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How the Art of Social Practice Is Changing the World, One Row House at a Time

By ***Carolina A. Miranda*** POSTED **04/07/14**

Social practice is going mainstream as more artists focus their work on making an impact on problems like homelessness and pollution. But the question of how to judge activist art remains elusive

Last summer, Thomas Hirschhorn constructed the final edition in a series of “monuments” commemorating thinkers he admires. Like the Swiss artist’s other monuments, this one was crude—resembling a feverishly built backyard fort made from plywood and packing tape—and assembled with the help of the community that hosted the project. In this case, his collaborators were the residents of Forest Houses, an austere arrangement of public-housing towers dating back to 1956 in New York’s South Bronx.

Hirschhorn designed his *Gramsci Monument*—in honor of Marxist political theorist Antonio Gramsci—to encourage interaction. “The question of the site,” he wrote in a text that accompanied the work, “is a question of human encounter.” And for its ten-week duration, the monument was just that: a place for panel discussions, seminars, Latin-music performances, and art workshops. Kids ran up and down the ramps. Local poets took to an open microphone to read their stanzas. On family day, someone showed up with a horse.

An art event at Rick Lowe’s “Project Row Houses,” which has transformed a group of neglected shotgun houses in Houston into an African American cultural hub. ERIC HESTER

“Even on a rainy day, it was special,” recalls Yasmil Raymond, curator at the Dia Art Foundation, which organized the project. “There was one day where Marcus Steinweg”—the philosopher—“was giving a lecture, and there were people there in raincoats listening to him.” One resident of the Forest Houses told the blog Art F City: “A lot of people up there have said they’re gonna cry when it’s down. I dunno if I’m gonna cry, but I’m gonna miss it a lot.”

This type of art of the encounter, frequently referred to as "social practice," has been having a moment in art circles—albeit a moment that dates back a couple of decades. In that time, artists such as Rick Lowe in Houston and Theaster Gates in Chicago have turned urban renewal into an art form, transforming abandoned buildings into thriving cultural hubs. In Detroit, the Museum of Contemporary Art harbors *Mobile Homestead*, one of Mike Kelley's final works, a near-exact replica of his childhood home, which now serves as an ever-evolving community center.

And the New Orleans Museum of Art recently opened the doors on "Mel Chin: Rematch," a career retrospective of the Texas artist, who has long produced socially driven projects. Chin's latest, *Operation Paydirt/Fundred Dollar Bill Project*, brings together groups of children and scientists to draw awareness to the issue of lead-contaminated soil. "The esthetic component is key," says Miranda Lash, curator of modern and contemporary art at NOMA, where the show remains on view through May 25. "But the involvement of children is a vital part of the piece as well. Children are the most affected by lead contamination, so he wanted children to be part of the solution."

Children participating in Mel Chin's ongoing *Operation Paydirt/Fundred Dollar Bill Project*, which calls attention to lead contamination in soil. COURTESY MEL CHIN STUDIO

Certainly, the notion of participatory art is not new. The Surrealists were staging hands-on events in Paris almost a century ago. In the 1950s and '60s, figures like Allan Kaprow and members of Fluxus were turning collective actions into art. The '70s provided all manner of boundary-blurring social projects: from Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago's *Womanhouse* in Los Angeles—which was part art installation, part educational facility, part performance space—to Mierle Laderman Ukeles's pieces involving workers at the New York City Department of Sanitation. (She remains an artist in residence there to this day.) All of these traditions, and many others, have made their way into social practice, a stream of participatory art that tends to display a strong sociological and political bent, often in an effort to draw attention to social ills and conditions. Sometimes, these projects are meant to incite empowerment or change in a community.

Tom Finkelpearl is the author of *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*, published last year by Duke University Press. He is also director of the Queens Museum in New

York, which sponsored, along with the public-art nonprofit Creative Time, Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International,* a piece begun in 2010 that resulted in the creation of a community center for immigrants in Corona, Queens. Finkelpearl defines social practice as "art that's socially engaged, where the social interaction is at some level the art."

A bike workshop for Spanish-speaking women at Tania Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International in Queens, New York. COURTESY QUEENS MUSEUM

He thinks that the popularity of social practice among today's artists reflects a pendulum swing away from the art market. "It's a reaction against the excesses of individualism," he says. Indeed, with its ephemeral gatherings and activist happenings, social practice generally produces little in the way of salable objects. (Of the artists mentioned in this story, a slim minority have gallery representation, such as Hirschhorn and Gates, who show at Gladstone Gallery in New York and White Cube in London, respectively.)

Nato Thompson, chief curator of Creative Time, thinks that the form is a byproduct of our technology-reliant times. "I mean, doesn't any kind of human interaction that isn't on the Internet just feel very special?" he asks. Last fall, Creative Time and the Brooklyn Museum staged Suzanne Lacy's *Between the Door and the Street*, in which 400 mostly female participants decked out in lemon-yellow scarves took over a brownstone-lined block in Brooklyn to discuss issues of gender, race, and class with passersby.

This September, Creative Time is cohosting a series of community-based commissions that will take place at the Weeksville Heritage Center, a historic African American site in Brooklyn. Thompson points out that these kinds of manufactured encounters aren't unique to the art world. "The entire foundation of the Apple Store was that it would be a place of human relations," he says. "Sales people were trained to be empathetic, and the cash register was purposely kept hidden. There is a global interest in human relationships."

It is in academia, perhaps, that the art of social practice has gained the most traction. In 2005, the California College of the Arts (CCA) began offering social practice as a concentration within its M.F.A. program and soon put it in the curriculum. Since then, similar programs have launched at Queens College in New York, Portland State University in Oregon, the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, and Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. Ted Purves, who founded the program at CCA, explains that these courses emerged out of pedagogical necessity. "If you're interested in doing work out in the world, you need another box of tools," he says—

tools that go beyond studio practice and art history. “You need classes on social theory, theories of politics, and theories of public space.”

At the museum level, social practice has made headway as well. Four years ago, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles launched an initiative called “Public Engagement,” which has gotten artists and other thinkers to connect with visitors in unusual ways—such as putting someone in a coat closet with an opera singer for a private concert. In 2012, New York’s Museum of Modern Art began a similar program called “Artists Experiment.” As part of that series, Caroline Woolard created the Exchange Café, where patrons could barter conversation for a cup of tea. “It established a real dialogue,” says artist Pablo Helguera, who initiated the program for MoMA’s education department and wrote the book *Education for Socially Engaged Art*.

Helguera’s interest in such interactive scenarios emerges from his own artwork. Last year, he created a crowd-sourced Spanish-language bookstore called *Librería Donceles* at Kent Fine Art in Chelsea, which became an impromptu hangout for Spanish speakers in a city without a dedicated Spanish-language used bookstore. Last month, the project traveled to Phoenix, where it was installed inside a defunct Borders bookshop under the auspices of Arizona State University. “We spend years in art school, where we are taught to explore ourselves,” Helguera says, “but social practice is completely about the opposite thing. It’s about how to listen. It’s remaining engaged with the world in an active way.”

For *Librería Donceles*, Pablo Helguera filled Kent Fine Art with used Spanish-language books, which he sold out of the New York gallery last year. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KENT FINE ART, NEW YORK

For artists and institutions, these kinds of projects have required some adjustments to the way they usually operate. Though some pieces last an afternoon, others go on for years. Bruguera’s *Immigrant Movement International* was launched four years ago and remains active today. Chin began his piece on lead pollution in 2007, and it, too, is ongoing. In 1993, Rick Lowe renovated a series of nearly two-dozen shotgun houses in a depressed corner of Houston, turning them into artist residences, studios, and galleries. More than twenty years later, “Project Row Houses” continues, with 49 buildings spread out over ten blocks—and a support program for young mothers to boot. “You have to spend years developing relationships to be able to do something like this,” Lowe says. “It’d be an arrogant disregard of a community to come in and think you can grasp all the complexities of a place in a short time.”

For this reason, some organizations are starting to rethink the way they award residencies and grants. Jen Delos Reyes is an assistant professor in social practice at Portland State, and the founder of the Open Engagement conference, an annual art and social-practice gathering launched in 2007. (The next one will take place at the Queens Museum in May.) Recently, Delos Reyes sat on a committee for Portland's Regional Arts & Culture Council, which wanted to establish a community-engaged artist program.

"Typically, when applying for a residency, an artist pitches a project in advance," she says. "But in this case, no one should be coming to us with fully formed projects—that should be determined by the context. So instead, we shifted the focus to have artists share their approach and their intent." The piece, therefore, emerges during the residency, not before—giving the artist time to conduct research and letting the community help shape the direction of the work. This is an approach shared by Lowe, who says he will take months, even years, to investigate an idea, before approaching institutional partners.

Despite the current enthusiasm for social practice, it is not without its tensions, especially in sectors where art and activism overlap. As agents of change, social-practice projects can seem wanting: the scale is often small, the works are temporary, and success may depend on the charisma of a single artist. On an esthetic level, they can also be befuddling, perceived as too much like community organizing to feel truly like art. (This tension is not new: Lacy addressed it back in 1995 in her collection of essays *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art.*)

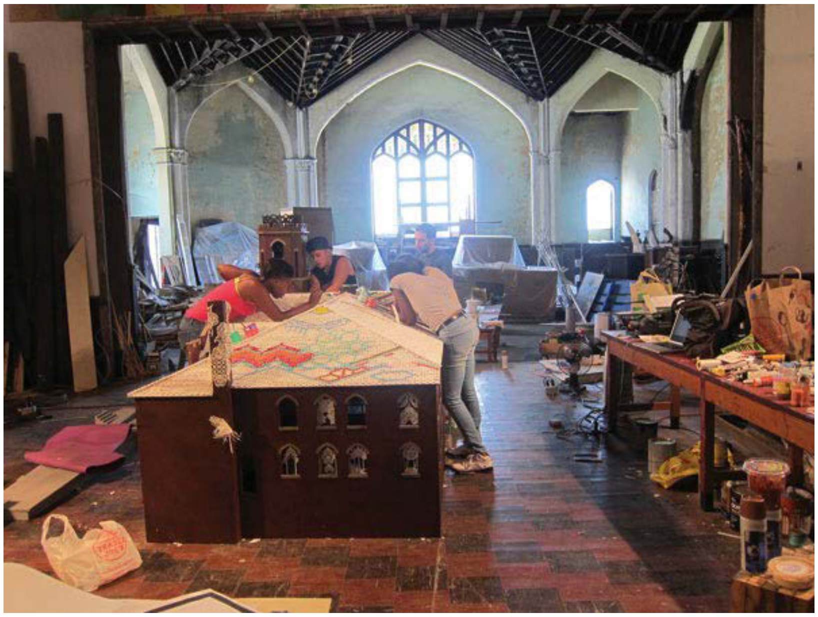
Finkelpearl says that the lengthy nature of some projects demands more engagement, over time, from critics. Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*, for example, was a work that evolved over the course of a summer. To visit for an afternoon wouldn't provide the viewer with a clear picture of what happened over the long haul. "That's like saying, 'I'm going to review Beethoven's Fifth, but I'm only going to listen for two minutes,'" says Finkelpearl. "This is not the kind of work that unfolds in an hour. Sometimes it is something that requires going three, four, maybe five times."

When Hirschhorn put up his temporary structure, critics debated how well it served the residents of Forest Houses. Artist Glenn Ligon, who once lived in the houses, wrote in *Artforum* last November: "What if instead of building the *Gramsci Monument*, Hirschhorn had proposed building the *Gramsci Charter School*? . . . Far-fetched, I know, but one of the many possible projects that might have resulted in a deeper collaboration between Hirschhorn and the residents of the Forest Houses."

Hirschhorn's intent, however, lay elsewhere. "He wanted to create a monument that didn't burden anyone with the fascism of permanence," says Raymond, the Dia curator. "He wanted a monument that you could walk into and be inside." Addressing Ligon's idea, she says, "We were not a school, nor did we have the time or skills to be a social-services agency."

This issue gets at how social-practice works are critiqued. Should they be evaluated for the social changes they produce, for the elements of performance they incorporate, or for the esthetic qualities of the environments in which they take place? "It's not easy to talk about this work," says Creative Time's Thompson. "You have to synthesize so many different things—the social aspects, what it does politically, as well as the cultural elements." He continues, "It's really about thinking about process: Who does it connect? And how does it connect them? And what makes this a unique experience for those involved?"

Many of the artists in the field say the "art" is in the intent. Chin describes his work as having an "invisible esthetic," a change that people can't perceive—such as the decontamination of soil—but a change nonetheless. Lowe sees his role with "Project Row Houses" as both an urbanist and a storyteller, one who can help change the narrative of a place. When he first took over those shotgun houses in Houston, they represented the worst of inner-city neglect. Since then, he has transformed them into important symbols of an African American cultural revival.



Ceramic-tile makers in an abandoned church in Braddock, Pennsylvania, where the artist Swoon has initiated a revitalization effort. The colorful tiles will provide a new roof for the building. CALEDONIA CURRY

Of course, Lowe is not the only artist who views his work in this way. Caledonia Dance Curry is an artist based in Brooklyn. In some quarters, she is better known as Swoon, a moniker she adopted as a street artist in the late ’90s. Swoon has done intricate cut-paper installations in galleries and collaborated on a series of sculptural rafts that have navigated the waterways of Mississippi, New York, and Venice. A few years ago, she and a team of artists helped build sturdy Superadobe shelters and a community center in earthquake-ravaged Cormiers, Haiti. Currently, the group is in the Rust Belt town of Braddock, Pennsylvania, where they are rehabilitating an abandoned church.

“We’re trying to think about how we can regenerate this space so that the narrative isn’t simply about destruction,” Swoon says. To help do that, the group is building a kiln that will fire the bright ceramic tiles that will one day cover the roof—tiles the community will have a hand in making. “It’s not that different from my previous work,” she adds. “My question to myself as an artist has always been, ‘How do I make something that engages my city—that creates art where people don’t expect to find to it? And how can we change what’s valued and how we value it?’” Art is a universe that traffics in these symbols, which means social practice should feel right at home.

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