

Dialogical Art
On the understanding of conversation as an art practice
and the articulation of an emerging one

By

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Foreword

This text has five parts.

An Introduction on the reasonings behind this dialogical art research. Part 1 is dedicated to the historical framework and evidence of understanding the fields of Dialogical and Socially Engaged Art, through the theorists' Grant Kester (b. 1959), Pablo Helguera (b. 1971) and Nicolas Bourriaud (b. 1965) and artist Allan Kaprow (1937-2006). Part 2 analyses Stephen Willats' (b. 1943) dialogical art practice. Part 3 features the rationale and forming methodology of my art practice, with links to the former theories and methods. The Conclusion will collect the findings emerging from this research and speculates on my future work as a dialogical practitioner.

Although I am going to focus on the five people listed in the above paragraph in considering my research and dissertation's development, I have also looked at Miwon Kwon's (b.1961) social spaces, Tom Finkelpearl's (b. 1965) advocacy of unconventional artistic practices, Hal Foster's (b. 1955) 'The Artist as an Ethnographer?' (1996), Claire Bishop's (b. 1971) critique of relational aesthetics and Suzanne Lacy's (b. 1971) socially engaged public performances.

This is an ambitious and adventurous process of investigating the history of social and dialogical practices. By adopting some of its methods into the ongoing research and so-called '*studio practice*', I will be creating spaces for universally relevant topics using dialogue and conversation as the mediums for art-making.

Introduction

This dissertation investigates and analyses the key concepts, theories and practices that inform Socially Engaged Art (SEA), in particular those that include dialogical and collaborative techniques. It explores the historical contexts and principles of SEA formed from a literary review of contemporary critics, theorists, and the work of artists and their methodologies. The research concerns my dialogical practice-based project that explores personal and social topics via collaboration, conversation and process-oriented approaches, links that are made in the final section of the dissertation.

The research was influenced by the current restrictions on studio activities and limited access to social gatherings, therefore requiring the necessity of creating a form of engagement. Developing an understanding of SEA prompted a new collaboration and research into the values and meanings reflected in online-based activities promoted by artists and institutions. These activities include CHAR's¹ grants for artists responding to the Covid-19 outbreak to *'innovative suggestions on the nature of the collaboration between activists and artists'* (14-04-2020). Sophie Hope's blog post 'Socially engaged art in a time of 'social' distancing'² (10-04-2020) discusses the restraints of socially engaged artists whose principles are usually based on physical interaction. Also, promoting New York-based performer and artist Pablo Helguera's 'Singing Telegram'³ (2020).

CLASS OF SERVICE		SYMBOL	CLASS OF SERVICE		SYMBOL
Telegram			Telegram		
Day Letter		DL	Day Letter		DL
Night Message		NM	Night Message		NM
Right Letter		RL	Right Letter		RL

THE GRAND CENTRAL SINGING TELEGRAM CO.

PABLO HELGUERA, CHIEF TELEGRAPHIST JOHN D. SPIAK, SECRETARY

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Pablo Helguera, Free Singing Telegram (2020). In collaboration with Grand Central Art Center in Santa Ana, CA

¹ CAHR recognises that collaborative endeavours between activists and artists have the potential to provide innovative responses to the current Covid-19 emergency, whether in a reactive, therapeutic or imaginative form. Reacting, therapy and imagination. Not necessarily dependent on an output, but connecting the objective is to provide therapy and reaction, reimagining opportunities facilitating through the act of collaboration. <https://www.york.ac.uk/cahr/news/2020/callforartists/> [Accessed 19-01-2021].

² Hope, S. (2020) Article: Socially engaged art in a time of 'social' distancing. www.sophiehope.org.uk (online) <https://sophiehope.org.uk/blog/socially-engaged-art-in-a-time-of-social-distancing/> [Accessed 19-01-2021].

³ Gelt, J. (2020) Coronavirus quarantine inspires artist Pablo Helguera's project: singing telegram. www.latimes.com (online). Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-04-09/pablo-helguera-coronavirus-singing-telegrams-grand-central-art-center> [Accessed 19-01-2021].

Isolation encourages conversation as Helguera made clear in his text 'Education for Socially Engaged Art' (2011). Ideas of the art of conversation have been led by Grant Kester, Professor of Art History and founding editor of 'FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism'⁴ (2015-2020) and 'Conversation Pieces' (2004) whose arguments are still dominant today.

There are organizations in the institution of art dedicated to SEA working away from the more traditional approaches "*with set dates, expectations of concrete outcomes, and the limitations of institutional walls.*"⁵ These organisations encourage a system of creating and making, based upon ways of connecting rather than on the conventional aesthetics of art objects and visitor footfall. Organisations like 'Re-Imagining Citizenship'⁶ or 'Grand Central Art Center'⁷ (GCAC), have been working on such terms of engagement away from institutional restrictions that "*often impede rather than support the creative process*"⁸.

Willats' practice is particularly significant, as it is focused on the relationship between artists and participants to a project, considering their responses, opinions and perspectives as an indicator to structure a tailored environment. I chose to present Willats' practice as it puts into action the theories above which then influenced my own art practice.

This dissertation explores the primary difference between Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' (2002), galleries as the site of cultural entertainment and Kaprow's Happenings as *object-oriented*, and Kester's understanding of dialogical and Helguera's educational processes as *subject-oriented* ways of analysing and placing conversation-based projects in any public space. The nexus of this exploration is perhaps best expressed by Willats:

*"Ultimately I am interested in the idea that reality is our own construction, that we build it and we create the reality we want in our life. There is not only one way of viewing reality. My work is an open work, based on agreement and open agreement."*⁹

S. Willats

⁴ FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism. (Online). Available at: <http://field-journal.com/> [Accessed 15/10/2020].

⁵ GCAC, Artist in residence programme (online). Available at: <http://www.grandcentralartcenter.com/artist-in-residence-program/> [Accessed 12-12-2020].

⁶ Re-Imagining Citizenship (online). Available at: <https://www.re-imagining.org/> [Accessed 12-12-2020].

⁷ GCAC, Artist in residence programme (online). Available at: <http://www.grandcentralartcenter.com/artist-in-residence-program/> [Accessed 12-12-2020].

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ WILLATS, S., (.), Context. www.stephenwillats.com (online), Available at: <http://www.stephenwillats.com/context/> [Accessed 12-12-2020].

Part 1. Socially Engaged and Dialogical Art Practices

*"In these discourse-based projects concerned with creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange, conversation becomes an integral part of the work; it is framed as an active, generative process that can help [the participants] to speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities."*¹⁰

G. H. Kester (2004)

According to Kester, the definition of SEA is a generic term of artistic activities that fall within the tradition of conceptual process art.¹¹ SEA aims at achieving certain social change among existing rules, systems and norms through a provocative process of participation, communication, co-creation and making with specific groups of people choosing a particular topic usually directly connected to the community the groups operate within.¹² SEA is also known as community-based, dialogic-, littoral-, collaborative-, research-based-, participatory-art and social practice. The methodology and artistic approach is still considered an avant-garde of sorts and a new genre of art.¹³

Since the 1960s, artists have shaped ways of understanding socially engaged approaches and constructing its methodologies, from Kaprow's *'Happenings'*¹⁴ to Willats' *'basis of operation for collaborative projects'*¹⁵. SEA's shift from indecipherable works without distinctive aesthetics and apparent artistic values, to a more widely discussed and appreciated art form, shows that this unorthodox work is getting closer to being recognised as an art practice¹⁶ and given a much clearer space in the discourse of art (see GCAC, Kester's FIELD and Willat's CONTROL¹⁷ magazines). Although theories and aesthetics have formed around this particular axis of contemporary art, SEA remains an ambiguous activity that continues to be difficult to accommodate and to involve in the institutionalised context.

¹⁰ KESTER, G. H., (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. Print.

¹¹ HELGUERA, P., (2011) *Education for Socially Engaged Art*. Jorge Pinto Books. pp.2

¹² KESTER G.H., (2004) *Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Calif.; London: U of California. Print. pp 91-97

¹³ DAUBNEY, C., (2017) *Dissertation ART AND THE SOCIAL_Articulations of The Social Turn in Contemporary Art* /Supervisor: Dr Andrew Hewitt (Northampton); The University of Northampton ; quoting Bishop, C. (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.

¹⁴ HARRISON, C., and Wood, P., (2001) *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. New ed. Malden, Mass ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub. Print. 4. Allan Kaprow (b. 1927) from *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*, pp. 703-709

¹⁵ WILLATS, S., (1976) *Extending The Meaning In Art: A Basis For Operation*. Audio Arts (Vol. 3 No. 1). Youtube (online). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mEAQBdUvTw&list=PLMJcbVCnLD4o3ko6XeSzdncI7nmXZmBLI&index=48&t=853s> [Accessed 31-12-2020].

¹⁶ BOURRIAUD, N., (2002). *Relational aesthetics* (Collection documents sur l'art). Dijon?:Presses du réel. pp12 + Helguera, P. (2011) *Education for Socially Engaged Art*. Jorge Pinto Books.

¹⁷ CONTROL Magazine. (Online). Available at: <https://www.controlmagazine.org/> [Accessed 14/10/2020].

Allan Kaprow and his rules for '*Happenings*' have been pivotal in this understanding of SEA. He believed this avant-garde art had to ask philosophical questions to find the truth. The making process and social interactions were key in Kaprow's practice and were against a final perfect outcome responding to aesthetical theories he deemed unnecessary and irrelevant, such as rehearsing or restaging happenings¹⁸. Kaprow's desire to reconnect art to the everyday is deeply rooted in British writer and academic Claire Bishop's theories. The idea of the art gallery as an obsolete space and a form of constrictive frame is echoed by Bishop, stating that artists themselves without organisations have become pivots of social relations within the purpose and the aims of a project (2012). These artists have become part of a '*post studio*' practice, more recently referred to as '*socially engaged art*' or '*social practice*'¹⁹. Helguera notices that this latter term has emerged most prominently in recent publications (2011) and appeared to be the most preferred word as it:

*"...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 'social practice' democratises the construct, making the artist into an individual whose speciality includes working with society in a professional capacity."*²⁰

P. Helguera (2011)

Bishop also makes her claims for the political potential of art based on aesthetics, describing them as a '*social turn*' in art²¹. She argues art institutions and organisations have lost their pivotal status of being the portal to the art world, now fully held by the durational and participatory artists and their collaborative processes of art-making, which are exponentially self-led and detached from the institution of art as "*relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience.*"²²

According to Kester "*...aspects of these [dialogical] projects cannot be grasped as relevant by conventional art critical methodologies. Criticised for being anaesthetic, for not giving sensory stimulation, critics find the work not visually engaging*"²³, therefore dismissing it as failed art. Subsequently, artists can share these difficulties in recognising that their approach is dialogical as an art practice.

By the lack of visibility of SEA in institutions, it can be inferred that there is an instinctive refusal, resistance or lack of understanding to recognise dialogue as an artistic process. Therefore, some of these institutions fail to give it the right to exist or to be promoted as a way of making. Also, this results in an inability by the artist to communicate to both organisations and audiences, as the terminologies and ways of placing this artwork are missing.

¹⁸ The House of Hidden Knowledge, (2019) Allan Kaprow: How To Make A Happening (1968). YouTube (online). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvDUNefAmAQ&list=PLMJcbVCnLD4o3ko6XeSzDncl7nmXZmBLI&index=51&t=1s> [Accessed 05-01-2021].

¹⁹ DAUBNEY, C., (2017) Dissertation ART AND THE SOCIAL_Articulations of The Social Turn in Contemporary Art /Supervisor: Dr Andrew Hewitt (Northampton); The University of Northampton ; quoting Bishop, C. (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.

²⁰ HELGUERA, P., (2011) *Education for Socially Engaged Art*. Jorge Pinto Books. pp.3

²¹ See Glossary

²² BISHOP, C., (2004) *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*. October 110. pp: 51-80. Web.

²³ KESTER, Grant H., (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. Print.

To understand dialogical art, Kester introduced the 'Dialogue Interactive Artists Association' (DIAA)²⁴ in Kopaweda. He states:

*"The center's name (..) reflects a key component of their creative philosophy. While their projects often take physical form (usually spaces are related to collective activities like children's play or water collection) they are equally concerned with the processes of reciprocal learning generated in the planning and creation of these spaces, as well as the form of social interactions catalyzed by their subsequent use."*²⁵

G. H. Kester (2009)

Kester questions if it is possible to conceive an emancipatory model of dialogical interaction and if there is a way to understand dialogue as a form of art²⁶. This commitment to dialogue as an art practice relies on a polyilateral system of shared values and acknowledgement in which all collaborators, artists and participants, can speak, listen and respond. Conversation was always in need of its inclusion in art. When we refer to *'the lost art of conversation'*, it is an affirmation that verbal exchange emerges from a need for a *'colloquial commerce of thoughts'*²⁷. Helguera noticed that this urge was present at least since the 1800s and voiced by Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) who stated: *"It was apparent that a greater art must exist somewhere applicable to this power [of conversation] —not in the pyramids, or in the tombs of Thebes, but in the unwrought²⁸ queries of man's mind, so many and so dark."*²⁹

Conversation-based works are not about the aesthetic of a thing produced, they are about the conversation as a process and the event as a social happening. This type of SEA can be considered as a *subject-oriented* process (outcome), rather than *object-oriented* (output). According to Kester and Helguera, collaboration-based projects should place attention on the conversation between artists and participants, instead of the production of *objects*; focusing on the *subject* relationships as outcomes of the artwork.

In opposition to this, in Bourriaud's theory of 'Relational Aesthetics' (2002), objects have to be made for engagement to happen and for analysis to occur. According to Bourriaud, relational aesthetics are defined as a *"...theory consisting in judging artworks on the basis of the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt"*³⁰. This principle depends on artworks being made as products before engagement can happen. Once made, the artwork generates human relations. Relational aesthetics can

²⁴ DIAA Dialogue Bastar Center, (online). Available at: <http://www.dialoguebastar.com/> [Accessed 25-01-2021].

²⁵ MILIJKOVIC, N., (2012) Grant Kester Delivers the Keynote Address @ the Art of Collaboration Symposium - Part 1, (2009) at the UC Santa Cruz Digital Arts Research Center. Minute (09:44). YouTube (online). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwioJXc_8_o&t=139s [Accessed 05-01-2021].

²⁶ KESTER, G. H., (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. Print. P. 89.

²⁷ HELGUERA, P., (2011) *Education for Socially Engaged Art : A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto. Print, pp 42.

²⁸ See Glossary.

²⁹ HELGUERA, P., (2011) *Education for Socially Engaged Art : A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto. Print, pp 42 quoting Thomas de Quincey, "Conversations", in Horatio S. Krans, ed., *The Lost Art of Conversation: Selected Essay* (New York: Sturings & Walton Company, 1910), p. 20.

³⁰ BOURRIAUD, N., (2002). *Relational aesthetics* (Collection documents sur l'art). Dijon?:Presses du réel. pp 112.

be seen as an *object-oriented* judging process, rather than a *subject-oriented* analysis of collaboration³¹. In Kester's and Helguera's theories, there may or may not be a thing created after a collaboration, making these final *outputs* overall unnecessary, as the outcome *offers* a basis for an actual social engagement, which is also key to SEA.

According to Helguera, the term '*relational aesthetics*', preserving the word '*aesthetic*' ironically refers more to traditional values, i.e. beauty, than it does art³². Bourriaud's theories therefore, seem in conflict with socially engaged theorists³³, as he directly applies them to the gallery as an institution and possibly devalues some social aspects of connectivity. More than infiltrating artists in social spaces, galleries and the institutions of art stage fictitious happenings under their internal consensus and instigation, creating a deceptive, artificial need for social interactions. In contrast, Kester finds issue with the notion that broader societal movement, from an industrial to a service economy and the shifts in contemporary art practice, are neatly imbricated within Bourriaud's description of institutionalised relational practices. Audiences engage with products, rather than with the sector of art.

This shift is reflected in Kaprow's original thinking in relation to the making of *Happenings*, that originally hinged on being de-institutionalised and free from repetition. However, nowadays his very *Happenings* are re-staged under an '*institutionalised*' art/event context, transforming his work into an *object-oriented* approach. In this instance, Kaprow's SEA methodology is clearly adopted as an entertainment *output*, linked to the galleries and art institutionalised context³⁴; which Bourriaud can accommodate in his ideas of relational aesthetics.

Kaprow's rules of *Happenings*³⁵ and his terms of engagement are good examples of relational aesthetics, if examined under the contemporary lens. Kaprow's principles of creating *Happenings* was to make them "...as far away from art as possible and based on everyday life"³⁶. To arrange *Happenings* in inexpensive ways and most importantly, never to rehearse or reproduce the same *Happening* as this would defeat the purpose. Therefore his work was and should have remained naturally detached from institutions. At the time (1960s), Kaprow's rules were avant-garde and deinstitutionalised ways of making SEA. Today, these are fully absorbed, represented and used as strategies by institutions³⁷.

³¹ ibid

³² HELGUERA, P., (2011) Education for Socially Engaged Art. Jorge Pinto Books. pp. 3

³³ A strong one driven by Bisho's Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics. October 110 (2004): 51-80. Web.

³⁴ Museo Novecento (2019-20) Kaprow's exhibition. (online). Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBKpZAbHwe7/> [Accessed 10-10-2020].

³⁵ The House of Hidden Knowledge (2019) Allan Kaprow: How To Make A Happening (1968). YouTube (online). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvDUNefAmAQ&list=PLMJcbVCnLD4o3ko6XeSzDncl7nmXZmBLI&index=51&t=1s> [Accessed 05-01-2021].

³⁶ The House of Hidden Knowledge, (2019) Allan Kaprow: How To Make A Happening (1968). YouTube.com (online). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvDUNefAmAQ&list=PLMJcbVCnLD4o3ko6XeSzDncl7nmXZmBLI&index=51&t=1s> [Accessed 05-01-2021].

³⁷ A good example can be the paradoxical exhibition at the Museo Novecento (Firenze) di Allan Kaprow Happening 'Fluids' specifically designed to happen only once in a non-gallery space and connected to everyday life. Kaprow being exponent of Fluxus is now like Bauhaus: once a way of live, now merchandised items. (online). Available at: <http://www.museonovecento.it/myallankaprow/> & <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBKpZAbHwe7/> [Accessed 05-01-2021].

In the modern gallery culture, happenings and object-made artworks are accepted under conventional terms and rules of critical analysis, unsuited for this genre of art as defined by Kester and Helguera. For them, institutional bias and focus with *object-oriented* production is something to overcome in favour of art linked to the social and to the co-creation with participants, coming directly from the pool of audiences in real debates³⁸.

Since Kaprow's *Happenings* have been currently exhibited by institutions, are they constituting a re-enactment or a documentation process? Documentation is a delicate topic of discussion in SEA. According to Helguera, the documentation of artwork should also include and be produced by the '*primary recipients*' (participants) as a collective experience, otherwise it becomes a product made by an '*author*' (the artist). If the goal of a collaborative project is to be objective and verifiable and an experience based on the collaboration itself, documentation should be an inextricable action, part of the work and constructed with the participants, not an element of post-production. Documentation tends to be used as a proof of practice and collaborations tend to be described by its lead artists, curators and critics without taking into account the experience and perspective of all participants³⁹. The accommodation of Kaprow's original *Happenings* into the contemporary art institution shows how Bourriaud's relational aesthetics can be practically applied. They unify the institutionalised urge of *object-oriented* production and the *subject-oriented* organic evolution of a project. Not all SEA adopts documentation as envisioned by Helguera. In fact, it is also used as an archive method for posterity, for artists to receive future commissions, as a way to showcase SEA in the white cube and for other institutional functions.

Applied to today's socio-political situation, specifically in current day England, society lives in a new world, locked away from social interactions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Video calls, homeschooling, self-isolation, face coverings and social distancing are terms now fully adopted into everyday life. In a moment where physical contact is a utopian ideal, the idea of creating online communities has quickly shifted from being the domain of nerds to the only alternative to loneliness and complete isolation. This scenario is mirrored by institutions of art, usually operating on face-to-face public interaction and visitor footfall as funding criteria to be met and prompted. This drastic shift in society was followed by the subsequent increase in call-outs for digital artworks, socially engaged artists and the requirement to create a new program of social engagement and ticket sales through online activities, socially distanced works and alternative ways of interaction⁴⁰.

In this contemporary scenario, online spaces and temporary communities are more relevant and real than ever before. There is a need for belonging to a group or community and a craving for alternative social gathering, as physical contact is impossible outside of the home bubble. Although previous community environments were not full-time realities, the remnant of these gatherings brings a sense of warmth that cannot be erased by its being temporary or fictitious. The communities⁴¹ rising before and during this solitary era are now pivotal to the emotional and mental wellbeing of all individuals living in isolation.

³⁸ HELGUERA, P., (2011) *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto. Print, pp 41

³⁹ Ibid, pp 73-76

⁴⁰An example can be the the British Council DICE commissions (online) Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts> [Accessed 18-11-2020].

⁴¹ 12o collective, (2020), *Thirtyworks30days*. (online). Available at: <https://www.thirty.works/> [Accessed 12-01-2021].

Lockdown, loneliness and remote working have played a great factor in my desire to join and create collaborative spaces. Perhaps because of the sudden lack of physical interactions, I as an emerging artist have engaged in online collaborations, such as 'Forced Collaboration'⁴² (2020) and 'Project Buddy'⁴³ (2020) which have been creating unorthodox, social-based happenings since the pre-Covid era. Previously these online-based works were looked at as low-brow and possibly not immediately accepted in their own right.

*"The artist dwells in the circumstances the present offers him..."*⁴⁴

N. Bourriaud (2002)

⁴² GENGALL, G., (2020) Forced Collaboration (online). Available at: [www.forcehttps://forcedcollaboration.org/](https://forcedcollaboration.org/) [Accessed 12-01-2021].

⁴³ Project Buddy - British Council – ZU-UK and the DICE Global Team (2020). (online). Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/dice-artist-commission> [Accessed 05-10-2021].

⁴⁴ BOURRIAUD, N., (2002). Relational aesthetics (Collection documents sur l'art). Dijon?:Presses du réel. pp13, paragraph 3.

Part 2. On Stephen Willats' dialogical practice

*"Ultimately I am interested in the idea that reality is our own construction, that we build it and we create the reality we want in our life. There is not only one way of viewing reality. My work is an open work, based on agreement and open agreement."*⁴⁵

S. Willats

British artist Stephen Willats (influential in Europe and the USA) shifted his art practice from object-initiated conceptual work, to collaborative dialogical art. Since the 1960s Willats' practice has raised important questions around the function and meaning of art in society and our way of living⁴⁶. This has been achieved by working with residents of public housing estates and tower blocks.

He is concerned with the social and somatic experience of living in public housing by identifying and facilitating "...modes of resistance and critical consciousness among the resident..."⁴⁷. Willats wishes to represent the potential richness of people's self-organisation in a reductive culture of objects and their complexity⁴⁸. One aim is to acknowledge and honour an autonomous process of "...decision making and self-reflection among communities that are typically treated (..) as a kind of inert raw material to be variously processed and [spatially] regulated (..) through the mechanisms of consumer society."⁴⁹

Taking into analysis 'The People of Charville Lane'⁵⁰, the participants were asked the question: "What do you think are the everyday pressures on family life created by moving into a house on this estate?". Residents described their own experience to other participants and ultimately reflected upon this question for themselves. The residents responded with statements and images which established a distance from their individual experiences by adopting a parallel perspective which emerged from their reflective examination⁵¹.

Willats' work is dependent on three main factors: the intentions of the artist, the social context in which the work is to operate within, and the composition of the audience.

⁴⁵ WILLATS, S., (...) Context. Stephenwillats.com (online). Available at: <http://www.stephenwillats.com/context/> [Accessed 19-12-2020].

⁴⁶ Whitechapel Gallery, (...) Press Release 'Stephen Willats: Concerning Our Present Way of Living. whitechapelgallery.org (online). Available at: <https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/about/press/stephen-willats-concerning-present-way-living/> [Accessed 19-12-2020].

⁴⁷ KESTER, G. H., (2004) Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. Print, pp 91, paragraph 2

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp 91, quoting KESTER, G, (1992) Starting from Zero: Stephen Willats and the Pragmatics of Public Art, Afterimage 19 (May 1992), pp. 10.

⁴⁹ KESTER, G. H., (2004) Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. pp 91, paragraph 2

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp 93.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp 94.

Willats' strategy to construct a collaborative project, is to identify a specific site for participants to exercise some form of resistance to the repressive housing estate environment. This is to help the residents to distance themselves from the fully immersed life in such estates and to critically reflect upon the visible and invisible network of forces that structures this world⁵². This '*defamiliarization*'⁵³ is achieved through collaborative production itself, the same as in a modern painting, this is achieved through the manipulation of representational conventions. The key to initiating such '*defamiliarization*' is posing what Willats called '*the question*'⁵⁴ as an interrogatory statement developed with a given group of participants used as a framework for critical reflection.

The artwork is to be considered a product made using a very different approach to the traditional viewable art, where the audience's perspective is presumed and certainly not determined by methodologies serving a particular public⁵⁵. Not only does Willats specify the audience, but he uses approaches depending upon the type of interactive process the audience will be using to interact with the work. This is hinged on active participation, co-construction of meanings and realisation of the participants' status quo.

From the perspective of Kester's '*socially interactive culture*'⁵⁶, conventional art is perceived and understood as that object-making process occurring in isolation and alienated from the viewer. The artworks are created under the artists' presumptions about their own perception of the artworks, viewed by the potential audiences. The artwork is rarely tested (never, according to Kester⁵⁷) nor is there direct communication between the public and artist for further modification, based on the viewer's perception and understanding.

Willats' collaborations allow the possibility of static exchanges to be challenged. The artist's presumptions can be confronted by the response of the participants through direct collaboration. This transforms the collaborators' perception through the encounters mediated by the production of artworks. A clear example is Willats' signboards placed in the housing estates or tower blocks⁵⁸.

Willats often returned to the site years after the collaboration ended, a gesture that seems to place particular attention in nursing his interpersonal relationships. Although it is unclear whether or not these visits are aimed at an actual continuation or a second edition of the former collaborative environment, it seems that at the very least, Willats cares about the effects of his work in the communities he has engaged with.

⁵² Ibid, pp. 92-23.

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 93.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 93.

⁵⁵ CELESTIALROAD, (2020) Stephen Willats - Extending The Meaning In Art: A Basis For Operation (1976). Minutes (03:36-04-34). YouTube (online). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mEAQBUDUvTw&t=849s> [Accessed 19-12-2020].

⁵⁶ See Glossary

⁵⁷ KESTER, G. H., (2004) Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. pp 92, paragraph 1

⁵⁸ KESTER, G. H., (2004) Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. Print, pp. 92, paragraph 1

In Willats' approach, the artwork's evaluation process is much richer than in traditional works, as it was backed up by the evidence of people's participation. These methods were initiated, referred and evaluated as a process through the time people were involved in the collaboration, as well as the number of participants engaging⁵⁹. However, the main difficulty lay in the fact that, in evaluating the work's content, it could become de-contextualised as the viewer would not know the intrinsic relationships that occurred throughout the collaboration.

Willats' projects commissioned or funded by institutions are based on a task-orientated methods (*object-oriented*) used in conjunction with passive-oriented methods (*subject-oriented*). The task-orientated method involves some literal actions to be completed (tasks), which also acquire some perception or information by interacting in some designated area. The passive-oriented method is a much more cognitive involvement which requires subtle interaction (collaboration)⁶⁰.

Willats' strategy has merged elements of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics and its need to produce something concrete for the institution's requirements (*object-oriented*) and found a space for *subject-oriented* encounters to occur, through the direct acknowledgement and engagement of participants in line with Kester and Helguera's theories.

Willats treats difficult societal subjects linked to the way of living. An approach greatly inspiring and mirrored by the emerging social practice explored in Part 3.

*"If art was to try to relate to (that) setting, that it would have to externalise beyond this community, beyond what I call art social environment, would have to extend it in the sort of fabric of society and would have to become a much more central feature of people's priorities. And would have to concern what's meaningful to people. The purpose of relevance and meaning in social territory would have to be examined."*⁶¹

S. Willats (1967)

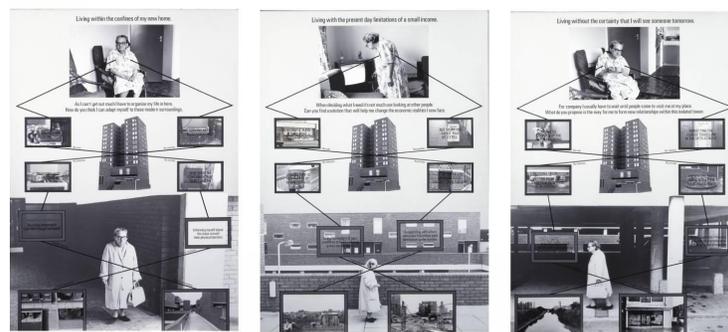


Image Caption: Stephen Willats, Living with Practical Realities (1978). (online). Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/willats-living-with-practical-realities-t03296> [Accessed 18-01-2021].

⁵⁹ CELESTIALRAILROAD, (2020) Stephen Willats, S.(1976) - Extending The Meaning In Art: A Basis For Operation. Minute (17:52). YouTube (online). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mEAQBUDUvTw&t=849s> [Accessed 19-12-2020].

⁶⁰ CELESTIALRAILROAD, (2020) Stephen Willats - Extending The Meaning In Art: A Basis For Operation (1976). Minutes (03:36-04-34). YouTube (online). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mEAQBUDUvTw&t=849s> [Accessed 19-12-2020].

⁶¹ CELESTIALROAD, (2020) Stephen Willats - Extending The Meaning In Art: A Basis For Operation (1976). YouTube (online). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mEAQBUDUvTw&t=849s> [Accessed 19-12-2020].

Part 3. An emerging dialogue-based art practice

Part 3 refers to the formation of an art practice focused on the principles, theories and methodologies outlined in Part 1 and Part 2. This content has been applied to the creation and delivery of a live, socially engaged collaboration, putting those theories and methods into action through the 'DIY Knicker Kit Project' (2021) run under 'Wombenhood: exploring the field of menstruality'⁶².

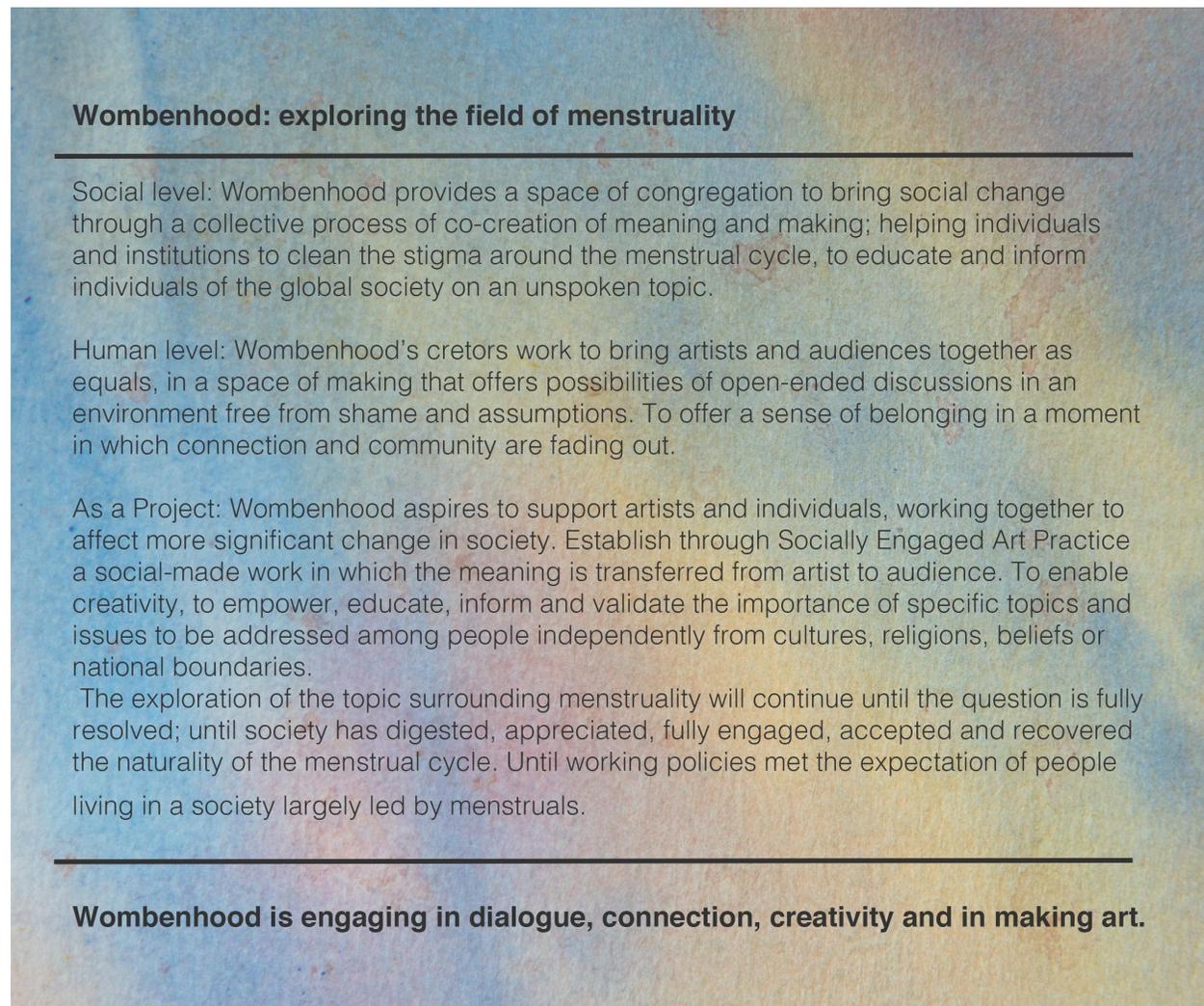


Image caption: Valeria Medici, Wombenhood (2020-21). (online).
Available at: <https://www.valeriamedici.com/wombenhood> [Accesses 20-01-2021].

⁶² Medici, V., Burgess, R., (2020-21) Wombenhood: exploring the field of menstruality. (Online). Available at: <https://www.valeriamedici.com/wombenhood> [Accessed 10/11/2020].

This practice was developed after the need of creating a space for human connection, similar to other online collaborations. My practice through 'Wombhood' was made to explore another way of sharing. It offers what unilateral and bilateral collaborative environments⁶³ are missing, namely: a directly proportional and adaptable consensus-based exchange between artists and participants, to build relationships through open-ended conversations on relevant topics as well as being liberated from geographical and cultural restrictions. This new way of practicing an art form was also a strategy of adaptation from a lack of studio-based opportunities to practice in conventional ways.

This evolving method is in response to Kester's belief on the importance of exploring SEA practice and of Helguera's invitation to adopt educational tools for social engagement. The project responded to Kaprow's vision of creating something linked to everyday subjects to make temporary realities, these being conversations centred on relevant questions and topics. As a practitioner, this approach provides the opportunity to evaluate how this social practice is able to inform people and to find solutions related to the theme. In agreement with Helguera⁶⁴, this work emphasises how dialogical art uses conversation, develops and curates the discussion with an important attention paid to what the conversation *does* and the opportunity for prolonged engagement with people and subject matter.

This social practice supports and aids the emergence of meanings through the facilitation of dialogue-based happenings as incentives for conversations. It aspires to produce fertile art through human experiences linked to everyday life predicaments (Kaprow⁶⁵).

The act of discussion forms a process of emancipation⁶⁶ presented through conversations and practical sessions. These activities offer a space for artists and participants to search for resolutions to issues and also seeks to fill the gap of public access into art projects through the use of non-academic terminology (Willats⁶⁷).

⁶³ such as Forced Collaborations and Project Buddy which relied on submission being presented in online spaces and without any further engagement after their conclusions. This dissertation does not offer the space to evaluate the limitations of these other projects. It's important to state that having experienced those limitations both as a user and as an artist has pushed me to finding a resolution of those gaps into my practice.

⁶⁴ HELGUERA, P., (2011) Education for Socially Engaged Art : A Materials and Techniques Handbook. New York: Jorge Pinto. Print, pp.40-41

⁶⁵ The House of Hidden Knowledge, (2019) Allan Kaprow: How To Make A Happening (1968). YouTube (online). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvDUNefAmAQ&list=PLMJcbVCnLD4o3ko6XeSzDncl7nmXZmBLI&index=51&t=1s> [Accessed 05-01-2021].

⁶⁶ HELGUERA, P., (2011) Education for Socially Engaged Art : A Materials and Techniques Handbook. New York: Jorge Pinto. Print, pp. 42, paragraph 1.

⁶⁷ Tate Modern, (...) Stephen Willats, Living with Practical Realities (1978). www.tate.org.uk (online). Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/willats-living-with-practical-realities-t03296> [Accessed 19-01-2021].

The images below shows Wombenhood's and Willats' artwork-making principles, the latter of which have inspired the creation of the actions to develop my own projects. This art practice is also made accessible through non-academic terminology used in the conversation-based happenings.

For me these concepts have remained a constant, as I wrote in the 1960s:

- A work of art can itself constitute a societal state, a model of human relationships
- A work of art can consist of a process in time, a learning system through which the concepts of the social view forwarded in the work are accessed and internalised
- A work of art must acknowledge the relativism inherent in perception and the transience of experience, there being no right or wrong, it taking the form of an open-ended process
- A work of art has the possibility of operating as its own institution and as such is independent of art institutions
- A work of art can engage anyone meaningfully, being available to whoever wishes to enter its domain, only through embodying in its presentation the means by which people are able to acquire the necessary language and procedures to receive and internalise its meaning

My work engages the audience in a new way of encountering art in society. I am not talking about a compliance, but something more active, a mutual understanding, an interaction between people – similar to the dynamic image of the homeostat where all the parts of the network are equal and equally linked.

Ultimately I am interested in the idea that reality is our own construction, that we build it and we create the reality we want in our life. There is not only one way of viewing reality. My work is an open work, based on agreement and open agreement.

Image Caption: Stephen Willats, Context (1978). (online). Available at: <http://www.stephenwillats.com/context/> [Accessed 18-01-2021].

Steps/Actions to organise a dialogical collaboration/ Philosophical discussion art

- Action #1
Call out for interventionists. Is there a need to simplify the terms/knowledge around menstrual related medical topics?
- Action # 2
Wait for responses. draw points to be simplified not understand the peoples unclarity.
- Action # 3
Co-write definitions for pamphlet/content page/webpage. What to know before, during, after the GP/gynaecology visit? A gloss of terms, understanding menstrual cycles.
- Action #4
In parallel invite GP/gynaecologist/doctor /Minister of health in the discussions.
- Action # 5
Implement the policy, publish the pamphlet, showcase work
- Action # 6
Check the results, evaluate users responses, GP/gynaecology/NHS responses. Is this working?
- Action # 7
Amendments.
- Action # 8
Implement in sex education in schools, universities, consultant Oriel, NHS website.
- Action # 9
Possible PhD or Case study

Image Caption: Valeria Medici, Actions to produce a collaboration (2020-21).

As this practice is currently free from restraints, aims and outcomes imposed by external bodies, it can experiment with the freedom of inter-authorship between artists and participants through a horizontal hierarchy, enabling the development of the collaboration, documentation, exhibition and presentation of the artwork. This shift of the artist's authorship to include all in curatorial discussions is further established by offering participants the chance to create their own content for activities, mirroring Willats' co-creation with participants. By moving from the role of a participant to the one of collaborator, audiences become sitting artists, hosting sessions for their project's peers. The democratisation of documentation is borrowed from Helguera, in that participants are invited to include their selections of responses to the collaboration's archive. The artistic response to topics of interest and the act of making doesn't need to be an individual creation or a solo-artist gesture. It can mature in the formation of relationships, in the co-creation of meanings and artistic responses.

Resolution is another element of this practice, which determines the continuation or termination of a socially engaged project. Until a topic is resolved, the work continues to be explored as the topic still has social relevance. When change occurs and social purpose is achieved, the work has offered all that was needed in fulfilling its aims.

Continuation of a conversation can become political or politicised. The act of listening can offer a refuge for '*differend*'⁶⁸, the excluded (public and some SEA) who lack the opportunity to be understood and a place for sharing. However, this project is careful to remember what Foster stated in 'The Artist as an Ethnographer?' (2003), that the artists practising in this field must resist the tendency to project political truth onto their works, which might become arrogant, single-minded and alienating leading to "...*self absorption, ethnographic self fashion and narcissistic refurbishing.*"⁶⁹ By creating something to be placed in a gallery context, conventional institutions of art would be more accepting of this SEA practice as it would satisfy Bourriaud's relational aesthetics need, maintaining the importance of processes to construct those everyday life situations, as supported by Kaprow. Similarly to Willats, this practice can juggle between the *subject-oriented* experience of collaboration-based environments and the *object-oriented* process of exhibition-making and institutionalised aesthetics urges.

Now that I have found this niche of SEA I am able to explore the many possibilities before me. I shall start by connecting with organisations and institutions pivoted on dialogical art and SEA like GCAC, Grand Union⁷⁰ and 'Re-Imagining Citizenship'⁷¹. I will be able to construct the initial base for this evolving practice, having the desire to create social engagement through art. I will be focusing on expanding my practice and Wombenhood beyond academia, also attempting to generate projects with non-art-based education and workplace settings.

⁶⁸ See Glossary

⁶⁹ FOSTER, H., (1996), 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. Annotation by Hopkins, B. (*Theories of Media*, Winter 2003).(online). Available at: <https://9bdb> [Accessed 19-12-2020].

⁷⁰ Grand Union, (online). Available at: <https://grand-union.org.uk/> [Accessed 28-01-2021].

⁷¹ Re-Imagining Citizenship, (online). Available at: <https://www.re-imagining.org/> [Accessed 28-01-2021].

Conclusion

Art arises from being social. It acquires meaning and value when related to life, universal relevance, social change and the human experience. Dialogical practice is art that exists, not art to be looked at.

This dissertation has facilitated a deeper understanding and importance of SEA, especially in this historical moment. Throughout this research, I was able to recognise many ways of working in the public realm through social engagement. I have witnessed and participated in conversations and projects, as well as discovered some very important institutions such as GCAC, pivotal for the evolution of SEA practices. After participating in collaborative environments, I realised there was a specific need for an unaddressed type of connectivity: one based on the polylateral validation and contribution between participants and artists as equals.

This practice can engage with *object-oriented* institutions of art, by finding agreements on ways of producing collaborations and outcomes, as achieved by Willats and discussed by Bourriaud in 'Relational Aesthetics' (2004). It can also operate outside of the institutions of art as done by Kaprow, but it should never be detached, becoming irrelevant to the participants and public audiences beyond the art institutions.

Participation and cooperation are the materials of this art-making process. Its core values reside in letting everyone involved share the workload and take responsibility in directing the group's intent throughout the collaboration. Whether they are artists or non-artists, the participants are always teaching something to whoever is present through contribution. If there is a desire for social engagement, as argued by Helguera, then this should also be linked to the public.

Creation of meaning can be a shared experience established through socially made work in which the content is transferred from one to the other as equals. This action of gentle acceptance, of guiding and being guided is teaching me as an art practitioner to trust the audience, participants and fellow artists without ever losing the project's focus. Creativity can construct emotional bonds as outlined by Helguera, it can be a methodology of actions, processes and instructions as performed by Kaprow and prompted by Willats' ways of constructing socially engaged collaborations.

Projects in this practice will evolve to the point that the collaboration can naturally come to a conclusion as the issue around the topic chosen will eventually be resolved, the work will be completed and there will be no further need for discussion. In summation, this all distils into Kester's concept of creating an emancipatory model of dialogical interaction understood as a form of art⁷².

⁷² KESTER, G. H., (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. Print. P. 89

*"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."*⁷³

C. Bishop (2006)

SEA is a special kind of practice that best happens outside of those institutions of art operating in *object-oriented*, aesthetically-minded ways and can be better celebrated by those dedicated to its open exploration.

My practice is now aligned with Kester's dialogical ideas of collaboration, with Helguera's perspective on the importance of informing the artist with educational tools to facilitate conversations and with Kaprow's free spirit of working on a given set of rules that liberate the process. Guided by Willats' understanding of the importance of those institutions of art more hinged on aesthetic values and backed up by Bourriaud's same understanding, I have learnt the flexibility of such practice and the necessity of being interconnected with those *object-centred* institutions. Nevertheless, there are places dedicated to SEA celebrating it for what it is, such as GCAC and its unique non-traditional approach to art residencies and acceptance of SEA's unorthodox outcomes produced.

To influence wider social circumstances, including policies, SEA must be inclusive and audience-led. This will bridge the audience perception of art as well as promote social causes and topics relevant to non-artists. This focus on audience participation opens up the opportunity for non-artists to propose the direction of a project. Their needs can be expressed through the collaboration and supported by a Socially Engaged Artist.

This practice invites people to connect through artistic methods, focusing on relatable subject matters, as Wombenhood is focusing on '*menstruality*'. Ultimately, beyond this approach of conversation-based art, the polylateral environment becomes less about socially engaging with subjects and more about socially engaging with art itself.

⁷³ BISHOP, C., (2006) The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents. Artforum. pp. 178-184 February 2006

Glossary

Catalyse

A new form of understanding and agency⁷⁴.

Dialogical Art

Conversations based on dialogue. *"...in these [discourse-based] projects (concerned with creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange) conversation becomes an integral part of the work; it is reframed as an active, generative process that can help [the participants] to speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict"*⁷⁵.

Differend

A wrong or injustice that arises because the discourse in which the wrong might be expressed does not exist. To put it another way, it is a wrong or injustice that arises because the prevailing or hegemonic discourse actively precludes the possibility of this wrong being expressed. To put it still another way, it is a wrong or injustice which cannot be proved to have been a wrong or injustice because the means of doing so has (also) been denied the victim. Jean-François Lyotard, who coined this term in his book *Le Différend* (1983), translated as *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1988), took as his key exhibit Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson, whose position is that the only person who can legitimately testify to the existence of gas chambers is somebody who died in one. One might also point to the situation of the detainees at Camp X-Ray in Guantanamo Bay who as suspects or persons of interest in the so-called 'War on Terror' are denied the right to a trial because a trial on the grounds that they are neither enemy combatants (which would be covered by the Geneva convention) nor on US soil (which would place them under the jurisdiction of the US judiciary). The language, the opportunity, and the means to articulate any wrong that may have befallen them are also denied them⁷⁶.

New genre public art

The term new genre public art refers to public art, often activist, and created outside institutional structures to engage directly with an audience. Coined by artist Suzanne Lacy in 1991⁷⁷.

Relational aesthetics

Aesthetic theory consisting of judging artworks based on the inter-human relations which they represent, produce or prompt⁷⁸.

Socially-interactive culture

Shift the focus of art from the phenomenological experience of the creator fabricating an object to the phenomenological experience of his co-participants in the spaces and routines of their daily lives⁷⁹.

⁷⁴ KESTER, G. H., (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. Print. pp 82

⁷⁵ Ibid, pp. 89

⁷⁶ KESTER, G. H., (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California. Print. P. 89, Lyotard | Oxford Reference
OXFORD reference, (...) *Differend*, Oxfordreference.com (online). Available at: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oj/authority.20110803095717700> [Accessed 12-11-2020].

⁷⁷ Tate Art Term, (...) *New genre public art*. www.tate.org.uk (online). Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/new-genre-public-art> [Accessed 12-01-2021].

⁷⁸ BOURRIAUD, N., (2002) *Relational aesthetics* (Collection documents sur l'art). Dijon?:Presses du réel. pp. 211

⁷⁹ KESTER, G. H., (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley, Calif. ; London: U of California, Print. pp 91, paragraph 2

Social Turn

Term coined by Claire Bishop (2006) used to describe the recent tendency of the return to socially engaged art in collaborative, participatory practices which involves people as collaborators to the co-creation of meaning.⁸⁰

Unwrought

Adjective; (of metals or other materials) not worked into a finished condition.

Term used by Thomas de Quincey (1785-1859) in his quote: *“It was apparent that a greater art must exist somewhere applicable to this power [of conversation] —not in the pyramids, or in the tombs of Thebes, but in the unwrought⁸¹ queries of man’s mind, so many and so dark.”*⁸².

⁸⁰ BISHOP, C., (2006) The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents. Artforum. pp. 178-184

⁸¹ See Glossary.

⁸² HELGUERA, P., (2011) Education for Socially Engaged Art : A Materials and Techniques Handbook. New York: Jorge Pinto. Print, pp 42 quoting Thomas de Quincey, “Conversations”, in Horatio S. Krans, ed., The Lost Art of Conversation: Selected Essay (New York: Sturings & Walton Company, 1910), p. 20.

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