

# History & Theory of Social Art Practice History (Spring 2020)

\* Most readings will be available online before the start of class: see books below.

\*\* Syllabus and its content might change so be sure to track the online site as latest version.

<http://www.sholetteseminars.com/arts-777-2020-spring/>

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An increasing number of artists, curators, and critics have recently turned their energies toward a new type of participatory art activism. What had previously been marginalized is now gaining more mainstream attention, with a new prominence in museums, biennials, but also on the streets and other public spaces. Even the New York Times has hailed the emergence of this tendency as “social practice art.” The aim of this seminar is to survey, critique and historicize the theory and practice of social practice art as well as activist, interventionist, public, participatory and community based art operating within and across fields such as performance, urban studies, environmental science and other socially engaged disciplines. The class will focus on such questions as: Why is it useful, even necessary, to understand the history and theory of social practice art? Where should we look to find the historical roots of social practice art? Are these within the history of art, or external to it, or crossing a line between two spheres of cultural interpretation and understanding? And what is the "social"? In an increasingly privatized society how do we define and operate within a concept of the public sphere? And how are both mainstream and alternative types of cultural institutions responding to the increasing interest in socially engaged art by emerging artists? Through lectures, readings, discussions and student research presentations we will seek to position socially-engaged visual culture and the shifting role of the artist within an historical, ideological, and critical framework. If possible, guest speakers and offsite visits will also be added as available.

## *Learning Goals & Objectives*

- Develop theoretical and historical knowledge of emerging social practice art field.
- Explore and debate complexities, paradoxes and possibilities of socially engaged art.
- Engage in original research related to social practices and individual student projects.
- Foster an environment for investigating cross-disciplinary exchange and critical thinking.
- Acquire working knowledge of seminal texts relevant to this field and in relation to the broader background of art history.

### *Five Research Questions this Course will Attempt to Answer:*

1. **The definition question:** How does social practice differentiate itself from social service ? Is this important to resolve? What kind of questions and assumptions arise if we seek to make social practice its own distinct artistic method? And what sort of questions and assumptions arise if we do not differentiate it from art or from say, community work, environmental activism, urban reform, or social justice advocacy?

2. **The institutionalization/academic question:** Is social practice art radically opposed to mainstream art and culture? Is it rejuvenating it? Or is it being co-opted by it? How can we frame this question to get beyond simple answers and find a more engaging and useful thesis from which to work?

3. **The context question:** Who is a social practice artist and what sort of “agency” does she or he have in a world of hyper-surveillance and economic ? And who is such work made for and why? Is it global or local, white or black, academic, or populist? Does it have a specific historical framing? Is it logical to assume it will be part of future arts academic curricula and how will this alter the study of art and of art criticism, history, curating, etc..?

4. **The "aesthetic" question:** Is there a social practice art-aesthetic or form or repertoire of forms specific to this kind of work? If yes, what kind of questions do we need to ask in order to investigate what this particular aesthetic consists of? And if there is no such thing as a social practice aesthetic how will this “lack” impact the practice of social practice art if at all?

5. **The organizational question:** the practice of social practice art, as opposed to many other types of artistic practice, inevitably involves processes of organization, administration, and self-governance. What precedents exist regarding this conjoining of artistic and organizational needs and goals, and does a distinctive hybrid of some type emerge from this entanglement?

### *Assignments and Expectations*

- A. Generate at least one question or observation for each week's reading or viewing.
- B. Make one short presentation on your research during the course of the semester in consultation with instructor.
- C. Each student produces a final critical research essay (10 pages) based on original research that may be centered on archival work, first-person observation of a socially engaged or community art project, and/or an interview with at least one stakeholder (artist/organizer/participant) engaged in social practice art.

### *Grading and Requirements*

You are responsible for reading and discussing all assigned texts. Attendance is essential due to the participatory nature of this course. All students are expected to come to class prepared and on time. If a problem arises regarding attendance or assignments, you should contact me as soon as possible. Missing a class does not mean that you are excused from an assignment. You should make arrangements with me or with a classmate to obtain any handouts or information. In short, **participation and attendance** figures heavily in your overall evaluation and grade.

#### *Evaluation:*

- 30% Participation in class
- 10% Five one-page response papers
- 40 % Class presentation
- 20% Final paper (10-12 pages)

### *Books with multiple chapters readings to purchase for this course:*

Tom Finkelpearl, *What we made: conversations on art and social cooperation*. Duke University Press, 2013.

Sholette, Gregory, and Chloë Bass, eds. *Art as social action: An introduction to the principles and practices of teaching social practice art*. Simon and Schuster, 2018.

## THE SYLLABUS

30 January—Introduction

6 February-- Presentation: origin stories about socially engage art

Readings:

- Pablo Helguera introduction to *Education for Socially Engaged Art*
- Grant Kester introduction to *Conversation Pieces*
- Sharon Irish. ["Book Excerpt - Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between"](#)

13 February – Urbanism, Real Estate and Art Estates(Part One)

How can art intervene in a city? Compare the goals and accomplishments of Corona Plaza here in Queens and Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas.

Readings:

- Chapter 5 in "What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation," interview with Rick Lowe and Mark Stern.
- My interview with T. Cruz “Urban Policy & DNA”:  
<https://gregsholette.tumblr.com/post/175474765415/urban-policy-social-dna-an-interview-with-teddy>

And on SPQ’s Transforming Corona Plaza Project:

- <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/2012-06-07-corona-plaza.pdf>
- <http://www.streetfilms.org/queens-corona-plaza-a-community-place-rises/>

20 February— Immigration and Art

Compare and contrast the work of Teddy Cruz, Pedro Lasch and Tania Bruguera. All are deeply engaged with issues of art and immigration. How do they choose to enact their ideas?

Readings:

- Chapter 9, "What We Made," interview with Pedro Lasch and Teddy Cruz.
- Article about Immigrant Movement International (IMI)
- [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/arts/design/immigrant-movement-international-in-queens.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/22/arts/design/immigrant-movement-international-in-queens.html?_r=0)
- <http://vimeo.com/33193227>

27 February— Critics of Social Practice

How doe Claire Bishop and Ben Davis criticize the social and community practices we have been studying? Do you find their arguments convincing? If not, how would you defend Project Row Houses against their attack? If so, how would you apply their arguments to other projects we have studied in the class?

Readings:

- Chapter 7, part 2, p. 204 in "What We Made," interview with Claire Bishop.
- Ben Davis in International Socialist Review: <http://isreview.org/issue/90/critique-social-practice-art>

5 March—Labor and Art and Society

Compare the relationship between Rev- and Mierle Ukeles in terms of their relationship with the workers they collaborate with. How do the community participants have a say in the artwork? What is artistic dark matter and does it have agency?

Reading:

- Chapter 10, "What We Made," interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Brett Cook.
- Sholette, "[Activating the Archive From Below at a Moment of Cultural and Political Crisis.](#)"

12 March— Communalism, Cooperation, Collaboration and Collectivism

Can we make meaningful distinctions between these various terms used for social practices?

Reading:

- Finkelparl, "A Cooperative Animal"
- Stimson and Sholette, Introduction to Collectivism After Modernism.
- Stephen Wright, "And Then You Disappear," Stephen Wright

19 March— The Internet as a Social and Public Platform?

What is the nature of the Internet as a public space? How do these projects differ from others discussed in the class that take place in the physical world? What is gained and lost by working online?

Mini-Assignment

- Find an internet based artwork that uses collaboration, cooperation, crowd sourcing , or the like and be ready to discuss it in class (for example: <http://www.tenthousandcents.com/> )

Reading:

- Chloë Bass: "Reflections from Nowhere: Social Media Activism and the Strange Politics of Participation." <http://field-journal.com/issue-12/north-america/reflections-from-nowhere-social-media-activism-the-strange-politics-of-participation>

26 March— The Institutionalization of Social Practice Art?

What is happening when major art institutions around the world embrace political, interventionist and socially engaged art practices? Does it undermine this art's critical edge, or add to its potential for making actual change in the world, or some paradoxical combination of both cooptation and legitimating strengthening of the practice?

Readings:

- Michael G. Birchall, Socially engaged art in the 1990s and beyond [CLICK](#)

2 April— Urbanism, Real Estate and Art Estates (Two)

The work of Chicago-based Theaster Gates is the primary focus of this evening as we examine the claims and criticisms of his regenerative art and real estate projects on the city's impoverished South Side.

Readings:

- Gary Younge, "Theaster Gates, the artist whose latest project is regenerating Chicago."
- Nate Bert, "From Theaster Gates to Assemble: is there an art to urban regeneration?"
- Sholette, "Art After Gentrification."

X 9 April—No Class, Spring Break

X 16 April—No Class, Spring Break

23 April— Teaching Socially Engaged Art (Part One)

Readings:

- Excerpts from Sholette & Bass: *Art As Social Action*

30 April— Teaching Socially Engaged Art (Part Two)

Readings:

- Additional excerpts from *Art As Social Action*

7 May— Presentations for feedback

14 May— Conclusions and Self Critique

### **CUNY POLICY ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

The Policy on Academic Integrity, as adopted by the Board is available to all candidates. Academic Dishonesty is prohibited in The City University of New York and is punishable by penalties, including failing grades, suspension, and expulsion. This policy and others related to candidates' issues are available to you at: <http://qc.cuny.edu/?id=IUHC>

### **USE OF CANDIDATE WORK**

All teacher education programs in New York State undergo periodic reviews by accreditation agencies and the state education department. For these purposes, samples of candidates' work are made available to those professionals conducting the review. Candidate anonymity is assured under these circumstances. If you do not wish to have your work made available for these purposes, please let the professor know before the start of the second class. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

### **REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR CANDIDATES WITH DISABILITIES**

Candidates with disabilities needing academic accommodation should: 1) register with and provide documentation to the Special Services Office, Frese Hall, Room 111; 2) bring a letter indicating the need for accommodation and what type. This should be done during the first week of class. For more information about services available to Queens College candidates, contact: Special Service Office; Director, Miriam Detres-Hickey, Frese Hall, Room 111; 718-997-5870 (Monday – Thursday 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. & Friday 8:00 a.m. to 4 p.m.).