



a blade of grass

nurtures socially engaged art

[HOME](#) | [WHO WE ARE](#) | [FELLOWS AND GRANTEES](#) | [APPLY](#) | [ATTEND](#) | [DISCUSS](#) | [SUPPORT](#)

SEARCH

GROWING DIALOGUE

Growing Dialogue is a series of moderated online debates among thought leaders in social practice.

September 18, 2013

Growing Dialogue: What is the Effectiveness of Socially Engaged Art?

Ben Davis Responds

Tom Finkelpearl is probably the most engaged of all museum directors in the United States. Nato Thompson is one of the most interesting and thoughtful curators out there. Rick Lowe has created, with the Project Row Houses, a form of social engagement that is an inspiration



by Ben Davis

FORUM

Growing Dialogue

CATEGORIES

SHOW

for idealistic cultural practitioners across the world. While my article for the *International Socialist Review* on “social practice”[i] may have rubbed some the wrong way, I’d begin by saying that I think we probably agree about more than we disagree.

Some of the difficulty is that my original article was written for a very specific audience: activists. When I lay out my agenda, right at the beginning, it is to explain “how activists should interact with a strand of art that often looks so much like activism.” What are people advocating for abortion rights to think of Rebecca Gompertz’s *Women on Waves*? How do housing advocates approach Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument*? What do my friends who have been organizing around immigrant rights in Jackson Heights for years think of Tania Bruguera’s *Immigrant Movement International*? My own experience is that many are enthusiastic, or at least amused. But a substantial number of activists roll their eyes at the attention accorded to such things. In his introduction to *Living As Form*, Thompson himself quotes Josh McPhee: “I am tired of artists fetishizing activist culture and showing it to the world as if it were their invention.”[ii] The potential for a hostile relationship between movement activists and “social practice” artists exists — particularly as the latter become institutionalized and celebrated in a way that the former aren’t.

ARCHIVES

[SHOW](#)

BLOGROLL

[SHOW](#)

FOLLOW US



[JOIN OUR MAILING LIST](#)



Gramsci Monument, a project by Thomas Hirschhorn in collaboration with the residents of Forest Houses in the Bronx.

My intention in writing the article was not to dismiss all such art because it wasn't sufficiently radical or anti-capitalist. Quite the opposite: My intention was to explain such art-making practices to people who might be liable to dismiss them outright, and to try to lay out the conditions for a possible productive relationship. To do that, one does have to give an honest account of possible pitfalls, it's true. But when I end the article by saying that for activists such artistic-political phenomena should be treated as an opportunity, I am not being flip. Activists should be looking for ways to engage with such gestures, not excuses to dismiss them. In general, I'm not trying to argue for (or against) this or that type of art but for an overall way of relating to the questions raised by "social practice."

Finkelpearl frames my argument in relation to the classic opposition between "reform" and "revolution," thinking that I oppose the latter to the former, and that in my framework, if art doesn't directly put an end to the scourge of capitalism it must have no value at all. While the idea that "social practice" art is "not revolutionary" is a charge its practitioners get all the time

from radicals of various stripes, I'm of the opinion that a dismissive approach is wrong-headed and shortsighted. In her classic book on the topic, *Reform or Revolution*, Rosa Luxemburg started from the premise that reform and revolution are not opposed; there will have to be many, many small victories and tiny, inspiring acts that lead up to any movement that makes even modest systematic changes in society (this is doubly true in a time as disillusioned as our own).[iii]

A problem only arises, in Luxemburg's still-useful account, when the fight for reforms becomes ossified into "reformism," that is, when the overall terms of social struggle are set by what is immediately possible and not what could be possible, thereby becoming an ideological brake. Sometimes it may be difficult to know where we find ourselves on that continuum, but to state at the outset that this possibility is a challenge that socially engaged practitioners have to tangle with is only to take them seriously as political actors. Some forms of activism are clearly more palatable than others to the powers-that-be, and will get more support precisely as a way of containing discontent. Given the recent anniversary of the March on Washington, I've been thinking a lot of the early Civil Rights movement: In the early 1960s, then-attorney general Robert Kennedy offered organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee a deal: "If you cut out this Freedom Rider and sitting-in stuff and concentrate on voter registration, I'll get you a tax exemption." [iv] What if they had taken the offer?

As people living at the tail end of generations of rightward drift, movements of mass protest are not a huge part of our immediate experience. They have, however, been a key to every important social movement that has made any sort of advance. Given that "social practice" is clearly attracting some of the most sincere and motivated artists in the present, the question for me is how various forms of socially engaged art practice do or don't relate to such politics. I think that "social practice," in its various incarnations, can be an inspiring jumping off point, and raise political horizons — when the Yes Men and Company, years ago, handed out their fake *New York Times*, written as if it hailed from a progressive future where Obama had ended the Iraq War and set his eyes on redistributing wealth, I was there passing out papers (and wrote about the experience).[v]



New York Times Special Edition, a collaboration with Steve Lambert, Andy Bichlbaum of The Yes Men, along with 30 writers, 50 advisors, around 1000 volunteer distributors, CODEPINK, May First/People Link, Evil Twin, Improv Everywhere and Not An Alternative. November 2008.

And yet... let me give an example that haunts me, from the expanded field of cultural activism. In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, the remnants of the Occupy movement heroically organized to form Occupy Sandy. While government officials sat on their hands, scores of volunteers joined together across the boroughs to try to get some relief to devastated communities. Teaming up with my neighbors to bring hot food to a mosque in Coney Island or deliver bottled water and baby formula to blacked-out public housing blocks in the Rockaways was one of the most meaningful experiences of my political life. However, when I returned in the evening to my untouched Williamsburg apartment, I was distressed to log onto Facebook and see the graphic that was circulating, a stylized image of volunteers at work with the caption “Occupy Sandy: #WeGotThis.” Here is my anguished Facebook post from that night (complete with unedited sentence fragments):

What Occupy Sandy has done is inspiring... But the slogan “#WeGotThis” bugs me... I think we need to be honest that we definitely don’t “have this.” Volunteers are stepping in, heroically, where the system has failed people... But we don’t have the generators, the earth movers, the massive stores of food, housing, blankets, and on and on needed to handle a crisis of this scale. People have lost their homes and lives. This just feels like focusing on how important it feels — and it is very important — and not the real state of the case, which is that the government NEEDS to be doing a lot more. That’s why you still pay taxes, because you

believe some public services are necessary, that they do things that we, even acting together, can't; not to start terrible wars and bail out crooks. The idea of crowdsourced disaster relief, if that is what the future holds, is scary, not awesome.



Image posted on the Occupy Sandy Facebook page.

Just as the natural disaster accelerates and dramatizes the crisis and neglect faced by marginalized communities in general, so do such moments accentuate and dramatize the dilemma of activism. We are facing terrifying ecological challenges, ever-more-deeply entrenched economic inequality, huge and ingrained structures of systematic racism... Individuals or even small groups engaging in creative projects simply do not have the metaphorical generators or earth movers to turn these things around, and until the tide is turned activists and artists alike are going to be fighting an ever-increasing number of battles in ever-more embattled circumstances. That's the big picture against which this debate takes place for me. Of course, just as I would never say that we should not have taken food and blankets to people starving in the cold in the wake of Sandy, I would never say that we shouldn't engage in

modest experimental initiatives to agitate to make things better — what else are we going to do? However, we can't be too self-satisfied about them; such initiatives should be critically hashtagged #WeDON'THaveThis. I think that conceptual shift makes a lot of difference.

One of the useful things about this approach is that it helps reframe the vexed debate over efficacy, which is for me perhaps better thought of in negative rather than positive terms. Thompson is correct that it is hard to judge the immediate impact of gestures that are symbolic. Building a culture of creative activism has value, as a base where ideas about social change can be fostered and, as Rick Lowe says of the Project Row Houses, as an example that can inspire bigger things, even if it doesn't actually solve everything itself. An art project needn't have any measurable immediate positive effect, as far as I am concerned. It does, however, need to avoid having one negative effect: There is clearly the danger, because of the very worthy nature of the projects involved, combined with the prestige and intellectual sheen that the art connection gives these things, that "social practice" substitutes rather than complements non-artistic activism in our minds. Addressing that danger is an obligation that goes with the territory. But as long as we start from that premise, then I think we are pulling in the same direction.

[i] Ben Davis, "[A Critique of Social Practice Art](#)," *International Socialist Review*, 90.

[ii] Josh McPhee, quoted in Nato Thompson, "Living as Form," *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991-2011* (Creative Time Books, 2010), 31.

[iii] See Rosa Luxemburg, *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution and the Mass Strike*, edited by Helen Scott (Haymarket, 2007).

[iv] Robert Kennedy, quoted in Ronald Steel, *In Love With the Night: The American Romance With Robert Kennedy* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), 159.

[v] Ben Davis, "[Oh Yes They Did!](#)," *Artnet Magazine*, November 20, 2008.

Read more from Growing Dialogue: What is the Effectiveness of Socially Engaged Art?

["What is the Effectiveness of Socially Engaged Art?"](#) – September 18, 2013

["Ben Davis Responds"](#) by Ben Davis – September 18, 2013

“Spaces of Possibility” by Nato Thompson – September 23, 2013

“#DoWeHaveThis?” by Tom Finkelpearl – September 24, 2013

“Working Towards Justice” by Rick Lowe – September 24, 2013

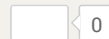
“On Bullshit” by Deborah Fisher – September 26, 2013

“Round 2: The Ontological Question” by Ben Davis – October 21, 2013

“The Ethically Neutral Dilemma of SEA” by Nato Thompson – October 23, 2013

“A Belated Conclusion” by Ben Davis – November 26, 2013

“The Name Game” by Louisa McCall – January 11, 2014



SIMILAR POST



#DoWeHaveThis?



Working Toward
Justice



Round 2: The
Ontological
Question



Growing
Dialogue: A
Belated
Conclusion

1 COMMENTS

LEAVE A COMMENT

SPEAK UP

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

Elizabeth Grady

September 27, 2013 at 4:48 pm

I think when you say, “...the question for me is how various forms of socially engaged art practice do or don’t relate to such politics,” you hit the nail on the head. SEA can at worst be unhelpful, masking real problems with deceptively warm and fuzzy interactions, if it fails to remain conscious of its political aims and real-world goals. This is not to say that the work should be instrumentalized, turned into a mere tool or engine for achieving specific aims, but that in order for its aesthetic and social goals to have impact and carry meaning, its practitioners need to remain mindful of their political and social position. This is doubly true when communities are engaged, and the work’s “success” or “failure”, however defined, has a marked and observable impact on the lives of those who work with the artist and activate their connections on his or her behalf. I’ll leave aside definitions of success and failure for another debate, but the question you raise here is critical.

[EMAIL US](#)
[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

137 5TH AVENUE, 10TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10010
(646) 757-4599

   
JOIN OUR MAILING LIST