

Socially engaged art in the 1990s and beyond¹

by Michael G. Birchall

The shifts in community art, to more radical ideas of socially engaged art, share a long history with new genre public art and site-specific art; these practices are largely overlooked in the period, as we focus our attention to the socially engaged models. However, in this text I attempt to discuss the legacy of site-specific exhibitions since the 1990s. It is during this period where we first see a tendency towards the site in exhibitions, which then becomes a standard practice later on. As early as 1973, while discussing site specificity, Daniel Buren proclaimed:

Whether the place in which the work is shown imprints and marks this work, whatever it may be, or whether the work itself is directly—consciously or not—produced for the Museum, any work presented in that framework, if it does not explicitly examine the influence of the framework upon itself, falls into the illusion of self-sufficiency—or idealism.”²

More so than the museum, the site comes to encompass several interrelated but different spaces and economies, including the studio, gallery, museum, art history, and the art market. All of these nodes constitute a system of practices that is not separate from, but open to, social, economic, and political pressures. To be site-specific is to decide or recode the conventional conventions and to expose their hidden operations, to reveal the ways in which institutions shape art’s meaning to challenge its cultural and economic value.

The new public art that came into the spotlight in the 1990s was a new practice; the application of the genre of public art made digestible some sort of art known under more specific labels, such as feminist performance. Curator Mary Jane Jacob, who was writing in the 1990s, notes that the increase in activity around public art that addresses social issues was dramatic.³ I define the 1990s as being an important point in the shift of socially engaged art, with major exhibitions such as Culture in Action in Chicago, Sonsbeek 93 in the Netherlands, as well as Project Unité in France. These exhibitions acted as a precursor to what is now known as socially engaged art—and what has become expected from biennials, exhibitions, and art fairs around the world. A curator invites a group of artists to generate work within a specific locale. What emerged in the 1990s was a trend or a renewed interest in socially engaged art and the political exhibition. Exhibitions from this period frame a range of art practices, as Claire Bishop notes: “The curatorial framework is tighter and stronger than the projects by individual artists, which are open-ended, unframed, and moreover made in response to a curatorial proposition.”⁴ It is in these propositions where we see the turn towards the social emerge in the exhibition format of the 1990s and indeed beyond into contemporary biennial production.

When viewers become participants in a work of art, or co-producers, there is a transition in the aesthetic considerations. It could be said that socially engaged art is the neo-avant-garde; artists use social situations to produce de-materialized,

anti-market, politically engaged projects that carry on the modest call to blur art and life. In reaction to this, art critique focusing on socially engaged art is concerned with ethical considerations. The social turn in contemporary art has prompted this ethical turn in criticism. Emphasis is placed on “how” collaborations are undertaken; artists are judged by their processes and how successful collaboration is developed.⁵ Critique is given for any hint of potential exploitation that fails to “fully” represent their subjects.⁶ During the 1990s, curators were the ones who first brought these practices to the attention of the art world, not only in exhibitions but also in their writing. Far beyond the ideas set out in Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (1997), curators such as Maria Lind and Mary Jane Jacob have become ambassadors for socially engaged art as well as being responsible for the canonisation of the discourse.⁷

The exhibition *Culture in Action*, took place in Chicago from 1993-1995, in deprived areas of the city; that same year *Sonsbeek 93* opened in Arnhem in the Netherlands, curated by Valerie Smith. Both exhibitions frame the artistic practices through curatorial statements, which were made in response to curatorial propositions. This elevates the position of the curator to that of author, who uses a curatorial framework to present a specific set of ideas or practices to the public, in a position that is usually occupied by artists.

Valerie Smith's proposal was about creating context-orientated issues and the individual's relation to the social environment. The art for *Sonsbeek 93*, “should be site-specific of situational work,” she wrote. “The work must create meaning from and for the place in which it exists.”⁸ Smith's ambition was to create a series of projects produced by artists after spending no more than twenty-four hours in the city to do their research. Her catalogue on the exhibition demonstrates a case study in site-specific curating, as well as giving the impression that the curator is no longer a mediator between the artist and the public. It represents a desire to co-produce socially relevant art for many audiences.

Most of the work in the exhibition was sculptural; however, Mark Dion conducted a series of interventions in a museum attached to the royal home for retired veterans. The museum houses a collection based on their belongings acquired during their overseas missions. Dion's contribution addressed the display system at the museum and exposed a conflict. The veterans disliked the curators, as they decided which works would be exhibited after they had passed away. As an antagonistic response to this, Dion's project saw the creation of two display cabinets, filling them with objects belonging to the veterans—specifically those objects that would not make it into the collection. The German duo, Irene and Christine Hühnenbüchler, worked with prisoners at Arnhem prison to produce a series of paintings, installed in small huts inside the prisons walls. The artists had previously worked with community groups and following this project at *Sonsbeek*, they went on to work at two psychiatric clinics in Germany. Both Dion's and Hühnenbüchler's projects dealt with the social, yet at the time Valerie Smith was reluctant to use this term.

Bishop notes that prior to the institutionalization of participatory art following relational aesthetics, there was no adequate language for dealing with works of art in the social sphere that were not simply activist or community art.⁹ Although Smith's exhibition hinges on the social tendencies that are omnipresent in exhibitions of today, during the same period it was Suzanne Lacy who coined the term *New Genre Public Art* and discussed the emergence of this practice at a particular moment in the US: while large shifts were taking place in both art institutions and also beyond this.

Culture in Action (1993–1995) is regarded as changing the way the art is mediated in public spaces; curators consider it to be a new model of curatorial practice that changed how we create community projects. Quoting from the press release, the exhibition “established a new vocabulary within the genre of urban-oriented sculpture exhibitions and tested the territory of public interaction and participation.”¹⁰ Curator Mary Jane Jacob's goal was to shift the role of the viewer from passive spectator to an active art-maker. This was perhaps her “curatorial statement,” which became central to the exhibition; in total eight projects were created as community collaborations and were facilitated by artists and the not-for-profit organisation Sculpture Chicago. Projects included: Suzanne Lacy's commemorative boulders; a multi-ethnic parade by Daniel J. Martinez; a new candy bar designed and produced in collaboration with members of the candy-making union by Simon Grenan and Christopher Sperandio; a storefront hydroponic garden to grow food for HIV/AIDS patients by the collaborative team of Haha–Richard House, Wendy Jakob, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof–with Flood (a network of health care volunteers).

The exhibition received theoretical and critical comments in the 1990s, as it emerged at a key moment in the development of community-engaged work. The projects in the exhibition are somewhat contradictory, since they express an activist desire to interact directly with new audiences and accomplish concrete goals; and they achieved this through an embrace of open-endedness, in which the artist is recognised as a facilitator of others' creativity.¹¹ It embodied and institutionalised a convergence of significant conceptual and historical developments from the 60s through to the 90s. It altered the way we consider public space, rethought the potential of art production as a catalyst for social activism, and experimented with new models of community-based artistic cultural engagement. Fundamentally, it proposed a new ethos of social and political responsibility, as exemplified by artists committed to working with urban citizens in their everyday circumstances of economics, class, labour, and ethnicity.¹²

A contemporary example of this transformation, into how the social has permeated into the biennial model, would be Jeanne van Heeswijk's 2Up2DHomebaked (2012–) in Liverpool, a project (in the framework of) the Liverpool Biennial. This project features a collaboration with a strong community association who were determined to reopen their local bakery and to revitalize their failing community. Van Heeswijk decided to engage in this project after spending some time in the area. In an area that was not part of Liverpool's post-industrialisation regeneration, the project now runs as a functioning bakery, selling breads, cakes, and pies, and is able to sustain itself as a viable business model. In addition, apprenticeships have been offered, as well as baking courses to train future bakers.

In the spirit of enterprise culture, funding for equipment has been raised using micro-finance websites, with the support of the art establishment. Jeanne van Heeswijk is an expert in developing socially engaged work of this kind, having done several other works in the Netherlands, the UK, and Germany in recent years. Her practice as an artist involves bringing communities together in the context of sustainable art projects that gives them a voice. Her expertise as a cultural producer can be seen in the outcome of her projects, as they go on to revitalise communities or provide critique on local political issues. 2Up2DHomebaked has brought a community together and also enabled the Liverpool Biennial to promote itself beyond the established art circuit. Systems of the bourgeois public sphere, the mass media, and the art system are co-opted and politicized. It is exactly the kind of project art-funding agencies like to promote, and in Liverpool it is working well.

In this case, the biennial and the artist entered into the fray of a socially engaged project. In many ways contemporary art has absorbed methodological strategies from anthropology and reformulates the “collaborative” interaction between the artist and a local community group.¹³ Hal Foster notes this phenomenon in these practices—as the artists position themselves as outsiders who have the institutional authority to engage the local community in the production of the artists’ self-representation. I am cautious as to what this may mean for future long-term projects, and to quote Foster: “The quasi-anthropological role set up for the artist can promote a presuming as much as a questioning of ethnographic authority, an evasion as often as an extension of institutional critique.”¹⁴ While the curator may no longer be a carer of collections, in the museological sense, in this context, they become a carer of communities—becoming embedded in the context within which they work, and producing socially relevant work for their audiences, with the community being at the forefront. In many ways this can become a problematic social mission.

While curators, biennials, and commissioning bodies may reap the benefits from establishing socially engaged projects, they add value or gentrify deprived areas into “unique” locales.¹⁵ 2Up2DHomebaked has been established as a counter model to the wider regeneration that has taken place in a specific area. However, inadvertently this may pave the way for a second round of regeneration as the locale becomes more attractive due to the successes and publicity from a project commissioned by the Liverpool Biennial. This is part of a wider shift in biennial production, where the locale becomes the emphasis for long-term projects that impact the city over a period of time, in place of short bursts of artistic activity. This sustainability is not only about long-term projects, but also about maintaining a presence in the art community in the city, and acting as a site of production in association with guest curators and artists who may develop elements of the programme.

Projects such as 2Up2DHomebaked function well as the focus on local issues; however, they become problematic when state authorities try to use art projects as a “social-work.” The decline of community art in the UK was replaced with the socially engaged project via government-sponsored funding initiatives. This model established by curators and institutions stems from a desire to engage “real” non-art places, and prepare the way for the conversion of abstract or nonexistent space into “unique” “authentic” locales, thus increasing the chance for real community engagement. The people involved in this process can, according to Miwon Kwon, “install new forms of urban primitivism over socially neglected minority groups.”¹⁶ However, community groups needn’t be “neglected” or even a “minority,” as in the case of The Edgware Road Project, where all members of this community could involve themselves in the process regardless of their ethnicity. The level of community involvement is dependent on the willingness of the participants and on their desire to learn and acquire new skills. Superflex’s Tennantspin, commissioned by FACT in Liverpool, empowered local residents living in a high-rise development to film, program, and edit their own local TV show. Superflex provided the groups with the resources to engage with TV, and used the institutional affiliation—FACT, one of the UK’s largest media arts centres—to facilitate this process.

Community art is primarily about fulfilling its purpose to strengthen a community’s sense of self by promoting “feel-good” social values.¹⁷ They are often aimed at marginalised groups in poor areas and aim to empower the community. Suzanne Lacy defines “interactive, community-based projects”¹⁸ as being a special genre that developed through social practice. Her use of the term new genre public

art reveals an interest in artworks that have practical value and make political impact. They respond to local contexts and cultures, and are less emphasised on the creation of objects per se, than with the collaborative process that develops the consciousness of the artist and co-participants¹⁹

There has been a significant shift in the way community art is delivered through exhibitions and public programmes, in what is now largely regarded as socially engaged art. Socially engaged art takes reference points from the history of community art, but as Pablo Helguera notes, "It expands the depth of the social relationship, at times promoting ideas such as empowerment, criticality, and substitutability among its participants."²⁰ However, the community art practices and new genre public art of Culture in Action equally empowered the local communities, who were able to engage with the social models that were put in place. Socially engaged art may offer an alternative name, which perhaps fits more comfortably within the power relations of the art world, without the connotations of badly painted sculptures associated with community arts. It is unequivocal that today's socially engaged art continues the practice of community arts, as both artists and participants may engage in a project over a period of time. Fundamentally it remains the same, and one could argue, community arts in the 1970s and 1980s in Great Britain presented a range of radical political practices that were radicalizing feminist groups, local councils, and young people.²¹ Kwon puts forth the view that in social practices there is an assumption that communities are coherent and unified. Instead she asserts that communities are unstable before the artist brings his or her work.²²

The difficulty faced with socially engaged art is the act of unifying the social conditions; communities, whether they are unstable or not, do not always require an opening up or a dialogue instigated by an artist, a curator, or an institution. As the dialogue broadens around this issue, huge disparities grow between the Anglo-American context and European conditions. As the welfare state becomes neoliberalised, or watered down, "culture," as the term broadly used by politicians, is brought in as a mechanism to instigate a dialogue with a community. Questioning the necessity of socially engaged projects becomes ever more prevalent, as we may become tangled up between what is "ethically" right and what is required by funding bodies. The labour years in the UK may be regarded as "cool Britannia" due to Britain's cultural outputs during this period, yet they also mark a period of social engineering. The "do good" mentality of social practice may be concerned with generating social work for communities, which allows them to be targeted by arts institutions, government funding bodies and increasingly private companies.

Projects such as Suzanne Lacy's *The Crystal Quilt* and *Mother's Day* in Minneapolis (1987) featured 430 older women discussing hopes and fears of ageing, their accomplishments and disappointments.²³ Lacy's projects offer a sense of empowerment to the specific women who are part of the event. One could easily refer to this as a socially engaged work or as a community art piece. The critique of "new genre public art" argues that it has a lack of political analysis and that projects operate with a mixture of pastoral care and education that displays "pseudo religious traits."²⁴ New genre public art is mostly comprised of projects with marginalised communities such as the homeless or HIV-infected people. However, it remains clear that the "do good" motivation is what drives community art facilitators, many of whom are not visual artists, but have trained in other areas such as pedagogy and social work.²⁵

Within the practices of Johanna Billing, Annika Eriksson, Jeremy Deller, and Phil Collins (to name a few), these artists share an interest in the social, political, and economic conditions of communities and the rich context their locales possess as source material for ideas, discussion, and critique. While the aforementioned artists may not cite their work as socially engaged, there still remains an inherent social quality to their work. There is not a desire to commit to a "social practice," as some artists have gone on to do, but rather to incorporate these questions into their practice. Jeremy Deller's well-known video and performance, *The Battle Of Orgreave* (2001), features a re-enactment of a violent clash between miners and policemen in Yorkshire, England that took place in 1984. His reconstruction brought former miners and residents together with historical re-enactment societies who restaged the conflict for the public. This fuses art production with the social, and its aim is to be seen in official institutions as well as providing a cathartic exercise for the community involved. In socially engaged art, the task placed on the artist and the curator to work with a specific group is no longer limited to those groups with fixed identities—from different socio-economic backgrounds. It also functions as a critique of the shared values of "Communitarianism conscious"²⁶ politics that were reflected in early community art as well as Marxist notions of community unified by class struggle.

As contemporary art production has moved towards collective, self-organised, participatory, and socially engaged art as a response to the new labour conditions in neo-liberal societies, what has emerged in this field is a significant shift in how art is produced, mediated, and curated. Artists, curators, institutions, and publics all respond to socially engaged art in numerous ways; whether they are commissioned directly by publicly funded entities or via the artists' own initiatives. The latter may become a prevailing model, as the microfinance alternative allows for a greater level of autonomy, without the intervention of state-sponsored financing. When the curator becomes part of the social enterprise model—on large projects to drastically alter an area—they become part of a capital-intensive social regenerative scheme. The outcome is that the curator's or artist's labour contributes to a process of capital accumulation. In the widest sense, it provides an attractive milieu for business and further investment.

Notes

1 This essay derives out of a lecture delivered at Open Engagement in May 2012.

2 Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Museum," *Artforum*, September 1973 [missing page nos.].

3 Mary Jane Jacob, "An Unfashionable Audience," in Suzanne Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, WA, 1995.

4 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London, 2011, p. 217.

5 Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," *Artforum*, 2006, pp. 178–183.

6 Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents."

7 See: Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson, *Taking the Matter into Common Hands Black Dog*, London, 2007; Maria Lind, "Returning on Bikes: Notes on Social Practice," in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, Thompson, N. (ed.) *Creative Time*, New York, 2012; Mary Jane Jacob, "An Unfashionable Audience," in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Lacy, S. (ed.), Bay Press, Seattle, WA, 1995; Jacob, M. J., Brenson, M., Olson, E. M. and *Sculpture Chicago*, *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1995.

- 8 Valérie Smith, "Sonsbeek 93," in Brand, J. and de Muynck, C. (eds.), *Sonsbeek 93*, Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, Ghent, 1993.
- 9 Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, p. 202.
- 10 Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, p. 100.
- 11 Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, p. 213.
- 12 Joshua Decker and Helmut Draxler, *Exhibition as Social Intervention: 'Culture in Action' 1993*, Afterall, Koenig [distributor], London, 2014.
- 13 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996.
- 14 Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*.
- 15 Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, p. 213.
- 16 Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, p. 151.
- 17 Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, Jorge Pinto Books, New York, 2011, p. 11.
- 18 Suzanne Lacy, "Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art," in Suzanne Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, WA, 1995, pp. 171–188.
- 19 Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*.
- 20 Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, p. 18.
- 21 Owen Kelly, *Community, Art, and the State: Storming the Citadels*, Comedia Publishing Group in association with Marion Boyars, London; New York, 1984.
- 22 Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*.
- 23 Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson, *Taking the Matter into Common Hands*, p. 24.
- 24 Marius Babias, Hamburg, Kulturbehörde, and Kravagna, C., *Die Kunst des Öffentlichen: Projekte, Ideen, Stadtplanungsprozesse im politischen, sozialen, öffentlichen Raum ; [diese Publikation erscheint anlässlich des Projekts Weitergehen im Rahmen des Programms Kunst im öffentlichen Raum der Kulturbehörde der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg]*, Verl. der Kunst, G+B Fine Arts, Dresden; Amsterdam, 1998.
- 25 A specific example of a community art group is "fort da", based in Karlsruhe, Germany. This ten-person group consists of artists, teachers, designers, and art historians. They create and foster community projects for mainstream museums.
- 26 Möntmann, N. (2010) *ARTocracy: art, informal space, and social consequence: a curatorial handbook in collaborative practice*, Sacramento, N. and Zeiske, C. (eds.), Berlin, Jovis.