Pablo Helguera

Education for
Socially Engaged Art

A Materials and Techniques Handbook

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Definitions

What do we mean when we say "socially engaged art"? As the terminology around this practice is particularly porous, it is necessary to create a provisional definition of the kind of work that will be discussed here.

All art, inasmuch as it is created to be communicated to or experienced by others, is social. Yet to claim that all art is social does not take us very far in understanding the difference between a static work such as a painting and a social interaction that proclaims itself as art—that is, socially engaged art.

We can distinguish a subset of artworks that feature the experience of their own creation as a central element. An action painting is a record of the gestural brushtrokes that produced it, but the act of executing those brushstrokes is not the primary objective of its making (otherwise the painting would not be preserved). A Chinese water painting or a mandala, by contrast, is essentially *about*

the process of its making, and its eventual disappearance is consistent with its ephemeral identity. Conceptualism introduced the thought process as artwork; the materiality of the artwork is optional.

Socially engaged art falls within the tradition of conceptual process art. But it does not follow that all process-based art is also socially engaged: if this were so, a sculpture by Donald Judd would fall in the same category as, say, a performance by Thomas Hirshhorn. Minimalism, for instance, though conceptual and process based, depends on processes that ensure the removal of the artist from the production—eliminating the "engagement" that is a definitive element of socially engaged art.

While there is no complete agreement as to what constitutes a meaningful interaction or social engagement, what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence.

Socially engaged art, as a category of practice, is still a working construct. In many descriptions, however, it encompasses a genealogy that goes back to the avant-garde and expands significantly during the emergence of Post-Minimalism.* The social movements of the 1960s led to greater social engagement in art and the emergence of performance art and installation art, centering on process and site-specificity, which all influence socially engaged art practice today. In previous decades, art based on social

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* In this book it is not possible (nor is it the goal) to trace a history of socially engaged art; instead I focus mainly on the practice as it exists today, with reference to specific artists, movements, and events that have significantly informed it.

interaction has been identified as "relational aesthetics" and "community," "collaborative," "participatory," "dialogic," and "public" art, among many other titles. (Its redefinitions, like that of other kinds of art, have stemmed from the urge to draw lines between generations and unload historical baggage.) "Social practice" has emerged most prominently in recent publications, symposia, and exhibitions and is the most generally favored term for socially engaged art.

The new term excludes, for the first time, an explicit reference to art-making. Its immediate predecessor, "relational aesthetics," preserves the term in its parent principle, aesthetics (which, ironically, refers more to traditional values—i.e., beauty—than does "art"). The exclusion of "art" coincides with a growing general discomfort with the connotations of the term. "Social practice" avoids evocations of both the modern role of the artist (as an illuminated visionary) and the postmodern version of the artist (as a self-conscious critical being). Instead the term democratizes the construct, making the artist into an individual whose specialty includes working with society in a professional capacity.

Between Disciplines

The term "social practice" obscures the discipline from which socially engaged art has emerged (i.e., art). In this way it denotes the critical detachment from other forms of art-making (primarily centered and built on the personality of the artist) that is inherent to socially engaged art, which, almost by definition, is dependent on the involvement of

others besides the instigator of the artwork. It also thus raises the question of whether such activity belongs to the field of art at all. This is an important query; art students attracted to this form of art-making often find themselves wondering whether it would be more useful to abandon art altogether and instead become professional community organizers, activists, politicians, ethnographers, or sociologists. Indeed, in addition to sitting uncomfortably between and across these disciplines and downplaying the role of the individual artist, socially engaged art is specifically at odds with the capitalist market infrastructure of the art world: it does not fit well in the traditional collecting practices of contemporary art, and the prevailing cult of the individual artist is problematic for those whose goal is to work with others, generally in collaborative projects with democratic ideals. Many artists look for ways to renounce not only object-making but authorship altogether, in the kind of "stealth" art practice that philosopher Stephen Wright argues for, in which the artist is a secret agent in the real world, with an artistic agenda.*

Yet the uncomfortable position of socially engaged art, identified as art yet located between more conventional art forms and the related disciplines of sociology, politics, and the like, is exactly the position it should inhabit. The practice's direct links to and conflicts with both art and sociology must be overtly declared and the tension addressed,

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* See "*Por un arte clandestino*," the author's conversation with Stephen Wright in 2006, http://pablohelguera.net/2006/04/por-un-arte-clandestino-conversacion-con-stephen-wright-2006/. Wright later wrote a text based on this exchange, http://www.entrepreneur.com/tradejournals/article/153624936_2.html.

but not resolved. Socially engaged artists can and should challenge the art market in attempts to redefine the notion of authorship, but to do so they must accept and affirm their existence in the realm of art, as artists. And the artist as social practitioner must also make peace with the common accusation that he or she is not an artist but an "amateur" anthropologist, sociologist, etc. Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines. For this reason, I believe that the best term for this kind of practice is what I have thus far been using as a generic descriptor—that is, "socially engaged art" (or SEA), a term that emerged in the mid-1970s, as it unambiguously acknowledges a connection to the practice of art.*

Symbolic and Actual Practice

To understand SEA, an important distinction must be made between two types of art practice: symbolic and actual. As I will show, SEA is an actual, not symbolic, practice.

A few examples:

Let's say an artist or group of artists creates an "artist-run school," proposing a radical new approach to teaching.

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

The project is presented as an art project but also as a functioning school (a relevant example, given the recent emergence of similar projects). The "school," however, in its course offerings, resembles a regular, if slightly unorthodox, city college. In content and format, the courses are not different in structure from most continuing education courses. Furthermore, the readings and course load encourage self-selectivity by virtue of the avenues through which it is promoted and by offering a sampling that is typical of a specific art world readership, to the point that the students taking the courses are not average adults but rather art students or art-world insiders. It is arguable, therefore, whether the project constitutes a radical approach to education; nor does it risk opening itself up to a public beyond the small sphere of the converted.

An artist organizes a political rally about a local issue. The project, which is supported by a local arts center in a medium-size city, fails to attract many local residents; only a couple dozen people show up, most of whom work at the arts center. The event is documented on video and presented as part of an exhibition. In truth, can the artist claim to have organized a rally?

These are two examples of works that are politically or socially motivated but act through the *representation* of ideas or issues. These are works that are designed to address social or political issues only in an allegorical, metaphorical, or symbolic level (for example, a painting about social issues is not very different from a public art project that claims to offer a social experience but only does so in a symbolic way such as the ones just described

above). The work does not control a social situation in an instrumental and strategic way in order to achieve a specific end.

This distinction is partially based on Jurgen Habermas's work *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). In it Habermas argues that social action (an act constructed by the relations between individuals) is more than a mere manipulation of circumstances by an individual to obtain a desired goal (that is, more than just the use of strategic and instrumental reason). He instead favors what he describes as communicative action, a type of social action geared to communication and understanding between individuals that can have a lasting effect on the spheres of politics and culture as a true emancipatory force.

Most artists who produce socially engaged works are interested in creating a kind of collective art that impacts the public sphere in a deep and meaningful way, not in creating a representation—like a theatrical play—of a social issue. Certainly many SEA projects are in tune with the goals of deliberative democracy and discourse ethics, and most believe that art of any kind can't avoid taking a position in current political and social affairs. (The counter-argument is that art is largely a symbolic practice, and as such the impact it has on a society can't be measured directly; but then again, such hypothetical art, as symbolic, would not be considered socially engaged but rather would fall into the other familiar categories, such as installation, video, etc.) It is true that much SEA is composed of simple gestures and actions that may be perceived as symbolic. For example, Paul Ramirez-Jonas's

work *Key to the City* (2010) revolved around a symbolic act—giving a person a key as a symbol of the city. Yet although Ramirez-Jonas's contains a symbolic act, it is not symbolic practice but rather communicative action (or "actual" practice)—that is, the symbolic act is part of a meaningful conceptual gesture.*

The difference between symbolic and actual practice is not hierarchical; rather, its importance lies in allowing a certain distinction to be made: it would be important, for example, to understand and identify the difference between a project in which I establish a health campaign for children in a war-torn country and a project in which I imagine a health campaign and fabricate documentation of it in Photoshop. Such a fabrication might result in a fascinating work, but it would be a symbolic action, relying on literary and public relations mechanisms to attain verisimilitude and credibility.

To summarize: social interaction occupies a central and inextricable part of any socially engaged artwork. SEA is a hybrid, multi-disciplinary activity that exists somewhere between art and non-art, and its state may be permanently unresolved. SEA depends on actual—not imagined or hypothetical—social action.

What will concern us next is how SEA can bring together, impact, and even critique a particular group of people.

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* Paul Ramirez Jonas's project, produced by Creative Time, took place in New York City in the Summer of 2010.