strive for a broader conception of liberation, then we resign ourselves to nothing less than bad faith, while abandoning hopes of rescuing that *longue durée* of opposition from below that so many before us have endeavored to sustain. Once upon a time art mobilized its resources to resist becoming kitsch. Now it must avoid becoming a vector for data mining and social asset management. Delirium and resistance prevail today, forming an increasingly indissoluble unit, two cogent responses to current circumstances. But it is this same fever that drives us onwards: a persistent low-grade fever for social justice. What remains paramount is recognizing the actuality of our plight, including its paradoxes, while asking how we can be *more than* what the market says we are. The terrain thereafter is a delirious *terra incognita*. It is waiting to be mapped. We must get there first.

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## Notes

A special thanks to Alan Moore, Erika Biddle, Kim Charnley and Grant Kester for their insights and advice.

1. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Alresford, England: Zero Books 2009), p.35.
2. Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, published on the occasion of the Museum of Arte Útil at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, 2013. It is also available as a PDF online at: <http://museumarteutil.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Toward-a-lexicon-of-usership.pdf>
3. Throughout most of this essay I will use the term “social practice art” to describe the type of cultural production under discussion because this label seems to have gained the widest usage at this point in time. For an interesting hypothesis about the evolution of this terminology see: Larne Abse Gogarty, “Aesthetics and Social Practice,” in *Keywords: A (Polemical) Vocabulary of Contemporary Art*, October 3, 2014, available online at: <http://keywordscontemporary.com/aesthetics-social-practice/>
4. In the past three or four years alone several East Coast institutions of higher education have added some level of social practice or community oriented arts curricula to their offerings. Along with Queens College CUNY this includes NYU, SVA, Pratt, Parsons and Moore College of Art in Philadelphia. Regarding the philanthropic turn towards social practices, in 2014 the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation announced what they describe as a “game changing” \$100,000 grant category called Artist as Activist which is aimed at supporting individuals who address “important global challenges through their creative practice”: <http://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/grants/art-grants/artist-as-activist>. There is also The Keith Haring Foundation which in the same year provided Bard College with \$400,000 to support a teaching fellowship in Art and Activism at the school <http://www.bard.edu/news/releases/pr/fstory.php?id=2516>, and just a few years ago in 2012 an entirely new foundation calling itself A Blade of Grass tells us that it “nurtures socially engaged art” <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/>. And the Education Departments at the Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim Museum sponsor socially engaged art projects with the latter hosting the think tank/community center known as BMW Guggenheim Lab both inside and outside its museums from 2011 to 2014. To this list one might add projects such as Martha Rosler’s 1973 “Garage Sale” that was recently restaged at the MoMA in 2012 and clearly intended to signal the museum’s interest in socially engaged art.

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7. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participation Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (New York: Verso, 2012).
8. Regarding Abu Dhabi's high-priced investment in Western museum branding see: Who Builds Your Architecture <http://whobuilds.org/> and Gulf Labor Coalition <http://gulflabor.org/>. On the relationship between art asset funds and ultra-wealth collectors see: Andrea Fraser, "There's No Place Like Home / L'1% C'est Moi," a downloadable pdf is available from *Continent* at: <http://www.continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/108>
9. Jared Keller, "Evaluating Iran's Twitter Revolution," *The Atlantic*, June 18, 2010: <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/06/evaluating-irans-twitter-revolution/58337/>
10. David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (London: AK Press, 2009).
11. Greg Sholette and Oliver Ressler, "Unspeakable the Grammar of Finance," introduction to *It's The Political Economy, Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).
12. The Financialization of Capitalism by John Bellamy Foster, *Monthly Review* (March 11, 2007): <http://monthlyreview.org/2007/04/01/the-financialization-of-capitalism/>
13. Carol Vogel, "Bacon Triptych Auctioned for Record \$86 Million," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2008: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/15/arts/design/15auction.html>. See also Tierney Sneed, "5 Art Auction Record Breakers That Prove the Industry Is Booming: Art history was made at auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's this week," *US News & World Report* (Nov. 14, 2013): <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/11/14/christies-142-million-francis-bacon-sale-and-this-weeks-other-art-auction-record-breakers>
14. "Fitch Assigns 'A' to Lehman Brothers Holdings Capital Trust VII," *Business Wire*, May 9, 2007: <http://www.businesswire.com/news/>



home/20070509006056/en/Fitch-Assigns-Lehman-Brothers-Holdings-Capital-Trust#.VPtOVmTF\_1g

15. Alexandra Peers, "The Fine Art of Surviving the Crash in Auction Prices," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 20th, 2008: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122713503996042291>
16. Chinese capital, which was not affected by the crash, no doubt played a part in this stability, see: Alexander Forbes, "TEFAF Art Market Report Says 2013 Best Year on Record Since 2007, With Market Outlook Bullish," *artnetnews*, March 12, 2014: <http://news.artnet.com/market/tefaf-art-market-report-says-2013-best-year-on-record-since-2007-with-market-outlook-bullish-5358/>
17. Gilligan's examples include Richard Prince's endlessly recycled works, and Seth Price's reworking videos that bear "a striking similarity to financial derivatives in one particularly suggestive way: they derive their value from the value of something else." From Melanie Gilligan, "Derrivative Days," in Greg Sholette and Oliver Ressler, *It's The Political Economy, Stupid*, pp. 73-81.
18. W.A.G.E.: <http://www.wageforwork.com/>  
 BFAMFAPHD: <http://bfamfaphd.com/>  
 Debtfair: <http://www.debtfair.org/>  
 Art & Labor: <http://artsandlabor.org/>  
 ArtLeaks: <http://art-leaks.org/>  
 Gulf Labor: Coalition <http://gulflabor.org/>  
 Artist's Union: <http://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/>
19. See: The Artist as Debtor: <http://artanddebt.org/>; the CAA panel <http://conference.collegeart.org/programs/public-art-dialogue-student-debt-real-estate-and-the-arts/>; Free/Slow University: <http://www.britishcouncil.pl/en/events/conference-freeslow-university-warsaw>. Also see Erica Ho, "Study: Art School Graduates Rack Up the Most Debt," Feb. 21, 2013, *Time* online: <http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/02/21/study-art-school-graduates-rack-up-the-most-debt/>
20. Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
21. For a strong argument to this effect see Tom Finkelpearl's book *What We Made: Conversations on Art as Social Cooperation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
22. Blake Stimson and Greg Sholette, "Periodising Collectivism," in *Third Text*, vol. 18, no. 6 (2004), p. 583, revised and reprinted as

the introduction to *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after the War*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

23. Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, Op. cit.
24. Grant Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists: The Rhetoric of Empowerment and Conversion in Contemporary Community Art," *Afterimage*, vol.22, no.6 (January, 1995), pp.5-11: [https://www.academia.edu/2999826/Aesthetic\\_Evangelists\\_Conversion\\_and\\_Empowerment\\_in\\_Contemporary\\_Community\\_Art\\_1995\\_](https://www.academia.edu/2999826/Aesthetic_Evangelists_Conversion_and_Empowerment_in_Contemporary_Community_Art_1995_)
25. See Ben Davis, "A critique of social practice art: What does it mean to be a political artist?" *International Socialist Review*, no. 90 (July 2013): <http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art>. Naturally socially engaged art still has many critics, especially amongst more orthodox critics, but following the substantial research of historians such as Grant Kester and Clair Bishop even its doubters are obliged to treat this work seriously as art, a courtesy that was not extended to community-based art in the recent past.
26. "Is Social Practice Gentrifying Community Arts?," a conversation between Rick Lowe and Nato Thompson at the Creative Time Summit, October 2013, a transcript is available from Bad At Sports here: <http://badatsports.com/2013/is-social-practice-gentrifying-community-arts/>
27. Chris Kraus, "Ambiguous Virtues of Art School," *Artspace* (March 2, 2015), [http://www.artspace.com/magazine/news\\_events/chris-kraus-akademie-x](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/news_events/chris-kraus-akademie-x)
28. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 80-81.
29. Stephen Wright, *Usership*. Op. cit., p. 4.
30. "It is my contention that some socially engaged artworks can be distinguished from others by the degree to which they provoke reflection on the contingent systems that support the management of life. An interest in such acts of support coincides with the project of performance," Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 29. Wright would likely respond that his idea of usership-driven art is work that is not performed as *art*, but literally and redundantly is action in the "real-world," quite unlike performative practices whose content is, first and foremost, art, and then only secondarily perhaps an action, useful or otherwise, in the real world. See Wright, *Usership*, p.16.

31. An obviously intriguing problem is how one might approach art that is detached from its artistic framing in critical, aesthetic terms. That, however, will require another essay in itself.
32. Martin Pengelly, "Pittsburgh restaurant receives death threats in 'anti-Israel messages' furor," *The Guardian*, Nov. 9, 2014: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/09/pittsburgh-restaurant-conflict-kitchen-death-threats-israel>
33. Theaster Gates TED Talk, "How to revive a neighborhood: with imagination, beauty and art". Published March 26, 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9ry1M7JlyE>
34. Consider for example Nike's elegantly designed fashion accessory Fuelband 3.0: an integrated cybernetic device in which the company monitors the muscular movements of the bracelet's wearer in real time via Bluetooth. While Nike sends information about the customer's physical fitness, it also aggregates human data useful for developing future products that the company will market to these same individuals. It is not hard to imagine a social practice type project that would operate in a similar way substituting, say, the Guggenheim or Museum of Modern Art for Nike.
35. Brian Holmes, "Future Map, 2007," <http://roundtable.kein.org/node/1332>
36. Quoted in an email to me from Monday, March 23, 2015 at 10:04 AM.
37. Ricardo Dominguez and Electronic Disturbance Theater designed a pro-Zapatista virtual sit-in platform aimed at overloading and crashing the Mexican Government's website. This is a form of "hacktivism" still in use by the group Anonymous today.
38. David Garcia and Geert Lovink, "The ABC of Tactical Media," from Nettime.org (May 16, 1997): <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html>
39. A discussion of EDT's floodnet is found here: <http://museumarteutil.net/projects/zapatista-tactical-floodnet/>
40. The situation escalated when Dominguez organized a virtual sit-in of the UC President's website: <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2010/apr/06/activist-ucsd-professor-facing-unusual-scrutiny/>
41. Viktor Shklovsky, *Energy of Delusion: A Book on Plot* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007); Fisher op cit.

42. Nato Thompson, "Trespassing Toward Relevance," from Thompson and Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p 17. The book that came out of the exhibition which Thompson, myself and MASS MoCA designer Arjen Noordeman produced, went on to be reprinted several times and used in numerous classroom curricula. It is not the topic of this paper however.
43. *The Interventionists*, p 60.
44. Choire Sicha, "The Guide," December 12, 2005, *The New York Times*. The only lengthier critical responses were by Carlos Basualdo, and T.J.Demos in *Artforum*, though these reviews largely recycled existing critical paradigms about site-specific art without successfully engaging in the concept of tactical media in relation to the counter-globalization movement or "the social turn" in art. <http://www.mutualart.com/OpenArticle/-THE-INTERVENTIONISTS--ART-IN-THE-SOCIAL/9FE37A35791E22C3>
45. See: Department of Space & Land Reclamation website: <http://www.counterproductiveindustries.com/dslr/>
46. Henry Moss, "The Climb to Oatman's Crash Site: Mass MoCA's Discontinued Boiler Plant," *Interventions/Adaptive Reuse*, vol. 2 (2011), p 6.
47. "Another Art World is Possible," happens to be the title of an essay by theorist Gene Ray from the same years as *The Interventionists* exhibition in *Third Text*, vol. 18, no. 6, (2004), pp. 565-572.
48. For example the Artists as House Guest program at the Museum of Modern Art in New York which is mentioned in Randy Kennedy's article, "Outside the Citadel, Social Practice Art Is Intended to Nurture," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2013: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/24/arts/design/outside-the-citadel-social-practice-art-is-intended-to-nurture.html?pagewanted=2&r=2>, and also "The politics of the social in contemporary art," at the Tate Modern Starr Auditorium, February 15, 2013: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/conference/politics-social-contemporary-art>
49. Fuzzy Biological Sabotage on CAE website: <http://www.critical-art.net/MolecularInvasion.html>
50. To read more about the investigation see the Critical Art Ensemble Defense Fund: <http://www.caedefensefund.org/>

51. The CAE Defense Fund emerged from this meeting, although members of The Yes Men were already involved in crafting a response to the government's allegations. And I also admit with regret that in retrospect I took the more pragmatic view. Caught up in the need to defend a fellow politically active artist from what appeared to be government railroading I endorsed the "free speech" defense myself.
52. This is certainly seems to be the position of artist Rubén Ortiz Torres who was an artist Thompson exhibited in *The Interventionists*. Torres believes that the occasion of the 2004 show was "supposed to be the moment when the art world (or at least part of it) would recognize the practices that a lot of artists (if not most) do in art schools and, alternative spaces and other circuits outside commercial galleries and museums. However it seemed that the Steve Kurtz incident cancelled or was used to cancel that opportunity." Notably he adds "I see "social practice" as a very ineffective way to do politics trying to validate them and justify them as art. It seems a way more bureaucratic, moralistic, self righteous and pretentious notion than the more open, anarchist and situationist one of "Interventionism." Cited in an email to me from Monday, October 14, 2013 at 8:45 PM.
53. Blake Stimson, "The Form of the Informal," *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 34 (Spring 2014), p. 36.
54. "The thing changes not one bit, yet once the trapdoor springs open and the 'dark agents' are on the loose, nothing could be more different." The dark agency is for Wright the allure of the thing that is both a proposition about art, and a completely redundant activity, object, practice of everyday life. *Usership*, p 7.
55. John Roberts, "The Political Economization of Art," in *It's The Political Economy, Stupid*, edited by Greg Sholette and Oliver Ressler (London: Pluto Press, 2013), pp. 63-71.
56. Jan Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), p. 12.
57. Tactical Urbanism/The Street Plans Collaborative: <http://issuu.com/streetplanscollaborative>
58. A Painting for a Family Dinner, 2012, Alina and Jeff Blum: [gerempty.org/nc/home/what-we-do/artists/artist/blumis-alina-and-jeff/](http://gerempty.org/nc/home/what-we-do/artists/artist/blumis-alina-and-jeff/)
59. No Longer Empty, Art in Empty Spaces: <http://www.nolongerempty.org/nc/home/events/event/program-art-in-empty-spaces-with-community-board/>

60. Examples of gift art are drawn from the Ted Purves book, *What We Want is Free* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004).
61. For a discussion regarding the Marxist concept of sublation in relation to art see a string of responses to my paper "Let's Talk About the Debt Due" available at The Artist As Debtor website: <http://artanddebt.org/greg-sholette-lets-talk-about-the-debt-due-for/> with the feedback located here: <http://artanddebt.org/lets-talk-about-the-debt-do-for-responses/>

## Futher Reading

Erika Biddle, "Re-Animating Joseph Beuys' 'Social Sculpture': Artistic Interventions and the Occupy Movement," in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2014). Available online: [https://www.academia.edu/5532769/Re-Animating\\_Joseph\\_Beuys\\_Social\\_Sculpture\\_Artistic\\_Interventions\\_and\\_the\\_Occupy\\_Movement](https://www.academia.edu/5532769/Re-Animating_Joseph_Beuys_Social_Sculpture_Artistic_Interventions_and_the_Occupy_Movement)

Brian Holmes, *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering*, (New York: Autonomedia Press, 2008).

Marc James Léger, *Brave New Avant Garde: Essays on Contemporary Art and Politics* (Alresford, England: Zero Books 2012).

Alan W. Moore, "A Brief Genealogy of Social Sculpture," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* (<http://www.joaap.org/webonly/moore.htm>)

Rebecca Zorach, *Art Against the Law* (School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2015).



# DO WE NEED A TURING TEST FOR ACTIVIST ART IN A BARE ART WORLD?

GREGORY SHOLETTE

*Repetition and doubling—themselves  
an uncanny pair which double and repeat  
each other—seem to be at the heart of  
every “uncanny” phenomena.*

—Mark Fisher, *The Weird and  
the Eerie* (2017)<sup>1</sup>

In its simplest form, the Turing Test involves a human evaluator physically separated by a wall or other barrier from two participants so that all communication between the three of them must take place through a keyboard device. The evaluator knows that one hidden participant is human and one is a machine, though which is which remains unknown. The evaluator is tasked with trying to identify who is the person and which is the imitation person. Simultaneously, both participants try to convince the evaluator they are human. At the moment the evaluator becomes genuinely uncertain which participant is machine and which is human, the machine has successfully passed Turing’s Test.

You’re in an art gallery. Toward the back of the space you spot a weird, ill-fitting emergency door. A question arises silently: is it a work of art or not? Just above your head is a rusted valve jutting out from a faded metal sign encased in white paint. Same question: Art? Not art? What about that awkwardly bent length of drainage pipe running alongside the track lights above the exhibition? Does anyone else see this? Should you refocus your attention exclusively on those objects with wall labels? Moments later, a dozen people enter the space singing, shouting, making boisterous declarations: “I Can’t Breathe”; “De-Colonize this Place”; “Not My President”; “Respect Workers Rights in the UAE.” Before leaving, the group hands out photocopied flyers and performs an Occupy Wall Street General Assembly in the middle of the gallery, complete with a Human Microphone.

When they do exit, the space returns to its muted, white-cube status. But you do not return to normal. Not completely. A string of questions follows: Was that a genuine, spontaneous activist intervention, or was it a carefully rehearsed performance of an activist intervention, and therefore a work of art? Then again, if something appears exactly the same as what it appears to be—if it stirs the same emotions in us and carries out the same task of raising social awareness—then does it really matter if we are uncertain about what it actually is in some fundamental, ontological way? What if this event was both at the same time: art and life, mimicry and authentic protest, fiction and fact, all doubled up and coexisting on a single continuous surface, sort of like a Möbius strip reality? Marcel Duchamp once proposed what he termed a “Reciprocal Readymade,” in which a work of art is converted to an object of everyday use.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps what you just witnessed was that thought experiment put into practice?<sup>3</sup>

The questions do not leave you alone. They return, repeat, becoming obsessional, even addictive. You find yourself wondering how and when things got so disorderly—and you wonder what it might take to tidy them up again. It’s not only your unease that seems at stake here. How many times have you overheard an art historian, critic, or even fellow artist demand to know “is it art or activism?”<sup>4</sup> Remember how they sought some type of epistemological solace such as providing empirical evidence that demonstrates activist art’s effective social outcome? Yet what that

proof, should it be made, assures the mainstream art historian is that these practices subordinate aesthetics to utility, allowing for a return to business as usual. It pissed you off. But it also led you to suppress your own need for certitude with a faint-hearted swagger. And contrarily, the same questioning demand arises from community activists troubled by what they perceived to be the enfeebling effects of aestheticized politics. This is when you ask yourself only half-sardonically: does contemporary art, especially art activism, require its own version of Turing’s thought experiment? Though even as you consider this, you can’t help but suspect that if this test were given today, nothing would change.

## INCIDENT REPORTS

October 26, 2017: a manifesto appears online from a previously unknown organization identified as the Monument Removal Brigade (MRB). The announcement begins ominously by stating, “Now the statue is bleeding.” Hours earlier, a gory splatter of red paint was splashed across the base of the equestrian statue of Teddy Roosevelt that stands outside the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.<sup>5</sup> “We did not make it bleed,” explains the digital declaration, “it is bloody at its very foundation.” MRB goes on to insist that their action “is not an act of vandalism. It is a work of public art and an act of applied art criticism,” thus allegedly expanding the concept of institutional critique outward from the interior of cultural spaces into the broader public sphere. The immediate aim of the



Figure 1.

attack was the manner in which the 26th U.S. President and former New York City Police Superintendent is depicted astride a horse, clothed in his signature Rough Rider uniform from the Spanish American War, and flanked by an African man in sandals and a barefooted Native American chief. But targeting this patronizing artistic arrangement in which a viral white leader towers above non-white subordinates is merely the start of MRB's critique. "The museum itself is an expanded monument to Roosevelt's [white supremacist] world-view. . . . In response, we choose to act immediately with the means at our disposal: artistic expression." Significantly, the

MRB in 2017 was in fact restaging the same direct public gesture made by six members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) over forty-five years earlier in 1971.<sup>6</sup> The 2017 MRB sabot-critique self-consciously leaks a bit of the past into the present in order to "clear space for new visions of reparation, freedom, and justice."<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, an inner link has always connected the artistic avant-garde with acts of insurgency carried out by socially disenfranchised populations insofar as both embrace the possibility of an emancipated future that is radically at odds with the present (picture Gustave Courbet helping to topple the Vendome Column in 1871), which makes the historical repetition that MRB performed all the more curious. As an attempt to confront the spreading reactionary penumbra cast by the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, activist aesthetics is compelled to repeat episodes of its own suppressed and under-represented history. But in light of recent political events about which I will have more to say below, we must ask if the mutual concerns of vanguard aesthetics and radical resistance have grown into a full-on, ontological entanglement precisely as the present has effectively immobilized the future (and this ontological uncertainty has also begun to migrate into the realm of activists who are beginning to question whether or not their activity might be art).

Consequently, would our activist art Turing Test be nuanced enough to detect this condition, and if so, from what observational

perspective would it operate? Or would the test evaluator not already be embedded within this unruly state of affairs? Consider three additional cases.

From September 2014 to May 2015, a female student attending an elite university in New York City carried her dormitory mattress around campus everywhere she went, including taking it to her graduation ceremony. The explicit purpose of the action “Carry That Weight” was to shame institutions that ignore the plight of female students who are harassed or abused by classmates; but the work also explicitly aimed to humiliate one particular male peer whom she has accused of raping her.<sup>8</sup> According to the student, and her instructor, this steadfast act of protest was also a work of performative endurance art, submitted as a class assignment and graded as such. Eventually, Columbia University’s internal investigation absolved the accused male student of wrongdoing, at which stage he brought a lawsuit against the school, ultimately receiving a cash settlement for his professed mental suffering.<sup>9</sup> The question that comes to my mind is not who was truthful or justified here—the art student or the teacher, the university or the accused—but instead on whose behalf the case shifted from performance to litigation. When has anyone ever settled a legal dispute based on charges alleging they were bullied by a work of art?<sup>10</sup> The materialization of aesthetic practices within the everyday world of depositions and litigation suggests that something unique and profound has happened to art’s once protective autonomy—a

change that is not without its critical possibilities, though it could just as easily devolve into a form of resignation to capitalist hegemony.

Starting around 2002, the absolute monarchy of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates began positioning itself as a wannabe cultural modern Constantinople thanks to its colossal oil reserves, but also to its oppressive labor and human rights policies.<sup>11</sup> Though far to the east of New York City, where the mattress and monument actions played out, Abu Dhabi is celebrated by many Western liberals who consider the Gulf monarchy crucial to the future of high art. Not only has a new Louvre Museum been constructed on Abu Dhabi’s Saadiyat Cultural District, but a Guggenheim Museum, designed by Frank Gehry, is also in the works. The sheikhdom also recently played host to what they described as the first “Culture Summit,” the mission of which explored “the future of culture and how its power can be harnessed to produce positive social change.”<sup>12</sup> Over one hundred and fifty guest curators, composers, museum directors, cultural advisors, and visual artists were flown in from around the globe to participate in the four-day event. Nevertheless, one must ask the obvious question: in what type of world do regressive labor policies and progressive social manifestos sit comfortably alongside one another with no apparent conflict, at least not on the part of participating Western liberals?

Although such contradictions have always been present in liberal capitalist nations, the tension generated between artistic autonomy

and the market was once the very space in which critical practice and theory flourished. When these antithetical positions shed their negative charge and become frictionless, the very possibility of radical critique was dismantled. The default position became the familiar process of arbitration within neoliberal enterprise culture, as institutional critique is ensconced within the museum and the future is once again abandoned for the demands of the present. A final example underscores this dilemma.

September 29, 2008 offers a final augmentation to this riddle. In the aftermath of the spectacular financial collapse, most capitalist markets spun into all-out free-fall, but not that of the fine art market. A *New York Times* headline underscores the culture industry's surprising post-crash vigor: "As Stocks Fall, Art Surges at a \$315.8 Million Sale."<sup>13</sup> And yet, as artist Caroline Woolard incredulously asks, "what is a work of art in the age of \$120,000 art degrees?" Woolard answers her own inquiry by contending that "a work of art today is a product of the classroom, the loan repayment, the lecture-hall, and the homework assignment."<sup>14</sup> We might reframe this contention by asking where the work of art begins and ends in relation to the capitalist marketplace today. Whereas the work of art has traditionally been considered a realm of non-productive labor immune to market forces, does society now so totally overlap with and enclose art that it is no longer insulated from commonplace legal procedures (the mattress endurance performance outcome);

from undisguised instrumentalization by ideologues (the Abu Dhabi Cultural District); or from subsumption to capitalist markets (art as an asset)?<sup>15</sup>

## WELCOME TO OUR BARE ART WORLD

Something more profound is clearly going on here than just the old familiar paradoxes of late capitalism. After all, is there really anything left to pry loose from the contemporary world's ideological façade when a sitting U.S. president utilizes the fuzzy realm of social media to blatantly contradict documented facts, including contradicting his own previous statements? Meanwhile, not only is Pierre Bourdieu's cultural capital now instantly convertible into just plain capital (or perhaps bundled financial art instruments),<sup>16</sup> but the affirmative utility of art is everywhere visible, both as investment and social practice, even as its spectacular post-autonomy is celebrated by superstar curators, artists, and wealthy liberal collectors.<sup>17</sup>

We appear to have entered a "bare art world," one that is conspicuously entwined within, as well as undaunted by, its relationship to the economic values, laws, and chronic political crisis of global capitalism. In this sense, contemporary artistic culture—but activist art especially—fulfills the early avant-garde's maxim of "art into life," except it does so in a world far from the socialist utopia envisioned by such radical cultural innovators as Vladimir Tatlin or Lyubov Popova or Kazimir Malevich. Instead, the dream is made flesh at

a moment of profound social disenchantment, as initially demonstrated by Brexit, and then with the 2016 U.S. election results, among many other bad omens. Welcome to what political scientist Rebecca Bryant terms “the uncanny present,” a present that is unfamiliar in its *present-ness*, and a future that is imaginable only as its own past.<sup>18</sup> I also note here that the term “unreal” has become a commonplace adjective among news commentators of late, with *The Guardian* describing the current American president as a “master of unreality,” and the *New York Times* labeling his administration an “unreality show.”<sup>19</sup> But to be sure, the uncanny present has spread beyond Washington. As one counter-demonstrator at the University of Virginia campus, where, on August 11, 2017, members of Antifa (and other opponents of racism and bigotry) confronted armed white nationalists reported, “I never thought I’d have to see this in America in my lifetime” (although, in truth, for most Black, Latino, Muslim, and Jewish Americans, this is simply business as usual). Still, what is relatively new is having a modern U.S. president condone this display of white supremacy.<sup>20</sup>

And yet, as of now, everything carries on, just as always, reminding us of Walter Benjamin’s ominous insight that “[t]he concept of progress is founded in the idea of catastrophe. That it continues like this, is the catastrophe.”<sup>21</sup> So while bare art is as strange as it is mundane, it is nevertheless also fully consistent with our post-2016 reality, which includes a U.S. president who has a documented history of misogynist behavior, though no political

experience, and who successfully hacked into the Republican Party, humiliated its leadership, and then received their endorsement as well as, of course, the White House. Still, even as we intuitively grasp the uncanny nature of the present, the very act of acknowledging this reality leads us to remorse, or even resignation. It need not be so. Stripped clean of autonomy and mystery, the most engaging contemporary “bare” art emerges brilliantly, if vulnerably, within a world lacking depth or shadow, its aesthetic so banal as to be monstrous. Nonetheless, it is the ordinariness of the uncanny present that makes it so very strange: a weird and uncanny phenomenon, as the late Mark Fisher understood it, within which contemporary activist art is both issue and barb.

## RADICAL LAUGHTER

Do we need a Turing Test for activist art? By now the answer to my opening question is painfully clear: There is no wall or barrier concealing anyone’s identity. Our test participants are successful machines, just like their evaluator, and activism as a rehearsal of the future has become activism as a rehearsal of the present, in all its preternatural materiality.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent to the events of November 2016, the question that now comes to the fore is how to reintroduce the notion of futurity as a horizon of radical alterity—not in either a vague or prescriptive way—but nevertheless with enough integrity and urgency to recognize both the vibrant, archival agency at work within activist art, including its repetitions and reoccupations of the past, as well as the unsparing conditions



generated by a bare art world brimming with unconcealed (and *unconcealable*) paradoxes and contradictions. Like the troupe of actors who, in wild fits of laughter, awaken to their own fictive roles in Alejandro Jodorowsky's film *The Holy Mountain* (1973), victory over the uncanny present will ecstatically, even deliriously, demand taking and failing the Turing Test, as often as possible.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2017), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of 'Readymades,'" *Art and Artists* 1, no. 4 (July 1966): 47. Theorist Stephen Wright has examined this aspect of contemporary art in works such as in the curatorial statement for his exhibition project: "The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade (The use-value of art)," 2004, <https://apexart.org/exhibitions/wright.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> See Wright, "Future."

<sup>4</sup> During a recent set of workshops I gave at Tania Bruguera's *Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt* (INSTAR) in Havana, Cuba (from January 19 to 24th, 2018) I was forced to confront the apparent cultural specificity of the arguments made in this paper, which was still in progress at that time. During two compulsory interrogations with Cuban officials my wife and I were threatened with "punishment and deportation" were we to continue our association with either Bruguera or INSTAR. 'She is not an artist,' they insisted, 'but a political activist.' We pointed out that Bruguera is exhibited at major art museums around the globe and even has an art work hanging in the city's own *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de la Habana*. Though briefly surprised by our challenge the uniformed official reiterated that 'regardless, in Cuba she is *persona-non-grata*.'

The immediate take-away from this encounter was that in capitalist nations an artist can claim to be an activist, or anything else she or he wants by self-definition, while in socialist Cuba, the designation *artist* is granted solely by the state. And while the impact of art activism may be difficult to measure in the US, UK or Europe, it is by contrast at least effective enough to be considered a nonexistent category in Cuba where a more orthodox definition of art is backed up by the state. Still, on further reflection, along with the growing privatization of tourism and high culture on the island, it is clear that the very same ontological entanglement of art and activism taking place elsewhere will not be halted in Cuba, but only delayed, as the vision of a true socialist future recedes. For more on the INSTAR incident see the blog *Greg Sholette: Welcome to Our Bare Art World*: <http://gregsholette.tumblr.com/post/169234308680/a-week-in-havana-at-instar-part-2-or-flow-my>

<sup>5</sup> For more about the controversies over public statues, see Gregory Sholette, "Reimagining Monuments to Make Them Resonate Locally and Personally," *Hyperallergic*, November 6, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/408996/remagining-monuments-to-make-them-resonate-locally-and-personally/>.

<sup>6</sup> Lesley Oelsner, "Six Indians Accused of Defacing Theodore Roosevelt Statue Here," *New York Times*, June 15, 1971: 37, <http://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/15/archives/six-indians-accused-of-defacing-theodore-roosevelt-statue-here.html>. The three men and three women accused, all of whom were either Comanche, Navajo, or Cherokee-Seneca, appear to have carried out the action to protest the government raid on Alcatraz in San Francisco that had removed a group called Indians of All Tribes who occupied the island from March 21, 1963 to June 11, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> All citations are taken from "Prelude to the Removal of a Monument," *Monument Removal Brigade*,

October 26, 2017, <https://monumentremovalbrigade.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>8</sup> Emma Sulkowicz, *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, Columbia University, New York, 2014–2015. For two opposing views within the liberal/progressive press, see Michelle Goldberg, “Emma Sulkowicz and the Benefit of the Doubt,” *The Nation*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/emma-sulkowicz-and-benefit-doubt/>, and Emily Bazelon, “Have We Learned Anything from the Columbia Rape Case?,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 29, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/29/magazine/have-we-learned-anything-from-the-columbia-rape-case.html>.

<sup>9</sup> It is unclear if the student had this in mind when she began her protest; however, one of her professors—an esteemed contemporary artist in his own right—encouraged the so-called “mattress-girl” to develop her practice along the lines of legendary performance artist Tehching Hsieh, who lived for an entire year physically tied by a rope to another artist, Linda Montano, between July 1983 and July 1984. See Catherine Trautwein, “Columbia Settles Lawsuit Brought by Former Student Accused of Sexual Assault by ‘Mattress Girl,’” *TIME*, July 14, 2017, <http://time.com/4858979/columbia-university-paul-nungesser-mattress-girl-emma-sulkowicz/>.

<sup>10</sup> Most instances in which an artist, or a particular work of art, get entangled in legal battles pivot on either copyright infringement or challenges to an art work’s authenticity. For example, the widow of a little-known photographer successfully sued Jeff Koons after he transformed one of her husband’s images into a sculpture. The ruling found that Koons had not sufficiently transformed the photographic source into something significantly new. To settle the charges of plagiarism, his company paid the widow and her family \$42,000, plus another \$4,200 for posting

the work online. Many other legal cases involve the sale of an artistic forgery to an unsuspecting buyer, often settled in the buyer’s favor even when the seller was unaware of the bogus nature of the work sold. Nevertheless, successful lawsuits involving direct personal damages caused by a work of art are rare or unprecedented, thought that may not be typical in the future if the “mattress girl” situation serves as a precedent. See Claire Voon, “Jeff Koons Convicted of Plagiarizing a Photo of Naked Children,” *Hyperallergic*, March 9, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/364267/jeff-koons-convicted-of-plagiarizing-a-photo-of-naked-children/>.

For an engaging overview of recent cases, see Daniel Grant, “The Art of Art Lawsuits,” February 4, 2014, *Hyperallergic*, <https://hyperallergic.com/107150/the-art-of-art-lawsuits/>.

<sup>11</sup> Abu Dhabi holds the vast majority of oil reserves in the UAE, 92 billion barrels versus the next closest kingdom of Dubai with only an estimated 4 billion barrels. “Oil Reserves in the United Arab Emirates,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil\\_reserves\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Arab\\_Emirates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil_reserves_in_the_United_Arab_Emirates).

<sup>12</sup> See my detailed discussion about the Abu Dhabi Cultural Summit: Gregory Sholette, “High Culture in a ‘Bare Art’ World: The Politics of Direct Art Activism,” *Pluto Press Blog*, May 10, 2017, <https://plutopress.wordpress.com/2017/05/10/high-culture-in-a-bare-art-world-the-politics-of-direct-art-activism/>. See also David Rothkopf, “The Urgency of Art in a Dangerous, Rapidly Changing World,” *Foreign Policy*, April 10, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/10/the-urgency-of-art-in-a-dangerous-rapidly-changing-world-united-arab-emirates-culture-summit/>.

<sup>13</sup> Carol Vogel, “As Stocks Fall, Art Surges at a \$315.8 Million Sale,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/10/arts/sothebys-contemporary-art-sale-totals-316-million.html>.

<sup>14</sup> BFAMFAPhD and Caroline Woolard, "Pedagogies of Payment," *The Enemy* 2, no. 2 (2014), <http://theenemyreader.org/pedagogies-of-payment>.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, we now know, thanks to the scholarship of Eva Cockcroft, Serge Guilbault, and other researchers, that the U.S. State Department and CIA promoted the arts, including Abstract Expressionism, around the world in order to support a Cold War ideological agenda against the USSR and its allies. However, these facts only came to light after considerable effort. See Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). By contrast, the overt alignment of high culture with the interests of free market, corporate neoliberalism, or with a particular national program as in the UAE, is today taking place in real time and directly before our eyes with no need for secrecy. Consider this self-assured (and self-promotional) quotation promoting Athena Art Finance by Ben Genocchio, executive director of the Armory Show: "art has become a multi-billion-dollar asset class traded globally in a market." "Why Athena?," *Athena Art Finance*, <https://www.athena-art.com/why-athena/>.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Bourdieu would balk at this proposal having written in 1985: "As everyone knows, priceless things have their price, and the extreme difficulty of converting certain practices and certain objects into money is only due to the fact that this conversion is refused in the very intention that produces them, which is nothing other than the denial (*Vérneinung*) of the economy." Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, Nicole Woolsey Biggart, ed., (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 281.

<sup>17</sup> In the past few years, an increasing number of U.S. foundations have initiated grants for funding socially engaged art (and, in full disclosure, my

program at Queens College is a recipient of one of these). This includes the Obamas, who, between the time I began this essay and completed it, added their high-profile presence to this phenomenon in September 2017 by offering a fellowship to generate artistic projects aimed at inspiring "civic good." The Obama Foundation Fellowship program, <https://www.obama.org/fellowship/>.

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Bryant, "On Critical Times: Return, Repetition, and the Uncanny Present," in "Ethnographies of Austerity: Temporality, Crisis and Affect in Southern Europe," Daniel M. Knight and Charles Stewart, eds., special issue, *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 1 (2016): 27.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, "How to Survive the Trump Era—Be Vigilant and Resist at Every Turn," *The Guardian*, February 20, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/feb/20/how-to-survive-trump-era-be-vigilant-resist-joseph-stiglitz>; David Barstow "'Up Is Down': Trump's Unreality Show Echoes His Business Past," *New York Times*, January 28, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/28/us/politics/donald-trump-truth.html>.

<sup>20</sup> "White Nationalist Rally at University of Virginia," *BBC News*, August 12, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40909547>.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Benjamin, cited by Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 169. Theorist Sami Khatib's succinctly summarizes Benjamin's approach to history and time when he writes that "capital-time structurally necessitates an endless repetition of its retroactive measurement—even though a final measurement is endlessly postponed. Against this form of spurious infinity, Benjamin called for a 'messianic arrest of happening,' breaking off, interrupting, derailing the historical dynamic of the auto-temporalizing movement of capital-time." Sami Khatib, "The Time of Capital and the Messianicity of Time. Marx with Benjamin,"

*Studies in Social and Political Thought* 20 (Winter 2012): 60, [https://www.academia.edu/482245/The\\_Time\\_of\\_Capital\\_and\\_the\\_Messianicity\\_of\\_Time\\_Marx\\_with\\_Benjamin](https://www.academia.edu/482245/The_Time_of_Capital_and_the_Messianicity_of_Time_Marx_with_Benjamin).

<sup>22</sup> My position in this essay may appear to be at odds with conclusions drawn in my 2016 essay “Merciless Aesthetic: Activist Art as the Return of Institutional Critique. A Response to Boris Groys,” from the fourth issue of Grant Kester’s journal *FIELD*. In that text, I optimistically asserted that activist art might best be thought of as “an event-object situated partially in the here and now, and partially in a time, place and medium still to come . . . [that] interrupts the present by drawing upon its own impending futurity. . . . artistic activism may not be the viral video or spectacular photograph but the moment participants and bystanders are temporarily disengaged from familiar social narratives and forced to confront their own tacit state of *un-freedom*.” Gregory Sholette, “Merciless Aesthetic: Activist Art as the Return of Institutional Critique. A Response to Boris Groys,” *FIELD: A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art Criticism* 4 (Spring 2016), <http://field-journal.com/issue-4/merciless-aesthetic-activist-art-as-the-return-of-institutional-critique-a-response-to-boris-groys>.

The first draft of this essay was completed in June 2016, six months before the election of the current U.S. presidential regime. Without rejecting the arguments found in “Merciless Aesthetic,” it would be the worst expression of groundless idealism not to acknowledge the sense of political defeat and emotional desolation that the left has experienced over the past fifteen months. Even worse, despite an initial outburst of spontaneous opposition following the November 2016 election results, a growing normalization toward current political conditions is now becoming sadly detectable. I put this essay forward, therefore, as a sobering adjustment to the realities of an unreal

world; though hopefully it is neither completely pessimistic adjustment, nor an adjustment made to reconcile ourselves to a permanent condition, for no matter how intransigent the present appears, we must continuously prepare to storm the future.

//

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## MARTHA DOES DONALD

MARTHA WILSON

Hello, America! People keep asking me how  
I’m going to make America great again.  
How I’m going to make America safe again.  
It’s you and me, baby—we’re going to do  
this together.

It’s the coming of the solid state  
When we’ll all be together again  
Just like—I can’t remember when  
We’ll have paradise on Earth at last

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# INSTITUTING THE COMMON IN ARTISTIC CIRCULATION: FROM ENTREPRENEURSHIP OF THE SELF TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP OF THE MULTITUDE

KUBA SZREDER

**Abstract:** In this paper I trace the contradictions embedded in global artistic circulation, which is dialectically analysed as a nexus of exploitation and a site where the commons can be instituted. To enable this argument, I synthesise the methodologies of dialectical materialism, the sociology of art and action research, supplementing a theoretical overview of systemic pressures with a keen observation of the social practices that emerge in critical response to it. Basing my analysis on empirical evidence, I examine social conflicts, triggered by the extracting value from the distributed labour of artistic networks, as political opportunities to be seized by progressive art workers. Thus, I propose a new perspective on current processes of incorporating contemporary art into the late-capitalist cycles of accumulation and modes of establishing and reproducing social distinctions. Instead of mourning for – presumably lost but still positively valorised – artistic autonomy, I argue for a revamping of the apparatuses regulating artistic circulation for the sake of the labouring multitudes.

**Keywords:** artistic circulation, social conflict, the common, self-entrepreneurship, structural opportunism, art workers.

When analysing artistic circulation, one is faced with a paradox. Even though the globalized system is grounded in social cooperation its effects are privatized, as every producer moves between projects as an atomized individual. On the one hand, most cultural producers face precarity, exclusion and poverty. On the other, some of them enjoy unprecedented levels of freedom and mobility, being able to engage in meaningful undertakings with like-minded people in distributed systems without any need for centralized coordination. At first glance, this may seem like the general intellect in action, an epitome of self-organization based on principles of personal autonomy and free exchange. But, as I shall argue, this is only a semblance of the common (Hardt and Negri 2009, 175–184).

My ambition here is to move beyond mere critique. The argument is that artistic circulation can become an institution of the common as a result of the social struggles waged by art workers, who institute the common owing to productive withdrawals – art strikes, occupations, boycotts. Instead of predefining what institutions of the common are (see Hardt and Negri 2017, 104), I will rather ask what they do, looking for instances of commoning in social struggles provoked by the inequality and expropriation inherent to this circulation. To identify where, how and if the common can be instituted, following in Marx's footsteps, I will delve into the abode of networked, cultural production to identify the conflicts that erupt at the nexuses where social labour is extracted as privatized capitals. I will argue that the resistance provoked in the extraction process is socially productive, and that this prompts the circulation of art to become a form of the common by socializing the means and gains of distributed, social productivity underpinning the art system. Follow the conflict, one might quip, and gain a more acute understanding of what looms at the end of it, thus anchoring theory in social praxis.

## From false oppositions to the dialectics of circulation

So, my aim here is dialectically to trace the oppositions, tensions and conflicts underpinning the circulation of contemporary art. Just as for the metropolis is, for Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, a factory of the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2009, 249–263), a site where the common emerges and where the extraction of value unfolds, networks and projects are, for me, apparatuses that both facilitate social cooperation and enable the extraction of value from the many to the few (Szreder 2016; 2015a).

Some words are needed though to introduce a dialectical method of understanding this subject. I do not only account for the oppositions and ambivalences of networked-modes of production, but also consider them as sites of social struggles and potential becoming of



the institutions of the common. In order to dialectically understand conflicts that erupt at different nodes of global artistic circulation, I not only introduce but also modify several theoretical concepts, the attempt being to grasp the complex dynamics of this social universe, in which the topsy-turvy economy of autonomous art (in itself based on economic denial) is overdetermined by late capitalism, with its extended modes of value extraction. Here I conduct a thought experiment. Following on from the basic premises of dialectic materialism, I use the theoretical model of conflict between capital and labour as an intellectual framework to identify and analyse the frictions specific to artistic circulation. Obviously, this model needs adjustments if it is to explain the social universe, in which people frequently work for no money but instead for reputation or for the “love of art,” in which access to accumulated social production is not mediated by economic capital, but by social connections, in which those who often feel most exploited are those who are not employed but rather used as a mere human resource. To understand such peculiarities, I introduce the sociological concept of capitals (in plural), adjusting the Marxist notion of capital to grasp symbolic and social hierarchies that are not directly economic in nature. Another potential confusion stems from the dialectical understanding of the entrepreneurship mobilized in networked operations. As I will argue, the very model of entrepreneurship of the self should be considered not only as a social and ideological apparatus, but also as a site of conflict. As suggested in the title, in the process of political mobilization entrepreneurs of the self can become entrepreneurs of the multitude, instituting the commons by challenging the systemic pressures that, if left unchecked, atomize them as competitive opportunists.

To trace this dialectic, one needs to move beyond false oppositions between institutional inside and outside, flatness and hierarchy, agency and co-optation through countercultural demands. In accordance with the opposition between the institutional outside and inside, artists and theorists such as Andrea Fraser and Isabelle Graw work to eradicate the possibility of instituting alternatives to existing institutional configurations, to the art market and corporate museums (Graw 2006; Fraser 2006). In the context of such simplistic oppositions, Gerald Raunig introduces the notion of non-dialectical resistance (Raunig 2009). As he argues, instituting exodus or instituting the commons simultaneously works to undermine ossified institutions as it enacts alternative institutional forms. Hardt and Negri recently reformulated this argument in their *Assembly* (Hardt and Negri 2017), but it is also a recurring topic in debates about artistic self-organization, as flocks of mock-, alter-, pata- or monster-institutions frequent chapters on the social theory of contemporary art (Carrillo 2017; Baravalle 2018; Sholette 2011; Universidad Nomada 2009). In these emergent formations, as I argue in the final sections of this text, one can trace nascent forms of

the common, forms that rearticulate the dynamic of circulation beyond the false opposition of inside-outside.

Another false opposition is that proposed by Pascal Gielen, who contrasts the world of flat networks – understood by him as sites of anomy, chaotic accumulation and widespread competition between atomized producers – with the more vertically oriented civic institutions of Western modernity, which were at the very least able to uphold the values of civil society by opposing the subsumption of all spheres of life to capitalist logic (Gielen 2013). Theoreticians like Raunig and Isabel Lorey quite rightly point out that not only were the institutions of bourgeois society not so civic to be worth the nostalgia of mourning, but that in the horizontal networks specific to social movements, new forms of self-government emerge, ones that are more democratic than those of bourgeois society (Raunig 2013b; Lorey 2013). In this sense, contrasting disrupted value systems of flat networks with the civic verticality of “proper” institutions is just empty rhetoric. This issue requires a more dialectical approach like the one Paolo Virno elaborates in his discussion of the contemporary forms of cynicism specific to the flexible social structures of late capitalism (Virno 2004, 84–86). As everyone in these societies is mobile and exposed to many value systems simultaneously, each of these systems is considered arbitrary. On the one hand, flexible producers are thereby tempted to undermine the laws of equivalent exchange, considering every social situation an occasion for self-promotion [the aspect on which Gielen focuses (Gielen 2009, 36–37)]. But, on the other, the shared perception of the arbitrariness of value systems (which are indeed arbitrary and veil relations of power) might be used to activate the general intellect to establish better social systems, prompting an exodus – a productive withdrawal – from the current ones.

## Between co-optation and dissent

The debate about the possibility of enacting alternative, non-hierarchical institutional systems directly or indirectly touches upon the legacy of countercultural dissent, in particular of the workers and students’ upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. When Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello suggested that the new spirit of capitalism co-opts what they call the “artistic critique of capitalism,” which, in contrast to a more egalitarian one, promotes such bohemian values as personal freedom, self-realization and creativity (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 97), they provoked direct rebukes and polemics from many, including Maurizio Lazzarato (Lazzarato 2011, 2009). Concerning the example of dissenting creative workers, Lazzarato

pointed out that the demands for freedom and self-governance are complementary and not opposed to egalitarian forms of critique.

At a deeper level, this discussion refers to the status of flexibility, mobility, self-governance and creativity as they are embedded in the contemporary systems of organizing creative labour. The resounding question is whether they are directly subsumed in the new cycles of capitalist accumulation or rather evoke demands and desires of living labour, which are captured by capitalist machines at later stages. But all sides of the debates are in agreement that capitalism has transformed itself in recent decades. In their treatise Boltanski and Chiapello dissect this evolution. Analysing discourses of new managerialism from the 1970s and 1980s, they provide evidence of how capitalist management has responded to demands for freer and less dull work places, appeasing artistic critique by implementing some of its mechanisms while disarming its potential (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 199–202). As a result a new spirit of capitalism emerged, rearranging organizational mechanisms and value systems around the notions of projects, networks, connections, flexibility, mobility and creativity (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 4–41).

By contrast, post-operaists like Lazzarato focus on social movements, evidencing their *potentia*, as well as on locating a power of dissent and agency in immaterial labourers, or precarious workers, dubbed the rebellious multitudes. The argument runs as follows: capitalism has had to change to placate social dissent, which in the 1960s and 1970s was powerful enough to thwart at least some of capitalism's mechanisms. The transformation was not prompted by managers but by workers' demands, and the new forms of organizing labour are nothing but empty shells. Not only do demands for freer and self-governed life remain unfulfilled, but they still politically charged, able to prompt the social development of more democratic and non-hierarchical social assemblies. Here I share Virno's more dialectical understanding of this situation, according to which flexible modes of production can either prompt negative sentiments like cynicism, fear, opportunism, or else be articulated progressively as a socialized, general intellect.

These debates riff on another, even more fundamental discussion that refers back to the process of extracting capital in cognitive capitalism, the post-operaist position on which was meticulously reconstructed by Mikołaj Ratajczak, and additionally applied by him to the realm of artistic labour (Ratajczak 2014, 2015). The question is whether social production of value is an autonomous process that is organized within the multitude and only secondarily captured by capitalist mechanisms of extraction – or whether capitalist mechanisms of organisation play a significant role not only in extracting value, but in moulding the very process of its production, which needs to be dialectically overcome, just as the factory-form of industrial capitalism was supposed to be.

## Artistic circulation: between incorporation and autonomy

This conundrum of co-optation and dissent is especially striking in global artistic circulation, which retains some of its specificity even in creative capitalism. Over the last three decades this sector has grown exponentially, both in terms of its geographic scope, its social volume and its density of relations. Currently, there are thousands of art institutions and art schools, hundreds of biennales, myriad foundations, associations, collectives, and galleries, and dozens of art fairs, art-dedicated banking branches, art consultancies, specialized agencies and council departments that absorb hundreds of thousands of people all around the globe. This is a large field, which has evolved out of the modern art institution, which itself was – as criticized by Peter Bürger – a contained exception of bourgeois society, the exceptionalism of which the aesthetic and political avant-gardes were supposed to overcome (Bürger 1984). The autonomous field of art emerged as a laboratory for the art of bohemian living, directed by the ideals of art, poetry, intensity, creativity and love, all of which undermined the dull routines of the bourgeoisie (Bourdieu 1996). This field had an at least partial autonomy, one driven by its own anti-economy, in which money was despised, art celebrated and artists revered. Obviously, it had its economic underpinnings and dependencies on the field of power, but this was a shameful secret that art discourse openly rejected.

With the recent expansion of artistic circulation, the autonomy of this field has weakened, while it has been partially incorporated into the markets, policies and mechanisms of social reproduction of global capitalist society (Stallabrass 2006; Graw 2009; Lind and Velthuis 2012; Malik 2013; Sholette 2017; Lind and Minichbauer 2005; Kozłowski et al. 2014). Yet, it is still relatively less incorporated in cycles of accumulation than other creative industries, to say nothing about traditional branches of industry. For example, global museums – which are large employers – are usually listed as non-profit enterprises, and this non-profitability remains an integral part of their corporate policies, business models and their expansion as globally recognized brands. Another example is bohemian ideology, which is cherished on the art market as a sales point, while motivating thousands of students to get indebted in order to study fine arts, supporting what Greg Sholette calls the “bare art world” (Sholette 2017, 54).

On the other hand, artistic circulation shares similar traits to other social fields in cognitive capitalism, fields on which capital does not directly accumulate [by the means of organizing production and the direct employment of labour power (Vercellone 2007)], but on which values are generated that are indirectly captured for accumulation, such as in higher education (Szadkowski 2015). The good and frequently discussed example of such capture is the process of gentrification, which David Harvey analyses in his essay on the “art of rent” (Harvey 2006), and Sharon Zukin labels an “artistic mode of production” (Zukin 1989, 176–

192), in the framework of which artists contribute indirectly to the real estate value, which rentiers and capitalist then proceed to siphon off, leaving artists with naught.

Another example of the integration of financial capitalism in social systems is financial capital's function as a nexus of social reproduction of the rentier class on a global scale. As Fraser has pointed out, it is enough to look at the boards of leading art institutions in New York to spot many people who are also mentioned on the Forbes 500 list (Fraser 2011, 114–116). In the universe of contemporary art, a semblance of meritocracy is underpinned by class hierarchies, which enable the privileged to acquire and hold more prominent positions in this sector. From the throngs of young artists or independent curators roaming the network, those who really “make it” usually come from a more privileged background. The illusionary flatness of circulation is in fact a strict hierarchy, as in the chaos of circulation only a few win while many lose, and success depends on having access to various forms of capital.

In terms of organizing work, highly individualistic models of studio artists are mixed and matched with more recently introduced trajectories of freelancers and the self-employed (independent curators, project artists), the institutionalized employment of technicians, accountants or curators, academic positions in higher education, a plethora of temporary jobs in NGOs and projects, all underpinned by the free labour of assistants and volunteers. Despite this diversity, flexible and project-related systems of organization are dominant in this sector, where even larger institutions organize their content-related operations (educational programs, exhibitions, etc.) as projects, activating both their employers, freelancers and volunteers to maximize efficiency.

The systems of value adopted in artistic circulation reflect the fundamental paradox of this field, which is caught between nostalgia for artistic autonomy and its more recent incorporation into the social and economic systems of global capitalism. People in art refer to traditional bohemian beliefs in the value of art, but rearticulate them as demands for personal freedom, creativity and self-directedness that are specific to the new spirit of capitalism, as mapped by Free/Slow University of Warsaw in its research on the Polish field of visual art (Kozłowski, Sowa, and Szreder 2015b). The typical exceptionalism of art, namely its own belief in its having a special status, which legitimizes personal sacrifices, and which Hans Abbing criticizes as one of the reasons for artists' poverty (Abbing 2014), is reformulated as a more down-to-earth assessment of networked reality, wherein it is not only artistic talent that matters, but also the social skills of the networker. Also, people seldom subscribe to a romantic ethos, at least not in the Polish field of art; they are not willing to make sacrifices for art's sake, but are rather testing their chances of establishing a professional trajectory that would enable them to do both – to make art and make a living. In this way, the topsy-turvy economy of art, which is typical for the autonomous field of art, the developed form of

which emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century European bourgeoisie societies (Bourdieu 1996), is recalibrated within strategies adopted by people working in this field, who consider their present sacrifices as investments – in prestige, connections, skills – the conscious aim of which is to generate the capitals utilized to stabilize their prospects. In sum, the field of art carries over some of the bohemian promises of art-centred life, but rearticulates them in response to the project-related system of production and a projective order of worth, which in itself has developed in response to the artistic critique of capitalism.

## Productive withdrawals

The dialectic between incorporation and autonomy provokes diverse forms of resistance – strikes, boycotts and occupations. They can all be categorized as productive withdrawals, which, by debunking exploitative institutional apparatuses of artistic circulation, forge new assemblages, ones that sustain art as a practice of freedom (Szreder 2017).

Productive withdrawals carry on the legacy of the art strikes dating back to the 1930s. These strikes challenged the art institution in the name of art as a practice of living, which artistic institutions were supposed to endorse but did not, at least according to the artists on strike. Artists like Gustav Metzger, Marcel Duchamp, Lee Lozano, Mladen Stillinović or Goran Dordjević withdrew or contested the field of art, because it did not stand up to the values of bohemian living, of imagination embodied in daily existence. Thus, they contested a system that contained art's autonomy within class society and the capitalist economy, thereby corrupting it. Classic art strikes addressed the dialectic of resistance and corruption, of promises given and failed. For this reason, many contemporary theoreticians of productive withdrawals refer to this legacy to deal with similar paradoxes around defining creative labour in contemporary capitalism (Kunst 2015; Lazzarato 2014; Raunig 2013a; Shukaitis 2014).

The recent wave of productive withdrawals – even though it riffs on the classic legacy of art strikes – differs because of its collective character, however. The strikes of Stillinović, Duchamp or Metzger had the status of artistic gestures, and as such they drifted institutionally and discursively to the status of being “just” art, even if it was not their initial impulse. Productive withdrawals refer to the collective actions of art workers who adopt bohemian demands but rearticulate them in the context of artist fronts, trade unions and associations, with reference to the legacies of strikes organized by Art Workers Coalition (1960s), Artists' Union (1930s) or neoists (1990s) (Bryan-Wilson 2010). The subjectivities of art workers themselves develop in response to the transforming systems of cultural



production (Apostol 2015). They target artistic circulation as a site of work and extraction, not as a nostalgic recollection of artistic autonomy (and its exceptionalism), but as driven by a collective demand for better wages, social security, freedom. As I argue below, precisely such responses to networked modes of production institute the common, since, instead of cynicism, opportunism and fear, the striking multitude institutes solidarity and mutualizes social production.

Owing to productive withdrawals, the same networked modes of production, which otherwise facilitate the extraction of social labour, are progressively revamped. From this point of view, I am getting closer to Virno's aforementioned insights into the "neutral core" of post-Fordism. He states:

[...] it is necessary to rise up from these "bad sentiments" [i.e. opportunism and cynicism – KS] to the neutral core, namely to the fundamental mode of being, which, in principle, could give rise even to developments very different from those prevailing today. What is difficult to understand is that the antidote, so to speak, can be tracked down only in what for the moment appears to be poison (Virno 2004, 84).

Later Virno emphasizes that "we can hypothesize that every conflict or protest [in post-Fordism – KS] will take root in the [...] »neutral core« which, for the moment, manifests itself in these rather repugnant forms [i.e. of opportunism and cynicism – KS]" (Virno 2004, 88). When Virno discusses the "neutral core", he is speaking about forms of social organization specific to flexible capitalism. When these conditions are articulated in accord with capitalism, we see "bad sentiments" such as opportunism, cynicism and fear emerge. When targeted by progressive social formations, the same conditions of production can give rise to modes of collective autonomy, direct democracy and self-governance.

## From structural opportunism to entrepreneurs of the self

Structural opportunism is not a moral stance, but a highly individualistic relation of production, arising because art workers – always moving between projects – need to chase interchangeable opportunities. My understanding of this situation is inspired by a non-moralistic definition of opportunism, which Virno forges to discuss flexible labour markets in post-Fordism:



The roots of opportunism lie in an outside-of-the-workplace socialization marked by unexpected turns, perceptible shocks, permanent innovation, chronic instability. Opportunists are those who confront a flow of ever-interchangeable possibilities, making themselves available to the greater number of these, yielding to the nearest one, and then quickly swerving from one to another. (Virno 2004, 86)

People chase the flow of interchangeable opportunities by turning their reputations, social contacts, skills and emotions, into capitals. This enables them to gain access to future opportunities and offers them the ability to stir networks in a direction considered as advantageous by their “owners”, thus harnessing social and individual labour in the network-specific value form. In this manner, structural opportunism moulds art workers into entrepreneurs of the self, one of the dominant modes of subjectivation in artistic circulation. Foucault dissects this figure in the context of neoliberal discourse, in which an “entrepreneur of one’s self” is “one’s being for oneself one’s own capital, one’s own producer, one’s own source of earnings” (Foucault 2010, 226). In other words, a cultural producer is structurally enticed to consider his/her own knowledge, skills, emotional capacities, social networks as a form of capital to be invested in for future gains.

In this wicked manner, labour power is ideologically presented as if it was a capital, which is simultaneously true and not true. It is not true, because just like on a classical labour market, the labourers are in a drastically disadvantaged position, and enhancement of their labour power mainly serves people who purchase such luxury items – the capitalists themselves. On the other hand – and here artistic circulation proves an interesting case in point – in the situation of structural opportunism specific to flexible systems of production, people who capitalize on themselves (and others) are better able to find better opportunities and thus secure access to pools of accumulated social labour. Given an advantageous situation a micro-entrepreneur can outsmart the system and build his/her position to pick and choose jobs, opportunities and construct his/her professional portfolio, one not bound to a single employer nor subsumed by a given work discipline. This capacity of some to move freely is unequivocally praised by such sociologists such as Jean-Michel Menger, who generalizes from these exceptional situations by presenting them as entrepreneurial models for other precarious workers (Menger 1999). Clearly, however, such is not the case for majority of people operating on the artistic circuit, not to mention other precarious people. Freedom – as sociologists Andrew Ross and Guy Standing have proven – becomes precarity when not coupled with other resources like education, social contacts and means of subsistence, the lack of which drives people into a state of unwanted dependency, forced to beg for any work whatsoever and chase opportunities without rest or remorse (Standing 2014; Ross 2009).

But there is another important side effect to becoming entrepreneurial. The entrepreneur of the self is not only individually responsible for his/her own success when competing on an open market with other entrepreneurial individuals. Such an entrepreneur establishes an instrumental relation to his/her inner and social self, eradicates bonds of solidarity with other cultural producers, and tries to outcompete them in securing individual access to opportunities. And this access is mediated by the capitals at his/her disposal, as in the process of acquiring social and symbolic capitals he is not only capitalizing on his/her own labour, but also – or even especially – the labour of others.

## Social and symbolic capital

As I already indicated in the introduction, to analyse the complexities of artistic circulation, I refer to a sociological notion of social and cultural capitals inspired by the theory of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu adopts Marx's notion of value as objectified human labour. In capitalism, labour is harnessed in capitalist value form and ultimately transformed into capital, which enables its owner to claim a share of future social production. Bourdieu's sociological amendment to this notion sees him focus not on economic capital, but rather he uses it as a model to understand the social reproduction, class distinctions and hierarchies structuring such social fields as art or scholarship and the strategies of actors operating within them (Bourdieu 1996).

Both social and symbolic capitals are objectified human labour that determine the success of strategies aimed at the future acquisition of a position, a job, a reputation. Even though they are not directly expressed in money form, they are potentially convertible into financial gain. As Hans van Maanen suggests, social and symbolic capitals operate on three different layers: first, on that of embodied knowledge and social skills; second, on that of field-specific reputations and social contacts; and third, on that of the institutionalized knowledge and social density to be found within the structured fields themselves (Maanen 2009, 55–60). It is precisely this latter aspect of objectified social labour – of all the accumulated past and present efforts of people according to social field – that is akin to the general intellect.

On a structural level, artistic networks operate as generators of social and symbolic capital, expanding connections by means of projects, which can, but do not have to, be subsequently turned into a capitalist value form. They can be monetized when a market niche is found, for example by tourist industries or owners of real estate, who operate in cities such as Venice or Barcelona, and raise rents by enhancing the atmosphere forged by

past and present generations. But these capitals can be harnessed – by corporations, capitalists, states or municipalities – in their raw form without being converted into monetary equivalents in order to acquire prestige or enhance soft power. Generally speaking, the collective and frequently underpaid or even unpaid labour of the multitude of artists, who still sacrifice themselves for the sake of art, maintains art's aura as something special and worthy of sacrifice. Abbing suggests that this aura serves as a resource for the elites of the sector, who cynically benefit from the sacrifices others make (Abbing 2014). Diedrich Diederichsen and Ratajczak propose to consider this generalized aura of art as anchoring the prices of particular artworks (Diederichsen 2008; Ratajczak 2014). This is still a matter of discussion though, as other theorists like Luc Boltanski rebuke the relationship between socially generated values and market prices, and instead focus on the arbitrary evaluations made by bigger market players, who operate as if they were totally independent in their judgements (Boltanski 2014). I think this latter argument holds, but only if one limits the analysis to the prices of individual artworks. If one considers the art market as a social universe, it is hardly conceivable – at least as it currently operates – that it could work as well as it does without the general aura of art as something precious and worthwhile. The use-values produced and maintained by throngs of art producers and lovers, being mostly symbolic in nature (captured in the notion of symbolic capital), play their role as anchors of a general, positive evaluation of art, thus enabling speculations (just as general demand for wheat sustains the speculative behaviour of people who invest in financial instruments around fluctuating wheat prices).

The weakening of artistic autonomy does not mean that the fields in question are directly incorporated, but rather that they are formatted to enhance the generation of such forms of capitals, which can be more easily subdued in heteronomous pursuits. The good instance of this tendency is corporate sponsorship of art. For example, in a case disclosed by the activist group Liberate Tate, the Tate group in the UK has an established partnership with British Petroleum to art-wash its drilling operations (Evans 2015). When such deals are made, a general social labour, condensed in artistic circulation, is turned into capital controlled by more powerful players and directed for their own sake, thus enhancing brands, attracting visitors and legitimizing corporate agendas by granting art an aura. Another example here is the non-profit industrial sector – named as such by the activist group INCITE! from the USA (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2009). Both non-governmental foundations and state agencies format circulation through their project-related modes of cultural funding, which stimulates the continuous flow of cultural projects, thus amplifying the over-production of artistic events with quantifiable outcomes. This means the social labour underpinning them is expressed in a networked value form that is easily capitalized by the funders themselves and other capitalist enterprises.

## Capitalization of labour by entrepreneurs of the self

What unfolds on a structural level is mirrored at the micro-scale of projects and personal trajectories. Apparatuses that regulate structural opportunism both facilitate and enforce the acquisition of capitals, i.e. objectified social labour, by individual cultural producers. In fact, the individual capacities of a successful networker are grossly enhanced as a result of such acquisitions. Artistic circulation is underpinned by pools of dormant knowledge and connections, which in themselves are results of past and present human labour, itself able to be temporarily amassed for any artistic project. For example, when a freelance curator organizes a large, prestigious exhibition, s/he might not own anything personally; however, because s/he is given temporary access to accumulated capitals, s/he is able to pull off very ambitious undertakings in a relatively short time. But artistic circulation is a winner-take-all economy, as Abbing shows with reference to the general artistic context (Abbing 2002). To understand this disparity Sholette devises the notion of artistic dark matter (Sholette 2011), a theoretical metaphor suggesting that people at top of the hierarchy – famous artists, curators, institutional functionaries, gallerists – accumulate capitals and resources at the expense of people who reproduce the circulation, but who are by themselves relatively deprived of visibility and connections. Sholette contends that the labouring multitude remains dark, not acknowledged in the universe, and is sustained by its continuing efforts. Yet again, similar to the case of prices of artworks, a more nuanced approach is required. The trajectories of successful entrepreneurs of the self are very rarely directly related to the abuse of any individual labourer. They are underpinned by the general social labour of artistic dark matter, which is a dynamic category made up of people who are not recognized for their efforts at a given moment (due to the winner-takes-all logic, this means the vast majority of the artistic universe). Moreover, and this is a fundamental difference between “regular” capitalists, as Marx described them, and the entrepreneurs of the self who compete for social and symbolic capitals, expropriation is here not mediated by contractual employment. On the contrary, the capitals in question are of a contextual nature; they cannot be quantified or monetized directly (though they can be moulded into forms that are prone to capture), and not extracted by employing anyone. When I say that such capitals are invested, I do not mean it in the literal sense of investing money as capital in the pursuit of surplus value. Rather, I have in mind people who invest – their reputations, knowledge, social contacts – in their undertakings, and a few of whom are far more successful than others, not only in terms of recuperating their own investments but also a disproportionate portion of the accumulated social labour. In such situations, the distinction between labour and capital is not predefined, as it is in regular employment where capitalists purchase labour to extract surplus value. Instead, it is processual and defined only retrospectively. For example, people may engage

in a project as freelancers, such that nobody actually employs anyone. Each person invests him- or herself in it, but only a few persons will thrive by accumulating enough kudos to secure access to future opportunities. The remainder end up with naught. Only in retrospect can they be identified as labour-givers and not as accumulators of capitals. Another complication is that this accumulation happens not only (and not even predominantly) around projects, but within the vast, chaotic nexus of networks and transient relations. For entrepreneurs of the self thrive on the general social labour accumulated in circulation and not on the small bits acquired as a result of individual projects. It is important here, I think, to underline this systemic perspective. Otherwise, instead of developing a sharp dialectical analysis of circulation, we end up describing a typical tit-for-tat wherein networkers squabble with each other for bits and pieces of prestige or connections. I would consider such conflicts properly as squabbles rather than as struggles, as they usually derive – as symptoms – from a systemic arrangement that turns people into entrepreneurs of the self, obsessed with their own precious investments.

People who manage to maintain a position in circulation are totally deprived of access to capitals only very seldom. When, together with the team of Free/Slow University, we conducted the aforementioned research into the division of labour and distribution of capitals in the Polish field of visual art, we were surprised by the general complicity of our respondents with the structures of the field. Even if people voiced more detailed concerns about their economic conditions, or the precarity or burdens of networking, they generally tended to agree with how the field is organized. When we assessed these outcomes, we concluded that the results were possibly skewed by the fact that we researched people who are still active in circulation, i.e. present and visible, and managing to acquire enough capitals to keep circulating by accessing new projects, frequently at the cost of their own unpaid labour or other sacrifices. The ones who are really deprived are the ones who have withdrawn from circulation or were excluded from it. Such exclusion, as Boltanski and Chiapello argue, is a double deprivation and a form of exploitation embedded within a connectionist society (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 346–355). On the one hand, the excluded do not have access to circulation and are downgraded to the status of an anonymous resource; they are mobilized only for projects initiated by others and from which others benefit the most. Adding insult to this injury, the excluded are deprived of access to the only platforms that would enable them to voice their concerns publicly, to denounce the experience of injustice. This is because, in circulation the only platforms of public visibility are those accessed via circulation. As a result, the excluded disappear, their presence is eradicated, they become a real dark matter and a potential hotbed for resentment or action.

In the cruel economy of artistic circulation, capitals are not equally distributed. Their acquisition depends on a general standing in hierarchy and is contextualized by a portfolio of capitals at the disposal of a networker. Basically, the rule is that the person with the largest amount of capitals will benefit the most from any given project. On the other hand, others may also benefit from taking part in a project enhanced by the capitals of somebody more famous than themselves, someone able to count on the connections, visibility or knowledge that s/he brings. But in a larger picture, even small differentials accumulate over time and constitute skewed hierarchies between celebrities and dark matter, i.e. people who manage to get access to better opportunities tend to secure even better access in the future, entering more prestigious projects at higher positions, thus making it possible to get a larger share in the future results of collective undertakings.

This law of social accumulation, which enables people who have more capitals to acquire even larger shares of social labour, is particularly important for maintaining class hierarchies on a global scale in a seemingly horizontal or flattened world of networks and flows. When Gielen criticizes freelance curators as “joy riders” – opportunistic and cynical – who freely roam the globe in search of more interesting and beneficial undertakings (Gielen 2009, 36–37), he is actually describing people who already enjoy better positions in the network, while others are struggling to deal with the reality of precarity. But, more importantly still, the meritocracy supposedly underpinning their exploits is a convivial myth. Artistic circulation distributes its benefits mostly to people who have inherited an initial portfolio of capitals, either because of their class or because of the citizenship rent distributed in the form of free education, stipends, access to more beneficial labour markets in the countries of global North.

In my analysis of the cruel economy of authorship, I have identified two types of labour – love and pollination – that seem to be most often exploited in cultural projects (Szreder 2013). I refer to the labour of pollination as the general social labour involved in generating the human knowledge and social connections condensed in artistic circulation. The labour of love, which George Yúdice has analysed with the example of a large art event at the US/Mexican border, is a socially necessary labour contributed by curators, assistants, volunteers, who commit themselves to a given project by facilitating the contextual work of social reproduction, which often goes unnoticed but is crucial for the success of any more ambitious artistic undertaking (Yúdice 2003, 287–337). This labour of social reproduction is structurally equivalent to the invisible labour of women, who maintain capitalist systems of production, even while not being formally employed. A general critique of authorial capture was formulated by Jan Sowa in his depiction of contemporary art, in which he points to the exploitative relation between authors and the common (Sowa 2014).



The depreciation of support labour harks back to the art field-specific system of beliefs, which sanctifies authorial positions as carriers of social value (Bourdieu 1996, 166–173). The F/SUW research clearly confirms it. When our respondents were asked to indicate who contributed most of their time to a given project, all professional groups equally named artists and support personnel. However, when respondents were asked who contributed most to the success of an exhibition or festival and should be honoured as such, only artists and curators were named (Kozłowski, Sowa, and Szreder 2015a, 208–234). This ideologically skewed assessment was voiced by everyone, without any significant difference between artists, curators or assistants. But this symbolic depreciation is a very ambivalent mechanism looked at from the position of an individual artist who is often “paid” only in a symbolic recognition. Consequently, artists are expected to work for free, only for the promise of a future accumulation of symbolic capital. However, they often end up working for nothing, because only very few mechanisms exist for converting their reputations into “real” money; the majority of projects are unpaid, jobs are scarce and the art market serves the ideological function of arousing aspirations rather than of providing a real means of subsistence. In this sense people who work as technicians (some of them trained artists who have parallel art careers) and have stable sources of income are in a better position than artists who sacrifice their own free time for merely symbolic recognition (in this situation we could read a symbolic capital, with Abbing, as an illusory construct).

The entrepreneurial mode of subjectivity proves to be detrimental or even directly harmful to most people, forced as they are to compete and self-capitalize without having any means to win the competitive games of structural opportunism. But by taking part in circulation, they do generate capitals, which are siphoned off by those who can afford strategic investments, and thereby secure their privileged access to the fruits of social labour. The subjectivity of art workers, though also forged in the process of expropriation, considers this relation in accordance with its social truth, i.e. as exploitation. This progressive subjectivity tears through the ideological aspirations of entrepreneurialism of the self, supporting self-organization and motivating struggles, as a result of which both means and gains of social production can be socialized and the common instituted.



## Better social time machines<sup>1</sup>

In the following sections, I look for varied instances of instituting the common in artistic circulation. Here, I turn more directly to empirical instances of such instituting, that is, the productive withdrawals due to which people collectively reclaim the temporal arrangements, means and results of networked production. Consequently, employing my methodological premise of following the conflicts, I do not provide an overarching definition of what the commons is, but rather look at how it is instigated by the dissenting multitudes. Instituting is understood here not only in the narrow sense of making new institutions (though I discuss a plethora of collectives, clusters and the like), but also as instituting new social norms, such as paying wages for artworks, or even instituting new, better social time machines. Following on from this premise, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, I start by discussing the commons not as a (material or immaterial) resource but as a different approach to the apparatuses that regulate the flow of social time.

Apparatuses that form artistic circulation organize social energies by regulating the time patterns, in which they unfold. The time of global art circulation is comparable to the time of stock exchanges, where values and stocks are flipped in nanoseconds. Framed by such temporal patterns, people speculate about the future values of artistic trajectories and art objects – commodifying them both. Such circulation is organised by the patterns of speculative time complex, as analysed by Suhail Malik and Armen Avenessian, which remixes future, present and past, eradicating spaces in which human reflectivity and agency could potentially unfold (Avenessian and Malik 2016).

For precarious art workers, every passage from one project to another, every passing opportunity, every deadline and every application is a time machine through which the future enters into the present, only to eradicate the real possibility of changing anything, as every project, deadline and application results in yet another project, deadline and application. Having a successful career mainly means that one gets more of the same, i.e. a celebrated networker needs to circulate even more, make more projects, answer more emails and attend more events, as Hito Steyerl sensibly points out (Steyerl 2016). It sounds like an awful lot, unless one can afford to hire studio assistants. But even this might not help mitigate feelings of being spread too thin.

Art workers, when integrated into the art market, expect returns on their current precarity. But in the cruel economy of art, many artists will never get anything except what they already know – precarity and debt. This nexus forges an iron link between debt and

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<sup>1</sup> The concept is gleaned from Suhail Malik's lecture held at the Bartlett School of Architecture, London, March 2017.

the art market, which is mediated, at least in the USA, by student loans, as is succinctly analysed by Sholette, who takes up the collective research done by such groups as Occupy Museums (and their project Debt Fair), Strike Debt or bfamfaphd (Sholette 2017, 53–77). Caught in the capitalist debt loop, which Lazzarato and David Graeber analyse (Graeber 2012; Lazzarato 2012), artists are forced to compete in the art market, from which they are not able to escape, but in which they are not able to succeed. It is indeed a bare art world, in which the economic underpinnings of artistic circulation overshadow its own claims for autonomy.

Productive withdrawals, as modes of instituting the common, are also, or especially, important because they interrupt these routines, building new, better social time machines. The multitudes on strike try to establish different relationships between present and future, as they struggle to come up with alternatives to the deadened productivity of artistic circulation, in which everything moves so that nothing can change. When Liberate Tate unmakes the partnership between the Tate and British Petroleum, they operate within a clearly strategic horizon. They reinvent the Tate as an institution of the common, the aim of which should be to project a vision of the future, one that can be democratically deliberated to protect the multitude from climate mayhem. Instead of expecting individual returns on their precarity, members of this collective invest themselves in collective futures. In this sense, Liberate Tate is both a prefiguration of an institution of the common and an alliance advocating enactment of such a model in general social praxis, which is constituted in the process of dismantling neoliberal time machines.

These better social time machines are put in motion to gain collective access to the means of subsistence. The main demand of the organizers of Art Strike in Poland in 2012 was to introduce retirement programs for artists, who are currently excluded from participating in the public pension and health systems due to their intermittent working patterns (Figiel 2014). Art Strike disrupted social illusions that such a miserable condition is the individual responsibility of entrepreneurial artists. In this way, Polish art workers resonated with other advocacy groups, like the American W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy), or the Precarious Workers Brigade and Artist Union in the UK. Members of these collectives debunk the ideology of return-on-precarity, debunk the mythology inherent to most artistic circulation and unmake the concept of artists as entrepreneurs of the self. To advocate for more reasonable policies, politicized art workers underscore the strategic and general character of artistic contributions to the cultural commons, thus struggling for a collective right to the future (spelled out in the basic terms of pension, healthcare, social welfare). They do this not only for themselves, but for other precarious people as well.

## Entrepreneurship of the multitude

Structural opportunism is both a mode of production and a site of struggle. On the one hand, it is the self-centred struggle of networkers, of entrepreneurs of the self, who compete, one versus the many, for access to opportunities. But this negative sentiment – of cynical, opportunistic entrepreneurship, the underside of which is anxiety for individual survival – can be rearticulated differently. Characterizing art strikes, Raunig has drawn a paradoxical figure of industriousness, orgiastic, self-directed and self-governed productivity of the multitude on strike (Raunig 2013a, 121–122), which I have picked up on with the notion of productive withdrawals. When art workers strike, the argument goes, they do not rest idle; on the contrary, they generate politically charged contents, affects, situations, values and resources. These values are of a different ilk to those prioritized in artistic circulation, the organizational grammar of which aims at continuous expansion, prompting the overproduction of interchangeable projects, the content of which matters insofar as it enables the generation and privatization of capitals that express the values produced in a networked form. This is the credo of structural opportunism. When the striking multitude interrupts interruptions, which are imposed by the networked form of value to expand the circulation and speed up social production, it fills those spaces with collective activity, self-valorised as politics, joy, or both. For example, when art workers in Milan squatted Galfa Tower, a corporate high-rise in city centre, it was both an anti-capitalist statement and an art workers' festivity, in that they refused simply to engage in making yet another project, and instead indulged in production of the sort that did not need to be expressed through individualized portfolios of social, symbolic or economic capital in order to be valorized (Spinelli 2018).

Negri and Hardt evoke entrepreneurship of the common to talk about the self-directed labour of the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2017, 139–153). What interests me here, though, is the progressive moulding of networked production, which undoes structural opportunism. The entrepreneurship embedded in productive withdrawals challenges what happens between the individualized producer and the tenuous flow of interchangeable opportunities. Usually, this in-betweenness is traversed by individuals competing for interchangeable opportunities. But when art workers strike, they enact opportunism of a different sort, that is, the tactical seizing of opportunities for the sake of collective actions, something that Michel de Certeau discusses in the context of social movements and urban guerrilla in his *Practice of Everyday Life* (Certeau 1984). Such opportunists not only seize opportunities for themselves, but also create them for others. In this sense, opportunities become socialized and various semi-open structures evolve, securing access on a cooperative and not competitive basis. This notion applies to countless occupied art centres, like Isola Art

Centre in Milan, S.a.L.E. Docs in Venice, or Green Park in Athens, as well as to artists-run spaces and cooperatives, like GoldexPoldex in Kraków, the Free/Slow University of Warsaw or Critical Practice in London (Baravalle 2018; Isola Art Center 2013; Critical Practice 2011; Sowa 2009; Szreder 2015b). These collectives entrepreneurially collate resources, secure access to a space, generate the willingness and enthusiasm of people, and then share them among their friends, comrades and associates, thus socializing access to opportunities.

What is the qualitative difference between this mode of access and the one of structural opportunism? Socializing opportunities means that access is not mediated by privatized capitals but rather granted due to a shared engagement in the necessary social labour, which is an open arrangement per definition, one in which every art worker is invited to take part, and wherein only his/her willingness to engage in a process of commoning is a factor determining his/her access to the common. This engagement can take various forms. Sometimes it is about occupying, building and maintaining the space, as evidenced by the study of a group process conducted by the Macao people in Milan – 69,300 hours were collectively spent refurbishing the Macao building to turn it into a cultural centre (Spinelli 2018). In other cases, like in Critical Practice, an open research cluster associated with Chelsea College in London, group members organized collective processes based on shared enthusiasm, collating their scarce resources to facilitate carrying out a shared idea.

Productive withdrawals are open, because the more art workers engage, the more efficient these struggles are. And the access thus generated is distributed not only among the comrades on strike, a core group of initiators, but also among newcomers, who sustain the (social) space thus emerged when the initial impulse is gone, which gets us closer to an idea of instituting. This suggests persistence in time, as well as a strategic and not merely tactical perspective. The perpetual rhythm of securing, creating and sharing opportunities is crucial for sustaining any nascent institution of the common. For example, the longevity of the Isola Art Centre, as described by Spinelli, was due precisely to the persistent openness of its organizational form. It welcomed new waves of artists-activists, who engaged in the institutional process by utilizing opportunities and generating new ones that their successors then took over and continue to develop (Spinelli 2018).

Importantly, such entrepreneurship of the common can devolve into a core activist clique, a form of clumsy directness that distributes opportunities among closed networks of camaraderie based on personal connections. This leads only to degeneration, stalls networks and diminishes their potentials. I advocate here that the circulation should be approached dialectically, not rebuked entirely, and devolved into cloisters of localized echo chambers of like-minded individuals. It is about revamping circulation on a global scale as the entrepreneurship of the multitude moves about in the open spaces of an international network, rearticulating symbolic and social capitals as reputations embedded in struggles and

movements based on distributed trust. For example, when, together with Greg Sholette and Marco Baravalle from S.a.L.E. Docs, we curated Dark Matter Super Collider, an open exhibition structure, organized in parallel to the opening of Venice Biennale in 2017, which featured dozens of examples of political art from the entire world, the process of soliciting materials activated networks of mutual trust between artists and activists on a global scale. Thanks to the open call made, dozens of examples of political art were donated to S.a.L.E., brought in suitcases by people attending the opening. As Super-Collider accelerated social energies accumulated previously in art-activist networks, it was possible to put up the exhibition with the help of the tiny financial investment of a couple of hundred euros. The social and symbolic capitals involved were socialized and distributed, fed back into the networks in which they originated, because of the programmatic inclusivity of this structure, which redistributed opportunities and visibility to people engaged in social struggles all around the world. On this occasion, S.a.L.E. operated in contrast to the typical biennale pavilion, which offers chosen individuals exclusive access. This formula is also repeated by progressive public institutions, as for example when they engage in organizing networks for the public's benefit, as we saw with the Association and Museum of Arte Util, an international coalition of museums, artists and activists who aim to mobilize art for social utility, to harness and share opportunities – like new commissions or exhibitions – for the benefit of collective endeavour (Byrne, Medina and Saviotti 2018). In other cases, the socialization of opportunities does not have to be based on conviviality but rather feeds on tension. When the aforementioned Liberate Tate organized their actions in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, they seized on an opportunity for collective action, wresting the visibility granted by the institution for the sake of its progressive revamping. The value thereby generated should not be counted as a sum of capitals generated individually, but rather as an accumulation of social energy and public attention, which here eventually disrupted ties between the public art institution and extractive corporation.

## Socializing the results of social creativity

Super-Collider, however, was “just” a project, one made possible because S.a.L.E. managed to secure long-term access to resources and social labour, which were not privatized as individual capital to be used to extract rent or secure individual opportunities, but rather for the sake of a collective. The typical mode of capitals acquisition through capturing social labour (either of love or of pollination) is reversed in such instances. Very often instituting the common is based on mechanisms that redistribute the effects of social cooperation for

the sake of the collectives involved. My discussions of capitals distribution in previous projects have suggested that involving a person with higher amount of capitals – i.e. one who is better connected, more recognized, etc. – might prove beneficial for everyone involved, as these intangible forms of capital tend to get distributed to the teams of co-operators as well, precisely because their individual success depends on the success of the collective undertaking, the chances of which are enhanced by the capitals of those involved. However, in the context of a competitive network, this tendency is overwritten by another law, according to which a person with a higher amount of capitals secures a larger share of the social product. But the entrepreneurial multitude challenges this second law of networked dynamics by redirecting reputations, visibility and connections for the benefit of the collective. This happens when a respected philosopher, like Negri, Sholette or Raunig, responds to an invite by an art-activist platform like S.a.L.E., which makes sure that the exchange is mutual and collectively enjoyed in a non-hierarchical environment. Sometimes simple gestures work best – food is shared, work is done together and credits are spread equally to everyone involved, and hospitality is mutualized by exchanging invitations. At other times, it can be more complicated. When the Isola Art Center fought against the gentrification of its home district in Milan, they deliberately utilized their social connections and international networks, calling prominent artists and intellectuals to help with their cause, and with getting things done by drawing on their participation, art, reputations (Isola Art Center 2013). Another example: when Polish art workers went on art strike, more established artists promptly voiced their support, committing their reputations to the struggle. This translated into real collective gains, such as securing exhibition fees for everyone and not just a select few. We can describe this as a mechanism of capture embedded in the entrepreneurship of the common, a radically pragmatic mode of reversing the expropriations of social labour for the benefit of the multitude.

Another reversal of expropriation challenges the division between recognized (attributable) and unrecognized (anonymous) labour – between authorial pursuits and a labour of love or labour of pollination. As indicated above, this division of labour only seemingly works in favour of artists or people who struggle to build their individual symbolic capital, as they often end up with neither money nor opportunities, and are instead paid only in empty promises of future gains (embedded structurally in the economic architecture of symbolic capital). Instituting the common cuts through this Gordian knot by equalizing access, which is not dependant on capitals but rather defined through shared engagement. The most entrepreneurial multitudes – like the activists occupying Macao in Milan – manage even to generate financial gains, which are shared between all involved as a kind of basic income. One only needs to spend enough hours monthly on collective undertakings (regardless of whether it is more intellectual or physical) to receive a share in revenues,



which are equally distributed among everyone involved, incentivizing the sharing of workloads and urging solidarity.

Another mechanism of breaking down divisions between different professional groups involves mutualizing the benefits of projects conducted in the spirit of the common, accounting for all types of labour and forms of capitals. Simply speaking, paying wages to all, crediting everyone, multi-authoring results, creating non-hierarchical spaces where everybody can mingle together and enact inclusive forms of governance. Even the introducing of such simple measures is no small feat, and is continues to be rare in artistic circulation, which offers a semblance of flatness, while cultivating distinctions. Equalizing the wages, credits, and social contacts generated in projects, contributes to instituting the common. This is why most spaces or projects with more progressive agendas pay utmost respect to simple courtesies, financial matters, mentions and credits – rewiring the loopholes that otherwise facilitate a capitalization on the labour of others. At a more general level, equalized distribution is secured by experiments with open licencing, the creative commons, the art commons and other radical licences like copy far left, all well recognized and widely discussed as a partial measure against expropriation of social labour.

On a political level, this kind of equalization is expressed in the political identification of art workers or cultural/creative producers, which aims at creating solidarity between professional groups that are otherwise easily exploited for the sake of networked governance, a governance that thrives on atomization, cynical opportunism and self-entrepreneurialism. Wages for art work is such an important postulate, because it disincentivizes freelancers from succumbing to competitive entrepreneurialism, while incentivizing all to struggle for a shared benefit and instituting laws of equivalence, the important side effect of which is preventing exclusions.

As aforementioned, exclusion is the ultimate form of exploitation in our networked society. The excluded – the dark matter of the artistic universe – are utilized as a resource for the careers of those who keep circulating. On the other hand, those who circulate sacrifice a lot just to maintain themselves in circulation, they capitalise on whatever they have, in turn sustaining the sparkling careers of the few. Not only that, as Bifo Berardi and Angela McRobbie have suggested, in a system that individualizes success, failure must also be suffered in solitude, causing depression to become the professional illness of freelancers, who take individual responsibility for structurally induced risks (Berardi 2009; McRobbie 2011). In this context, instituting the common means mutualizing risks, or de-individualizing desire in order to maintain shared support structures and creating bulwarks against exclusion. All collective initiatives not mediated by the flow of interchangeable opportunities might serve as such bulwarks, because they sustain the social trust generated in cooperation and struggles. When art workers partake in becoming common, they are not alone. And this



sociality has political potential, because support structures serve as spaces of mutual recognition, where people can act in front of their equals, discuss issues of importance, formulate and execute agendas. Otherwise, the excluded, those who suffer the most, remain unrecognized not only in artistic circulation but also to each other. In this way instituting the common is a condition of public action in a circulation where all that is solid melts into flows.

## Wasps, orchids and extra-institutional assemblages

I have purposefully avoided discussion about the institutional forms that can potentially emerge in the process of constituting the common. Instead, I have focused on tracing actually existing, progressive responses to the tensions embedded in artistic circulation, tensions that revolve around the fundamental conflict between socialized labour and privatized capitals, and that address the dialectics of artistic networks, which can both condense into the poison of opportunism, cynicism and fear, or be constructed as mutualized structures of cooperation, redistribution and political action. Instituting the common, in other words, is distinguished by what it does and not by what it is. I do not for even a second presume that a university-affiliated group of researchers is exactly the same as an activist-run and occupied space. But even if they are not identical, they often share affinities, processes and struggles, insofar as they find themselves challenged by similar systemic pressures. This is another important advantage of dialectical analysis, which supports an in-depth understanding of systemic pressures as political opportunities due to their synthesizing function, whereby they form otherwise unlikely alliances. A progressive university cluster is no less exposed to neoliberal assaults on social welfare than a collective located in the midst of the most gentrified city in Europe. For this reason, more often than not such clusters transversally align themselves in progressive constellations, emerging for the sake of socializing the means and results of social labour. I think that this process would not have happened were it not for an unprecedented level of systemic integration, introduced by the ever-expanding networks (and nexuses of expropriation) constitutive of artistic circulation.

The institutional forms of the common provoked by this tension are as diverse as the forms of life of the multitude. This diversity is mirrored by the multiplicity of terms used to denote these initiatives, as people talk about monster-, mock-, pata-, conspirational-, exodus- and alter-institutions. It is possible, though, that the institutions in question will not be single institutions at all. Just as wasps and orchids – in the account of Gilles Deleuze and

Felix Guattari – form new assemblages, mutualizing not only their habits, but also their beings, so, too, can the common be instituted as assemblages of collectives, initiatives, public institutions, individuals and affinity groups that sustain the common by reversing the expropriations of artistic circulation, mutualizing gains and seizing opportunities.

The commons – as I have argued – is not only instituted at the micro-scale of a small collective, a cosy activist group, a passing occupation. The commons does not have to be based on principles of immediacy and direct contact; but sometimes operates on the scale of an entire country, like Polish art workers or W.A.G.E. have done in their struggles for wages and social security, or of the planet, such as when a boycott in Sydney reverberated globally, inspiring action in Saint Petersburg. The commons can constitute and revamp scenes, networks, coalitions and swarms of glocalised dimensions. Information is shared, inspiration flows, connections are made and the general intellect is activated. These are not small feats and are achieved by using a variety of means, in some cases a radically democratic form of assembly, but in other radically pragmatic entrepreneurship of the multitude, getting things done in a networked coordination. These assemblages become cradles of an entrepreneurial multitude and of industrious art workers, who collectively seize opportunities to mutualize the benefits of social cooperation, recapturing capitals and dissolving them into the common.

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**TYTUŁ:** Instytucje dóbr wspólnych w artystycznej cyrkulacji: od przedsiębiorców siebie do przedsiębiorczości wielości.

**ABSTRAKT:** Autor analizuje sprzeczności charakterystyczne dla globalnego obiegu sztuki, który ujmowany jest dialektycznie, jako system eksploatacji oraz miejsce potencjalnego wytwarzania instytucji dóbr wspólnych. Analiza przeprowadzona została w duchu metodologicznej syntezy dialektycznego materializmu, socjologii sztuki i badań w działaniu. Teoretyczny namysł nad strukturalnymi determinantami autor łączy z czujną obserwacją praktyk, które wylaniają się w krytycznej reakcji na systemy eksploatacji. Opierając swoją analizę na empirycznych przykładach, wskazuje on na polityczny wymiar społecznych konfliktów, które wylaniają się w toku ekstrakcji wartości z rozproszonej pracy artystycznej cyrkulacji. Szreder argumentuje, że takie konflikty często są wykorzystywane przez progresywnych robotników sztuki do politycznej mobilizacji. Tym samym przedstawia nowe spojrzenie na obecną inkorporację produkcji artystycznej w cykle akumulacji kapitału i formy podtrzymywania społecznej dystynkcji, specyficzne dla późnego kapitalizmu. W artykule wysunięta zostaje teza, że zamiast opłakiwać utratę artystycznej autonomii, należy zmieniać społeczne aparaty regulujące artystyczną cyrkulację na rzecz pracowników i pracowniczek artystycznego obiegu.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** obieg sztuki, konflikt społeczny, dobra wspólne, przedsiębiorcy siebie, strukturalny oportunizm, robotnicy sztuki.

# Toward a Lexicon of Usership

## Stephen Wright



Emergent concepts  
(underpinning  
usership)



Conceptual  
institutions to be  
retired



Modes of usership

1:1 Scale

Allure

Artworlds (art-sustaining environments)

Assisted readymades and prototypes

Authorship

Autonomy

Coefficient of art

Cognitive surplus

Competence

Conceptual edifices

Deactivate (art's aesthetic function)

Disinterested spectatorship

Double ontology

Escapology

Eventhood

Expertise / expert culture

Externalities (positive and negative)

Extraterritorial reciprocity

Gaming

Gleaning

Hacking

Idleness (creative and expressive)

Imperformativity

Lexicon (toward a user-repurposed wordscape)

Loopholes

Museum 3.0

Narratorship (talking art)

Objecthood

Ownership (copyright is not for users)

Piggybacking

Poaching

Profanation

Purposeless purpose

Reciprocal readymades

Redundancy

Repurposing

Slackspace

Specific visibility (sub specie artis)

Spectatorship

UIT ('use it together')

Usology

Usual (the usual ≠ the event)

Usership



'the cause and origin of a thing and its eventual usefulness, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous 'meaning' or 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.'

-  
Nietzsche,  
*On the Genealogy of  
Morals*, II, 12.

## Toward a Lexicon of Usership

The past several decades have witnessed what might be described as a broad *usological* turn across all sectors of society. Of course, people have been using words and tools, services and drugs, since time immemorial. But with the rise of networked culture, users have come to play a key role as producers of information, meaning and value, breaking down the long-standing opposition between consumption and production. With the decline of such categories of political subjectivity as organised labour, and the waning of the social-democratic consensus, *usership* has emerged as an unexpected alternative – one that is neither clear cut nor welcomed by all. For usership runs up against three stalwart *conceptual edifices* of the contemporary order: *expert culture*, for which users are invariably misusers; *spectatorship*, for which usership is inherently opportunistic and fraught with self-interest; and most trenchantly of all, the expanding regime of *ownership*, which has sought to curtail long-standing rights of use. Yet usership remains as tenacious as it is unruly. The cultural sphere, too, has witnessed a shift. Turning away from pursuing art's *aesthetic function*, many practitioners are redefining their engagement with art, less in terms of *authorship* than as users of artistic competence, insisting that art foster more robust use values and gain more bite in the real.

Challenging these dominant conceptual institutions feels disorienting, however, as the very words and concepts one might 'use' to name and clarify use-oriented practices are not readily available. All too often, user-driven initiatives fall prey to lexical capture by a vocabulary inherited from modernity. Yet no genuine self-understanding of the relational and dialectical category of usership will be possible until the existent *conceptual lexicon* is retooled. This requires both retiring seemingly self-evident terms (and the institutions they name), while at the same time introducing a set of emergent concepts. In the spirit of usership this may be done best by *repurposing* the overlooked terms and modes of use, which remain operative in the shadows cast by modernity's expert culture.



‘use the country  
itself, as its own map’  
–  
Lewis Carroll,  
*Sylvie and Bruno  
Concluded* (1893)

## 1:1 scale

Art and art-related practices that are oriented toward user-ship rather than spectatorship are characterised more than anything else by their scale of operations: they operate on the 1:1 scale. They are not scaled-down models – or artworld-assisted prototypes – of potentially useful things or services (the kinds of tasks and devices that might well be useful if ever they were wrested from the neutering frames of artistic autonomy and allowed traction in the real). Though 1:1 scale initiatives make use of representation in any number of ways, they are not themselves representations of anything. The usological turn in creative practice over the past two decades or so has brought with it increasing numbers of such full-scale practices, coterminous with whatever they happen to be grappling. 1:1 practices are both what they are, and propositions of what they are.

Scaling up operations in this way breaks with modernist conceptions of scale. By and large, the art of the twentieth century, like so many post-conceptual practices today, operated at a reduced scale; art was practiced as both other than, and smaller than, whatever reality it set out to map. In his 1893 story, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, Lewis Carroll tells of an impromptu conversation between the narrator and an outlandish, even otherworldly character called ‘Mein Herr,’ regarding the largest scale of map ‘that would be really useful.’

*‘We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile! (...) It has never been spread out, yet(...) the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So now we use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.’*

A book could be devoted to unpacking that pithy parable! Were the farmers right, do maps (embodiments of the will to make-visible) constitute ecological threats? Every light-shedding device will also inevitably cast shadow, and a map (or any representation) is also a light-occluding device. But whatever it may mean to ‘use the country itself, as its own map,’ and



however it may be done, one thing is sure: it provides an uncannily concise description of the logic of art on the 1:1 scale – as good a description of many usership-oriented initiatives as any on hand.

Notorious for creating tales full of mesmerising warps in the fabric of space and time, Carroll undercuts some of the fundamental assumptions about scaled-back representation: its role as surrogate, its status as an abstraction, and its use as a convention that references the real to which it is subordinate. The ‘grandest idea of all’ – that is, producing a full-scale representation – turned out to be useless... And this is precisely the pitfall of so many politically motivated art initiatives today: they remain squarely within the paradigm of spectatorship. Mein Herr’s map, replaceable as it is by the territory it surveys, raises questions about what happens to representation when, at its limit, it resembles its subject so closely as to confound the distinction between what is real and what is not. It evacuates the mapping event altogether. The territory is neither mapped nor transformed in any way. And yet, used ‘as its own map,’ all is transformed. In this case, the representation not only refuses to be subordinate to its subject, it is also interchangeable with it, and even superior, as Carroll slyly suggests. The ontological discontinuity between map and land – and by extension, between art and whatever life form it permeates – disappears as soon as the territory is made to function on the 1:1 scale as its own self-styled cartography. What are the conditions of possibility and usership of a land’s cartographic function, the *becoming-map* of the landscape?

Or more simply, what do 1:1 practices look like, when they start to use the land as its own map? Well they don’t look like anything other than what they also are; nor are they something to be looked at and they certainly don’t look like art. One might well describe these practices as being positively ‘redundant,’ as enacting a function already fulfilled by something else – as having, in other words, a ‘double ontology.’ Yet in many cases, being burdened with an ontology (let alone a double one!) seems to be just exactly what they are seeking to escape from. Certainly they are intent on eluding ideological and





institutional capture, and the kind of defanged representation to which it leads; but that does not describe the full thrust of these projects. They seem to be seeking to escape performative and ontological capture as art altogether. It is certainly possible to describe them as having a double ontology; but it may be more closely in keeping with their self-understanding to argue that this is not an ontological issue at all, but rather a question of the extent to which they are informed by a certain coefficient of art. Informed by artistic self-understanding, not framed as art.



## Allure

When an art-informed practice is ramped up to the 1:1 scale, deactivating its primary aesthetic function and activating instead its usual or useful function, there's no sure way of seeing it as art. There are certainly no perceptual properties to tip us off once its coefficient of artistic visibility drops to the negligible. To perceive such practices as art requires some supplementary theoretical information, something that lets us know that the initiative, whatever it may be, is both what it is, and a *proposition* of what it is; some external knowledge letting us know that the initiative's existence does not exhaust itself in its function and outcome, but that it is *about* something. It embodies meaning. But what does that knowledge do for our *conception* and even our *perception* of an activity which itself remains unchanged? However we may wish describe such practices, something definitely happens to our understanding when we see things anew under the aspect of art – either as having a 'double ontology,' simultaneously and inseparably what they are and artistic propositions of what they are; or as having a certain 'coefficient of art,' thus avoiding the issue of art's ontology altogether; or as having an 'infrathin' dimension, to use Marcel Duchamp's cleverly elusive term for an equally elusive dimension. Artworlders invariably assume that our appreciation of something is somehow enriched or augmented, when we learn it is art inspired. Occasionally, though, we hear someone proclaim, upon discovering that some usual activity or service was grounded in artistic self-understanding, that they 'didn't even know it was art,' and find ourselves wondering whether that discovery came as an epiphany or as a let down...

One concept that has been put forward to describe the shift in how we conceive of and perhaps perceive an object or activity once learning of its concealed dimension is that of 'allure,' a term used by Graham Harman. It may seem paradoxical to draw upon the lexicon of Harman's 'object-oriented ontology' in a discussion of relationally defined, usership-oriented social practices; and doubly so in that 'allure' has unabashedly aesthetic overtones. However, speculative realism, with which Harman is closely associated, has done more than any body of thought to challenge Kantian hegemony. On top of which,

'We need a general term to cover both the comic and charming ways of encountering the sincerity of objects, and the best term I can think of is *allure*.'

– Graham Harman,  
*Guerrilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*



allure doesn't so much restore art's aesthetic function as allow us see to aesthetics from a new angle.

The 'labour of allure,' writes Harman, involves separating an object from its traits, even as these traits remain physically inseparable from the object. 'Allure,' as he describes it, 'is a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing's unity and its plurality of notes somehow partially disintegrates.' These notes become sensual objects in their own right, rather than disappearing into the thing to which they belong as happens under ordinary conditions of perception. Allure is not necessarily aesthetic perception but 'whereas normal experience deals solely with surface qualities,' Harman explains, 'allure apparently brings objects directly into play by invoking them as dark agents at work beneath those qualities.' In some way, allure 'connects the upper and lower floors of an object in the manner of a trapdoor or spiral staircase.' Well, that could suit our purposes quite well, could it not? The thing changes not one bit, yet once the trapdoor springs open and the 'dark agents' are on the loose, nothing could be more different.



'an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.'

–  
Arthur C. Danto, 'The Artworld' (1964)

## Artworlds (art-sustaining environments)

Common sense seems to tell us that we all live in one and the same world. Upholding the conjecture of a plurality of worlds requires a sustained theoretical effort. And yet the consensus around one-worldism has found itself seriously challenged of late: from every quarter, other worlds appear not only possible but far more plausible and desirable than the hegemonic version that continues to pass itself off as the only one. The ontological chauvinism of one-world theory has made some headway into art as well and the mainstream artworld tends to assert a sort of axiological and ontological superiority over its contenders and counterparts. It doesn't so much deny their existence – art tends to know intuitively and by definition that other worlds are plausible, flattering itself as being one of the more sophisticated launch pads for world multiplication – as it questions their value, saying in effect that though other worlds may be plausible, they're just not much good. However, the past decade has seen an increasing number of art-related practitioners scale up from the production of artworks alone to actively conceiving and developing the art-sustaining environments required if their practices are to thrive, often far from the referenced field of art. Artworlds are the places where art is used and, as such, are fundamental to any usological examination of art and art-related practice.



'I realised very soon the danger of repeating indiscriminately this form of expression and decided to limit the production of 'readymades' to a small number yearly. I was aware at that time, that for the spectator even more than for the artist, art is a habit-forming drug.'

- Marcel Duchamp, 'Apropos of Readymades' (1961)

## Assisted readymades and artworld-assisted prototypes

In a short exposé delivered in 1961, Marcel Duchamp offered some acute insights into the logic of readymades – describing them as highly ‘addictive drugs.’ In addition to standard readymades, by which usual objects have their use value suspended (as if placed between invisible parentheses) as they are inserted into the performative framework of the artworld, and his farsighted (but uninstantiated) suggestion of *reciprocal* readymades, which restore use value to artworks through their withdrawal from the performative frame, Duchamp briefly describes an intermediary variant. These, he says, are basically standard readymades, except that they have been modified ever so slightly. He calls these ‘assisted readymades’ (*readymades aidés*). It’s a nice term – and prescient too; today we have a different name for such deeds and contrivances modestly tweaked by artistic subjectivity: we call them *contemporary art*.

While the assisted readymade has become the addiction of the autonomous artworld, apparently intent on pursuing its logic exhaustively until such time as every commodity on earth has an identical counterpart in the realm of art, it is now rivaled by another trope: the artworld-assisted *prototype*. On the one hand, the prototype borrows the principle of industrial-design characteristic of the readymade but rather than embracing the logic of the multiple, it insists upon its experimental uniqueness. One might say that the proliferation of prototypes in contemporary art production is yet another symptom of an ongoing usological shift; but inasmuch as these prototypes are by no means autonomous but require artworld assistance to function at all, they are above all rather spectacular examples of an attempt to square the conceptual architecture and protocols of autonomous art with emergent intuitions. Such prototypes might indeed be functional, if ever they were freed from their artworld-assistance mechanisms and made available for genuine use.



# Authorship

With the rise of possessive individualism in seventeenth-century Europe, a previously unheard-of idea began to gain currency – one that today has achieved hegemony – according to which individuals are conceived as the sole proprietors of their skills and owe nothing to society for them, meaning that these skills (and those of others) are commodities to be bought and sold at the marketplace. One of the conventions for packaging those skills is the conceptual institution of *authorship*. People had been using words, notes and pigment to string together tales, tunes and pictures forever, and though history retains the names of some of the more illustrious, it hadn't occurred to anyone that users of words, melodies and colours could somehow lay claim in any meaningful way to some particular arrangement that they had come up with; that they could claim authorship of some particular configuration of otherwise freely circulating marks and noises, and as such regulate other people's use of them. Previously, ideas and sentences, rhymes and rhythms were socially available for all to use (that is, modify, or not, and reproduce). Authorship became the name for stabilising that semiotic swarm, commodifying it by by congealing it around a single name – a signature – as if it owed nothing to the contributive usership of society. What Michel Foucault famously called the 'authorship function' developed as a way of containing semiotic dispersion around an arbitrary signifier (a proper name).

The twentieth century was not kind to authorship (though by then the institution of authorship had long since triumphed). Psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and post-structuralism amongst many others challenged the idea of a constituent subject underpinning authorship, shifting the locus of production toward the subconscious, the collective, the reader or the viewer... But these critiques, though they deconstructed the notion, paradoxically only strengthened the market value of authorship. Today, authorship continues to function in a sort of holy trinity with objecthood and spectatorship as a mainstay of the mainstream artworld. Indeed, from an investment perspective, authorship has now overtaken objecthood as a monetisable commodity.

The possessive quality of modern democratic liberal theory is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them.

– C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962)



However, authorship is facing a challenge from contributive usership. As users contribute content, knowledge, know-how and value, the question as to how they be acknowledged becomes pressing. With the rise of collectively organised art-sustaining environments, single-signature authorship tends to lose its purchase – like possessive individualism in reverse.





# Autonomy

'the watchword of  
*l'art pour l'art* was  
always the mask of its  
opposite'

–  
Theodor Adorno,  
*Aesthetic Theory*  
(1970)

Autonomy is a tricky term to handle because in the field of art it has come to denote almost the opposite of what it set out to name. Literally, *auto / nomos* means to determine one's own laws. When art slowly but surely pried open a new social space for itself in nineteenth-century European society, on the basis of aesthetic principles laid out by Kant, Hegel, Diderot and others, it was in the name of giving itself its own laws. Its 'conquest of space,' as Pierre Bourdieu calls it, was about wresting art from the overarching control and hindrance of religious and political authorities, carving out a separate sphere for itself where it could develop in keeping with its own internal logic. This space of autonomous art determined the art of modernity. Of course, the autonomy was only ever relative – but it was effective, and jealously guarded. In fact it still is. Incursions from other fields were repulsed vigorously. Indeed, they still are. This autonomous sphere was seen as a place where art was free from the overcodes of the general economy (its own, utterly unregulated market notwithstanding) and the utilitarian rationality of market society – and as such, something be cherished and protected. This realm of autonomy was never supposed to be a comfort zone, but the place where art could develop audacious, scandalous, seditious works and ideas – which it set about doing.

However, autonomous art came at a cost – one that for many has become too much to bear. The price to pay for autonomy are the invisible parentheses that bracket art off from being taken seriously as a proposition having consequences beyond the aesthetic realm. Art judged by art's standards can be easily written off as, well... *just art*. Of contemplative value to people who like that sort of thing, but without teeth. Of course autonomous art has regularly claimed to bite the hand that feeds it; but never very hard. To gain use value, to find a usership, requires that art quit the autonomous sphere of purposeless purpose and disinterested spectatorship. For many practitioners today, autonomous art has become less a place of self-determined experimentation than a prison house – a sphere where one must conform to the law of permanent ontological exception, which has left the autonomous artworld rife with cynicism.



'the coefficient of art is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed'

-  
Marcel Duchamp,  
'The Creative Act'  
(1957)

## Coefficient of art

In a famous eight-minute talk called 'The Creative Act,' Marcel Duchamp put forth the idea of a 'coefficient of art,' by which he referred to the discrepancy, inherent in any artistic proposition, between intention and actual realization, setting out to define this gap by a sort of 'arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.' It is of course this gap that prevents art from being exhausted in the moment of its emergence, conferring on it the potential to evolve through interpretation. Coefficient of art is a nice term, but a strange one too, as if there were something 'unintentionally expressed' in those words – as if it itself had a coefficient of art which was not immediately audible to Duchamp himself. That there might be variable coefficients of art may enable us to understand how art may be construed so as to not fall prey to ontological capture. To speak of 'coefficients of art' is to suggest that art is not a set of objects or events, distinct from the larger set of objects and events that are not art, but rather a degree of intensity liable to be present in any number of things – indeed, in any number of symbolic configurations, activities or passivities. Could it be that art is no longer (or perhaps never was) a minority practice, but rather something practiced by a majority, appearing with varying coefficients in different contexts? What coefficient of art have we here? Or there? What is the coefficient of art of such and such a gesture, object or practice?

It is a radically deontological conception of art – as socialised competence, rather than performed works. A way of describing art gone fallow, and then to seed; finding itself in a permanent state of extraterritorial reciprocity, having no territory of its own. An unexpected fate, but then, art-historical movement is never lineal; if anything, it seems avunculineal (based not on direct lineage but on the looser inspiration drawn freely from those bearing some family resemblance) moving like the knight on the chessboard, one step to the side for every two forward. Lateral shifts do indeed appear to be taking place on the art field. And though in many ways, if contemporary art seems to be the purview of Duchamp's nieces and nephews, sometimes we may feel more like his orphans.



## Cognitive surplus

The expression ‘user-generated content’ describes both individual and, more importantly, social acts. No one generates content just for themselves. Insofar as user-generated knowledge creates meaning, and value, it must be user-shared. Detractors of usership are quick to point to that category’s built-in component of self-interest. Yet even as users pursue self-interest, they mutualise uses and produce a kind of usership surplus, building upon and expanding prior uses. In this way, usership is contributive and yields more than the sum of the individual uses that comprise it: sharing all the tools in a workshop allows everyone to benefit both from the use of the tools and (even more so) from the compounding know-how of their collective usership. Call it a utility surplus. When the mode of usership in question involves connecting brainpower – what Gabriel Tarde calls ‘intercerebral collaboration’ – the type of excess produced is referred to as ‘cognitive surplus.’

For instance, when users tag images, texts, sounds or videos, they make those tags available and avail themselves of others’ tags in an upward spiral. The rise of contributive usership through new media tools came as something of a surprise; indeed, it could not have been predicted because the possibility of that usership was less determined by the tools themselves than by the desire to gain access to one another. The potential impact of usership-driven cognitive surplus is pretty staggering. Wikipedia, for instance, an extraordinary user-made initiative by any account, has been built out of roughly 1% of the man-hours that Americans spend watching television each year... What makes user-uploaded libraries and film archives and p2p file-sharing arrangements work is usership surplus.

User-aggregated task engines, such as reCAPTCHA (those distorted texts found at the bottom of online registration forms, that one has to retype to reduce spam) produce astronomical amounts of cognitive surplus - that in the case of reCAPTCHA is turned toward transcribing all the books and newspapers prior to 1945, whose print cannot be machine read with reliable accuracy. It is estimated that some 200 millions CAPTCHAs are solved by humans every day, requiring on average a mere ten seconds of labour time... which, totals some

‘The atomization of social life in the twentieth century left us so far removed from participatory culture that when it came back, we needed the phrase ‘participatory culture’ to describe it.’

– Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus* (2010)



150,000 hours of unremunerated labour each day. One of the largest factories in the world, driven by inadvertent labour alone. Leaving aside the question as to the universal human value of the tasks into which projects such as reCAPTCHA have yoked internet users, they underscore the prodigious cognitive-surplus potential that aggregated usership embodies. A labour force tantamount to the one required to build the pyramids or put astronauts on the moon – accomplished as the by-product of a primary task! Aggregated usership brings a previously unheard-of potential for cognitive surplus into play, one liable to utterly transform our conception of labour. For now usership has precious little say over the use of its community-generated surplus, and rarely accrues its share of the benefits it produces.



# Competence

If 1:1 scale, usership-driven practices are not performed as art, then what will become of art? For all the invaluable insights provided by performance studies, it is clear that performativity has an inherent blind spot, just as any outlook has; and in the wake of the ostentatious and inflationary use of that concept in any number of theoretical sauces, it is 1:1 scale practices which have laid bare its basic aporia. What performativity overlooks is what exactly is being performed - and with respect to art practices leaving the sandbox of art for the social, that can best be called 'competence.' Now after a century of radical deskilling, to speak of artistic competence is to sound suspiciously conservative, if not downright reactionary - at least to the experts policing the field. But competence is not to be confused here with artistic *métier* or skill in the fine arts tradition. In fact it is to be understood as virtually synonymous with *in*competence, for usership-generated practice is founded on *mutualising incompetence*. On the face of it, that seems an odd thing to say; but, a competence can only be defined as such from the perspective of a corresponding incompetence. And in effect, it is only because a given incompetence is somehow competence-deficient that it calls a competence to the fore. This is of fundamental importance in situations of collaboration, where art engages in skill sharing and competence crossing with other modes of activity whose domains of competence, and hence of incompetence, are very different. By mutualising (in)competence, this difference is made fruitful and productive. For instance, as Robert Filliou once famously put it in his equivalency principle, there is in art a fundamental equivalency between the well done, the poorly done, and the not done. Because this 'principle' seems self-evident to art - making it a basic artistic competence - while remaining almost certainly unacceptable to any other field of activity, it goes some way to underscoring what art per se brings to the table of 1:1 scale practice, once its aesthetic function has been deactivated.

At any event, one can observe a definite tendency amongst contemporary practitioners not to be pressured into constantly performing underlying competences. An analogy can be drawn here with Noam Chomsky's famous distinction

'The difference between linguistic competence and linguistic performance can be illustrated by slips of the tongue, such as 'noble tons of soil' for 'noble sons of toil.' Uttering such a slip doesn't mean that we don't know English but rather that we've simply made a mistake because we were tired, distracted, or whatever. Such 'errors' also aren't evidence that you are a poor English speaker... When we say someone is a better speaker than someone else, we are referring to performance, not competence.'

- Kristin Denham & Anne Lobeck, *Linguistics for Everyone* (2010)



between linguistic competence (inherent to all native speakers of a natural language enabling them to distinguish a grammatically coherent speech act from one that is not) and linguistic performance (actualising that competence in producing speech acts). One can, of course, always perform a competence; but one *need* never perform it for that competence to exist. This gives art particular potency in its contemporary moment of trans-social migration: it can deploy its (in)competences and self-understanding in social settings far removed from art, without ever performing them as art.

This is a huge issue, because it has to do with the socialisation of art and the repurposing of existent institutions, both conceptual and physical. Chomsky's insistence on competence has often been criticized as being ahistorical – referring to an inherent, hard-wired attribute – and thus unable to account for change in the way language is actually used or 'performed'. This may not be an insurmountable obstacle, though, inasmuch as competence can also be construed itself as something dynamic, constantly being informed through a kind of feedback loop by developments in performance. What is perhaps most attractive about the idea that competence need never be performed in order to exist is that it draws attention to, and provides an escape route from, an event-centered conception of art – one of the most rarely challenged mainstays of artworld ideology, according to which art is not only made up of events (exhibitions, publications, production of works) but is itself seen as event. On the one hand, the everyday, here-and-now perspective of usership doesn't allow this privilege. But on the other hand, without those everyday acts of usership and repurposing, there is no way to account for how events actually come about! To put it differently, one might associate event with performance and competence with everyday usership – something largely invisible to the event-focused attention economy but which may actually be the engine of social transformation. It is certainly fair to say that there is an extraordinary amount of art-related competence at work and at play that is simply not being performed – that is, not being captured institutionally and performed as event. The implications for curatorship are obviously immense.



# Conceptual edifices

We dwell in conceptual edifices. They shelter and confine us, with or without our consent, even in the great outdoors. The architecture of these complex, invisible edifices relies on conceptual building blocks repurposed from previous edifices. Though it is rare to be able to point to the architect of any given conceptual edifice, as their users, we are all somehow their co-architects. We use them for our purposes, for without users, they are just empty shells; with time, they come to bear the brunt of usership's wear and tear and ultimately can no longer contain the uses to which they put. By thwarting purposes, they invite repurposing: with a bit of help from their usership, they inevitably undergo change: an annex is added here, a tunnel and a trapdoor there. But that can only go so far. At some point users tear them down and establish new ones. Needless to say, the conceptual architecture of these edifices very much determines the physical architecture of all society's institutions. Many conceptual edifices of modernity, including Spectatorship, Authorship, the Aesthetic Function of Art, the Nation State and Productivism are showing signs of severe stress and need to be torn down so their constituent parts can be put to new ends.

'Just as the reader can make a new book through reading... the user can make a new building through using.'

- Jonathan Hill, *Actions of Architecture: Architects and Creative Users* (2003)





'The creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative.'

–  
Giorgio Agamben,  
*Profanations*

## Deactivate (art's aesthetic function)

'Deactivate' is a verb often used by Giorgio Agamben to name the political conditions of possibility for genuine paradigm shifts, which can only happen, he contends, if residual power structures are effectively deactivated. If they are merely displaced or overhauled, their power remains active. To describe the paradigm shifts underway in many contemporary discourse-based and interventionist art practices, investigator Mabel Tapia rightly speaks of the 'deactivation of art's aesthetic function.' It is a stinging formulation, to be sure, but it succinctly captures the radicality of the moment. To say that art's aesthetic function has today been deactivated (and, where still active, has become something of a decoy), is not of course to say that artworks no longer have an aesthetic, or are somehow aesthetic-free – which would be absurd. All sensual things have an aesthetic; that cannot be deactivated. But they do not necessarily have an *aesthetic function*. It was Kant who assigned art an aesthetic function: he did not believe art was functionless, only that it should not be seen as having a purposive or a goal-oriented function, but one which endlessly unfolds in disinterested aesthetic contemplation. As long as that function remains active, art remains outside the realm of usership and can have no operative use value.

Deactivating art's aesthetic function, rendering it inoperative, opens art up – by Agamben's account – to other functions. To a heuristic function, for instance; or an epistemic function. Or the more operative functions of 1:1 scale practices.

But art's aesthetic function is so intimately bound up with many contemporary understandings of what art is that the aesthetic function has become almost ontologised – as if that historically determined (and altogether recent) function were inseparable from art's very mode of being... exactly what Kant had hoped for. This accounts for the reticence amongst some practitioners to envisage the deactivation of art's aesthetic function. Other practitioners, however, have concluded that it is only by deactivating this debilitating, use-precluding function that they can make way for a purposive aesthetics of art; an aesthetics repurposed in the name of usership.



## Disinterested spectatorship

Immanuel Kant is the single greatest architect of the conceptual edifice of modern, autonomous art. For all intents and purposes, the conceptual architecture of today's art museums (and, hence, their physical architecture of display) is underpinned by Kant's two intermeshed and brilliantly paradoxical imperatives, formulated at the end of the eighteenth century. On the one hand, he argued, art is characterised by its 'purposeless purpose'; on the other it was geared toward 'disinterested spectatorship.' The former imperative was to ensure art's universality, preserving it from the realm of use and utilitarian interest, enabling it to freely embody what he rather nicely called 'aesthetic ideas,' which could be the object of knowledge. But Kant realised that he somehow had to protect this objective dimension of art as knowledge from the slippery slopes of subjective appreciation, even while explicitly acknowledging that art was something that could only be apprehended subjectively... Hence his second, complementary brainchild, 'disinterested spectatorship.' It would be difficult to overstate the almost fantastic robustness of this conceptual arrangement - which, of course, is precisely what accounts for its extraordinary longevity.

For Kant, an actor in any given situation - or, worse still, a *user* - is not 'autonomous,' and is incapable of theoretical onlooking. As one of Kant's most lucid commentators, Hannah Arendt, points out: 'The standard is the spectator. And this standard is autonomous.' Kant was adamant about these issues, because he felt that if spectatorship fell prey to subjective interest, all was lost. In what can only be described as a pre-Wittgensteinian moment in his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant argued that one could not *say*, before a painting or other artwork, 'this is beautiful *for me*.' For to thus qualify an aesthetic judgement subjectively, *for me*, rather than making a universal claim, was an illicit use of language. Such subjectivity was reserved for issues of preference (Kant mentions Canary wine...), and was precluded from aesthetic judgement that required disinterested spectatorship.

If disinterested spectatorship continues to enjoy strong art-world support, not least of all because it is so entrenched in

'Kant's view is different: one withdraws to the 'theoretical,' the onlooking, standpoint of the spectator, but this position is the position of the Judge.'

- Hannah Arendt, *Lectures of Kant's Political Philosophy* (1970)



institutional architecture, it has recently been somewhat upstaged by a not unrelated notion – what Jacques Rancière's refers to as *emancipated spectatorship*... Seeking to save spectatorship from the inherent passivity to which it has been relegated by such unlikely adversaries as Bertolt Brecht and Guy Debord, Rancière has argued that 'it is in the power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists...' Spectators, he claims counterintuitively, know what they see, and know what to do with it, translating and counter-translating in terms of their own experiences. Like *The Emancipated Spectator* as a whole, the argument is enticing, but odd. Does it not stretch the definition, and agency, of spectatorship a notch too far? Genuinely emancipated, spectatorship rolls up its sleeves, as it were, becoming something else altogether, and it may not be unreasonable to name that something else 'usership.' In many respects, *The Emancipated Spectator* reads much better if one replaces 'spectator' with 'user'...



## Double ontology

1:1 scale practices operating within a paradigm of usership, actually being what they are – house-painting outfits, online archives, libraries, restaurants, mushroom hunts, whatever – and at the same time artistic propositions of what they are, can be described in different ways, depending on what set of properties (or allure) one wishes to emphasise. They can be described as *redundant*, inasmuch as they fulfill a function, as art, which they already fulfill as whatever it is they are. They can also be said to have a *double ontology*: a primary ontology as whatever they are, and a secondary ontology as artistic propositions of that same thing. The sorts of things Marcel Duchamp once punningly referred to as ‘reciprocal readymades.’

‘It was like living a secret life, somehow dishonest, but I felt that to reveal the purpose of the undertaking would compromise the outcome, like the Schrodinger’s Cat example, where the observance of something changes the outcome.’

–  
Raivo Puusemp  
‘Thoughts on Control’  
(2013)

Practices with ‘double ontologies’ do not immediately appear as art, though that is where their self-understanding is grounded. To that degree, at least, they do indeed break with the basic tenets of autonomous art. Whatever its descriptive power, however, the notion of a double ontology has two downsides. Firstly, it is not entirely sure that two ontologies are better than one, even if a double-take of this kind allows for considerable usological and escapological play. In fact, in some ways, it may be twice as cumbersome, and an enormous concession to institutional theory, reinforcing as it does the idea that art has an ontology at all. Secondly, to describe practices in these terms is to make them inherently reliant on performative capture to repatriate them into the art frame – otherwise, their secondary (artistic) ontology remains inert, and not so much disappears as fails to appear in the first place. From the perspective of institutional theory, this is intolerable: what is not performed as art, is not art, and so is lost to posterity. But in another way, that may be precisely the point. To disappear from that ontological landscape altogether in order to gain traction somewhere else.



'Escape is all that remains.'

-

Henri Laborit,  
*Éloge de la fuite*  
(1976)

## Escapology

Escapology, broadly speaking, refers to the rapidly growing field of empirical enquiry and speculative research into the ways and means, tactics and strategies of escaping capture. Not so much Houdini-style escape from physical bonds (though his methodologies hold metaphorical appeal for both researchers and practitioners as well as for popular culture), as from the more insidious forms of capture in contemporary society that hobble action, desire and thought by cloaking them in often invisible overcodes. Capture may be ideological, encouraging agents to think in terms of categories whose mere existence is their sole merit. Or it may be institutional, framing practices into a sphere of action that determines their specific visibility and forecloses their potential deployment. Ever increasingly, both in the general economy and in the symbolic economies of art and activism, capture may be logistical, subsuming human decision-making and rationality itself into algorithms. Capture may be epistemic, terminological, but whatever its configuration, escapology is about fleeing its normative clutches. The mode of escapology most widespread in the mainstream artworld has to do with escaping the ontological capture that is the bane of autonomous art practice, whereby actions or objects have their very mode of being (their 'ontology') captured as art; just art. This form of capture relies on that most perversely neoliberal form of capture – operative or performative capture, whereby things are put to work, made to perform. Escapology, in short, is the theory and practice of suspending the operations of all these mechanisms of capture.

Yet escapology is a paradoxical undertaking, and an often-ambivalent science. For obvious reasons, escape itself can neither assert itself for what it is, nor perform itself as escape: it must always appear impossible from the perspective of power, yet at the same time it must be always already under way. Escapology, then, is less the study and implementation of sets of tactics or strategies for avoiding capture, than the acknowledgement of a simple, concrete fact: *escape happens*. This is escapology's *a priori*, and though it seeks to better appreciate the escapological drive in contemporary culture, it does not see escape as a self-conscious attempt to escape *from* something. It envisages escape in terms of offensive retreat; as such, it shares



none of the projective logic of an event-driven vision of history. Whereas (left-leaning) art historians and social theorists have conditioned us to think of emancipation, and indeed of art itself, in terms of events – whether past or yet to come – escapology rejects this masculinist perspective as one premised on the luxury of being able to wait for the coming event or to look back on the one which took place. Escapology is the science of the kind of everyday elusiveness, leakage and doing-others that can really only be described as ‘escape’ once power structures shift to capture its movement. Ultimately, escapology’s examples, those that instantiate its concrete truth, all lie beyond, or behind, the event horizon itself.

In lieu of an example, then, consider this speculative etymology suggestively put forth by a contemporary escapist. The verb ‘escape’ is usually thought to derive from the Vulgar Latin *excapare*, from *ex-* (‘out’) + *capio* (‘capture’). It may well be, however, that it comes from the Late Latin *ex cappa*, in reference not to capture at all but to a ‘cape’ or cloak which remains behind even as the living body which it had clad has slipped away.

'not infrequently,  
in these situations,  
you were really art;  
it's just that no one  
noticed'

–  
Mladen Stilinovic,  
*Dear Art* (1999)

## Eventhood

Eventhood is the horizon line in the spontaneous ideology of much art-historical discourse. Art historians have accustomed us to seeing art in terms of events: artworks, exhibitions, publications, movements... construing art as an irruptive event, penetrating stable appearance with novelty and all the attendant fireworks. But this is a strangely masculinist understanding of art-historical process. To focus on the epiphany of 'events' – and to see art itself as event – rather than on fugitive occurrences, is to foreground particular moments when a set of material, social and imaginary ruptures come together and produce a break in the flow of history. As Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos have argued in *Escape Routes – Control and Subversion in the Twenty-First Century* (2008), an escapological perspective is inherently different: 'An event is never in the present; it can only be designated as an event in retrospect or anticipated as a future possibility. To pin our hopes on events is a nominalist move which draws on the masculinist luxury of having the power both to name things and to wait about for salvation. Because events are never in the present, if we highlight their role in social change we do so at the expense of considering the potency of the present that is made of people's everyday practices: the practices employed to navigate daily life and to sustain relations, the practices which are at the heart of social transformation long before we are able to name it as such.' In our society of the event, the event itself disappears from view. It becomes the horizon line itself.





# Expertise / Expert culture

'B's competencies  
enrich A's  
competencies  
if C's incompetencies  
enrich B's  
competencies  
then C's  
incompetencies  
change polarity and  
move to a higher  
order'  
-  
François Deck,  
'Reciprocal Expertise'  
(2004)

From the high-minded perspective of expert culture, users' claims are inherently shot through with self-interest. Take the experts of State. On the one hand anxious to uphold their regime of exception with respect to the market-driven private sector, public-sector experts are quick to point out that they serve users, rather than customers or clients; and on the other hand, they are the first to again uphold their exceptional status by stigmatizing users (or consumer advocacy groups) as the Trojan Horse of this same market-driven logic... But the person who takes such and such a bus line every morning at dawn to get to work knows something about that line which no urban planning expert, whose perspective is informed by countless disinterested 'studies,' can simply ever know. This cognitive privilege is user specific.

It is expert culture – whether the editors, the urban planners, the curators – which is most hostile to usership: from the perspective of expertise, *use* is invariably *misuse*. But from the perspective of users, everywhere, so-called misuse is simply... use. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre points out a fundamental difference between the cognitive space of usership and the epistemological chauvinism of expert culture.

*'The user's space is lived – not represented... When compared with the abstract space of the experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of the everyday activities of users is a concrete one which is to say, subjective.'*

Of course, this is also what makes usership something of a double-edged sword, which is precisely what makes it interesting to consider, not as an alternative to the supposedly universal category of the 'proletariat,' for instance, but as a way of rethinking the dialectics of collective and individual agency.

Michel Foucault is premonitory in this respect. In his usage, usership at once designates the site where individuals and their comportments and needs are expected, where a space is available for their agency, both defining and circumscribing it; and it refers to the way in which these same users surge up and barge into a universe, which, though accustomed to



managing their existence, finds itself thrown off balance by their speaking out as users. In other words – and this is related to Foucault's theory of political action – it is not as if users burst forth in places where they are not expected; rather, the very immediacy of their presence is ambivalent and cannot be reduced to a progressive recognition, nor to a mere cooptation by the powers that be. Governance, control, disciplining devices of all kinds, necessarily generate users whose agency is neither exclusively rebellious nor purely submissive toward an exterior norm. They know they will never be owners; that they will never eliminate that dimension of exteriority from the power relations that impact on them. Users take on those instances of power closest to them. And in addition to this proximity, or because of it, they do not envisage that the solution to their problem could lie in any sort of future to which the present might or ought to be subordinated (very different in this respect to any revolutionary horizon). They have neither the time to be revolutionary – because things have to change – nor the patience to be reformists, because things have to stop. Such is the *radical pragmatism of usership*.



## Externalities (positive and negative)

Externalities are the by-products of usership. Economists define externalities as the inadvertent or indirect benefits or costs that result from a given activity or transaction. Acid rain, for instance, is considered a negative externality of using coal-fired power stations. In calculating the overall social value of that type of energy production, one would have to calculate the intended benefits and the negative externality of being surrounded by dead forests, and so on. One classic example of a positive externality is beekeeping. Beekeepers keep bees primarily for their honey, which accounts only for a modest contribution to the general economy. A spillover effect or positive externality of their activity is the pollination of surrounding crops by the bees (some 80% of all crops are pollinated in this way) – which generates a non-monetised value incommensurably greater than the value of the harvested honey. The implications for usership are tremendous.

Detractors of usership invariably point to its negative externalities. Champions of ownership bemoan the fact that they cannot monetise the positive externalities of their activities that users enjoy for free. But usership is in fact akin to pollination – users are like bees, as it were, producing incalculable externalities. As Yann Moulier Boutang has argued (rather optimistically) in *The Bee and the Economist*, we may currently be transitioning from an ‘economy of exchange and production toward an economy of pollination and contribution’ – that is, an economy of usership.

‘pollination is but one example of a complex symbiosis underlying the many contributions not based on market exchange’

–  
Yann Moulier Boutang,  
*The Bee and the Economist* (2010)



'Always implicated,  
and yet elusive.'

–  
Maurice Blanchot  
*The Infinite  
Conversation*  
(1969)

## Extraterritorial reciprocity

What happens when art leaves its 'own' territory? When it moves into situations of collaboration in other territories? When it migrates south, socially and epistemically speaking? All too often, we tend to devote attention to what art does when it gets to whatever new territory it invests, rather than thinking about what happens to the place art left behind. But it is no less important to attend to the fate of art's place of departure than to its point of arrival. Does it not open a kind of invisible void through its often conspicuous absence – taunting culture, the way nature abhors a vacuum? This is the operation of *extraterritorial reciprocity*, a perhaps excessively multi-syllabic way of describing how in leaving its own territory for another, in becoming a 1:1 scale practice, art vacates, in a gesture of reciprocity, a space for other social practices to use. This space, and all that goes with it, formerly reserved for art but suddenly made available to other forms of endeavor, is often a tremendously desirable and useful resource for practitioners from other fields – the very fields where art may have migrated and who repurpose art's vacant space their own use.

It is easy to see what would tempt art to migrate southwards, slipping its moorings and making its way into the shadows of the attention economy; in trading off autonomy for the social; exchanging artworks for practices: the desire to gain traction in the social realm and not find itself, time and again, written off as 'just art.' But the space art leaves behind is a polyvalent one, and the swap may be mutually beneficial. Extraterritorial reciprocity, then, consists of art vacating its convention-bestowed territory in the artworld, making it available to other activities, in a gesture of reciprocity as it sets up shop in a different domain. This is an art without a territory, which operates in the intersubjective space of collaboration. Yet that 'space' is really no space at all, or only in the metaphorical sense of the term; it is probably more accurate to speak of a 'time' of collaboration and intervention – the time of common yet heterogeneous purpose. But the geographical model, with its cartography of partially overlapping territories, has the advantage of providing a tangible picture of what practitioners of reciprocal extraterritoriality are really after. Constitutive mobility. Elusive implication.



## Gaming

Some would contend that usership is about gaming the system – misusing its intentions to achieve better outcomes. That may be, but insofar as one could also argue the converse (that the system games its usership), the question becomes: is there anything outside gaming? Certainly there are different ways of gaming, but is there anything beyond gaming? Is playing the spoilsport not also a game? It is by no means a moot point, for we know that in language games, for instance, usership alone determines whatever meaning there may be. In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga argues that what he calls the ‘troublesome *only* feeling’ (i.e., that it’s *only* a game) is abolished in play. Is that also true for art? The Situationists, who quote Huizinga’s remarks on ‘just gaming’ approvingly, sought to develop a ‘superior game’ that would be characterized by the disappearance of any competitive dimension - ‘a bad product of a bad society,’ in their eyes. One of the last texts written by Guy Debord is a short treatise called ‘Notes on Poker,’ a game he played frequently and about which he held highly unorthodox views. Since poker is a game of bluff, he argued, the good player never bluffs, nor pays any heed to other players’ bluffing, but only ever plays his hand. It’s hard to say whether the theory has any application in the game of poker; but it provides astounding insight into the game of usership. Spectators see bluff everywhere and take it into account. Users consider bluff to be negligible and follow only the knowledge they have of their means at any given moment. If others bluff, it is of no concern to users. Usership is not beyond gaming; indeed, it’s just gaming – but playing for real.

‘The bad player sees bluff everywhere, and takes it into account. The good player considers it negligible and follows only the knowledge he has of his cards in hand at any given moment.’

– Guy Debord, ‘Notes on Poker’ (1990)



'Leftovers are clusters  
of possibilities'

-

Pierre Pons, in Agnès  
Varda, *The Gleaners*  
and I (2000)

## Gleaning

Gleaning has been a customary right to farm products in Europe and elsewhere since the Middle Ages. It refers to both the right and the practice of gathering leftover crops from farmers' fields after they have been commercially harvested or where reaping is not economically viable. Gleaning differs from scrounging in that, unlike the latter, it is legally regulated - it is a common and informal type of usufruct that ensures gleaners a circumscribed right to use (*usus*) others' property and to enjoy its fruits (*fructus*). Because it is specifically regulated (for instance, after thrashing, the collecting of the straw and the fallen grains of wheat is authorised) it is distinguished from pilfering - defined as the offence of stealing fruit or vegetables before they have fallen to the ground. A more subordinate mode of usership than, say, poaching, gleaning is nevertheless significant because it points to historically entrenched rights of common usership over resources found in private domains. Today, immaterial gleaning is widely practiced by a whole host of art-related practitioners; its agricultural antecedents offer it a haven from encroachment by groups lobbying on behalf of increased intellectual property rights and the foreclosure of the epistemic commons.



# Hacking

‘Hacking’ is a great old Saxon word. A hack is a kind of beveled cut with an axe. Not a clean slice, but an oblique chop – opening something up in a way that’s not easy to repair. There has been much speculation about when and why the term was adopted by programmers. But the most thought-provoking discussion of what hacking means socially is to be found in *A Hacker Manifesto*, by McKenzie Wark. It is a rare thing, and the measure of genuine intellectual creativity, when a writer is able to develop and deploy a full-fledged, conceptual vocabulary and use it in a sustained way: the writing becomes at once the staging ground and the first application of a new way of talking.

‘What calls for a creative application of the hack is the production of new vectors along which the event may continue to unfold after its initial explosion into social space, and avoid capture by representation.’

– McKenzie Wark,  
*A Hacker Manifesto*  
(2004)

A hacker, in Wark’s lexicon, is very different from the image of the super-specialised anarcho-programmer, or criminal subculture, which the term still conjures up for most people; it refers to someone who hacks into knowledge-production networks of any kind, and liberates that knowledge from an economy of scarcity. ‘While not everyone is a hacker, everyone hacks,’ writes Wark, suggesting that hacking is really quite akin to usership of knowledge, information, images, sounds and other social resources that one might find useful. In a society based on private-property relations, scarcity is always being presented as if it were natural; but in the contemporary context, where intellectual property is the dominant property form, scarcity is artificial, counter-productive – and the bane of hackers – for the simple reason that appropriating knowledge and information deprives no one else from accessing it. This is a key issue in art-related practice – indeed, Wark talks about hacking as if it *were* an art-related practice – for the system of value-production in the mainstream artworld is also premised on a regime of scarcity, underpinned by the author’s signature. Wark hacks his rather unorthodox theory out of Marxism: like Marx, Wark believes human history can be conceptualised in terms of class relations and conflict. Today though, he argues, this conflict is most acute between what he calls the ‘vectoralist’ class (the class that owns the pipelines, the satellites and the servers, which has come to supplant the hegemony of the capitalist class) and the new productive class that Wark describes as hackers, whose purpose it is to free knowledge from illusions of scarcity. The hacker class, he argues, arises out of



the transformation of information into property, in the form of intellectual property.

This is a usefully redescriptive understanding of hacking. And it sheds an interesting light on the Obama Administration's unwavering reaction to the recent Snowden hack, whose shock waves continue to reverberate through global civil society: 'The documents are the private property of the United States Government and must be returned immediately.' As if the hacked documents' ownership were their salient feature! In another way, though, it makes sense to see hacking as a way of turning documents against their owners. In political terms, one might argue that leaking documents is the 'southern' response to the 'northern' privatization of information – southern being understood in an epistemic and political sense. A counterhegemonic gesture, using the information power produced by the adversary – the readymade documents – to tactical advantage. Something that in the hacker milieu is often referred to as 'hack value.'

Hack value is difficult to define and ultimately can only be exemplified. But, by and large, it refers to a kind of aesthetics of hacking. For instance, repurposing things in an unexpected way can be said to have hack value; as can contributing anonymously to collectively used configurations, in the spirit of free software. Steven Levy, in his book *Hackers*, talks at length about what he calls a 'hacker ethic.' But as Brian Harvey has argued, that expression may be a misnomer and that what he discovered was in fact a hacker *aesthetic*. For example, when free-software developer Richard Stallman says that information should be given out freely – an opinion universally held in hacker circles – his opinion is not only based on a notion of property as theft, which would be an ethical position. His argument is that keeping information secret is inefficient; it leads to an absurd, unaesthetic duplication of effort amongst the information's usership.



'Stasis is the new movement.'

–  
Kenneth Goldsmith,  
*Uncreative Writing*  
(2011)

## Idleness (creative and expressive)

Can we think of art, not as something that must be performed, but which might well exist as a latent competence, an active yeast or undercurrent beneath the visible field of events, all the more potent in that it remains unperformed? Can we not think of art as capable of a self-conscious, Bartelby-like decision to *prefer not to* (in this case, not to inject competence into the art frame) but instead to bide its time and, perhaps, redirect that competence elsewhere?

Even in its most proactive, productivist moments, there is something profoundly idle about usership. Something slack. It uses what is, what's there. Plagiarism, appropriation, repurposing, patching and sampling, cutting and pasting, then databasing and tagging for reuse – these are the domains of usership's expertise. Translating is a form of usership (of a text, a word, a string of words, an image or a sound): users are translators, transposing what they find in one idiom into another. And while translating can be hard work, it is creatively idle, making do with what is available rather than feeling compelled to add something else.



*‘aktivnoe strmelenie  
k nichemu’*

–

Mit’ki Motto (USSR,  
1980s)

# Imperformativity

Usership is characterised by its radical imperformativity. It eschews performative capture. To perform usership would be to spectacularise it – that is, to negate it, to make it into something else. Imperformativity is not usership’s horizon, but rather its modus operandi.



# Lexicon

The powerful conceptual vocabulary inherited from Western modernity presents us with an unusual – indeed, historically unprecedented – paradox. The conceptual toolbox is full; all the word tools are there, and in great shape too. But, somehow, they're not quite the right tools for the jobs at hand; they are the right tools for a job no longer needed – tools calibrated to older conceptual edifices, founded in mainstream artsustaining environments, aligned to practices (before they were even called that) stemming from aesthetic autonomy. And yet, since they are the tools that continue to enjoy the legitimacy of expert culture, their very presence precludes the proper identification of the right job...

Where the crisis of the lexical toolbox's inadequacy becomes excruciatingly obvious, however, is where the continued use of a tool warps, twists and distorts emergent intuitions, forcing contemporary practices into twentieth-century molds. Since we can neither think nor even name art without appropriate terms, retooling our conceptual vocabulary has become a crucial task, one that can only be undertaken by fostering terminological cross-pollination with other avenues of human activity. What we need, perhaps more than anything, is a retooled lexicon. This has nothing to do with drumming up some sort of new expert speak or coining neologisms, and everything to do with repurposing common terms from other lexical fields, other practices of knowledge. The only way to produce a meaningful, user-repurposed wordscape, uninhibited by an overcoded vocabulary, is to listen to the language games of other activities, experimentally importing notional edifices. An extradisciplinary retrofit of sorts, paying heed to the ongoing usological turn in contemporary practice.

Rather than seeing art as the lens through which to consider conceptual migration, it might well prefer to see itself as a host to, and guest of, lexical migrants. If it is to have a useful critical edge, and if it is to challenge invisible norms, naming must be a tool for undoing apparent self-evidences – that 'misty mantle of illusion,' as Nietzsche caustically put it, 'that counts as essential, so-called 'reality'.' Which is tantamount to wresting 'art' from 'art,' sundering art from itself.

*'Unspeakingly more depends on what things are called than on what they are. (...) Only as creators can we destroy! But let us not forget that in the long run it is enough to create new names and plausibilities in order to create new 'things'.'*  
– Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 58. (1890)



'Whatever it wins,  
it does not keep.  
It must constantly  
manipulate events in  
order to turn them  
into 'opportunities'.'

–  
Michel de Certeau,  
*The Practice of  
Everyday Life* (1980)

## Loopholes

Loopholes are the quintessence of usership-instantiated tactics since they offer ways into systems without physically damaging them. Literally, or least historically, 'loopholes' were the narrow vertical windows found in castle walls. The defenders of the castle on the inside referred to them as 'arrow slits,' using them to launch arrows against assailants, who, on the other hand, referred to them as loopholes – the only anchor point for the loop on their climbing rope, and hence the only ready means of gaining entry without breaching or destroying the wall or gate. Thus a loophole in a law - or customary use, institutional convention and so on – often contravenes the intent of the law without technically breaking it. Users have an inherent knack – call it the cognitive privilege of usership – for finding ambiguities in a system which can be used to circumvent its implied or explicitly stated intent. Loopholes are sought out and used strategically and creatively by users, including artists, in all manner of circumstances, including taxation, security, elections, politics, different levels of the legal system and civil liberties.

Artists as users are in a way particularly well equipped to exploit such grey zones inasmuch as one of the reflexes of artistic competence is '*détournement*' – never responding forthrightly to expectations, nor refusing to engage, but rather countering obliquely. Art itself, like the space of autonomy within which mainstream practices operate, is often used as a foil to avoid the legal consequences that would apply to the same action if it were not 'art' or carried out in art's name. Usership-driven art uses loopholes both in the mainstream art system and beyond to circumvent any number of overcodes. The highly paradoxical instrumentalisation of artistic autonomy is one widely practiced example.

More consequential forms of loopholing invariably occur in sectors of society where legal norms have failed to keep pace with social need – including migration, mores, ownership issues and various fields of expert privilege – as expressed through the actual usership of available legal instruments. These slackspaces of normative action (sometimes called legal voids) emerge quickly but are swiftly shut down, making



loopholing a particularly dynamic mode of under-the-radar operation. Users of such practices know from experience and observation that while it is both fun and possible to outfox the authorities for a while, once the loophole has come to light, their window of opportunity is already closing and it's time to move on.



'I leave it an open  
book'  
-  
Macedonio  
Fernandez, *The  
Museum of Eterna's  
Novel* (1925-52)

## Museum 3.0

Museums these days find themselves in the throes of a crisis of self-understanding, hesitating between irreconcilable museological paradigms and userships. On the one hand, their physical architecture of display is very much top down: curatorship determines content which is oriented toward spectatorship. On the other hand, while concerned about protecting their 'vertical dignity,' to the degree that they have tried to keep pace with the usological turn in the field of culture, museums have embraced elements of 2.0 culture. Not in the digital-media sense of the term – we are not talking about some kind of online museum – but insofar as their model of legitimation is at least partially premised on visitor experience, feedback and input. One might argue we have already implemented a 2.0 museum model, we simply haven't acknowledged it yet. Or more precisely, we have usership-dependent museums, integrating elements of user-generated content, without recognising the contributive usership and its collective input. Museums have so far proved reluctant to make way for usership, both because their physical architecture is geared toward display (not use), but above all because their conceptual architecture would have to be thoroughly revamped in order to make this integration meaningful.

But broader economic developments in society may soon compel them to take bolder steps. Both from a practical and a theoretical perspective, it seems pointless to continue to bemoan the dismantling of the social-democratic consensus and its public institutions, including museums, by the neoliberal revolution. This war of attrition can go on indefinitely, but with ever diminishing returns – and entrenchment in a resistential posture of defending the status quo is a depressing prospect. The moment calls for a bolder strategy. What may be required is to rethink the conceptual architecture of our evolving institutions from a perspective outside the public / private binary – repurposing tools, categories and opportunities inadvertently made available to new ends. Here again the category of usership – a form of collective subjectivity no more governable by neoliberalism than it is palatable to social democracy – comes to mind. In contemporary 2.0 culture, usership generates both content and value; indeed, it is a locus of





surplus-value extraction, for it is rarely if ever remunerated. In this respect, 2.0 culture is both a promise, and a swindle. For the time being, 3.0 names the prospect of fulfilling that promise. Though contemporary modes of accumulation have come to rely on usership – making it a category that is unlikely to go away any time soon – it stands opposed to that mainstay of neoliberalism that is ownership. For, simply, users are not owners. Nor are they spectators. But what if the museum made way for usership, actually embedding it in its *modus operandi*? A museum where usership, not spectatorship, is the key form of relationality; where the content and value it engenders are mutualised for the community of users themselves? Where the usership of museums, like that of languages, produces their meaning? Current scenarios predictions about what 3.0 culture might look like invariably focus on the advent of the ‘semantic web’ and insinuate that user engagement will somehow wane in favor of object-oriented content – data talking to data. But this seems excessively ideologically determined, as if users only actively use by default and would really prefer to consume. The offline 3.0 museum, like a kind of walk-in toolbox for usership, could be a place where user engagement – user wear and tear – was explicitly acknowledged as generating value, and as such was entitled to share that value.

Remunerated usership (not financial retribution, perhaps, but in some negotiated form) is tantamount to a cultural revolution, and could only go hand in hand with a politics of usership based on the counterintuitive self-understanding that usership in fact generates value rather than consuming it; for the time being, many users remain grateful not to have to pay for use. When in the 1970s Jean-Luc Godard quipped that television viewers ought to be paid to watch, it was assumed he was sarcastically commenting on the quality of broadcasting. Thirty-five years on, the remark appears utterly premonitory: if usership generates value, it should be remunerated. If it produces surplus value, great! We may be witnessing the end of work as we know it. But that surplus value must be redistributed within the community that produced it, not foster capital accumulation for a rentier class of property owners, who play no useful or productive role in the economy *per se*, but who



monopolise access to the use of physical and financial assets and technologies. In *From Capital-Labour to Capital-Life*, Maurizio Lazzarato has recently argued that ‘capture, both in creation and realisation, is a reciprocal seizure open to the unpredictable and infinite, now that ‘creator’ and ‘user’ tend to merge.’ All too often, creation and use find themselves radically separated by political economy. But applied to museum usership, they might be made to merge: usership, far from being synonymous with consumption (destruction), spills over into production. Usership is creation socialised, and as such engenders a surplus.



## Narratorship (talking art)

'Things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense. You seem to start at the beginning. And in reality you have started at the end.'

- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938)

When artistic practice takes place on the 1:1 scale (far from the performative frames of the artworld) how can it be repatriated into the fold of art without betraying its fundamental thrust and use value? In the absence of such reterritorialisation, how can we ensure that it not be lost to posterity? How is documentation of the project to be shaken from its state of inertia? Or its residual by-products wrested from their opacity? And their exhibition torn from its mute passivity? In modern times, it was the aesthetic function of art that guaranteed their activation, giving them a voice – ensuring what Michel de Certeau would call their '*prise de parole*.' It was an ambivalent operation, for while it was art's aesthetic regime that authorised them to speak, to mean, no sooner did it do so that retracted that speech in the name of the aesthetic overcode to which they remained subaltern. Today, though, with the deactivation of art's aesthetic function, it is more precisely the document, the exhibition, the proposition itself that seem to call for a gesture to free their potentiality from its latency; now it is they who lay claim to our speech, not the other way round. In other words, the activation of practices that have deliberately impaired their coefficient of specific visibility cannot be dealt with by a *narrative*, as was supposed by late twentieth-century narratologists, but only through the active agency of *narratorship*.

Narratorship names the vital function of the narrating subject and, as such, opens up a new discursive life for the object (or the document) behind the exhibition's back. The inflationary rise of artists' talks, curated panels, open forums and rap sessions all and sundry has been one of the more marked developments in contemporary art over the past decade – and one of the most significant inasmuch as the need for 'talking art' may be seen as palliating a knowledge crisis. By and large, the tendency has been to integrate talking into the existent conceptual and physical architecture of the artworld; to think of the verbal as a mere enhancement of the visible, rather than perceiving it as a potential alternative to often reifying exhibition structures. Though such narratorship can be adapted to the modalities of visibilisation – indeed, anything can be – it is worth considering this tendency more closely and ask whether artists talking about their work is not a thoroughly vi-



able and particularly non-reifying way for art to appear in the world – including object-based work. Isn't it invariably more stimulating to hear artists present their work than to have to go and look at their exhibitions? Beyond the trivial explanation that this is because the artist's presence evidences an existential engagement in the work that is not otherwise tangible, it may also reveal that the site of art itself has undergone an historical shift; that art itself is not immediately present, but withdrawn, its coefficient of specific visibility too low for it to be detected and identified as such. One might then contend that in the case of off-the-radar practices, talking art – like the popular musical form of 'talking blues' – is a means of activating a proposition as art. Narratorship as a mode of using art seems to point the way to a thorough overhaul of how art is apprehended, and where it takes place.



# Objecthood

Objecthood, in a triangulated arrangement with authorship and spectatorship, forms one of the linchpins of the mainstream contemporary artworld. Indeed, a generation ago, it was *the* dominant conceptual institution in art – becoming the target for politicised concept artists who felt that by attacking, and as they put it, ‘dematerializing’ the reified, fetishised and commodified art object, they could bring down what they saw as a corrupt art system. Though it led to some fantastic art, the assault failed, or more precisely perhaps, succeeded in a perversely unforeseeable way. Objecthood turned out to be a more flexible category than it had seemed (or than it had been). By-products of interventions and snapshots of performances became art objects, as did protocols for immaterial conceptual pieces. And not only did the residual documents become fetishized objects; artistic objecthood itself expanded its purview with documentation and performative capture becoming dominant artistic genres. What had previously been seen as support documents (if indeed they were seen at all) became the object of art. More unexpectedly still, the very characteristics that concept art objected to in objecthood spread to non-objectal artistic experience, once it became clear that it too could be commodified and monetized. To a large degree, in a kind of zero-sum game, objecthood has now been surpassed by what might be called ‘eventhood’ as a hegemonic conceptual institution.

‘Perhaps most important, Conceptualists indicated that the most exciting ‘art’ might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art.’

–  
Lucy Lippard,  
‘Escape Attempts’  
(1997).



'Theft!'  
-  
Pierre-Joseph  
Proudhon,  
*What is Property?*  
(1840)

## Ownership (copyright is not for users)

Proudhon's definition of property ownership is at once the most sparing, and unsparing ever proposed. Ownership describes a legal institution that codifies a relationship of exclusivity with respect to an object, or any property construed to be an object, in terms of rights and control. It is made up of complex sets of instruments of regulation and enforcement, and is such a mainstay of liberal ideology that it would enjoy virtually self-evident status in majority opinion were it not for... usership, which challenges its very conditions of possibility by insisting on use value and rights of use.

There isn't much land left to privatise – it's mostly already in the hands of owners – so ownership is now expanding vertically, codifying the notion of 'intellectual property' as fast as it can dream up the arguments and erect the firewalls. But whereas land is, if not scarce, at least finite, privatising the vertical domain of knowledge requires creating artificial scarcity in the realm of potentially unlimited profusion. And here ownership knows very well the name of its nemesis: usership. Copyright laws and other legal fictions to crack down on p2p and TorrentShare sites, 'premium' (i.e., paid) subscriptions to user-fuelled media like YouTube and other streaming sites, beguiling algorithms for monetising user-supplied search results by Google, even a special 'photocopillage' tax on photocopy machines. Capitalism is still grappling for a durable model of accumulation for the twenty-first century, but in every case the force to be reckoned with is the same: usership. A category that must by no means be done away with, since it is the locus and agent of surplus-value extraction; but one that cannot be easily governed and whose inherent interests stand opposed to ownership.



'We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of an immense intelligence.'

– John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (1927)

## Piggybacking

Literally, of course, piggybacking refers to carrying a person on one's back or shoulders. By extension, it also refers to transporting something by having it ride on the back of something else – a kind of free ride at no inconvenience to the vehicle since it was going there anyway. Piggybacking has become a widespread mode of usership in the past decade due to the advent of wireless Internet connections. Piggybacking on internet access is the practice of using another subscriber's wireless service without their explicit permission or knowledge. It is a legal and ethical grey zone, regulated in some places, permitted in others. It is a form of freeloading (another nice term), different from parasitism and more akin to a logic of the epiphyte: whereas parasites are the uninvited guests who overeat to the point of endangering the host's food supply, and thereby ultimately imperiling the well-being of the parasites themselves, the epiphyte lives in a negotiated form of symbiosis with the host. As a form of usership – one very often exploited by art practices operating outside of art-financed domains – piggybacking is akin to reading someone else's newspaper over their shoulder, using a drinking fountain, reading from the light of a porch lamp, that is, benefitting the user at no expense to others. Art practices that use platforms like skype, for example, as their medium or support might be described as piggybacking off a free and widely used (though often somewhat dodgy) service. In a society whose distribution of resources is so massively and systemically skewed, piggybacking may be seen as a user-driven form of redistributive symbolic justice.





'Everyday life invents  
itself by poaching in  
countless ways on the  
property of others.'

-  
Michel de Certeau,  
*The Practice of  
Everyday Life* (1980)

## Poaching

Poaching is a particularly evocative mode of usership, drawing attention to some of usership's most salient features. Though it may seem rustic and agrarian, it can also be seen as the rural predecessor to hacking, if the latter is understood and practiced as a form of digital poaching – armed with usb thumb drives, say, rather than snares and guns.

In 2008, ace-hacker Aaron Swartz wrote his 'Guerrilla Open Access Manifesto,' where he argued for the 'need to take information, wherever it is stored, make our copies and share them with the world...We need to download scientific journals and upload them to file sharing networks.' The good news, if Swartz can be believed, is that this is exactly what is happening. Possibly the most interesting passage in the Manifesto is not where he argues for a principled practice of document sharing amongst users, but where he claims that it's what's occurring anyway:

*'Meanwhile, those who have been locked out are not standing idly by. You have been sneaking through holes and climbing over fences, liberating the information locked up by the publishers and sharing them with your friends. But all of this action goes on in the dark, hidden underground. It's called stealing or piracy, as if sharing a wealth of knowledge were the moral equivalent of plundering a ship and murdering its crew.'*

Swartz's image of 'sneaking through holes and climbing over fences' draws explicitly on the rhetoric of poaching. Breaches in fences are a recurrent element in its iconography. In most folklore, if not in painterly representation (presumably because of the class bias of its patrons) poachers were widely identified with and celebrated. They were invariably portrayed as one step ahead of the gamekeeper. Traditionally, poaching had nothing to do with the mercenary-style massacre of endangered species with which it has become associated today; it was all about the proactive redistribution of resources, like wood, fruit, fish, game... Legally speaking, poaching is hunting that, for whatever reason, is not allowed. Poaching is one of those 'catch-all' terms for off-the-radar modes of intervention, whereby in the shadow of the night,



unauthorised agents (poachers) make stealthy forays behind the enclosures of the owner's land, capture their prey, and withdraw. And in that respect, though born of necessity (the young Marx famously linked the rise of poaching from private woodlots to a rise in unemployment), for those who practice it, poaching has always been a bit of a game – there is a kind of aesthetics of poaching, which distinguishes it from say cattle rustling. Could it be that both the scale and mode of poaching constitute a useful paradigm, and genealogy, for many contemporary stealth practices whose game are documents rather than venison?

One of the characteristics of poaching is that it is by definition rigorously *imperformative*. A poacher who signs his work, or who *performs* his poach, is no poacher at all – or at least not for long. Poaching inherently withdraws from the event horizon, taking cover in the usual. Events are easy to spot; the usual, on the other hand, is invisible. The subjectivities we are called upon to perform in our prosumer society, though they may appear subversive, are easily read by power. All too often, it seems, we perform our rebellion. As Proudhon put it, in a moment of pre-Foucauldian insight:

*'To be ruled is to be kept an eye on, inspected, spied on, regulated, indoctrinated, sermonised, listed and checked off, estimated, appraised, censured, ordered about by creatures without knowledge and without virtues. To be ruled is at every operation, transaction, movement, to be noted, registered, counted, priced, admonished, prevented, reformed, redressed, corrected.'*

That's a pretty thorough, and entirely frightening checklist. In *Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*, James Scott refers to a whole realm of what he calls 'infrapolitics,' practiced outside the visible spectrum of what passes for political activity in event-oriented historiography. It is a term that grasps perfectly the imperformative, everyday practice of poaching. Because poaching happens.

*'The state has historically thwarted lower-class organisation, let alone public defiance. For subordinate groups, such politics is dan-*



*gerous. They have, by and large, understood, as have guerrillas, that divisibility, small numbers, and dispersion help them avoid reprisal. By infrapolitics I have in mind such acts as foot-dragging, poaching, pilfering, dissimulation, sabotage, desertion, absenteeism, squatting, and flight. Why risk getting shot for a failed mutiny when desertion will do just as well? Why risk an open land invasion when squatting will secure de facto land rights? Why openly petition for rights to wood, fish, and game when poaching will accomplish the same purpose quietly?"*



## Profanation

Profanation, as Giorgio Agamben defines it, is ‘the returning to common usership what had been separated in the sphere of the sacred.’ To suggest that profanation instantiates a *return* is of course to imply that common use constitutes the initial state. In Europe today, Agamben is the philosopher who has looked most searchingly into the issue of usership, recently disclosing that the forthcoming final volume of *Homo sacer* will be devoted to the question. That which is sacred is removed from the realm of usership; it is intangible, untouchable, and must not be profaned by consumption. This is true literally and figuratively. Today, as Agamben argues, the usership prohibition has found its place of choice in the Museum, where it is protected by the stalwart institution of spectatorship. Of course the museification of the world is almost total – spectatorship allows its extension far beyond the museum walls to any ‘separated dimension where that which is no longer perceived as true and decisive has been transferred.’ It’s art, but, well, *it’s just art*. This is why in the institution of spectatorship, the analogy between capitalism and religion becomes so evident. And why usership, understood as the reality of using, is a political act: for it repurposes what is used. Repurposing, by transforming former ends into new means, neutralises the sacred. In this respect, *usership is synonymous with the act of profanation*. The useful, indeed the used in general, is profane.

In his essay on profanation, Agamben both challenges a fundamental proscription of autonomous art and Kantian aesthetics (that art, in essence, must not be profaned... under the threat of ceasing to be art at all) yet also seems to rule out the possibility of something like... ‘useful art.’ For in the act of artistic profanation, as he sees it, objects do not so much gain *use* value as a kind of *ludic* value... But what about practices that have multiple uses? Can 1:1 scale practices not be conceptualized in terms of profanation – inasmuch as they would seem to embody the very essence of a living form that has become inseparable from life itself?

‘Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Profanation deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized.’

– Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (2007)



'When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance...'

— John Dewey,  
*Art as Experience*  
(1934)

## Purposeless purpose

Some two centuries ago, through two exceedingly potent, and paradox-laden concepts, Immanuel Kant defined the mechanisms of capture for autonomous art. Art, Kant argued, is geared toward 'disinterested spectatorship,' through which he introduced the disinterested spectator as the new heroic figure of aesthetic experience. Since everything about that term precludes usership, it dovetailed nicely with Kant's other architectural brainchild: art's 'purposeless purpose' – by which he did not mean that art was useless or without purpose; rather, its usefulness is its uselessness, its purpose is to be purposeless. In a world hell-bent on cost-benefit analysis and utilitarian rationality, this circularity is not without virtue. But it comes at an exceedingly high cost: it deprives art of any purchase, any use-value in the real. To repurpose art and develop a form of purposive aesthetics, then, would require breaking completely with the autonomous sphere of art and the values underpinning it. And this is precisely where we are now with respect to usership-purposed practices: facing the imperative to build a new art-sustaining environment from the ground up.



## Reciprocal readymades

'Wanting to expose the basic antinomy between art and readymades I imagined a 'reciprocal readymade': use a Rembrandt as an ironing board!'

- Marcel Duchamp, 'Apropos of Readymades' (1961)

In a late text, Marcel Duchamp set out to distinguish several different types of readymades. Of particular interest in the present context is the genre he punningly described as 'reciprocal readymades.' Anxious, he claimed, 'to emphasize the fundamental antinomy between art and the readymade,' Duchamp defined this radically new, yet subsequently never instantiated genre through an example: 'Use a Rembrandt as an ironing-board.' More than a mere quip to be taken at face value, or a facetious mockery of use-value, Duchamp's example points to the symbolic potential of recycling art – and more broadly, artistic tools and competences – into other lifeworlds. In that respect, the reciprocal readymade is the obverse of the standard readymade, which recycles the real – in the form of manufactured objects – into the symbolic economy of art. Historically speaking, the readymade is inseparably bound up with objecthood: it refers to a readymade, manufactured object. Yet, it would be reductive to confine the readymade to its objective dimension alone, if only because it provides such a strong general image of the reciprocal logic between art and the real.

In the same way that framing an object in an art context neutralises it as an object (distinguishing it, as it were, from the mere real thing), can the de-framing of an artwork neutralise it, in reciprocal fashion, as art? This is an important question, and one to which Duchamp was expressly alluding, because it would enable art to produce a use-value. Since Immanuel Kant's influential championing of 'purposeless purpose' and 'disinterested spectatorship' as defining features of our engagement with art, it has been broadly held that art cannot produce use-value. Kant argued in effect that art, unlike design, could not be evaluated and appreciated on the basis of its objective purpose – be it external, regarding the object's utility, or internal, regarding the object's perfection. In so doing, Kant sought to preserve art from the realm of the 'merely useful'; and in our contemporary world where utilitarian rationality and the sort of cost-benefit analysis to which it leads reign supreme, where art is regularly co-opted by such profit-driven, subjectivity-production industries as advertising, to even mention use-value tends to smack of the philistine. Of course one



might say that in such a context there is something circular about defending art on the basis of its uselessness alone (or even its 'radical uselessness,' as Adorno put it), for it would seem to suggest there is something very worthwhile and thus useful about something entirely lacking use-value...

At any event, an increasing number of art-related practices in the public sphere cannot be adequately understood unless their primary ambition to produce a use-value is taken into account. In trying to grasp what is at stake and at play in many of the art-informed practices which are, today, self-consciously concerned with generating use-value by injecting artistic skills into the real, it is no doubt useful to anchor their approach in art-historical terms. And perhaps the most straightforward way to understand such works is as attempts to reactivate the unacknowledged genre of artistic activity conceived by Duchamp. For though he never got beyond the speculative phase – never actually putting his thoughts on the reciprocal readymade into practice – Duchamp clearly saw it as a way of 'de-signing' art, of removing the signature by using an artwork to produce a use-value. For it is quite difficult to imagine how an artist-signed artwork (a 'Rembrandt'), put to use as an ironing board, could then be re-signed as an 'artistic' ironing board, at least not within the sphere of autonomous art. Indeed, Duchamp's point was that (until such time as the art-sustaining environment changed substantively) it would revert to non-art status – the price to be paid for acquiring use-value, though it would assuredly be a most uncommon ironing board. With the rise of usership-determined practices, it just may be that after lying dormant so long the reciprocal readymade's time has finally come.





## Redundancy

Art has become redundant, in every sense of the term. Far from its doom, this may prove to be its salvation. The challenge for this century's art production is to free itself from its economic and social dependency on the institutional-market structure. To do that, it must, from an art-historical perspective, free itself from the conceptual and physical architecture bequeathed upon us by the twentieth-century art economy. Art must find a self-sustaining existence. Perhaps it already has; call it redundancy.

One thing that twentieth-century art could never wholeheartedly commit itself to be was something other than art – subordinating itself, ontologically, to whatever activity or entity it also was. This is a singularly uncourageous posture, but art's privileged ontological status enabled it to subordinate all other modes of objecthood and activity to itself. Redundancy means putting an end to art's twentieth-century ontological exception.

So, what is 'redundant' art? It is not possible to define it by what it looks like – it doesn't look, or not look, like art. It looks like what it is: the redundant thing or action. Redundancy ends the charade of artistic autonomy. It is neither more nor less creative or expressive than whatever it also happens to be. Redundant art covers all those activities and passivities, enterprises, initiatives and pursuits, which, though informed by art and an art-historical self-understanding, are in fact just what they are and what they appear to be. They are redundant only as art.

A redundant system is one that duplicates the same system. Art is not redundant the way in anatomy a second kidney is said to be a redundant organ (the body being able to function with one alone). Art is redundant as an artistic initiative: its artistic ontology is utterly redundant with respect to its primary ontology. Of course twentieth-century art did make regular forays into life systems, life worlds, beyond the porous confines of its autonomous sphere. But it invariably did so as art – at best as a replication – not as a redundant instance of what it also happens to be.

In other words, art's function as a liberating force is dependent not only on its becoming something other than art but also maintaining its identity as a specific material as well as a symbolic practice.'

–  
Rasheed Araeen,  
*Art Beyond Art*  
(2011)



Redundancy is invariably seen as depreciative, a term used to discredit something – be it an activity, phenomenon, object, or utterance – whose function is already fulfilled by something else. However, the notion of redundancy is a highly useful focusing tool in understanding the logic of forward-looking art in the early years of our century. Repurposing redundancy allows us to name in a new way practices that do indistinguishably what is already being perfectly well done in other realms of human activity, and to do it with an entirely different self-understanding. Though redundant, they are by no means superfluous. Today, we see art apparently withdrawing from the world (at least from the artworld); yet upon closer scrutiny, that withdrawal appears more as a merging with the world, a quest for redundancy.



# Repurposing

There is often a kind of heuristic advantage to frontloading the prefix ‘re’ onto verbs and nouns all and sundry. This is certainly the case with the watchword of usership, ‘repurposing’ – a term that captures both usership’s paradoxical idleness (no need to add anything new) and its transformative dynamic (putting the given to new purposes). In a way, we’ve already got all the tools and skills we require – they’re just not being *used* for the best purposes; we need to wrest them from their original purposes to repurpose them for other tasks. The immediate task at hand is to develop purposive artistic practices.

‘Remember that bull’s head I made out of the handlebars and the seat of a bicycle, which everybody recognized as a bull’s head? I’d like to see it metamorphose in the opposite direction. Suppose my bull’s head is thrown on the scrap heap. Eventually some guy may come along and say, ‘Now there’s something that would come in very handy for the handlebars and seat of my bicycle...’ And so a double metamorphosis would have been achieved.’  
–  
Pablo Picasso  
(1957)



'provide the strength  
for breaking the rules  
in the very act that  
brings them into play'

-

Michel Foucault,  
'Pierre Boulez:  
Passing Through the  
Screen' (1982)

## Slackspace

Slackspace is a technical term in computer science that refers to the under-used or residually-used storage space of file clusters on a hard drive. Typically, computers store files in clusters of a fixed size – for instance, files may be stored in clusters of four kilobytes. If the computer stores a file that is only two kilobytes in a four-kilobyte cluster, there will be two-thousand bytes of slackspace. It's as if the house were bigger when measured on the inside than when measured on the outside! At any rate, in almost any given file (unless its size is exactly divisible by the system's cluster storage size), there is an available space – one that can be used for other purposes. Typically, this slackspace is not empty, but contains leftover information from previously deleted files – making it of great interest to forensic investigators. But hackers often use slackspace as a hiding place for information they wish to conceal, encrypting it – in the strictest sense of the term – in the cluster of an unrelated file. One need not be a conspiracist to see the terrific use-potential of such spaces. Expert culture certainly sees it as 'wasted' space, just waiting to be misused...

However, it is its metaphorical descriptive power which is of interest to us in our contemporary moment of free terminological migration. Slackspace may refer to any similar gap between parts, the wiggle-room between law and custom, the space of play between prescription and actual usership. Slackspace names a vacancy where the imperatives of productivism and conformity are tolerably low; a highly creative space, caught between two normativities (just as a vacant lot is suspended between a defunct usage and an as-yet unrealised one), making it a realm of potentiality. Socially speaking, it is the adaptive space where opportunity effects change. By no means a revolutionary space (it by no means proclaims the overthrow of norms, merely their incessant renegotiation), it is the usual realm of usership.

Though he never uses the term, we derive this understanding of a slackspace as constitutive of usership from Michel Foucault. In the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, catchily entitled 'The Uses of Pleasure,' Foucault performs a close reading of how *chresis* – the classical Greek term for use or



usage – diverged from codified rules; how ‘use’ names a kind of gap between desire and law – a space of leeway and play never entirely chosen by those who use it, but whose use changes the rules of the game.



'The one caveat is that it must not be called art.'

-

Allan Kaprow,  
*Essays on the Blurring  
of Art and Life*  
(2003)

## Specific visibility (*sub specie artis*)

In a seminal statement written in 1964, Donald Judd argued that the emerging art of the time could best be described under the heading of 'specific objects.' Close to fifty years on, one might argue that the condition of art today is one of its specific visibility. Judd's 'specific objects' didn't much look like previous art; they were more 'minimal' in many respects; but they weren't invisible, particularly not as art, since the whole point was to frame them as such, thereby provoking a disruptive event of perception within the conceptual and physical architecture of the artworld.

Today, for better or for worse, art has become a question of specific visibility within institutional frameworks, or of specific invisibility without. Yet interestingly, as ever more art eludes those performative frames, the whole issue of art's invisibility becomes dedramatised, as if art were on the cusp of yet another ontological shift, moving from being determined by its coefficient of specific visibility to the coefficient of art it imparts on its host form. Less a question of being, than of intensity. Which of course only augments art's elusiveness, and immunity to scopic capture. It is unsurprising, indeed it is self-evident, that the smaller things get, the harder they are to see. We need magnifying glasses to read fine print, electron microscopes to see virus-size circuitry. Though not visible to the naked eye, small things are not invisible in conceptual terms; just very small. Their 'invisibility,' if makes any sense at all to talk in that way, is a mere function of their scale. In and of itself, this is of no interest for a politics of perception.

What is interesting, and always somewhat surprising, is the invisibility of often very large, even cumbersome, otherwise utterly obvious things; things that elude visual recognition *per se* despite their 'hyperobtrusive situation' – as Edgar Allan Poe puts it – right before our eyes. This ontological invisibility concerns an entire set of otherwise disparate objects and activities whose specific visibility has effectively been somehow purloined. Now an ontological fate as unique as this does surely raise some conceptual issues; and some key political ones as well. The category of paradoxically invisible, yet otherwise visible things is that of 1:1 artistic practice.



# Spectatorship

'Do not enrich the spectacle. Diminish it.'

–

Guy Debord,  
*Secret Instructions  
for a Putsch in  
Culture* (1961)

To a still greater extent than objecthood or authorship, spectatorship continues to enjoy almost self-evident status in conventional discourse as a necessary component of any plausible artworld. Indeed, in both popular and learned parlance, there is a tendency to conflate looking at something, and in some cases simply seeing something, with spectatorship. Yet spectatorship is not synonymous with mere viewing; it is a powerful conceptual institution in contemporary societies with a specific history – one whose historical underpinning needs to be unpacked.

The critical sermons of contemporary art are rife with celebration about free and active viewer participation. Yet there is something almost pathetic about such claims at a time when ever more practitioners are deliberately impairing the coefficient of artistic visibility of their activity, beating an offensive retreat into the shadows of the artworld's attention economy, envisaging forms of relationality and usage that fly in the face of the very regime of visibility designated by the collective noun 'spectatorship.' When art appears outside of the authorised performative framework, there is no reason that it should occur to those engaging with it to constitute themselves as spectators. Such practices seem to break with spectatorship altogether, to which they increasingly prefer the more extensive and inclusive notion of usership. Is the current mainstream focus on spectatorship – evidenced by a number of recent theoretical publications (Marie-Josée Mondzain's *Homo Spectator*, Christian Ruby's *Figure of the Spectator*, or Jacques Rancière's *Emancipated Spectator* being but the most speculative examples) – anything more than a last-ditch effort to stave off a paradigm shift already well underway? The real question, of course, remains: what alternative forms of usership of art are today being put forward to displace and replace it? But to better understand the full implications of this now largely obsolescent institution, it is useful to recall its historical trajectory.

It was Nietzsche, who, in the third essay of his *Genealogy of Morals*, first pointed out how the concept of 'spectatorship' was cunningly introduced into aesthetics in the late eight-



eenth century by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*, ‘unconsciously’ making the spectator the new heroic figure of art of the modern era. Nietzsche’s own rather conventional proposal – reintroduce the artist as the authentic subject of art – is less interesting than his mordant critique of what is implied by the paradigm shift brought about by Kant. The problem with Kant’s aesthetic paradigm, he argues, is that it sets up a conceptual edifice in which ‘a lack of any refined first-hand experience reposes in the shape of a fat worm of error. ‘That is beautiful,’ said Kant, ‘which gives us pleasure *without interest*.’ Without interest!’ One can only imagine Nietzsche’s incredulous howl at the very thought... Yet his insight is unassailable: Kant introduced what he called ‘disinterested spectatorship’ into aesthetics and made it one of the two mainstays of the conceptual (and hence physical) architecture of museums for the two centuries to come. The consequences of Kant’s paradoxical brainchild can hardly be overstated, for not only did he introduce a fundamentally passive form of relationality (spectatorship) as the cornerstone of the aesthetic regime of art, he shored it up by insisting on its *désintéressement* – in other words, that it remain exempt from any possible use, usership or use value. This would be the grounds for art’s permanent status of ontological exception throughout the twentieth century.

In *Shipwreck with Spectator*, Hans Blumenberg examines the genealogy of spectatorship, with particular attention to the metaphorical imperative of spectatorship to contemplate the distress of the shipwrecked from a safe vantage point on dry land – metaphorical, that is, of theory’s relationship to practice (*‘theoría,’* he points out somewhat speculatively, derives from *theoros*, or ‘spectator’). It must be said, however, that the advent of Kantian spectatorship had the tremendous advantage of opening up a new space for aesthetic practice – the autonomous field of art. Yet, at the same time – though this would only become obvious two centuries on when art had conquered and fully occupied that space – it tethered art to autonomy and to spectatorship. Today we see cutting edge practices seeking to wrest themselves from spectatorship and the autonomy of art (perceived as shackles rather than opportunities), not in a



desire to return to a pre-modern paradigm, but to reactivate a mode of usership that remains forbidden under the regime of spectatorship. It is nevertheless remarkable to see the extent to which the conceptual architecture of contemporary art conventions of display derive from Kantian premises; and to what extent they have been at once normalised through institutional embodiment and naturalised in discourse – even as they are becoming increasingly out of joint with emergent practices.



‘you have to struggle  
with or deform an  
engineered social  
programme to  
practise complex  
social exchange’

–  
Richard Sennett,  
*Together* (2012)

## UIT (‘use it together’)

There is a loathsome expression that has gained currency recently, which refers to taking pride in something, accepting something fully, adapting it to one’s purposes, claiming one’s due: ‘*Own it!*’ If it appears innocuous, that is only because the ideology of ownership is by now so deeply embedded in the contemporary psyche. The expression is sometimes even applied to public institutions – but rather than users being invited to ‘take usership’ of their local museum or school through their active involvement (*‘Just use it!’*), validation is expressed in terms of ‘owning them.’ As if ownership were synonymous with pride in, and care of, objects and actions, as opposed to the thoughtlessness and carelessness of usership. This rhetoric of ownership in idiomatic speech is a revealing symptom in our era of cross-the-board privatisation.

Although ownership names a relationship to an object based on exclusivity, usership names a far more hands-on mode of engagement. DIY (do it yourself) culture emerged in industrial societies when the division of labour had atomized people’s relationship to the production process and ratified expert culture; it was based on taking up and using tools and instruments traditionally reserved for experts. Punk culture took DIY’s challenge to expert prerogative a step further – to the level of DIT (do it together). Its watchword has enduring appeal: ‘Here’s a chord. Here’s another. Now let’s start a band.’ Of course with the mass availability and usership of digital media, what might be called UIY (use it yourself) culture has become a major form of knowledge and value production. But can one really use alone? Usership is a strangely impersonal collective noun – it doesn’t really name a collectivity of users, but it definitely implies multiplicity. ‘*Séparés, on est ensemble*’ – Stéphane Mallarmé’s wonderful line from *The White Water-lily* – nicely grasps the mutualization both by affinity and by contagion implied by usership. UIT (use it together) is one way to invite users to consciously build upon this social dimension of usership.



# Usology

'Pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures and ruses of users compose the network of an antidiscipline...'

– Michel de Certeau,  
*The Practice of  
Everyday Life* (1980)

Usology is an ambulant and approximate science, devoted to the study of uses and modes of usership. Current trends in usological research have tended to focus more specifically on what might be referred to as the 'tactical polyvalence of usages.' The reference here is of course to Michel Foucault's famous formulation regarding the 'tactical polyvalence of discourse,' where he emphasizes the complex and unstable play whereby 'discourse may be at once an instrument and an effect of power, but also an obstacle, a barrier, a hindrance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.' By examining – and accompanying – usership in action, usology is attentive to this constitutive polyvalence. Usership names both what actualises the function of a space, a building or an initiative and what, in one and the same movement, thwarts that same function. Because this duality is constitutive of usership, it has been the object of particular usological scrutiny. Usology, however, is a far more sweeping field of extradisciplinary enquiry, spanning everything from the history of the ways and means of using to usership's conditions of possibility as put forward in various theories of practice.



'to think life as that which is never given as property but only as a common use... will demand the elaboration of a theory of use and, moving forward from that, a critique of the operative and governmental ontology that continues, under various disguises, to determine the destiny of the human species.'

–  
Giorgio Agamben,  
*The Highest Poverty*  
(2013)

## Usual (the usual ≠ the event)

A generation ago, the work of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau persuasively analysed the goings-on, inventiveness and usership of what has come to be called 'the everyday.' Though it's hard to believe, the everyday has since become a victim of its own unforeseeable success. It has been championed, commodified and framed by spectatorship. For a long time, I considered 'the everyday' to be the environment of usership – the way eventhood is to spectatorship. But it was a poor fit. I couldn't quite figure out what the right concept and the right word might be to name usership's sphere of engagement. I never did figure it out; that's not how language use works. I overheard it one day. A regular stepped up to the bar, exchanged a quick glance with the barman who asked, invitingly, as if confident in what he already knew, '*the usual*'?



'Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use.'

–  
Ludwig Wittgenstein  
(circa 1945)

# Usership

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a new category of political subjectivity: that of usership. It's not as if using is anything new – people have been using tools, languages and any variety of goods and services (not to mention mind-altering substances) since time immemorial. But the rise of user-generated content and value in 2.0 culture, as well as democratic polities whose legitimacy is founded on the ability of the governed to appropriate and use available political and economic instruments, has produced active 'users' (not just rebels, prosumers or automatons) whose agency is exerted, paradoxically, exactly where it is expected.

Usership represents a radical challenge to at least three stalwart conceptual institutions in contemporary culture: spectatorship, expert culture, and ownership. Modernist artistic conventions, premised on so-called disinterested spectatorship, dismiss usership (and use value, rights of usage) as inherently instrumental – and the mainstream artworld's physical and conceptual architecture is entirely unprepared to even speak of usership, even as many contemporary artistic practices imply a regime of engagement and relationality entirely at odds with that described by spectatorship. In the artworld and other lifeworlds, it is expert culture – whether embodied in curatorship or formulated by the city hall's design office and other wardens of the possible – which is most hostile to usership. From the perspective of expertise, premised as it is on notions of universality and the general interest, usership is a particularly egregious mode of self-interest. For the expert, to put it bluntly, use is invariably misuse. Usership represents a still more deep-seated challenge to ownership in an economy where surplus-value extraction is increasingly focused on use: how long will communities of use sit by as their user-generated content value, rather than being remunerated, is expropriated and privatised?

Usership is neither revolutionary (usership shares none of the messianic potential attributed to the proletariat) nor is it docile or submissive. It is hands-on, task specific, proximate and self-regulating. And it is operative only in the here and now – it has no transcendental horizonline. We might put it this way:

users always and only play away from homegames; they don't have their own field, and just use those that are available. For one thing, because users know they are not owners, and that whatever their demands, whatever their successes, users know that, no matter what, it will never be all theirs. The challenge is clearly to imagine, and to instantiate, a non-instrumental, emancipated form of usership.

Though usership remains dramatically undertheorised – indeed, the word itself, though immediately understandable, has not been ratified by those indexes of expert culture called dictionaries – there are some compelling philosophical underpinnings that may help to better grasp the concept. The most over-arching is perhaps Ludwig Wittgenstein's user-based theory of meaning in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein argues that in language, all the meaning that there is, and all the stability, is determined by the users of that language, and by nothing else. It seems radically relativistic, yet language usership provides a relative stability of meaning – for the language is used by all, owned by none. It changes, but no one user can effect change; we are, at best, co-authors in the language game of usership. Wittgenstein's insight provides a sort of prism through which to imagine all forms of usership in terms of a self-regulating language game.

So if usership names a category of engagement, of cognitive privilege (if one may call it that), of those whose repurposing of art is neither that of a spectator, an expert nor an owner, then why has art-critical discourse and practice been so reluctant to adopt it? Artworld ideologues speak of 'participation,' often sexing it up with adjectives like 'free' and 'emancipated.' We speak freely of 'art lovers,' but 'art users' smacks of philistinism – which certainly says something about the lingering aristocratic values underpinning contemporary art's ostensibly democratic ethos. Perhaps part of the reason for the artworld's discomfort with usership is that it is an eminently unromantic category. It has none of gusty tailings of hijacking, pirating, '*détournement*' and other such forms of performative high jinks that have become so fashionable in artworldly circles. It may ultimately better name the underlying logic of





those operations, but it remains essentially different. Because it is radically imperformative. To perform usership would be to spectacularise it, make it an event – that is, to negate it, to make it into something else. Here the distinction between spectatorship and usership is clearest cut: spectatorship is to the spectacle as usership is to... the usual.

Usership, then, names not just a form of opportunity-dependent relationality, but a self-regulating mode of engagement and operation. Which makes usership itself a potentially powerful tool. In the same way that usership is all about repurposing available ways and means without seeking to possess them, it can itself be repurposed as a mode of leverage, a fulcrum, a shifter, and as such, a game-changer. That newly-purposed ironing board somebody mentioned may be just the war machine we've been looking for. Usership Potemkin.



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## Toward a Lexicon of Usership

‘...since we can neither think nor even name art without appropriate terms, retooling our conceptual vocabulary has become a crucial task, one that can only be undertaken by fostering terminological cross-pollination with other avenues of human activity.’

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# ART AS SOCIAL ACTION

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE  
PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF  
TEACHING SOCIAL PRACTICE ART

GREGORY SHOLETTE, CHLOË BASS  
AND SOCIAL PRACTICE QUEENS

***ART AS SOCIAL ACTION:***  
***An Introduction to the Principles & Practices of***  
***Teaching Social Practice Art***

Gregory Sholette, Chloë Bass, and Social Practice Queens  
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Concluding Essay

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**Dewey, Buys, Cage and the Vulnerable, yet Utterly Unremarkable Heresy of Socially Engaged Art Education (SEAE)**

Gregory Sholette (New York City)

Concluding essays are never conclusive, and this is no exception, I will however, venture some general observations and more specific questions about teaching socially engaged art, beginning with a few excerpts from *Art as Social Action* (ASA):

“Students and myself as their teacher became an art collective for a semester in order to design and implement a tactical art intervention”.<sup>1</sup>

“*Public Faculty* uses strategies to rethink, redefine and re-enter public space through collective cultural action”.<sup>2</sup>

“We aim to form and facilitate learning experiences that model socially equitable ways of being”.<sup>3</sup>

“The performance [*Becoming Zoya*] served as the process of reflection on the preceding

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1

Dipti Desai and Avram Finkelstein, *Art as Social Action*, p. xx.

2

Jeanne van Heeswijk, *ibid*, p xxx.

3

The Pedagogy Group, *ibid*, p xxx.



discussions and the controversial nature of the assignment”.<sup>4</sup>

“Start by not assuming what the outcome will be, or who all the participants will be. Have a framework that is open, experimental, multidisciplinary and research driven”.<sup>5</sup>

These snippets of curricular advice by Dipti Desai and Avram Finkelstein, Jeanne van Heeswijk and her collaborators, The Pedagogy Group, Chto Delat/What is to be Done?, and SPURSE could be applied to most, if not all lesson plans in *ASA*. But for some readers—as well as students, artists, educators, and members of the public—socially engaged art (SEA) will still remain puzzling. Cooperative self-care projects, participatory community activism, urban and environmental mapping, even political protests performed in public spaces... when did these become art? And how can acts of listening, walking, conversing, cooking, and gardening be related to, or even equated with, the well-established history of painting, drawing, sculpture, installation and other recognized art forms?

For the record, simply assuring someone that this is 'social sculpture' does not relieve unease. If we remove the word 'art' from the equation bewilderment subsides for some. After all, who would dismiss the sensual pleasure of everyday, non-market pursuits, and what scholar would cast doubt on the aesthetic dimension of scientific fieldwork, critical analysis, or academic debate? But for others, it is more effective to do the opposite as Desai and her students discovered in Washington Square Park, calling something art in a cosmopolitan setting adds both clarity and allure. But it is precisely this ontological and epistemological uncertainty that, I will argue, sooner or later catches up with everyone involved in this field of SEA, especially teachers. It can be a strange and even humbling experience as I discovered in 2013 while standing before a room of skeptical art students with my co-teacher Tom Finkelpearl. Using an open-discussion format we endeavored to impress upon the class that even though SEA looks like a social service activity it is art and worthy of their study. Ultimately they rebelled, generating an imaginative social sculpture all their own that assimilated the two of us 'learned pedagogues' into its central

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4

Chto Delat, *ibid*, p xxx.

5

SPURSE, *ibid*, p xxx.

performance. (More on this below.)

“Intimate education” is how Chloë Bass describes such encounters,<sup>6</sup> while Grant Kester applies the term “vulnerable receptivity,” believing this affect to be fundamental to all SEA practices, and not just academic study.<sup>7</sup> Examples abound. Consider Mierle Laderman Ukeles well-known Touch Sanitation project that brought her into direct physical contact with all 8500 NYC sanitation workers, or Mel Chin’s *Operation Paydirt* in which a typically passive art audience transforms into an investigative team to research and visualize the spread of lead poisoning; and there is Suzanne Lacy’s *Between the Door and the Street* in which she facilitates the gathering of community organizers to publicly reflect on their approaches to organizing, as well as Rick Lowe’s recent Victoria Square Project at Documenta 14 in Athens, an SEA place making project whose form will become “what people make of it”.<sup>8</sup> In each case these works embody “an openness to the specificity of the external world”.<sup>9</sup>

This same vulnerable receptivity carries over into the educational examples in this book including Bo Zheng’s instructions to his 'creative media' class in China to, “deviate from the norm,” and do so in public, after which his students compared these digressive acts to normative rules of social conduct, or Jaishri Abichandani’s South Asian Women’s Creative Collective (SAWCC) who collectively denounced male sexual violence and femicide towards women and girls in India by staging a choreographed protest piece in which individual artistic preferences were dissolved into a larger act of solidarity. ASA offers these and other lesson plans in which a given group of stakeholders –artists, students, instructors, community members– are transformed into participatory agents actively shaping and analyzing both the nature and outcome of the learning experience itself. In short, SEAE and SEA share a vulnerably receptivity through collaboration. They also intimately share something else: a fundamental relationship to the theory and practice of *radical pedagogy*.

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6

Chloë Bass, *ibid* p. xxx

7

Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces*: op. cit. p 13.

8

Rick Lowe, the Victor Square Project website: <http://victoriasquareproject.gr/>

9

Kester, op cit.

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Claire Bishop and Tom Finkelpearl's research convincingly demonstrate that SEA's public practices are grounded in the legacy of radical pedagogy, an unconventional approach to critical learning associated with 1960's counter-culture.<sup>10</sup> And while this volume references a wide range of challenging, even revolutionary influences, prominent among them is the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey and the artistic pedagogy of Joseph Beuys, two key figures about whom I will have more to say below. ASA contributors also acknowledged directly or indirectly Bertolt Brecht's learning plays (*Lehrstücke*), Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, Augusto Boal's liberatory theater, the Situationist International's urban interventionism, Alan Kaprow's art-life fusion, bell hooks's transgressive teaching methodologies, Henry A. Giroux's performative classroom insurgency, Michel De Certeau's tactics of everyday life, SNCC's freedom curriculum in the Jim Crow South, Black Mountain College's experimental aesthetics, and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's figure of the subversive intellectual who pilfers knowledge from the academy in order to give it back to the under-commons, like some scholarly Robin Hood or Leonarda Emilia.<sup>11</sup>

If I were to devise a shortlist of SEAE pedagogical operations it would include five steps: participatory curriculum planning, performative research (or art-based research), horizontal classroom discussion, and critical group reflection leading to the re-design of the study module itself. Put differently, SEAE is inherently Socratic and heuristic in so far as a given student, or participant, is encouraged to *learn how to learn*, as opposed to mechanically memorizing facts or artistic techniques. Yet notably, as Jane Jacob points out in her introductory essay, this is an approach Dewey proposed over a hundred years ago. And this also means SEAE appears opposite medium-specific studio art instruction focused primarily on teaching skills such as

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<sup>10</sup>

Bishop, *Artificial Hells*: op. cit.; Finkelpearl, *What We Made*: op. cit.

<sup>11</sup>

Also known as La Carambada, legendary folk here Leonarda Emilia was a young female *bandida* from the Mexican state of Querétaro who allegedly dressed as a man, killed corrupt government and distributed stolen money to impoverished campesinos in the 1870s, see Pascale Baker *Revolutionaries, Rebels and Robbers...*, University of Wales, 2016.

drawing, painting, sculpting, video and so forth. But appearances can deceive. As this volume reveals, many SEAE instructors incorporate object oriented craft techniques into their broader pedagogical objectives, even if these remain subordinated to Dewey's maxim that preparing a student for the future means readying "all his capacities," rather than turning him *necessarily* into an *artist*".<sup>12</sup>

As different as SEAE appears to be from classic forms of artistic education there is actually a sixth tendency that truly separates this approach to learning from other pedagogical models. Conspicuously demonstrated throughout the preceding lesson plans is student activity that occurs fully outside the classroom. How is this any different from, say, the hard sciences where fieldwork is essential for gathering data or testing hypothesis? I will argue that the difference is more than just a matter of degree, and represents something profound and far-reaching, and very much linked with the puzzling ontological status of SEA and SEAE described above. Before elaborating on this let me first say something about the long-standing conflict involving the very presence of art instruction within a university setting.

Those of us teaching art in academia know the drill well: *making* art objects is either too technical to fall under the rubric of liberal studies, or too subjective to be considered a rigorous category of empirically driven inquiry (this remains true whether students produce socially engaged art or paintings, drawings, video, sculpture and so on). SEAE is no less burdened with this skepticism, yet it still insists on framing its already suspect creative practice within the language of scientific analysis using terms such as *research*, *experimentation*, *testing*, *self-assessment*, *learning metrics*, and so forth. In this regard, SEAE finds itself in the same storm-tossed pedagogical waters as its European kindred, *Art Practice-as-Research* (APR).<sup>13</sup> And, not surprisingly, there is a level of institutional suspicion directed at both SEAE and APR, so much so that it can make acquiring research monies, or sometimes even gaining academic promotion, challenging (to be diplomatic).

But SEAE's pedagogical misdeeds go further. Not only does it frequently formulate

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<sup>12</sup>

John Dewey, *My Pedagogic Creed*, ReInk Books, 2017 (originally published in 1897), p 6.

<sup>13</sup>

Henk Borgdorff, *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*, Leiden University Press, 2016.

research methods *in collaboration with the very same subjects who constitute its alleged field of investigation*, thus violating traditional notions of scholarly objectivity, but SEAE simultaneously, and some would say, seditiously, shares actual material assets –university research funds, technical resources, the enthusiastic labor of students and faculty– with the communities, inmates, single-mothers, homeless people and activist campaigns that it is supposed to be treating as its object of inquiry.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately therefore, what most differentiates SEAE from other modes of artistic learning, and most other forms of pedagogy, is the degree to which normative boundaries separating the type of learning that takes place in a school, and that which happens outside, in the *real world*, are not merely blurred, but aggressively, even gleefully, deconstructed (though of course SEAE softens its heresy some by generating the mandatory white papers and diagnostics all institutions lust after, and social practice students no less obliged to leap through bureaucratic hoops in order to graduate).

It's almost as if no meaningful distinction were any longer possible between pedagogical spaces and life spaces, between art and life, and this sentiment also rings weirdly true across our entire culture today, bottom to top, an impression I will return to and try to clarify in my conclusion. Now, however, let me look at this question of SEAE's odd superimposition of everydayness and heterodoxy from a more historical perspective.

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From a certain historical perspective, SEAE could be described as simply the latest iteration of a much older academic dispute between those who teach art as a medium-specific process of individual expression (think of Hans Hoffman, christened by Clement Greenberg as “the fountainhead” of abstract expressionism, and mentor to such painters as Lee Krasner and Larry

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Within academia, SEAE is not unlike the anthropological approach of Michael T. Taussig who even calls his research methods *fictocriticism* in so far as they blend “fiction, ethnographic observation, archival history, literary theory and memoir.” See: Emily Eakin, *Anthropology's Alternative Radical* The New York Times, April 21, 2001: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/21/arts/anthropology-s-alternative-radical.html>

Rivers<sup>15</sup>), versus those who believe artistic learning is rooted in experimentation, transdisciplinarity, and self-reflexive design (consider the German Bauhaus and Russian Vkhutemas in the 1920s, or Mountain College in North Carolina between 1933 and 1957). Closely related to this second type of cultural pedagogy is the conviction that studying art is integral to developing a well-rounded, democratic citizenry, a conviction that dates back to American progressives like John Cotton Dana who established the populist education-oriented Newark Museum, and of course Dewey, founder of the Laboratory School in Chicago.<sup>16</sup>

As Jacob points out, teachers and practitioners of SEAE should come to recognize a similar pedagogy has a longer genealogy than typically assumed. She proposes re-reading Dewey, who, as early as 1897, asserted that “school is primarily a social institution” and “education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies [powers, interests, and habits] are concentrated”.<sup>17</sup> (Notably, this integration of the social and cultural with other areas of education is at odds with the compartmentalized academic world many of us teach in today as described above.) In the 1960s, Dewey’s pragmatic ideals flowed into the educational philosophy of the Freedom Schools in the segregated U.S. South, and another decade later, they reemerged in transfigured form when Joseph Beuys co-founded the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (FIU) in Düsseldorf in 1974 as a protest against the official local art academy, which had just fired him. And it is here I will argue where SEAE’s uncanny ontological status first takes shape.

Though not a scholar of either Dewey or Beuys, I believe something shifted in the 1970s, especially towards decade’s end as the radical energy of May 1968 began to falter, something that transformed the idea of aesthetic pedagogy conceived as an essential ingredient for a healthy democratic society, into a constituent of individual emancipation. Yes, certainly, Dewey sounds

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15

Cited from a 1955 review entitled “Introduction to an Exhibition of Hans Hofmann,” reproduced in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3*, Clement Greenberg, University of Chicago Press, 1995, p.240.

16

Duncan, Carol. *A matter of class: John Cotton Dana, progressive reform, and the Newark Museum*. Periscope Publishers, 2009.

17

Jane Jacobs, *Art as Social Action* page xxx.

like Beuys when he insists that all students should be trained through “a process of living and not a preparation for future living.”<sup>18</sup> But Dewey the pragmatist philosopher also maintained that the institution known as school “should simplify existing social life; should reduce it, as it were, to an embryonic form”.<sup>19</sup> This may seem like splitting hairs, but Dewey’s version of academia as a protected micro-society –one in which educational guidance is provided by dedicated pedagogues (such as Dewey himself)– still is organized around a concrete institution complete with faculty, students, and rules.

By contrast, Beuys wryly appropriated established pedagogical tools and practices, treating blackboards, didactic lectures, educational symposia and other classroom accessories as artistic material and media for his installations and performances. The resulting collapse of art and education is like a Surrealist collage conjoining Beuys the artist and Beuys the teacher, much as he also montaged Beuys the artist with shaman, and Beuys the artist with political activist by co-founding both the German Student and Green Parties in 1967 and 1980 respectively. Despite these multiple ironic *détournements*, however, the FIU aimed to transform “students” into true artistic beings. After all, Beuys was himself the program’s very archetype who, as Jen Delos Reyes tells us, “challenged institutional conventions by directly incorporating his practice into his teaching”,<sup>20</sup> or as Bishop confirms, Beuys asserted that being a teacher “is my greatest work of art”.<sup>21</sup>

This all fits neatly into the anti-institutional and anti-authoritarian *zeitgeist* of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the status quo, including traditional trade unions and prevailing Left parties, came face-to-face with an unprecedented historical revolt. Students and workers went on wildcat strikes and carried out increasingly militant confrontations with police, authorities, and government institutions in hopes of not simply reforming a broken liberal welfare state, but sweeping it away. As theorist Paolo Virno argues “it is not difficult to recognize

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18

Dewey, p. 7.

19

Ibid.

20

Reyes, *Art as Social Action*, page XXX.

21

Bishop p. 243.



communist inspiration and orientation in the failed revolution of the 1960's and 1970's".<sup>22</sup>

Virno's reference to a mass communist imaginary is exactly opposite the centralized state model of Lenin, drawing instead on Italy's autonomist Marxist tradition and upon Situationist slogans as "never work"; "live without dead time"; and "be realistic, demand the impossible!".<sup>23</sup> But then the uprising ended. Instead of realizing its radical emancipatory aspirations at the level of the state or society, the historical failure of 1968 led to our consumption-driven, "creative economy"<sup>24</sup> that simultaneously exploits and gratifies basic bio-political desires as long as one has the necessary cash or, more precisely, credit ready at hand. As McKenzie Wark puts it with regard to 'Bifo' Berardi's theories "before 1977, desire was located outside of capital; after, desire means self-realization through work."<sup>25</sup>

In short, while Beuys's educational approach sought to free individuals from every oppressive authority, including the state, but also the academy; Dewey's theory pivoted on the belief that the state must take responsibility for education if democracy is to thrive. Now, I am not implying that Beuys was either a communist provocateur or an agent of neoliberalism *avant la lettre*, any more than Dewey was a closet conservative. Rather, both men's pedagogical ideas set out to liberate our imagination, as much as our being in the world. What I am focusing on instead is the degree to which larger social, political, and economic forces mold the contour of even the most progressive intentions. In the gap between Dewey's pragmatist defense of education as collective self-representation, and Beuys's idea of education as autonomous self-realization, a significant political ramification emerges for SEA, SEAE, and contemporary art and society more broadly.

Nonetheless, it is Beuys's anarcho-educational pastiche whose influence persists, but for better and worse assimilated today through the lens of enterprise culture and its society of highly individualized risk. Its impact is visible within SEAE, but also in a range of 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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<sup>22</sup>

Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, MIT Press 2004, pp 110-111.

<sup>23</sup>

*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>

*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Wark is discussing the ideas of 'Bifo' Berardi on the website Public Seminar, June 5, 2015: <http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/06/franco-bifo-berardi/#.WabX-tN96rx>

informal educational experiments including Charles Esche's former *Proto-Academy* in Edinburgh, *Bruce High's Quality Foundation* in Brooklyn, Jim Duignan's *Stockyard Institute* in Chicago, *Home Workspace* in Beirut, and even Tania Bruguera's former *Cátedra De Conducta* in Havana or Marina Naprushkina's multipurpose refugee center *New Neighborhood Moabit* in Berlin that she has explicitly labeled an "artificial institution."<sup>26</sup> These community building and alternative learning projects celebrate a high degree of autonomy from state support structures, which is not a criticism because these endeavors are important and often necessary at a local level. Still, there is a catch, and one that we must grapple with now that the very concept of the democratic state is in radical free-fall.

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Drilling down into history a bit further I see a noteworthy and illuminating precedent to these pedagogical differences in the conflict between Joseph Albers and John Cage at Black Mountain College in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and it is worth a short detour to consider this. Albers was a strong proponent of Dewey who understood art to be the experimental arm of culture. As historian Eva Díaz tells us, for Albers's art served society by developing "better forms" as "the precondition of cultural production and progress".<sup>27</sup> Studying art is like doing research and development that is later incorporated into actual real world experience. Cage, on the other hand, understood creative experimentation quite differently by championing not contemplative design, but uncertainty, disorder and disruption. He introduced chance operations into music by rolling a pair of dice or casting *I Ching* sticks and letting the outcome guide his compositions. Before long Cage antagonized Albers and other Black Mountain College faculty when in 1952 he recruited "faculty and students to perform short, timed scripts, resulting in

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<sup>26</sup> These projects are further discussed in Sholette, "From Proto-Academy to Home Workspace Beirut," in the book *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East*. Anthony Downey, ed., (Sternberg Press, 2016) pp 190-204.

<sup>27</sup>

Eva Díaz, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College*, U. of Chicago P., 2014

many unrelated events scattered throughout the performance space”.<sup>28</sup> The result was *Theater Piece no. 1*, or simply the *Happening*, in which solitary overlapping actions unfolded, seemingly without order or logic, much as we encounter contemporary life as a fragmented, even alienating experience. Whether this was neo-Dadaism or ultra-realism, the composer nevertheless cast doubt on Albers’ Deweyian faith that art is a testable medium for improving society through aesthetic research and design. Cage later undermined the very notion of the academy itself when he famously goaded an audience in Germany with the Zen like query “which is more musical, a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school?”<sup>29</sup>

The discomfort generated by Cage’s intentionally interventionist educational aesthetic echoed through a seminar I co-taught with Tom Finkelpearl for Social Practice Queens in Fall of 2013 called *Participatory Art and Social Action*. The premise was simple: an increasing numbers of artists, curators, and critics are turning their energies towards a new type of participatory art activism, and therefore students should engage in research about this phenomenon. Graduate and undergraduate participants were read work by or about Rick Lowe, Tania Bruguera, Martha Rosler, Teddy Cruz, Marisa Jahn, Stephen Wright, Claire Bishop and Nato Thompson, as well as excerpts from our own writings.<sup>30</sup> However, it soon became apparent that for most of these studio-based art students, SEA was an entirely new paradigm, and after a few weeks of presentations, readings, and discussions the class broke into smaller research groups focusing on such questions as:

. “Is there a social practice art aesthetic or form or repertoire of forms specific to this kind of work?”

. “Is social practice art radically opposed to mainstream art and culture?”

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<sup>28</sup>

Díaz, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup>

Cited in Edward Morris, “Three Thousand Seven Hundred-Seven Words about John Cage,” *Notes*, vol. 23, no. 3, March 1967, p. 472.

<sup>30</sup>

Also included were a few of our own writings and the full bibliography can be found here: <http://www.sholetteseminars.com/new-forms-2013-readings-and-resources/>

. “How does social practice art differentiate itself from social services?”

It was this last question that most vexed and amused the class, ultimately leading them to stage a mock trial at the end of the fifteen-week semester in which Finkelppearl and I were respectfully cross-examined. At one point the *prosecutors* presented us with the following thought experiment:

“Explain to the jury exactly what significant difference exists between, on one hand, a project in which artists, working out of a moving truck adorned with an logo indicating that it is an art project, operate social services like baby sitting or assisting with predatory landlords, on one hand; and, on the other, the very same service that is run by a group of community activist volunteers? Does it come down to a question of which institution provides funding: an arts agency or some municipal social service organization?”<sup>31</sup>

Our expert testimony began to derail as us *learned* instructors scrambled for logical clarification. Meanwhile, our students rejoiced in their intoxicating self-emancipation from the authority of experts as our prayers to Dewey went unanswered. I could almost hear Joseph Beuys and John Cage chortling from the shadows.

[Figure 1: GS image 1.jpg]

[Figure 1: The *Nanny Van* is a mobile design lab and sound studio designed by artist Marisa Jahn to promote domestic workers labor rights nationwide.]

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Traditional education fails, Dewey contended, because it neglects the “fundamental

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31

I am paraphrasing from memory here, and also wish to note that the class discussed Marisa Jahn’s *Nanny Van* (2014-ongoing), and the Austrian collective *WochenKlausur*’s mobile medical clinic for homeless people (1993), thus providing two SEA examples that may have inspired their prosecutorial rebellion.

principle of the school as a form of community life”.<sup>32</sup> Though, I doubt that the pragmatist philosopher envisioned circumstances quite like the present day world of contemporary art in which the relationship between school and society, between reality and fiction, between culture and politics have more or less become a single continuous surface, not unlike a Möbius strip. To recognize the degree to which an ambient aesthetic spectacularity now deliriously saturates all aspects of our experience we need only mention “fake news,” or refer to the weird mimicry between the current White House administration and certain television shows including *House of Cards* or *Saturday Night Live*; or we can point to the protest art organized by the *1,000 Gestalten* collective in Hamburg, Germany, who choreographed hordes of ashen-covered zombies in a cinematic public pageant to protest the 2017 G20 summit.

It is this strange state of looping and doubling that contemporary art, including SAE, operates within, though not necessarily by choice, but by circumstance. Which may be why the *Pedagogy Group* astutely cautions about the danger of SEAE programs defining a “new autonomous sphere” as socially engaged artists “stand apart from social practices created in everyday community and movement making,” thus substituting cultural activism for political work in the real world.<sup>33</sup> As important as it is to heed this warning, I sense that this apprehension is itself a symptom of the broader socio-political, historical, and pedagogical subsumption whereby art conceived as a reflection upon reality is taken as that reality, *tout court*. One can hear the strain of this entangled conundrum in a statement made by several young artists from Los Angeles struggling with their role in gentrification.

“We write in hopes that more artists will finally break with their sense of exceptionalism and consider their roles in gentrification. We recognize that art is an industry with a structural reality that must be acknowledged in order for artists to challenge their complicity in the displacement of long-term residents in low-income and working class

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32

Dewey, op cit, p. 8.

33

The Pedagogy Group, “Toward a Social Practice Pedagogy,” SAS p xxx.]

neighborhoods and fight against this”.<sup>34</sup>

We have entered the time and space of the “uncanny present,” writes political scientist Rebecca Bryant: a present unfamiliar in its very *presentness*<sup>35</sup> or as Wark summarizes with reference to Jodi Dean’s theory of “Communicative Capitalism,”

“Communicative capitalism relies on repetition, on suspending narrative, identity, and norms. Framed in those terms, the problem then is to create the possibility of breaking out of the endless short loops of drive. But if anything the tendency is in the other direction. After blogging came Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, driving even further into repetition. The culture industries gave way to what I call the vulture industries.”<sup>36</sup>

Of course, Beuys was correct, everyone *is* an artist, though I suspect the current materialization of his proposition within the so-called creative economy has much more to do with the needs of neoliberal capital than with those of an artist in a felt suit and hat. Still, as Bishop asserts, the German post-war artist remains simply “the best-known point of reference for contemporary artists’ engagement with experimental pedagogy”.<sup>37</sup> It is also fair to say that Beuys artistic patrimony above all now provides the groundwork for the growing appeal of SEA and SEAE within both mainstream art and academic circles, with all of the resources and complications that brings with it.

Nonetheless, what is missing from the experience of the uncanny present in general is

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34

An Artists’ Guide to Not Being Complicit with Gentrification <https://hyperallergic.com/385176/an-artists-guide-to-not-being-complicit-with-gentrification/>

35

Rebecca Bryant, “On Critical Times: Return, Repetition, and the Uncanny Present,” *History and Anthropology*, No. 27, 2016. p.27.

<sup>36</sup> McKenzie Wark, “Communicative Capitalism,” Public Seminar, March 23, 2015: <http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/03/communicative-capitalism/#.WabfL9N96rw>

37

May 1968 Graffiti from the Bureau of Public Secrets website: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/graffiti.htm>. Bishop, op cit.

that discernible moment of alienation between subject and object, learning and doing, metaphor and thing, the very ground of both artistic study and social critique. The only point of rupture visible today is that flash of recognition when we discover which tiny minority of artists truly succeeds, and which remains structurally locked within the dark matter of our bare art world.<sup>38</sup> And finally a response to my initial question is glimpsed: SEAE is simultaneously heretical and humble, strange and utterly familiar because it embodies the asymmetrical uncanny present of our 21<sup>st</sup> century reality in a singular fashion, leaving us with one, Dewey-inspired question left to pose: how do we go about learning how to live, make art, and engage in social action and community building when the world around us is in free-fall? However preliminary and partial, I believe the preceding pages offer readers an impressive compendium of imaginative endeavors and practical experiments that take the vulnerable, yet utterly unremarkable heresy of socially engaged art education as their point of departure.

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As if in a dream, I hear John Cage's noisy truck rumbling over and over; only, by now the music school's oboists, sax players and drummers have stolen the tires off of it, perhaps using them to build barricades, or maybe exchanging them for weed off campus, who knows, and yet either way, the truck strangely keeps idling, its engine refusing to give up, so that its clamor, the very same din that once interrupted student rehearsals, is now fully part and parcel of the academy's basic educational experience, disappearing within the architecture of the campus, like the ambient unnerving white noise in Don DeLillo's novel of the same name.<sup>39</sup>

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Finkelpearl, T. op. cit. (See especially the chapter "Education Art" with Tania Bruguera about *Cátedra De Conducta*.)

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<sup>38</sup> For more about dark matter and bare art see Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance*, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup>

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***ART AS SOCIAL ACTION: An Introduction to  
the Principles & Practices of Teaching Social Practice Art  
Gregory Sholette, Chloë Bass, and Social Practice Queens***

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Nancy Bruno and Gina Minielli, SPQ, New York City.



## **Towards a Workers Pavilion: The Forming of the Workers Art Coalition**

Barrie Cline, SPQ, New York City.

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Concluding Essay.

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## **Dewey, Beuys, Cage and the Vulnerable, yet Utterly Unremarkable Heresy of Teaching Socially Engaged Art (SEAE)**

Gregory Sholette, New York City.

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Contributors Bios

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## **The Role of Diversity in the Production and Reception of Art in Belfast: *Space Shuttle*.**

SUZANNA CHAN, CHRISTA-MARIA LERM HAYES

Hello

This is *Space Shuttle* – an experimental base for  
artists and urbanauts.

I have been launched to six different orbits  
around planet Belfast.

My mission is to explore the creative environment.

Please keep in contact. [www.spaceshuttle.org.uk](http://www.spaceshuttle.org.uk)

Return to mother-ship PS<sup>2</sup>

(Mutschler and Morrow 2007: 5)



17) Aisling O'Beirn, *Space Shuttle: Some Things About Belfast (or so I'm told)*, Belfast 2006

*Space Shuttle* is a portacabin module which was “sent into ‘orbit’ for six ‘missions’”, each lasting up to two weeks, at locations in Belfast in 2006. The project was initiated by Peter Mutschler of PS<sup>2</sup> and the module was used by a diverse range of interdisciplinary artists, initiatives and community groups to operate as “a platform for urban creativity and social interaction” and to “produce new and site-influenced work”.<sup>1</sup>

In order to investigate the role of diversity in the production and reception of *Space Shuttle*, we isolate a number of diversity-related characteristics of the project. Focussing on Mission Three, Aisling O’Beirn’s *Some Things About Belfast (or so I’m told)*, we examine art historical reference points of such work in Belfast, especially in Joseph Beuys’ practice, finding shared characteristics between them, and in other projects internationally which address localised contexts using mobility to promote accessibility and dialogue. Following consideration of the diachronic similarities between *Space Shuttle* and the Beuysian paradigm, we flag the present context as a markedly changed one since Belfast in the 1970s, the period of Beuys’ engagement at the height of the Troubles. In the contemporary and so called ‘post-Peace Process’ context of intensive urban redevelopment and spatial re-privatisation, we examine how *Space Shuttle* operated as a cultural platform for dialogue, for engendering new forms of representation and participation, and for open-ended identifications. We then foreground how the historical and contemporary case studies reveal both the relevance and limitations of current theories of the uses of culture in deliberative democracy, focussing on Seyla Benhabib’s proposition of “complex cultural dialogues” (Benhabib 2002). We conclude with a brief assessment of the role of diversity in generating dialogue and poly-vocal forms of representation.

### **Diversity and Mobility as Methodology**

Issues of diversity were integral to the *Space Shuttle* project. They included the heterogeneity of artists, participants and audiences in terms of class, gender, and ethnic identifications. Diversity enters

the production of *Space Shuttle* by virtue of it being a collaboration between artists of different origins: the involvement of foreigners is one way of interpreting the title "*Space Shuttle*". Another is mobility as part of the approach or methodology. Indeed, its very title speaks of a mode of transport, of transition and movement between locations, an intention not to settle into rootedness but temporarily to arrive and depart again. This method of mobile creativity can be examined in relation to a body of cultural theory including Braidotti's (2006) writing on 'nomadic ethics', and Kaplan's (1997) on the trope of postcolonial travel as a way of encountering difference. As part of the methodology, mobility enabled engagement in a variety of sites and types of spaces chosen for public work, which expresses a concern that the greatest diversity of recipients should be attracted to engage with what happens and is shown in the portacabin. The fact that it is not a standard building site cabin, however, but that explicit mention is made of it being a scaled replica of the PS<sup>2</sup> gallery (project space) distinctly includes (fine) art and its dissemination, as well as its publics, as reference points. The "art world" was invited to an opening, and on the website, the "missions" radiate from the central "mothership" PS<sup>2</sup> base. It is thus not only the so-called "general public" that is attracted, but a link is sought to the conventions and histories of art, which legitimises the current approach.

The mentioned inclusion of "non-art" and art sites and spaces is extended into the realm of the genres and materials used, owing to the diversity of both art and traditionally "non-art" approaches that were chosen by the *Space Shuttle* team. Points of reference are popular culture (the TV series *Dallas* in Sarah Browne and Gareth Kennedy's *Space Shuttle* "mission"), as well as (citizen/tourist) information stalls. Again, when focusing on diversity, entry points are clearly given to people with a wide variety of cultural backgrounds and preferences. The creative practices used were not meant to crystallise into the production of art works in any Modernist sense of a discrete object but rather, correspond with a now well-established legacy of socially engaged, situated art practices which focus on process and seek to contribute to social transfor-

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mation through forming dialogues, engendering forms of activism and providing means of critical reflection, alternative modes of representation, protest and constructive engagement with institutions and agencies. The creative strategies could also address how individuals are affected by issues of power and inequality, issues which we must recognise as inseparable from 'diversity'. For if we say simply that there is 'diversity' to imply difference but equality, we can serve a hegemonic function of cloaking those inequalities and forms of marginalisation by which oppression is differently exercised and experienced.

The fact that an envisaged diverse reception has guided the choice of approaches and techniques is underlined by the prominence of communication as a "material" and strategy within the project, as announced in its subtitle: "Urban Creativity and Social Interaction". In effect, meeting places were set up in public spaces and the performative and durational were stressed through the different "missions". Mission Three, *Some Things About Belfast (or so I'm told)* was activated by the presence of the artist, Aisling O'Beirn (at times Amy Russell, invigilating for the artist) who was available for open-ended conversation, giving out information and acting as a guide to the material on view. Contesting official, dominant cultural narratives through the 'local knowledge' revealed in vernacular accounts of place is a central preoccupation of O'Beirn's practice, as the title of her project intimates. O'Beirn used the portacabin as a space, loosely fashioned as an unofficial tourist or citizens' information centre, in which unofficial information about Belfast was transmitted and received. Comprising a collection, this information took the form of hand-drawn maps, place nicknames and urban myths as anecdotes. O'Beirn observes that the one-to-one communication through which the exchanges took place led to many further communications, as visitors to the *Space Shuttle* passed the word to friends, prompting more people to visit the shuttle.



18) Aisling O'Beirn, *Space Shuttle: Some Things About Belfast (or so I'm told)*, Belfast 2006

O'Beirn's meeting place also stresses the openness of the format for the audience's relatively unguided participation. It is open, for example, whether they perceive the *Space Shuttle* as art or not, whether they assume an anthropological or community work interest or agenda. O'Beirn's nicknames of locations in Belfast provide a reaching out from the specificity of the portacabin to, in most cases, the visitors' own homes, i.e. the area with which they are most familiar. Through the clear segregation of most of Belfast city, issues of diversity inevitably come to the fore, as naming implies claiming ownership of an area. There will be conflicting or overlapping names, but the members of only one community could never achieve the bigger picture that has slowly arisen through the artist's collecting. She is perceived as an honest, caring broker, engaging with people on their own terms and concerning their own issues, encouraging and valuing their participation –

and not just their additions of nicknames. Diversity – in a broad (and temporary) understanding of the word – is both directly and indirectly or obliquely referenced. It is part of how the project was conceived and received.

### **Beuys as Precursor of Contemporary Participatory Practices**

When now comparing the characteristics listed above with Joseph Beuys' various projects and collaborations in and around Belfast from 1974 onwards, we argue that similar issues surrounding, and approaches towards diversity can be isolated. However, it needs to be said that we are not writing a stylistic history or engaging in formal(ist) analysis. It is far more relevant to note that the centrality of questions of diversity is not new in the art of the 1990s, as some theorists would have it (Bourriaud). While the gradual differences in approach are also interesting to note, we would like to propose that a troubled society, where identities and divisions have been in the foreground for well over thirty years, has brought with it similar characteristics in the art produced for this context. Here, artists have had to take into account the intercultural dimension of both the production and the reception of their work

. Deviating somewhat from what Ljiljana Deru Simic identifies as usual practice (Deru Simic 2003, abstract), artists in Northern Ireland have specifically created multi- or intercultural work. We would like to suggest, then, that they function – obliquely or otherwise – as “pilot studies” for peaceful coexistence, dialogue and the identification of shared spaces, while very much negotiating and renegotiating the by now venerable theory (if not history) of relational art.

Joseph Beuys let an exhibition of drawings, *The Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland*, travel South and North of the Irish border: the first exhibition to do so since the beginning of the Troubles. It had come from Oxford, Edinburgh and London (with the same title), was shown at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin (25 Sept - 27 Oct 1974) and, lastly, at the Arts Council Gallery in Belfast (6 - 30 Nov 1974). He thus “space shuttled” in. On 18 November, he



spoke and engaged in discussions for 3½ hours at the Ulster Museum. During the same month, he also gave a talk at the University of Ulster's Art School, at Magee Institute of Higher Education, Derry, and went to Coleraine and the Giant's Causeway. Much of his activity was directed at finding a suitable space for the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research, which Beuys had co-founded with Heinrich Böll, the novelist and Ireland-fan. The FIU did eventually have a Belfast base, the Art and Research Exchange (A.R.E.), founded in 1978 by Belinda Loftus, Alastair MacLennan, Rainer Pagel and others (Coppock 2005). This initiative has since had a long legacy in various artist-run spaces, studios, CIRCA Art Magazine, and teaching at the University of Ulster, out of some of which *Space Shuttle* has emerged. But how is that direct line of influence informing thinking surrounding diversity, if at all? The characteristics previously isolated in *Space Shuttle* need briefly to be compared to Beuys' Belfast endeavours.

Beuys "space shuttled" into Belfast as an outsider. Apart from great personal energy, he brought a hybrid identity that motivated his wish to (as well as his understanding that he could) contribute in relevant ways: he came from Germany, a painfully divided country during the Cold War, although its Lower Rhine area, the home of the artist, was historically a Catholic and formerly Celtic enclave, as well as (benignly) ruled by the House of Orange. Religiously, multi-denominational Germany could possibly be seen as a model of peaceful coexistence. Beuys brought with him Caroline Tisdall, a writer for *The Guardian*, who is English and "a quarter Irish", as she puts it.<sup>2</sup> She helped Beuys with his English vocabulary, took photographs, negotiated, and wrote a feasibility report on the FIU to the then EEC. She was always present and testifies, above all, to Beuys' sensitivity in grasping what distinguished and drove people around him. Beuys' was certainly an anthropologically interested perspective, engaging in something that Ullrich Kockel terms "applied anthropology".<sup>3</sup>

Owing to collaborations and his own hybrid identity, he hoped to provide multiple connection points for his audiences to loosen up entrenched mono-identity discourses. The duration of his talks, about 3½ hours at the Ulster Museum, was deliberate and instrumental for audience members to begin to contribute, and even to monopolise the floor. Community groups from West Belfast and other areas, who may not usually have visited the Ulster Museum, were specifically invited. Their issues were in the foreground, although what some perceived as audacious or naïve of a German to have offered as a “fix” for the Troubles was not universally popular at the time. It was communication – and as such, certainly strengthens an interpretation of Beuys’ activities in 1974 as relational in the current understanding. Here he facilitated, rather than created.

Mobility was an important factor. While tourist explorations were part of the itinerary, Beuys lectured in places where his name was not known. On the European continent, the by then canonical artist and his quasi-mythological persona (clearly a prominent part of the “Beuys package” or brand) were immediate attractions. In Northern Ireland, however, clearly owing to the politically desperate situation, he focused more than elsewhere on the issues at hand, engaging in collaborations, lasting friendships and providing support. One can evoke the conviviality (Bourriaud) that in current relational work is often not directed and happens for its own sake. Here, it took place against all the odds – and for specific ends. The fact that he invited Belfast-based artists to participate in workshops on migration and other issues related to diversity at *documenta 6*, 1977, as well as events at the Guggenheim Museum in New York two years later, and initially paid the rent for the first premises of their A.R.E. group, must in the current context appear as further relational aspects of his/their work. Just as he understood his teaching as art, his facilitating practice in and for Northern Ireland is also clearly part of that collaborative artistic practice.

Like *Space Shuttle*, the “mission” metaphor could easily apply to the various visits and projects that Beuys and his collaborators de-

veloped in and on Belfast. It may also be called a “mission” to use the Ulster Museum in diverse ways and for relatively diverse audiences: as conventional exhibition space, but also as a discussion venue, stretching the boundaries of their remit at the time. Despite the fact that the FIU later used a Beuys invention, a mobile discussion and information space called the *Bus for Direct Democracy* (which brings to mind Suzanne Lacey’s more recent new genre public artwork on diversity in Colombia), Beuys was not comfortable letting go of the museum context altogether. He thus shared with *Space Shuttle* an assessment of the museum as usable for engaged work. It is one that was unpopular in much of the intervening period.

“Non-art” sites as well as “non-art” approaches are also common features of both Beuys’ and *Space Shuttle*’s projects. If members of *Space Shuttle*’s audience were not conscious of the art context they were operating in, this is also true of the community groups which engaged in discussions with Beuys, those who witnessed his visits to Jimmy Boyle in prison, and, most likely, the assessors of the unsuccessful application for funding for the FIU. The A.R.E. programmatically exhibited local and international artists, as well as some popular culture and other “non-art” material: comics, Trade Union flags, posters etc. These were shown not just in the A.R.E.’s city centre premises, but “shuttled” around community and leisure centres on both sides of the divide. The diverse, international and thus non-partisan background of the artists organising such events was a vital prerequisite in reaching diverse audiences. The mixture of art and “non-art” material was programmatic, but meant that A.R.E. fell between the stools of “art” and “community” funding by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland – one reason for its eventual demise. Despite (from today’s standpoint, because of his overly) ambitious aspirations, Beuys was largely unsuccessful: EEC funding for the FIU did not materialise, the A.R.E. did not become as central as it could have been (but was thus also not co-opted into restrictive structures), and Beuys, during his time in Ireland, had just (in 1972) been dismissed from his professorial post for accepting too many students.

Beuys may even have compromised himself by keeping entry points to his works as diverse and open as possible, especially through media contact, at times explaining his work in very brief and reductive ways, for example subscribing to the traditional role of the mythical artist, in order to facilitate approaches. This now provokes theorists and practitioners of relational art to offset their work against that of Beuys (Hunter, Kester, Zingg).<sup>4</sup> Beuys' engagement with diverse audiences, his open-ended, unhurried conversations such as those that took place within the parameters of the FIU, have – despite the voices cited above – been included in Claire Bishop's anthology of writings on *Participation* (Bishop 2006).<sup>5</sup> It seems that now, an awareness begins to manifest itself that, while Beuys was hopelessly naïve in wishing to “save” more than a small fraction of the world, he always prioritised relational matters and was thus far more humble and credible (“unsuccessful”) in what he did than it might first have appeared. Judging by the lasting friendships and collaborations (as well as careers, community projects and many enriching memories) that have arisen from Beuys' activities in Northern Ireland, Beuys was, like the *Space Shuttle* artist O'Beirn, perceived as an honest, caring broker, interested in other people's concerns, encouraging and valuing their participation, often when no “artwork”, media headline or similar benefits arose, other than furthering communication and strengthening diversity.

Thus, when working in Northern Ireland, Beuys accepted and adapted to the smaller scale and intervened in the modest but (locally) effective ways that now characterise practice in the area. If, as we have found, similar conceptions of art have been researched and negotiated in practice again and again, it could raise a “concern that younger artists interested in this area are repeatedly forced to ‘reinvent the wheel’ in the absence of a sustained historical record [of dialogical art]” (Kester 2004: 190). This does not apply to Belfast, where the legacy of Beuys has continued to be very much alive – not necessarily in art historical writing, but in the recounting of lived experience, participation in artists' initiatives

that have arisen from Beuys' visits and friendships with the artist. Alastair MacLennan and Tony Hill play particularly important roles here as the teachers of several generations of younger artists at Northern Ireland's only art school, the University of Ulster's School of Art & Design. Rainer Pagel and others carry the memories, as well as the impetus to further that tradition into both artists' groups like *Beyond* and community work in *Inclusion Matters*.

The more likely reason for similarities in relational or dialogical projects is that, on the ground and over time, they seem to have been successful. This is not a claim that has arisen as a result of marketing studies or sociological questionnaires, but one that has been verified by sustained and esteemed, i.e. legacy-creating (artistic) practice. It seems as though Belfast kept attracting and catalysing such approaches and processes: Maurice O'Connell recently drew up the "Articles of Association" for a company established in order to "explore and find successful processes for an individual to participate in the ongoing social, economic and cultural development of an entire city" (O'Connell 2007: 76) – that city had to be Belfast<sup>6</sup> – and the "Articles" repeatedly have the ring of Beuys' and Tisdall's EEC application for the FIU. This tradition, it seems, will remain a strong and promising one, but it also changes; O'Connell's envisaged outcomes are "ever changing methodologies to directly engage others in the delivery process of change" (83).

### **Contemporary Climates of Redevelopment and Engendering New Forms of Representation**

While art history shows the links between Beuys' practice and current practices that engage with Belfast, the social, economic and political context of the city itself has changed radically since the 1970s and 1980s when Beuys, and later A.R.E., were operational. The 'post-Peace Process' city is now undergoing intensive market-led redevelopment, and it is in one of its engineered 'cultural quarters' that O'Beirn's *Some Things...* took place. It was located at the junction of North Street and Waring Street, on the edge of a non-

residential quarter of the city centre undergoing market-led regeneration and gentrification which was relaunched as the “Cathedral Quarter” in recent years. Marketed as a space for leisure and culture, the area currently features a mixture of flagship architectural developments and derelict and semi-derelict buildings characteristic of transitional spaces.

Aaron Kelly has written a searing critique of the uses of culture as the lubricant for consumption in the current redevelopment of Belfast into stylised quarters – there is also a “Titanic Quarter” and a “Queen’s Quarter”. Kelly refers to the political-economic contextualisation as the economic reconciliation of ‘post-Peace Process’ Northern Ireland with the dynamics of a world system that only responds to the flow of capital around the globe. His analysis shines a light on the uses to which ‘culture’ has been put in the development of a homogenising, exclusionary, sectarian template of ‘two traditions’ for the Peace Process, which is being redeveloped in the present by enlisting culture as a byword for consumerism to repress the political by re-presenting ‘Cultural Quarters’ of the city back to its people as spaces of consumption, eviscerated of their experiences of it (Kelly 2005: 548). The city’s poor are excluded from participation in the civic and commercial life of these non-public spaces in what Kelly identifies as the extension of Third Way capitalism westwards and the Celtic Tiger northwards through the promotion of private finance to establish a market-led postmodernist pluralism that masks socio-economic divides.

Working to privilege the accounts of those who are not usually given a platform, O’Beirn’s project could be described as running counter to the re-packaging of the city as theme park. She gives the city back to its inhabitants, turning to those who might best describe and represent it according to their own experiences, in contrast to the desiccated official culture which glosses over consumer consumption. The open access of the portacabin also meant that it was open for the participation of those usually excluded economically from spaces of consumption.

Belfast is, of course, hardly new in experiencing the adverse social effects of regeneration. Naomi Rodriguez's film *All that Glitters* reveals the grim and all-too-familiar negatives produced by the London Docklands development in the 1980s, namely, shrinking public spaces, stratospheric house prices, proliferating luxury housing, shops and businesses, and the corollary of marginalised, disdained poor people (see Sullivan 2005). To what degree then is art complicit in regeneration and market-led redevelopment, which turns land and space into real estate and a commodity for direct profit? How, by contrast, have artists exposed and organised against such processes? In the *Space Shuttle* publication, Susanne Bosch asks if artists are critical enough of politics and power. She phrases the scenario bluntly as one of artists being funded to "keep the neighbourhood in a good mood and to increase the value of property" (Mutschler and Morrow 2007: 76). Artists are well aware of, and resistant to, this involvement. In 2005, the curatorial duo B&B ran *Real Estate: Art in a Changing City* as part of the ICA's *London In Six Easy Steps* series of events. The artist's vanguard function in regeneration is well known, and the US-based weblog Boxtank satirically formulates it in "5 Easy Steps", as follows:

1. Construe a poor neighbourhood as a frontier to be tamed
2. Create a rent gap between a building's value and its land value by neglecting maintenance and repair while investing money elsewhere
3. Map a strategy for re-investment by setting anchor blocks as starting points from which to take back the neighbourhood block by block
4. Create tax incentives for artists and gallery owners as the first wave of pioneers to authenticate 'gritty' urban experience
5. Raise rents and drive out artists to be replaced with wealthy entrepreneurs, hipsters and yuppies (Boxtank)



The mobile, temporary nature of *Space Shuttle* is perhaps exemplary of the productive ways in which artists, art and cultural practices can critically engage with a location already 'softened' for redevelopment by decades of neglect and disinvestment. This mobility is one alternative to inhabiting an area of disinvestment until one is eventually driven out by those same processes of gentrification in which artists can function as unwilling facilitators of its initial stages.

### **Diversity in Dialogical Practices and their Production and Reception**

In order to elucidate the function – at the junctures of commercial spaces – of the art under investigation here, the line drawn through the decades to connect the practice of Beuys and the methods of *Space Shuttle* is revealing in several ways. Linking *Space Shuttle* to the Beuysian precedent does not mean discrediting the contemporary artists involved as "little Beuyses". Rather, it reflects the fact that the work has been created in response to a perceived – and real – demand, not purely for formal or "artistic" ends, where originality would have been a prime motivation. The range of activities across the whole spectrum of artistic and social activity speaks of a low level of specialisation in the Belfast art world, a dearth of art venues, and a diverse (and divided) society, where art and culture are in many instances shared, but have not so far become a widespread activity in which the majority of the population participate.

As reasons for the unbroken longevity of relational practices, one could cite an enduring allegiance with some Modernist practices, or "backwardness". But we would prefer to assess, with Terry Eagleton, that (some of) postmodernism was unable to grapple with amorphous and contradictory identity politics as they were found here (Eagleton 2000: 86). That a remarkable line like the one from Beuys to *Space Shuttle* can be drawn, speaks of the continued currency of some of the key theories in the area of diversity as they were formulated in Beuys' times and pertain to the realm of art

theory. Umberto Eco's *Open Work* (1962, English 1989) has pioneered the relatively higher valorisation of the reception of art (including literature) in comparison with the author's creation, regarding both as essentially active and creative. Reception theory (Wolfgang Iser) needs to be added, while Claire Bishop has recently anthologised such theoretical texts, featuring also Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin and Peter Bürger (Bishop 2006). Bishop has, with her anthology, been the first to historicise what had previously (Bourriaud) appeared as a new tendency in art from the 1990s.

Belfast has proven to sustain relational, dialogical or open practices and also let them appear right from their beginnings with Beuys (almost uncharacteristically for the artist) as low-key, practical and orientated towards individual people, forging small but long-lasting groups with an eye to the medium and long-term. Relational art took large steps forward through, and as a result of Joseph Beuys' initiatives in Belfast. Relational work has been furthered here in both art and non-art contexts (Rainer Pagel, mentioned earlier, is a case in point). Non-spectacular, often by necessity anonymous relational work has been furthered in Northern Ireland all through the 1980s, which, in the absence of a developed commercial gallery network and the presence of the Troubles, was not so commercial here. One can, therefore, look back upon 30 years of experience, fine-tuning and honing relational skills and networks.

With (loose) reference to some of the characteristics of both stages in art historical time, we will attempt to draw out some diversity-related points. Beuys and *Space Shuttle* seem to agree that, "The rules of the game [art] cannot be radically changed, only in small steps. Radical changes disturb the continuity with previous notions of art, and thus inhibit the use of a common conception of art across social divides. Using the word art with a changed meaning and yet in a way that is understandable to a large number of people is a prerequisite for admitting any shift in the conception of

art" (Zingg 2001: 134). Thus, such diachronic lines as the one explored here matter.

The museum or gallery space in particular is something that has not been left behind by these particular projects. One no longer sees the museum as the home of all cultural ills, regarding it rather as yet another public space that, despite its inevitable allegiances and often its role in regeneration projects, reaches diverse audiences and can provide a platform for parts of society that are inclined and open towards (initiated in) cultural experiences – or wish to perform themselves (Rogoff). There would have been a danger of forsaking the traditional art publics just at the time when more of an effort was being made to extend them. The museum/gallery can provide an alternative (relatively speaking) to the consumer space that the politicians have identified as the vacuous "shared space" in Northern Ireland's "post-conflict" society. When politicians have created a mandatory bipartite situation like that of the post-Belfast agreement era, art allows for spaces in between – and, as Ljiljana Deru Simic puts it, the "envisioning of it [a shared community] is what makes it real" (Deru Simic 2003: 11). Cutting the links with art history is also not viewed as beneficial (any more) by activist practitioners like WochenKlausur<sup>7</sup> in a corresponding move to that described earlier concerning the acceptance of museums or gallery spaces. Even Julian Stallabrass, revealing the many ways in which art production and the globalised marketplace are complicit and interwoven, concludes: "the local liberation in the production of art, and its enjoyment, are genuine" (Stallabrass 2004: 199).

Art like that pursued in the FIU (certainly initially conceived of as having a building as a base), A.R.E, or the *Space Shuttle* provides – literally – a sheltered space for diverse needs outside the political or commercial realm, where seeing artwork inside and out, sitting, drinking coffee, listening to the artist, asking questions and contributing suggestions, chatting and laughing in an unhurried way is as important as (and a pre-requisite for) stating contesting views. Experience has shown that these then take a form that is

non-prescribed but also (already) contained non-violently and more “normally”. Similarly, art has emerged as the only mechanism of truth telling that can be inclusive. Soliciting stories within an art context thus harnesses all this and adds the therapeutic quality of telling one’s own story (although it may be still much too early for that, considering the fact that Holocaust reports and memoirs began to appear only in the 1960s).

Jacques Rancière is the theorist who most clearly expresses what can here be called a return to such differentiated engaged practices as Beuys’ (in Northern Ireland, possibly not elsewhere) and *Space Shuttle*’s. While they may seem authoritarian or obsolete to those for whom only activism writ large will count, their projects nevertheless give opportunities to listen, sit, drink coffee and look, acknowledging the need for “passivity” as much as that for activity and activism. Privileging activity for its own sake neglects “being” and reflecting. Rancière comes to the conclusion that “the politics of participation might best lie [...] in putting to work the idea that we are all equally capable of inventing our own translations. Unattached to a privileged artistic medium, this principle would not divide audiences into active and passive, capable and incapable, but instead would invite us all to appropriate works for ourselves and make use of these in ways that their authors might never have dreamed possible” (Bishop 2006: 16). Beuys may have summarised this as “unity in diversity”.<sup>8</sup>

In order, therefore, to allow and provide for diversity in the recipients’ experience, the diversity of artistic media and spaces should be safeguarded (even if that means reconsidering the at times discredited museum) and invitations for independent appropriation appear to be the most effective in order not to patronise audiences. Excluding rather than re-interpreting and re-inventing the canon (like Beuys) may thus be counter-productive also. This is another outcome of establishing the current diachronic line: Beuys was creatively translated and appropriated in Northern Ireland. The work that has been created in Northern Ireland, like *Space Shuttle*, is dependent on and simultaneously independent of his legacy,

and dependent on and independent of the arts infrastructure and artistic traditions. The fact that Beuys' name is so rarely mentioned positively concerning current relational practices, while his networks, legacies and approaches are alive and well, could then be taken as a sign of something that has worked, that has empowered a very diverse set of people to create and engage with work that paradigmatically addresses, captures, allows diversity (in adverse circumstances) and thus promotes it.

The *Space Shuttle* case study thus appears as a microcosm of what is important in current relational practice and its thinking on diversity, as reflected in *Space Shuttle's* cosmic metaphor, together with Alastair MacLennan's assertion that for him as a Scot, Belfast appeared as a tiny place with enormous differences that could show problems of humanity in a nutshell – like a small universe.<sup>9</sup> Beuys shared this sense of Ireland as the most representative place, a “case study”.<sup>10</sup>

Its geographical marginality is one aspect that distinguishes it – marginality as a reconsidered notion, as bell hooks puts it:

It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse [...] I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the centre, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds. (hooks 1990: 341)

However small this microcosm is, what Zingg calls “cooperative shaping of life in society” (Zingg 2001: 16) cannot be assumed *a priori* to occur in a “shared space”. Deru Simic writes: “Social interaction can be based on the simple but powerful fact that different social groups inhabit the same territory. Cultural activities can play a key role in transforming this territory into a shared public space” (Deru Simic 2003: 12). However, where ghettoisation has

taken place or where different social groups do not necessarily inhabit the same territory, as in Northern Ireland, creating shared public space apparently has had to include a durational element, as well as mobility: meeting people where they are. Mobile Museums, like Deru Simic's own (Deru Simic 2003), the *Space Shuttle* portacabin, (strategically) travelling exhibitions, the *Bus for Direct Democracy* and many other comparable initiatives take this into account.

If we speak of universality in relation to diversity, seeming contradictions arise. Terry Eagleton confronts and integrates this, serving to highlight the sustained (time-consuming, painstaking) focus on the individual in the present context:

What Culture itself cherishes is not the particular but that very different animal, the individual. Indeed it sees a direct relation between the individual and the universal. [...] It is in the uniqueness of a thing that the world spirit can be most intimately felt [...] Culture is itself the spirit of humanity individuating itself in specific works [...] The universal is not just the opposite of the individual, but the very paradigm of it. ... It is no doubt for this reason that aesthetic questions crop up so often in a society which has less and less time for art. What the work of art promised was a whole new way of conceiving of the relationship at issue, refusing both empty universality and blind particularity. (Eagleton 2000: 55, 62)

Indeed, the projects at the centre of this investigation help build and assert individual identities beyond those prescribed and determined by "communities", but partially by focusing on markers of identity (like locations, nicknames etc.): "The paradox of identity politics, in short, is that one needs an identity in order to feel free to get rid of it" (Eagleton 2000: 66). Art and culture help delineate identification, but participatory art, through the incentive it provides for becoming aware of and formulating one's own individuality can then loosen the clearly delineated Northern Irish ze-

zero sum conceptualisation of both identity and space ("What is mine is mine").<sup>11</sup> As Eagleton puts it, in "revolutionary nationalism [...] culture could become a transformative political force [... Then] Culture, in short, can come to oust the politics with which it was previously so closely bound up" (Eagleton 2000: 63).<sup>12</sup>

### ***Space Shuttle as a Dialogical Platform for New Forms of Representation***

To refocus on uses of culture to produce multiplicity, Deru Simic has argued that cultural projects, which enable dialogues between people in different social groups, can assist in the development of multiple identities. The potential transformations of 'identity' that art offers can, in turn, play a role in the formation of what she terms 'creative cities', that is, cities which foster a culture of openness and expression toward social cohesion. Though a segue from openness to harmonious social relations cannot be readily assumed, what is implied is a relationship between the creativity manifested in a city and the plural identities of its inhabitants. These are identities which are conceived as open-ended works in progress characterised by hybridity and fluidity. This marriage of identity and multiplicity poses a tension between the singular and plural which indicates the limits of 'identity' and suggests we might dispense with it altogether. "Who needs 'identity'?", Stuart Hall wonders, when the concept has been roundly deconstructed across a range of disciplinary fields, all of them variously anti-essentialist and sensitive to a 'politics of location', which reject and seek to displace a Cartesian concept of an originary, unified identity (Hall 1996: 1). Sticking with the Derridean impetus, Hall suggests the term needs to be put 'under erasure' to signal that it cannot be thought in old positivist ways, but that without it key questions cannot be asked. Acknowledging that the signifier 'identity' is indispensable to identity politics, from which questions of agency are inextricable, Hall seeks not to reinstate a transparent knowing subject or identity as the centred author of social practice, but rather to think the subject in a decentred position within a paradigm of discursive practice. Influenced by Foucault, he



stresses the process of identity-formation as one of subjectification to discursive practices, with all the exclusions it entails, before raising an argument for *identification*. Though not without its own conceptual difficulties, *identification* is preferable to 'identity' in a constructionist understanding as a contingent process without completion and always in progress.

Identification does not lend itself to notions of a property that can be 'won' or 'lost', whereas if identity is conceived of as something to be recouped, or safeguarded against loss or subsumption, identity and difference are incommensurable. Identification, by contrast, does not involve the obliteration of difference since as a signifying practice, according to a post-structuralist informed paradigm, it entails the play of difference and deferral for which Derrida coined the neologism *différance* (Derrida 1982: 3-29). It is by working with this paradigm that political theorist Seyla Benhabib describes the other within the self, as that real or imagined other by which the self is differentially defined (Benhabib 2002: 4). Identification as a play of *différance* contrives a dynamic, processual concept rather than the essentialist notion of a stable core of self which remains unchanged despite the vicissitudes of history or social forces. This notion of identity as an innate property is dangerous, for once carried over to 'cultural identity', identity finds a platform for the ominous convergence of 'a people' whose claims of a shared history or ancestry that override all other differences bind them together in an exclusive cultural belonging (Hall 1996: 4).

Conceiving of culture in a similarly post-structuralist vein, Benhabib uses an auditory metaphor to propose a "complex cultural dialogue", viewing human cultures as hybrid, polyvocal and as constant creations, recreations and negotiations of imaginary boundaries between 'we' and the 'other(s)' (Benhabib 2002: 8). For Benhabib, the difficulty is how to respect the other's difference, and recognise the other's fundamental right to human equality and dignity. This is a call for universalism in the moral understanding that, as human beings, we are all equally entitled to be

considered equals and afforded equal moral respect. Yet the matter of our differences raises problems for the concept of equality. Benhabib recognises how the moral question of whether we can all be considered equal interrelates with philosophical questions over the existence of a common human nature, and of a normative content of human reason based on the cognitive legacy of the Enlightenment, such as belief in the validity of objectivity, arguments and data, impartiality and intersubjective verification of results (Benhabib 2002: 27). And yet most human communities will hold a generalised moral attitude that not all other human beings are worthy of being considered equal partners in settling moral, political and social matters (Benhabib 2002: 30). Thus, moral discourses are situated within the boundaries of specific cultures and they support a normative philosophy, while an open-ended view of culture and of our interdependencies can lead to the more favourable process of a complex cultural dialogue which shows that the other's cultural traditions are receptive to universalist norms (Benhabib 2002: 39).

A feminist problematisation of 'equality' would suggest that the task of respecting the other's difference is a more layered one than can be captured by Benhabib's term 'democratic equality'. She states that the task is "to create impartial institutions in the public sphere and civil society where this struggle for the recognition of cultural differences and the contestation of cultural narratives can take place without domination" (Benhabib 2002: 8). Yet in the light of French feminist theory, there can be much greater exploration of the difficulty posed by recognising the rights and equality of the other across sexual difference. This analysis can be deepened with reference to feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's thinking on what she calls "sexuate rights" – a proposition for writing the rights and duties of each sex differently, since they are different, into social rights and duties. In and of itself, Irigaray's call for sexually differentiated social duties and rights has potentially oppressive results for women, witness for example how the Irish Constitution defines the role of women as that of motherhood within the home and nuclear family. One effect of this was the ban on married women

from working in the civil service until the 1970s. However, a demand for equality must still deal with the problem of reducing the feminine other to the masculine self-same in a comparison where the latter constitutes the normative yardstick. Irigaray refuses the egalitarian demand amongst Anglo and US feminists, since she believes all language and thought to be gendered and that there is no neutral from which to begin. "What do women want to be equal to?" Irigaray asks, "Men? A Wage? A public position? Equal to what? Why not to themselves?" (Irigaray 1992: 32). This raises again those crosscutting questions of identification and representation, of women's self-representation.

More usefully, in considering the practices of minority cultural communities and the rights of women and children, Benhabib – like Rancière in the specific context of art practice – remains an advocate of the capacity of individuals to negotiate their narratives of identity and difference through multicultural encounters (Benhabib 2002: 104). Once we modify our view of culture, reject holistic essentialist conceptions, and retain faith in the agency of ordinary political actors, Benhabib argues that the rights of women and children within minority cultural communities can be respected without getting stuck between the equally undesirable practices of criminalising these communities or exercising a liberal tolerance that compounds the plight of women and children (Benhabib 2002: 104). We propose, then, that a central aspect of the negotiation of which Benhabib speaks, for women in minority communities, is to develop their own modes of representation and a symbolic system that is not a repetition of any dominant patriarchal one. We further suggest that *Space Shuttle* shows that art can contribute to the creation of new forms of representation authored by individuals themselves, and provide alternative fora where this struggle for recognition of cultural differences and contestation over cultural narratives can take place.

To eschew exclusionary, essentialist operations around questions of 'who we are' or 'where we came from', culture and identities must be about questions of becoming, of representation and of

how we might represent ourselves. It is within these questions that identities are constituted (Hall 1996). The question of representation returns us to Deru Simic's examination of the relationship between multiple identities, which we might now think of as open-ended identifications, and creative cities. How can art foster or underscore identification as a process open to difference? She establishes, firstly, that art and cultural projects are not an alternative to regeneration initiatives. What they are is a vital component of urban renewal and what they can do, she claims, is transform a given situation (Deru Simic 2003: 4). In both western and non-western contexts, there are virtually innumerable artistic and architectural collaborations and groups with an urban focus which organise site-specific projects, both temporary and permanent, e.g. City Mine(d), Art for Change, Stalker, or Park Fiction, to name but a few in Europe, while Sarai and Sahmat are examples based in India. Considering some European examples, Susanne Bosch identifies a role for art in empowering people's creativity, which, she argues, leads to problem solving (Mutschler and Morrow 2007: 77).

Thus, as Deru Simic contends, cultural projects which are enacted in urban situations can create altered or new situations in what we might conceive of as cities of creativity. Amongst the requirements for a city to become creative, she identifies the need, with reference to Jeremy Rifkin's work, for new forms of communication, new ways of describing things, new ways of monitoring and new methods of local research. Barriers between departments and institutions need to be dismantled, new forms of description are called for, given that the traditional language of geography cannot adequately capture the myriadly textured qualities of urban experience, and new methods of local research and monitoring are needed to define local aspirations, needs, trends and problems (Deru Simic 2003: 4). In particular, O'Beirn's Mission Three, *Some Things About Belfast (or so I'm told)* demonstrates how these new forms of representation could contribute to the struggle for recognition of cultural difference and to the contestation of exclusive cultural narratives. In Belfast's microcosm, the social and political

necessities (and relative lack of arts funding in comparison to community project funding) have given rise to sustained and fine-tuned cultural approaches, and the honed skills of practitioners in this field are worthy of being noted as exemplary. Relational and dialogical practices here have not been a fashion but a necessity. If there is now a “shared space”, it owes more to the sustained work of artists on the ground than to empty political rhetoric.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Space Shuttle* 2007, <http://www.spaceshuttle.org.uk/mission1.htm>.

The project was initiated by PS<sup>2</sup>'s Peter Mutschler and started with a pilot launch 'The Launch: Lower Garfield Street & Project Space', 10-19 August 2006 <http://www.spaceshuttle.org.uk/launch.htm>.

The Missions, all of which are documented under [www.spaceshuttle.org.uk](http://www.spaceshuttle.org.uk), were:

'Mission One: Donegall Pass', Call Centre Collective, 22-29 August 2006.

'Mission Two: Titanic Quarter', Sarah Browne and Gareth Kennedy, 31 August - 16 September 2006.

'Mission Three: North Street/Waring Street', *Some Things About Belfast (or so I'm told)* Aisling O'Beirn, 20 September-5 October 2006.

'Mission Four: Blackstaff Square', *7 by 7* Siraj Izhar, 9-19 October 2006.

'Mission Five: Dublin Road/Shafesbury Square', *Find Your Perfect Location*, Mick O'Kelly, 23 October-2 November 2006.

'Mission Six: St. Aidan's Christian Brothers Primary School', *H.I. (Humans Identified)* Amy Russell, Barnardo's, 19-30 March 2007.

The project culminated in 'Discoveries: PS<sup>2</sup>, 18 Donegall Street and Space Shuttle Location at Royal Avenue/North Street', 27 April-5 May 2007. Mission 1 - 6: report, edited work and launch of publication.

<sup>2</sup> In conversation with Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, London 1993, Dublin 2006.

<sup>3</sup> This would suggest an anthropological trajectory – if anthropology had not for a long time disallowed anthropology of “home”. The anthropologist was required to go to far-away places and apply what one would now call the colonialist's gaze. The artist or – more potently – the artists' group focusing on diversity issues in relational work cannot help but engage with anthropological questions. To be seen as a more “objective” outsider (while questioning notions of objectivity) and having the benefit of local knowledge and networks could be seen in both cases as the best scenario. Ullrich Kockel refers to such artistic work as “applied anthro-

pology" (in a presentation at the Academy for Irish Cultural Heritages, University of Ulster, Magee, 26 April 2007, as well as in this publication). *Space Shuttle*, in its investigation (by O'Beirn) of nicknames for streets and areas of the city, can also be understood as anthropological fieldwork.

<sup>4</sup> "In contrast to the thinking of the seventies, today's Activists are no longer concerned with changing the world in its entirety. It is no longer a matter of mercilessly implementing an ideological line, as it was in Joseph Beuys's idea of transforming a whole society into a Social Plastic [...] and many other manifesto writers of the Modern. [...] Activist Art no longer overestimates its capabilities. But it does not underestimate them either. It makes modest contributions" (Zinggl <sup>2001</sup>: 16).

<sup>5</sup> The present thoughts also motivated a reassessment of Beuys' legacy in a symposium in Dublin's Goethe Institut, January 2006.

<sup>6</sup> "Objects of the Company [...] (a) To relieve poverty, distress and sickness among those living or working in the Local Government administrative area of Belfast and its immediate vicinity (the area of 'benefit')" (O'Connell 2007: 77).

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Zinggl states: "The understanding of art changes very slowly". And: "Filled with a euphoria not lacking a measure of hubris [...] In the end it did not work without the old institutions. The museums, the art journals, the galleries..." (Zinggl <sup>2001</sup>: 11, 14).

<sup>8</sup> This is the title that Beuys gave to a "performance" at the Giant's Causeway, County Antrim. It is the point of departure of diversity-related thoughts on Beuys (Lerm Hayes 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Alastair MacLennan in conversation with Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Belfast June 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Ireland (Dublin) had already been captured as such by James Joyce in *Ulysses*, which had been formative for Beuys and provided a context for his engagement on the island, even his wish to find a site for the Free International University (FIU).

<sup>11</sup> For these thoughts, Brian Graham's presentation "Heritage and the Construction of Place and Identity" has been valuable, as delivered at the workshop *The Representation of Place by Collectors and Through Collections*, University of Ulster, 24 May 2007.

<sup>12</sup> The artists featured here have their own stake in the "Culture Wars", as Eagleton describes it: "Men and women are more likely to take to the streets over cultural and material issues rather than purely political ones – the cultural being what concerns one's spiritual identity, and the material one's physical one" (Eagleton 2000: 61).

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## **Anthropology, Mythology and Art: Reading Beuys through Heidegger**

NICOLA FOSTER

### **Beuys the mythmaker Shaman**

Most celebrated artists are as influential artistically as they are critically. Beuys' reception to date remains controversial and contradictory; his artistic influence is unquestioned but this is not matched by his critical acclaim. In an attempt to address this difficulty with the publication of *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy* (2001), Gene Ray notes that Beuys "inspired, enabled, or enriched important directions of contemporary art production, from what can broadly be called 'history of art' to installation, performance, and environmental art", (Ray 2001: 1). And yet, despite his overwhelming influence in the artistic world, critical reception of Beuys remains somewhat polarised and contentious.

Interestingly, perhaps the most critical essay came in response to Beuys' 1979/80 retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim New York. In his essay "Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol" (*Artforum* 1980), Benjamin Buchloh is disturbed by what he sees as "the aesthetic conservatism of Beuys [...] logically complemented by his politically retrograde, not to say reactionary, attitudes" (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 23). Buchloh goes on to argue that the root of the problem lies in Beuys' misconception that "politics could become a matter of aesthetics" and he goes on to compare this to Walter Benjamin's critique of fascism as the aesthetisation of politics and war. Buchloh is thus concerned by what he sees as the uncritical reception of Beuys where he is presented as "a national hero of the first order", "a cult figure" and "a figure of worship", with references to Hitler's reception in Germany some years earlier. Though more recently art historians are examining Beuys' work more care-

fully and critically, Buchloh's critique is still influential and stands in the way of any attempt to re-examine Beuys' work today.

In his essay "The Ends of Art According to Beuys" published in *October* in 1988, Eric Michaud offers the following helpful comment:

The disturbing element in Beuys' work is not to be found in his drawings, which have their place in public and private collections throughout the world, nor his 'performances', which have their place within the Fluxus movement and within a general investigation of the limits of art. It lies rather, I believe, in the flood of pronouncements testifying to the privilege that he gave, throughout his lifetime, to spoken over plastic language. (Michaud 1988: 36)

Michaud's comment points to two interrelated and closely linked difficulties in the reception of Beuys' work: one regarding the status of Beuys' spoken words and statements, the other regarding the artist's insistence on the prioritisation he allocates to the spoken word and communication through language.

The status of Beuys' spoken statements is perhaps *the* stumbling block for many critics and art historians and Buchloh is a good example. Depending on how they read Beuys' spoken statements, interpreters have offered a range of responses. Buchloh reads such statements as descriptive, explanatory and external to the artwork, though nonetheless explaining the artwork. Hence he is keen to point out that in Germany at the time, those who were seriously involved in radical student politics did not interpret Beuys' spoken statements as "anything more than simple-minded utopian drivel lacking elementary political and educational practicability" (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 201). According to Buchloh, a serious avant-garde artist would be expected to offer descriptive and explanatory comments that would show how their artwork also operates towards appropriate ethical, social and political goals. Beuys' spoken comments do not operate this way – much of it evokes mysti-

cism and naïve utopianism – and Buchloh is unable to interpret the works beyond a mere return to a-historical mysticism and conservatism demonstrated by works that make references to anthropological mysticism.

For Buchloh, Beuys had not understood the innovation brought about by Duchamp's readymades and as a result, he concludes that there is nothing of artistic innovation and value in Beuys' work. Hence he argues that:

Beuys does not change the state of the object within discourse itself. Quite the contrary, he dilutes and dissolves the conceptual precision of Duchamp's readymade by reintegrating the object into the most traditional and naïve context of representation of meaning, the idealist metaphor: this object stands for that idea, and that idea is represented in this object. (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 206)

Buchloh insists that whilst Beuys is intrigued by Duchamp, he does not understand the artistic innovation introduced by the latter artist's readymades. Instead, he argues, Beuys offers us a return to notions of the naïve primitive with references to anthropological and ethnographical presentations. We are offered, he says, "withering relics and vestiges of past activities", souvenirs of the past enshrined "in specifically designed glass and wood cases that look like [...] vitrines in Victorian museums of ethnography" (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 200). From Buchloh's perspective, Beuys' position is closer to fascism than to any attempt to mourn and seek forgiveness for this past.

For Buchloh, Beuys remains a conservative artist who offers no innovation and has not come to terms with recent artistic history. He offers a quotation from Beuys' comments on his "Bathtub" (1960) as an example:

But it would be wrong to interpret the *bathtub* as a kind of self-reflection. Nor does it have anything to do with the

concept of the readymade: quite the opposite, since here the stress is on the meaning of the object. It relates to the reality of being born in such an area and in such circumstances. (Buchloh in Ray 2001: 206)

Buchloh expects "Bathtub" to be a reference to Duchamp and, as such, to make formal references to the readymade; Beuys' emphasis, Buchloh's comment suggests, is on "the meaning of the object". For Buchloh, art that seeks to offer "meaning" also implies that such "meaning" is metaphysical, "spiritual" and a-historical as opposed to social, historical, political and ethical. According to the art historian, then, the "meaning" offered in such work is traditional, whether it is linked to Western religion or anthropological mysticism.

Paul Wood shares Buchloh's suspicions and points out – with reference to Beuys' other works and his accompanying statements – that in contemporary contexts, there are difficulties in establishing "the meaning of an object" understood in terms of symbolic meaning, solely on the basis of the visual:

Erased crosses do not 'mean' the union of East and West any more than dead hares are valid symbols of nomadic freedom from modern materialism. One of the key features of the contemporary social order has been, precisely, the loss of a common symbolic repertoire of the kind more organic cultures collectively invest in religion. (Wood 2004: 307)

Like Buchloh, Wood is alarmed by any suggestion of mere acceptance of Beuys' statements that imply common symbolic meanings in the way the Christian God operated in Europe for several centuries, or of their re-insertion into contemporary Western culture. For Wood, what characterises modern society is the openness, changes and plurality of possible meanings, in contrast to the closed worlds of traditional and primitive societies which are the objects of anthropological and ethnographical study.

Caroline Tisdall, who, from Buchloh's perspective, uncritically reads Beuys' statements as descriptive and explanatory, notes again and again that in Beuys' works art and life are not easily distinguishable and offers the following interpretation of Beuys' "Bathtub":

It is the tub in which he was bathed as a child, extended in meaning through sculptural additions: sticking-plaster and fat-soaked gauze. The plaster indicates the wound, while fat suggests a less physical level, Beuys' metaphor for spirituality and the passage from one state to another. Fat can appear in solid or liquid form, definite in shape or chaotic in flow, according to temperature. Of fat we will hear more later; here it indicates change, transformation and substance – like the act of birth. (Tisdall 1995: 349)

As Tisdall's description makes clear, the "Bathtub" is not an empty tub, it is not a readymade. The tub shows signs of use and wear and as such evokes history. Moreover, it is not empty; inside we find plasters, gauze and fat, and as Tisdall notes, fat is a recurring material used by Beuys and as such calls for our attention. Why is it used here and elsewhere in Beuys' work?

Gene Ray does not offer an interpretative account of the "Bathtub", but he does offer interpretative accounts of other works by Beuys involving fat and felt. Unlike Buchloh, he pays relatively little attention to the content of Beuys' statements on the grounds that even if Beuys does not offer us enough evidence in his statements that the works could be interpreted as anything other than conservative and naively utopian, primitive, anthropological artworks, they may nonetheless evoke other interpretations on the basis of their materiality. He thus argues that the works offer us enough references to indicate that they should be read as a response to the Holocaust, unbeknownst, perhaps, even to Beuys himself. Beuys' own words and statements, Ray argues, "cannot be taken as infallible guides" because "he may not have been able

to know or understand his deepest feelings about the Nazi period" (Ray 2001: 71). Ray proceeds to offer very convincing and tempting interpretations of Beuys' use of fat and felt as references to the Holocaust, admitting that we shall never know whether these were intentional on Beuys' part or simply unconscious.

Ray's account is very tempting in that it offers an interpretation that helps to explain, and more importantly justify, Beuys' remarkable influence, an influence which has inspired, enabled and enriched so much of contemporary art production. And yet, we are left with the awareness that, whilst it is a tempting account, it also leaves too much open to speculation without sufficient evidence. In the observations that follow, I would like to offer evidence that would allow us to both stabilise Ray's line of interpretation and yet keep it open to further evidence and interpretations; the source of which, in this instance, comes from the phenomenology of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and his emphasis on language.

### **Reading Beuys through Heidegger**

I showed earlier that perhaps *the* stumbling block in interpreting Beuys' work is our interpretation of the status of his statements, many of which are highly provocative, utopian or simply too naïve to ring true and sincere. In her Lehman Lecture "The Old and the New Initiation Rites: Joseph Beuys and Epiphany", Antje von Graevenitz points out that Beuys did not seek either to speak symbolically or to present work that could be interpreted symbolically: that is, he did not intend each comment, gesture, visual image, or linguistic phrase to hold a symbolic meaning in a similar way to those of priests and shamans. Beuys, she says, stated in 1968, "I do not want to interpret, because then it would seem that the things I do are symbolic, and they are not" (Von Graevenitz in Cook & Kelly 1996: 64). Von Graevenitz goes on to say that in conversation, Beuys said that he wanted to make "apparent only the things that already had meaning in their own right. He wanted to emphasise forgotten things" (von Graevenitz in Cook and Kelly 1996:



64). Beuys, it seems, is attempting to focus our attention on what exists, but is not always visible and seen, not because it is not possible to see it, but because our attention is focused elsewhere. Von Graevenitz goes on to argue that the problem has been a misinterpretation by art historians of the status of both images and real objects in Beuys' work.

In what follows, I would like to show that, through considering Beuys' work in relation to the writings of Heidegger, we can gain a better understanding of the problems art historians face in their attempts to interpret Beuys' work. Phenomenology for Heidegger is not the study of what is visible in our everyday life, but the capacity to allow that which is not otherwise visible – existence as such (Being) – to appear and become visible. For Heidegger the visual is always already interpreted culturally and thus in and through language. The capacity to allow that which is normally "forgotten", hidden from attention in everyday engagement – Being as such – to appear, is in and through language and its grammar. For example, when we say 'this is a woman' or 'this is a man' we highlight 'Being', in our everyday encounters we simply accept this and work with it. But when attention is paid to language, as in the case of art, we can focus on the 'is', the 'being' of something: man, woman. We claim 'being' for 'man' or 'woman' and thus expose that such meaning could be re-thought. We become aware that these definitions are cultural constructions and could/might be interpreted differently.

I suggested that one clue that an understanding of Heidegger's writings is relevant to understanding Beuys may well be Beuys' insistence on the centrality of language and his prioritisation of the spoken word whilst presenting himself as a visual artist. And yet, a remarkable proportion of his visual work is speech. Tisdall notes that his performance at the Tate in 1972 was a six-and-a-half hour "blend of art, politics, personal charisma, paradox and Utopian propositions" (Tisdall 1995: 339), and this was by no means the longest of his performances. I am proposing that our clue is to be found in Beuys' utilisation of aspects of Heideggerian phenome-

nology and its emphasis on language, as well as some of Heidegger's ideas and themes, in an attempt to come to terms with the changes he and his generation witnessed in Germany.

Beuys was educated under the Nazi regime, fought in the war, witnessed Germany's defeat, the atrocities it committed and the guilt and responsibility arising from the Holocaust, followed by the American 'occupation'/liberation and economic recovery. Not an easy history to come to terms with, and even more difficult to respond to artistically. Strangely, if Beuys were to have produced works that simply responded to Duchamp, under the above circumstances he would have rightly been seen as conservative, probably even by Buchloh. On the other hand, if Beuys had produced works that sought to mourn those who suffered, they would have been received with equal difficulty, since in some form, he was part of the generation responsible for it all and, as such, implicated.

I am not suggesting that Beuys was a Heidegger scholar, and it is likely that his knowledge of Heidegger's philosophy was very sketchy, at best. I have no evidence that Beuys ever read anything by Heidegger. And yet, there is evidence that he was familiar with at least some phrases and some Heideggerian concepts, even if these were second or third hand. There is evidence that Beuys read the works of Rudolf Steiner, who edited Goethe's scientific writings and other theoretical, literary and philosophical works before outlining anthroposophy as an educational and religio-scientific theory. Though Steiner died shortly before the publication of Heidegger's major work, it is likely that his theory incorporated several early Heideggerian themes circulating at the time.

Beuys read Steiner in the 1950s and I am suggesting here that Beuys' interest in Steiner indicates a receptivity to the ideas and arguments of Heidegger which were circulating in Germany at the time. For a generation that had to come to terms with so much, Heidegger offered some form of anchor: he was German, he experienced the same difficult historical changes, he did support the

Nazi party, albeit briefly, and was punished by being barred from teaching and only reinstated in the late 1950s when his works became very influential in France, Germany and beyond. Yet he never apologised for or renounced his brief encounter with National Socialism, and as such remains a politically problematic figure, even if philosophically highly influential. There is a similarity between Heidegger's evident philosophical influence – many of his students became prominent philosophers, others used his work as a springboard – and his persona and position as a philosopher in the history of philosophy, and Beuys' artistic influence and problematic reception by art history.

In 1947, Heidegger's essay "Letter on Humanism" was published in French and German, and several other essays followed during the 1950s and 1960s. There is enough textual evidence to suggest that Beuys was familiar with at least some of Heidegger's linguistic phrases and thus probably more. Tisdall quotes Beuys from his diary and the similarity between Heidegger and Beuys' phrases suggests the artist was at least familiar with the philosopher's work. For example, he says:

The purpose of philosophy is to arrive at materialism. In other words, to move towards death: matter. In order to be able to say anything about life, one has to understand death. (Tisdall 1998: 79)

Whilst this comment in no way paraphrases or explicates Heidegger and could be seen to make references to Steiner, the choice of phrases used – beyond the reference to materialism – cannot be explained without reference to Heidegger. "Letter On Humanism" was written in response to Sartre's reference to Feuerbach's comment that "the question of whether human thought achieves objective truth is not a question of theory but a practical question" (Feuerbach cited in Heidegger 1977b: 90). This is clearly visible in the above comment, but it is also visible in the numerous references made by Beuys regarding theory and practice, in his spoken statements and his performances. But, if we are still in any doubt,

the second and third sentences make unmistakable reference to the philosopher's work; the notion of 'being towards death' is a Heideggerian phrase and concept. The statement reflects Heidegger's belief that probably one of the most important aspects of human life is our awareness that we are the sort of 'being' who can also 'not be', that is to say, die. In that sense, Heidegger is sometimes also interpreted as an existentialist, on the basis of his focus on existence articulated as 'Being'. As is famously known, Heidegger distinguished 'being' from 'Being'; the former is a sort of being (man, woman, hammer, stone), the latter is existence. The theme of 'Being', though not articulated as such, is repeated in various guises in Beuys' work, such as death, birth, warmth, appearance, forgetting, language, speech, explanations, theory, practice. All are central themes in Heidegger's phenomenology.

Like Beuys, Heidegger suffers from the fact that it is easy to superficially interpret much of his work as mere mysticism, transcendentalism and naïve utopianism. Whilst Heidegger inspired, enabled and/or enriched important directions in philosophy, and his students went on to pursue a variety of philosophical new directions – social policy, political policy, the development of the European Union itself and much else – there remains a strong voice amongst Anglo-American philosophers that insist on interpreting Heidegger's work in terms of the mystical and transcendental.

As has become clear from the discussion so far, seeing Beuys' statements as descriptive and explanatory is not necessarily always helpful in the construction of an interpretation that reflects the importance of Beuys' artworks. We need to look for other strategies in order to achieve this. Like Beuys, Heidegger presents us with what might seem like mystical objects belonging to societies that did share in a common symbolism, societies anthropology is keen to explore. For example, in Heidegger's essay "The Question Concerning Technology", we are presented with the example of the chalice, an example Heidegger repeats in other contexts. The chalice is, of course, a religious object invested with a range of mystical meaning, including the imagery and symbolism of drink-

ing, with all the symbolism this evokes in Western Christian culture. Heidegger utilises it in order to re-interpret Aristotle's account of causality (a fourfold causality discussed for example in Aristotle's *Physics* (Aristotle 1957: 165;/ *Physics*/198a), where Aristotle offers four causes: material, form, moving force and goal or purpose. Heidegger develops Aristotle's account and offers the chalice (evoking complex cultural concept and stable object) as an example rather than Aristotle's candle wax or perfume (which point towards less stable substances).

Heidegger's language is strange here; he seeks to make language strange so that our attention will focus on the language as well as what it communicates in order for it to allow that which is not normally visible – Being – to appear. Heidegger says:

The silversmith considers carefully and gathers together the three aforementioned ways of being responsible and indebted [material, form, goal, for the silversmith in this example is the moving force]. To consider carefully is in Greek *legein*, logos. *Legein* is rooted in *apophainesthai*, to bring forward into appearance. The silversmith is co-responsible as that from whence the sacrificial vessel's bringing forth and resting-in-self take and retain their first departure. (Heidegger 1977a: 8)

He goes on to say:

According to our example, they [four causes] are responsible for the silver chalice's lying ready before us as a sacrificial vessel. Lying before and lying ready (*hypokeisthai*) characterises the presencing of something that presences. The four ways of being responsible bring something into appearance. They let it come forth into presencing. (Heidegger 1977a: 9)

For anybody unfamiliar with Heidegger, the above reads as strange, mystical and incomprehensible. We might be forgiven for

thinking that this text belongs to a different era or some primitive society, the kind of society that the French anthropologist Marc Augé describes:

The indigenous fantasy is that of a closed world founded once and for all long ago; one which, strictly speaking, does not have to be understood. Everything there is to know about it is already known: land, forest, springs, notable features, religious places, ... (Augé 1992: 44)

And yet, whilst Heidegger's writing may seem to belong to such a society, this is precisely what he is seeking to open up. For Heidegger, such a society is governed by metaphysics, that is to say: everything is already known and thus closed, for example, the terms 'man' or 'woman' are utilised as if they were fixed and thus have fixed social, political, economic and ethical implications. Heidegger's project is a critique of metaphysics and, as such, it seeks to open up this apparently closed system; it seeks to offer a way in which we need continuously to re-interpret the world. One of the reasons why Heidegger uses Greek terms is in order to propose an archaeology that would uncover how we came to adopt the present meaning of what we now call 'truth'; a term that for us today, he argues, functions like 'God' functioned in earlier Christian societies.

Hence, Heidegger is not seeking to determine what 'truth' is, but to open up to un-concealment as appearance. But how, Heidegger asks, "does bringing-forth happen?" This revealing happens, according to Heidegger, through art and through language. For Heidegger, 'art is the becoming and happening of truth', truth in terms of un-concealment. Moreover, he says:

Truth is never gathered from objects that are present and ordinary. Rather, the opening up of the Open, and the clearing of what is, happens only as the openness is projected, sketched out, that makes its advent in thrownness. (Heidegger 1971: 71)

For Heidegger, we are always between birth and death. As such we are forever re-interpreting our own being and the being of what appears visually in art (nature) or through language. Precisely because art can present us with objects or acts we cannot simply understand, art can help us suspend earlier conceptions and see things differently, it allows us to suspend our traditional view and consider that which otherwise we will not consider. Equally, it is precisely when language does not operate smoothly to communicate, when it is strange as such, that the medium of language as such becomes unconcealed and 'shows itself'. In other words, what shows itself is the Being of the medium. Of course, this is a simplification of Heidegger's argument, but for our purposes here it would suffice. At some level at least, this explains the strange archaic and constructed language that Heidegger utilised, and thus we can gain some understanding of Beuys' use of language.

According to Tisdall, Beuys' own version of biography merges art and life and begins with birth: "1921 Cleves: Exhibition of a wound drawn together with plaster". "Bathtub" refers directly to this event, "the wound or trauma experienced by every person" (Tisdall 1995: 349). Though Heidegger talks more about death than birth, trauma, death and birth are central to his ontological account, where he distinguishes 'Being' from non-Being (pre-birth, after death), and where he also distinguishes 'Being' from being – the former is referred to as ontology (being as such) the latter as 'ontic' where the focus is not on the existence of the being but its characteristics in space and time, its substance and its properties. Heidegger's ontological methodology focuses on the 'Being' of beings in order to re-interpret, re-think the being and what we see as its properties. The Being under interpretation is always 'me', the self: a being that requires continual interpretation of Being.

Tisdall goes on to quote Beuys' account of the "Bathtub":

My intention with this work was to recall my point of departure [...]. It acts as a kind of autobiographical key: an object from the outer world, a solid material thing invested with energy of a spiritual nature. You could call this substance, and it is the transformation of substance that is my concern in art [...]. If creativity relates to the transformation, change and development of substance, then it can be applied to everything in the world, and is no longer restricted to art. (Tisdall 1995: 349)

Viewed through Heidegger, I think it becomes easier to see even the above comments about the "Bathtub" not simply as descriptive and explanatory, but also as an integral part of Beuys' work. Moreover, the anthropological references and the autobiographical references now become part and parcel of an attempt at transformation, not necessarily metaphysical transformation, but opening up new possible interpretations of one's own being and the being of other 'substance' or beings. Beuys goes on to talk about the fat, "lying there like a moulding or sculpting hand of the kind, which lies behind everything in the world. By this I mean creativity in the anthropological sense, not restricted to artists" (Tisdall 1995: 350). Again, seen through Heidegger, if Beuys is looking for unconcealment, his project can be seen as a less metaphysical one, and as now perhaps even approaching the possibility of coming to terms with Germany's past and opening the door to possible mourning.

In his essay "Joseph Beuys and the After Auschwitz Sublime", Ray describes the way in which Beuys' uses of fat can be seen as references to the Holocaust. The melting of fat on a burner, he argues, "was a blunt allusion to the crematoria of the Holocaust". The other material repeatedly used by Beuys is felt. As Ray suggests, "the hair of Holocaust victims was shorn and collected at the killing centres and shipped to German-owned factories, where it was processed into felt" (Ray 2001: 63). Moreover, Ray argues, "the darker resonance of felt and fat needs to be read back into the specific deployment of these materials across the whole of Beuys'



oeuvre" (Ray 2001: 64). Read through Heidegger, these references are one possible way in which appearances happen; the material, the substance, allows us to see things anew, not only ontologically, but also ontically: that is not only in relation to the Being of the being, but also to its specific properties as a being.

For Beuys and the generation that was brought up under Nazism who saw the war and witnessed the Holocaust, it was not possible to simply mourn. Something else was necessary before mourning could take place. Beuys may well have attempted to offer this through his mix of art and life, his repeated use of felt and fat, his performances and his use of spoken words as well as his statements. Read in this way, it is also possible to understand why Beuys insists that his "personal history is of interest only in so far as I have attempted to use my life and person as a tool", to bring about new appearances. Equally, Beuys' disturbing statement "every human being is an artist" can be read through Heidegger to simply mean that all human beings are capable of bringing about appearances and re-interpreting their own being in the context of other beings: and thus other beings in the network of connections and interrelations.

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