

This article is from writer, curator and Associate Dean at RISD, Patricia Phillips. It is published in an anthology called "Artists Reclaim the Commons", edited by Glenn Harper (of Sculpture Magazine); the International Sculpture Center Press, 2013, University of Washington Press.

In 2011, Pablo Helguera published a slender, succinct primer entitled *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Technique Handbook*.¹ He writes that the book was prompted by an invitation from Harrell Fletcher and Jen de los Reyes to teach a course in the Arts and Social Practice program at Portland State University. Helguera is a public and performance artist and, since 2007, has been the Director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Some may suggest that Helguera has come belatedly to the topic of socially engaged art, however, his book sensitively, if briefly, acknowledges the history and developmental benchmarks of this work, including influential artists Allan Kaprow and Suzanne Lacy, for example, as well as writers and critics who have helped to contextualize and theorize this work such as Tom Finkelpearl, Claire Bishop, Miwon Kwon, Grant Kester, and Shannon Jackson. Unsurprisingly, a target audience for the (SEA) primer is art students. In many respects the handbook highlights the past five decades of this emergent work, but generally serves as a user's manual for artists who seek to develop and dissect, contextualize and understand the role of audience engagement their own socially engaged practices.

Socially engaged art expansively rests between "something for everyone" and "anything for someone." It occurs in specific sites and expanded fields, its duration (temporal formats) and participants (audience, collaborators) are strikingly variable, the forms it takes are diverse and discursive, and the content and issues range from the intimacies of the everyday to the intricacies of social justice and the ethics of social and economic disparity. It has conceptual and theoretical affinities with a wide range of disciplines, including education and pedagogy, anthropology and ethnography, performance and theatre history, philosophy and ethics, and sociology and communications theory. Socially engaged art constitutively is neither formless nor fully-formed. Thanks to the work of artists and critics (some who have been cited above), there are well-documented and analyzed examples, as well as a continuing unfolding of new forms, methods, and critiques of socially engaged art.

Some of the works and artists who have been formative to my own thinking about this seemingly unbounded area of art practice present a compelling compendium of case studies that raise critical and generative questions. Without placing a value on ephemeral or more enduring forms, a subliminal organizing device for this brief essay are the scale and durational dimensions of socially engaged art. Yet, from the start, it must be acknowledged that duration has exceptional elasticity – and particularly in the realm of the social. There are intense passages and singularities in long-term work, and the arc of short-term projects can produce resonances that are remarkably expansive. But all forms are shaped and revised by the many different ways that artists work with – and within – communities, as well as how individuals and communities assert or enfold themselves into a process.

Rick Lowe's deservedly renowned *Project Row Houses* (1993–ongoing) emerged out of the despair of economic fallout and dramatic abandonment of a historically black district in Houston. As an independent artist living in Houston, Lowe affiliated with a community center that was inventorying the scope of deterioration in the neighborhood, including twenty-two abandoned historic “shotgun” style houses. While common sense confirmed that these derelict buildings had declined to an intolerable level of urban blight, Lowe (inspired by his study of Joseph Beuys and John Biggers) saw opportunity in the forfeited and neglected site. With grants and other support he purchased the houses and, with students from the School of Architecture at Rice University and eventually other residents of the city, began to rehabilitate and develop social and cultural programs for the small structures. Some were designated as transitional homes for single mothers who sought to become independent and self-sufficient through education and support programs; other houses provided artists' and writers' residencies and sites for temporary installations and interventions. Almost 20 years later, the reconstituted houses have served as a vibrant catalyst and strategic summons for community and city revitalization, individual and institutional renewal within an environment of competing visions of economic development.

Over time, many stakeholders have become involved and Lowe's role has evolved from an artist who physically transformed the physical detritus of a dying neighborhood into an inhabited and living community, to a strategic planner, cultural collaborator, and skillful negotiator who works within different sectors of citizens, community leaders, and city officials to advance an agenda of affordable housing and redevelopment that resists the voracious and opportunistic forces of gentrification. *Project Row Houses* remains a radiant example of persistence and practiced agility within changing social conditions and public spheres. To ensure its survival, mission, and progressive symbolism, it has had to exponentially expand its radius of engagement. This largely, if not solely, has been guided by Lowe's transformation as an artist whose practice has become inextricably defined by the dynamic social conditions of a neighborhood within the context of pernicious economic forces and factors. 2

A more recent project by artist Marion Wilson continues the legacy of Lowe's consequential work in Syracuse, New York. Smaller scope and scale, it offers a compact, adaptable, and replicable model of a socially engaged artist's intervention as a cultural probe for community revitalization. In both cases, Lowe and Wilson have seized a stereotypic symbol of hopelessness and transformed this into an iconographic alternative of agency and potential. Wilson lives in Syracuse where she is a faculty member of Professional Art Practice and former Director of Community Initiatives at Syracuse University. In these roles, she has worked with students and community groups to transform an aged recreational vehicle into *MLAB*, a Mobile Literary Arts Bus, that serves as a peripatetic gallery, classroom, and learning lab for Syracuse public schools largely through after school art programs.

Her most recent project is *601 Tully Street* (2009-ongoing). Located on the west end of the city, the neighborhood was designated the ninth poorest nationally in the last United States Census. In the past three years, with different groups of Syracuse students in her “Social Sculpture” courses together with members of the community, Wilson has guided the comprehensive rejuvenation of a former drug house into an active and sustainable community center. Current programs include nutrition programs for low-income adults in collaboration with a local grocery store, barrista certification programs for teenagers with a local coffee distributor, and a gallery for rotating exhibitions. At a recent visit to the site, Wilson described to me a fascinating process of working with supportive and skeptical neighbors, a city zoning board that presented countless hurdles, and both eager and less motivated high school and college students. All of the interior renovations (floors, walls, and furnishings) were created from beams harvested from abandoned warehouses (another prevailing sign of Syracuse’s economic challenges and repurposed opportunities.) The space is filled with light, delightful ad hoc furnishings, books and art, and kitchen.

Wilson continues to hold most of her university classes at *601 Tully Street* so that students can continue to work on the building and develop programming in collaboration with the local community. Wilson sees the building as an ongoing, perpetually unfinished, and constitutively vulnerable work of art and identifies “neighboring” as new dynamic form of sculpture. Through this work, she has become a skillful and resourceful orchestrator of individual and collective capacities, as well as the positive and productive co-equivalence of expert, local, and amateur knowledge.

If frequently direct engagement is a goal, it provocatively and poignantly can be a means or conduit to other issues or areas of concern. Food, access, and eating increasingly have become national and global issues and central features of health disparity. From artisanal foods and the Food Channel, to food access and justice, to malnutrition and obesity, people’s everyday eating has radically different implications and consequences based on geography, economics, race, and class. Yet, the procurement of food and the sharing meals remain galvanizing opportunities for conversation and conviviality – and key potential conditions for spontaneous social engagement.

In 2006, Michael Rakowitz, through the support of Creative Time in New York, created *Return*, a project in a small storefront on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn that invoked the expectant and disquieting poetics incumbent in its title. He reopened, after many years, Davison & Co. that had been an import/export company operated by his family in Baghdad. When his grandfather was exiled from Iraq in 1946, he re-established the family-run business in New York. Rakowitz’s store provided free shipping to Iraq for patrons including the local Iraqi community, as well as United States families with military personnel serving in Iraq.

Another enterprise, and central lure of *Return*, involved the negotiation of a contract to import one ton of Iraqi dates to New York. The proposed transaction was both a great failure and significant success. Most of the dates were “detained” and rotted at the Iraq and Jordan border. Ultimately, only 10 boxes (having made their way through a thicket of exorbitant export charges, loopholes, and other restrictions) successfully arrived in New York. The first to be shipped to the United States in more than 30 years, the succulent and legendary fruit became surrogates for the Iraq diaspora and global conditions of exile and displacement. The small storefront – the selling and purchase of the fruit and other daily transactions – became, simply and strikingly, an affective decoy of difficult and entangled local and global issues.

If Rakowitz’s fugitive figs were modest, short-term prompts of sociality, another more persistent form of critical entrepreneurialism developed in Pittsburgh. A modest storefront (really just a little hole in the wall) is the home of *Conflict Kitchen* (2010-ongoing.) Unlike the countless other little shops that sell specific ethnic foods, this site has an expanded and serial mission. Artists and cooks Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski prepare and serve a particular cuisine, generally for six months, from a part of the world that is in acute and/or continuing conflict with the United States. During the run of a particular cuisine (Iran, Venezuela, Cuba), *Conflict Kitchen* provides great meals, as well as an enticing range of public programs, performances, discussions, Skype dinners with filmmakers from Afghanistan or young people from Iran, for example, and information on the historical and current conditions of conflict. Like Rakowitz’s imported dates, the fare of this restaurant offers other forms of prospective nourishment and engagement.

While their work generally resonates in different ways, some artists deploy more indirect forms of socially engaged art to recontextualize and reconsider concepts of self-representation. Alfredo Jaar’s 30 year practice has engaged a number of forms of public engagement and creative co-production. *Lumineres dans la Ville/Lights in the City* (1999), appropriated and intervened in a prominent building in Montreal that once served as the home of the Canadian Parliament and currently is an upscale commercial destination. Damaged by fires and rebuilt several times during its volatile history, the building with its prominent cupola is a well-known landmark. Less visible and shockingly overlooked at the time of Jaar’s project was the alarming number of homeless people living in nearby shelters.

The artist sought to bring a stealth visibility and municipal accountability to the city’s homeless population that protected individual privacy and precarity. At each cooperating shelter’s entrance, an instructional message (“This artistic intervention aims to inform people of your presence. While respecting your dignity and privacy, it transforms the cupola into a danger sign.”) placed above a button that, when pushed, brilliantly activated red lights installed in the cupola. The spontaneously, irregularly, and unpredictably triggered chromatic alarm represented a significant invisible crisis. Jaar described his act of extreme indirection as a form of “anonymous photography.” 3

Invited to have the inaugural exhibition in the under construction Museo del Oeste in Caracas, Jaar felt that troubling conditions of disparity that the new building exacerbated required a different kind of aesthetic response. Built in the poor working class neighborhood, the construction of the museum was fiercely controversial. Rather than developing an individual project or exhibition of his own work (undoubtedly what the museum organizers expected) Jaar instead chose to work as a community organizer and independent curator of a dispersed form of community creative representation. For *Camera Lucida* (1996) he distributed 1000 disposable cameras throughout the community. Individuals were invited to take a camera, to take photographs of their choice, and to drop off the camera at a designated collection site for processing. The citizen photographers (from young children to senior citizens) were asked to pick up their processed prints and to choose one for enlargement and inclusion in the inaugural exhibition in the museum. Of the 1000 camera distributed, 700 were returned for processing. Of these, 407 people selected an image for presentation in the exhibition.

With considerations of temporality, direct action and indirection, and concentration and dispersion as a substrate, Mierle Laderman Ukeles's work as a voluntarily embedded artist in the New York City's Department of Sanitation is one of the longest legacies, with multiple trajectories, of socially-engaged art. While the Department of Sanitation remains a significant conceptual platform for her many projects, she has worked globally on issues of maintenance, conditions and environments of waste, initiatives of recycling and repurposing, and the shared bonds, multiple scales, and common cause of maintaining individuals, communities, cities, and the world.

In 1969, she wrote a *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* and ten years later she embarked on her now legendary 11-month project to shake the hand of every sanitation worker (there were 8,500 at the time) in New York. Working with a map of the city, she devised a series of arcing and intersecting "sweeps" that enabled her to cover five boroughs and every sanitation district across three daily eight-hour shifts. With each handshake she said, "Thank you for keeping New York City alive." Reaching out to each "sanman", Ukeles engaged in an act of re-representation of work in public that, paradoxically, was isolating, alienating, and frequently degrading. Ukeles continues a committed socially engaged practice that includes collaborative performances, as well as participation in the design and repurposing of landfills into public spaces and parks. People – all of the stuff that they once need and desire and then reject and toss – and the collective maintenance of an expanding scale of sites and conditions are central to her prodigious work.

These diverse and discursive projects – ephemeral and long-term, focused and expansive, singular and serial, coordinated or co-produced -- only partially represent a scope of socially engaged art. Artist and educator Helguera takes some pains to differentiate between "symbolic" and "actual" socially engaged art (SEA). In spite of often being politically or socially motivated, some art represents ideas and issues of the social and engagement. They address issues on allegorical,

metaphorical, or symbolic levels. 4 Citing Paul Ramirez-Jonas's New York project sponsored by Creative Time *Key to the City* (2010) as an example, Helguera makes a more granular distinction between symbolic acts and communicative actions. In other words, Ramirez-Jonas's act of giving people a key as access to the city is a symbolic act that is enfolded within a developed concept of a "meaningful conceptual gesture." 5 Socially engaged art requires some kind of social action and interaction; it is not proposed, prospective, imagined, or speculative. The social dimension is key – even if the social is troubled, troubling, acrimonious, agonistic, disturbed, or difficult.

While the "social" is the context and frequently part of the content of the work, there generally are other issues and objectives that drive artists' socially-engaged practices. In her essay, "Art, Politics, and Climate Change," Adrian Parr cites the theories of Jacques Ranciere in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2006). 6 Ranciere analyzes the "sensible" as the "apportionment of parts and positions . . . based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution." 7 Parr elaborates that "there are fundamental divisions already in operation between what is visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, sayable and unsayable. The political condition of art struggles to visualize, give voice to, and render audible those who remain excluded from the dominant organizational system of knowledge, law, and social position. The power of Ranciere's thinking comes from his original description of how this system of inclusion and exclusion operates." 8

In its many forms, socially-engaged art inevitably – and always -- raises questions about conceptions and formations of the social realm, power and patterns, authority and access – and how artists prepare themselves to intervene and negotiate these complex and contingent dimensions. As Shannon Jackson writes: "Once again, the trick will be to place social systems in the foreground of analysis despite the fact that they usually occupy the background of experience." 9

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August 2012

Notes

1. Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engage Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011)

2. See Grant Kester's striking analysis of this project in his recent book, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011).

3. See Nancy Princenthal's thoughtful essay "The Fire This Time: Alfredo Jaar's Public Interventions" in *Alfredo Jaar: The Fire This Time – Public Interventions 1979-2005* (Milan: Charta, 2005).

4. Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engage Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), p. 6.

5. Helguera, p. 8.

6. Adrian Parr, "Art, Politics, and Climate Change," *New Directions in Sustainable Design* (New York, Routledge, 2011) 6-12.

7. Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2006) 12

8. Parr, 8.

9. Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: performing art, supporting publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011) 6