Pablo Helguera

Education for Socially Engaged Art

A Materials and Techniques Handbook

Jorge Pinto Books
New York

JORGE
PINTO
BOOKS

Education for Socially Engaged Art

Cover image: © Pablo Helguera, *Conferencia Combinatoria,*
Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, 2010

Book typesetting: Charles King: www.ckmm.com

ISBN: 978-1-934978-59-7
1-934978-59-0

Contents

Note

Fragments of this work have appeared in a series of writings I have published on the subject. These include the essays "Open House/Closed House" (published online, 2006) "Alternative Audiences and Instant Spaces" (in *Playing by the Rules: Alternative Thinking/Alternative Spaces*, ed. Steven Rand [New York: Apexart, 2010]), "Notes toward a Transpedagogy" (in *Art, Architecture, Pedagogy: Experiments in Learning*, ed. Ken Ehrlich [Valencia, Calif.: Center for Integrated Media at CalArts, 2009]), and "*Pedagogía y práctica social*" (in *Errata* [Bogotá], education special issue ed. Luis Camnitzer, June 2011).

Introduction

This brief book is meant to serve as an introductory reference tool to art students and others interested in learning about the practice of socially engaged art. I was motivated to write it after being invited by Harrell Fletcher and Jen de los Reyes to teach a course at Portland State University on the subject, which prompted my search for adequate reading materials on the practice.

In the United States, socially engaged art is rooted in the late 1960s, in the seminal influence of Alan Kaprow, the incorporation of feminist education theory in art practice, the exploration of performance and pedagogy by Charles Garoian, and the work of Suzanne Lacy on the West Coast and elsewhere, among many other examples. The practice of socially engaged art today, often referred to as "social practice," has been lately formalized and integrated into art schools, more or less along with academic literature that addresses the phenomenon. Over the last decade, several scholars have started to focus on the subject: Claire Bishop, Tom Finkelpearl, Grant Kester, Miwon Kwon, and Shannon Jackson, among others, have been key in providing interpretations and reflections on how the practice is being shaped, what historical background nourishes it, and the aesthetic issues it raises. The process of theorization of socially engaged art, however, has developed much faster than the more pedestrian discussion of the technical components that constitute it.

Other areas of art-making (painting, printmaking, photography) have nuts-and-bolts technical manuals that guide practitioners in understanding the elements of their practice and achieving the results they want. Those of us working in socially engaged art need our own reference book of "materials and techniques," as it were. I thought it would be useful to make available a brief reference guide that is based on concrete knowledge, experience, and conclusions derived from specific applications of various interactive formats, from discursive and pedagogical methods to real-life situations. The goal of this small book is to serve not as a theoretical text nor a comprehensive set of references, but instead to offer a few examples of how to use art in the social realm, describing the debates around theory as well as some of the more familiar and successful applications of the ideas.

In setting a curriculum for socially engaged art, mere art history and theory won't do: while they are critical to providing a historical and contextual framework of the practice, socially engaged art is a form of performance in the expanded field, and as such it must break away, at least temporarily, from self-referentiality. One is better served by gathering knowledge from a combination of the disciplines—pedagogy, theater, ethnography, anthropology, and communication, among others—from which artists construct their vocabularies in different combinations depending on their interests and needs.

This book presents an introduction to socially engaged art primarily through the tools of education. Partially, this is due to a personal bias: I came to art and education

simultaneously, in 1991, when I first worked in an education department at a museum and initiated my experiments in performance. Gradually I noticed parallels between the processes of art and education. The experience has led me to believe that some of the greater challenges in creating socially engaged artworks can be successfully addressed by relying on the field of education, which historically has navigated similar territories. Today, it is no secret that standard education practices—such as engagement with audiences, inquiry-based methods, collaborative dialogues, and hands-on activities—provide an ideal framework for process-based and collaborative conceptual practices. It is no surprise that artists who work in this area feel at home in the education departments of museums, even if they would also like to be recognized by their curatorial departments.

One example of the usefulness of the tools of education to socially engaged art is the story of Reggio Emilia. Shortly after the end of World War II, in the Northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia, a group of parents led by an educator named Loris Malaguzzi started a school for early childhood education that incorporated the pedagogical thought of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and others. The goal was to reenvision the child not as an empty container to be filled with facts but as an individual with rights, great potential, and diversity (what Malaguzzi described as "the hundred languages of children").* Based on the curriculum

* See C. Edwards, L. Gandini and G. Form, *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach Advanced Reflections*, Elsevier Science, Amsterdam: 1998.

they developed, the Reggio Emilia Approach calls for sessions are spontaneous, creative, and collaborative in nature, and children play a critical role in deciding which activities they will focus on any given day. For the Reggio Emilia *pedagogisti*, "to participate is not to create homogeneity; to participate is to generate vitality."* The visual and the performative are central in Reggio Emilia activities. The *atelieristi*, or workshop teachers, play a key role in being attentive to the interests of the group but also in integrating those interests and activities into the curriculum. In this way, the learning experience of every group is different and it functions as a process of co-construction of knowledge. Collaboration with parents and the process of documentation of the child's learning experience are also critical components of the Reggio Emilia Approach.

At first glance, there appears to be no connection between the early childhood pedagogy that emerged in the mid-twentieth century in a small northern Italian town and the kind of socially engaged artwork featured today in *kunsthalles*, biennials, and contemporary art magazines. Yet, in the debate and criticism around such artwork it is necessary to qualify the kind of participation or collaboration that takes place, to describe the experience, the role of the location, the instigator of the action, and the documentation process. All these subjects are carefully considered in the Reggio Emilia Approach, in sophisticated detail and with a nuanced understanding of the individual's cognitive abilities and potential for learning through experience.

* "*Partecipare non é homogenitá; partecipare e vitalitá.*" Elena Giacopini, Reggio Emilia educator, in conversation with the author, June 2011.

Obviously, the work done in Reggio Emilia is not geared to the formation of visual artists, the creation of artworks, nor the insertion of ideas in the art discourse, yet an artist who wants to learn about collaborative dynamics and experimentation as well as the effect that a particular type of documentation may have on the work would be well served by following the roads traversed by these and other educators, roads outlined in this book.

The development of a materials and techniques handbook for socially engaged art might suggest the institution of an academic ideal for the practice that can be measured in scientific ways. In Europe, where art programs in universities are subject to extreme regulation and standardization so that they meet certain educational outcomes, a book like this might be assumed to subject art to cold numbers. Or the existence of a book like this might inspire a more troubling assumption: that a certain set of social-engineering formulas will be recommended, to be deployed to construct a given art experience. I am aware that the subject of influencing a group of people is, in itself, highly controversial, as the implementation of such ideas has created authoritarian cults, repressive regimes, and closed, intolerant societies.

Those who hold such troubling thoughts can rest assured that this book does not turn socially engaged art into a set of academic rules nor push it in the direction of, say, a sort of relational eugenics. Instead, I show that socially engaged art can't be produced inside a knowledge vacuum. Artists who wish to work with communities, for whatever reason, can greatly benefit from the knowledge

accumulated by various disciplines—such as sociology, education, linguistics, and ethnography—to make informed decisions about how to engage and construct meaningful exchanges and experiences. The objective is not to turn us into amateur ethnographers, sociologists, or educators but to understand the complexities of the fields that have come before us, learn some of their tools, and employ them in the fertile territory of art.*

This book, in describing the equivalent of materials and techniques for socially engaged art, may appear to the reader to be a manifesto for best practices. But how can the concept of "best practices" relate to socially engaged art? Is it acceptable to articulate ideal practices, or would that be detrimental to the autonomy of art-making, which needs opacity and ambiguity to exist? While we need critical frameworks—such as those articulated in this book—to make art, they should not be understood as regulatory mandates that would impose moral or ethical demands on art-making. Unethical artistic actions, while crossing the line of acceptability and even legality in some cases, are part of the role that art plays in challenging assumptions in society, and for that reason freedom of expression must always be defended. In any case, to impose a sort of methodology, or "school of thought," onto the practice would only create an interpretation of art-making that the next artist will inevitably challenge, as part of the natural dynamics of art.

* It must be noted that, because both subjective anthropology and performance art developed in the early 1970s, interdisciplinary experimentation and crossover was consciously explored—and exploited, in partnerships—in many notable artworks during that era.

For that reason this book does not assume, nor does it pretend to propose, a system of regulation or schooling of socially engaged art. It doesn't propose, either, a best practices approach for this kind of art. However, socially engaged art-making crosses overtly into other disciplines and tries to influence the public sphere in its language and processes, and it would be absurd to ignore the perfectly useful models that exist in those disciplines. As artists, we may walk blindly into a situation and instigate an action or experience. But unless we don't really care about the outcome, it is important to be aware of why we are acting and to learn how to act in an effective way. Learning how to moderate a conversation, negotiate among interests in a group, or assess the complexities of a given social situation does not curtail artistic liberty; these are skills that can be used to support our activities. Understanding the social processes we are engaging in doesn't oblige us to operate in any particular capacity; it only makes us more aware of the context and thus allows us to better influence and orchestrate desired outcomes.

I have also grappled with another question: Is possible to distinguish and define successful and unsuccessful socially engaged artworks? To argue, for instance, that good socially engaged art creates constructive personal relationships is wrong: an artist's successful project could consist of deliberate miscommunication, in upsetting social relations, or in simply being hostile to the public. This debate belongs to the field of art criticism, addressed by the scholars I have previously mentioned, and it lies outside the scope of this project. Instead, this book is about

understanding and working with audience engagement and response for an artistic purpose. My hope is that an understanding of the nuances of these dynamics will be useful for artists but also for those who are interested in understanding and commenting in a thoughtful and critical way on the projects that emerge in this field.

Porto Alegre/Bologna/Brooklyn,
June 2011

1

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 interaction has been identified as "relational aesthetics" and

* 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.

"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, but not resolved. Socially engaged artists can and should challenge the art market in attempts to redefine the

* 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.

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. The project is presented as an art project but also as a functioning school (a relevant example,

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

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 Jürgen 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 affects 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, engage, and even critique a particular group of people.

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

Community

In this section I will consider some of the defining elements around group relationships created through SEA. They include, A: The construction of a community or temporary social group through a collective experience; B: The construction of multi-layered participatory structures; C: The role of social media in the construction of community; D: The role of time; E: Assumptions about audience.

A. The Construction of a Community

"Community" is a word commonly associated with SEA. Not only does each SEA project depend on a community for its existence, but such projects are, most people agree, community-building mechanisms. But what kind of community does SEA aspire to create? The relationships that artists establish with the communities they work with