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Education for Socially Engaged Art

A Materials and Techniques Handbook

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Cover image: © Pablo Helguera, *Conferencia Combinatoria,* Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, 2010

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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

* 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 *kunsthalles*, 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.

* *"Partecipare non é homogenitá; partecipare e vitalitá."* Elena Giacopini, 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 effect 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.

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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*

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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 interaction has been identified as "relational aesthetics" and

* 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.

"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, but not resolved. Socially engaged artists can and should challenge the art market in attempts to redefine the

* 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.

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. The project is presented as an art project but also as a functioning school (a relevant example,

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

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 Jürgen 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 affects 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, engage, and even critique a particular group of people.

* 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 engaging 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.

Siera'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.

* 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_.* 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

* 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.

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

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. 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

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 repertory of cultural codes, or passwords, that provide status and a role within a given conversation. Radical, countercultural, or alternative practices employ those 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

* 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 audiences through "style shifts" in speech.* Since that time,

* 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.

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 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.

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.
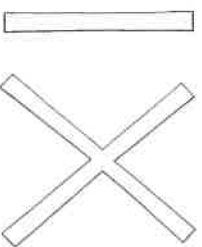
Transpedagogy

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.