

Socially Engaged Art at the Reimagined 21st Century Museum: An Emerging Conceptual Framework

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Socially Engaged Art at the Reimagined 21st Century Museum: An Emerging Conceptual Framework

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Conceptual Framework

On a warm sunny day in October, 2016, I sat in an uncomfortable office chair in the middle of a Midwestern campus quad, tethered to the woman sitting across from me by the connected microphones pinned to our shirts. We were brought together by our mutual participation in *Migration Stories* an art project led by visiting artist Mark Menjivar (2016). The piece was a component of *Northern Triangle*, a Borderland Collective exhibition about the United States' relationship to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala ("Borderland Collective: Northern Triangle," 2016). As a volunteer for Menjivar's project, I was tasked with drawing out the migratory histories of passing strangers on the college quad. Participants were invited to self-determine what they considered migration, be it their personal journey that led to their arrival on the campus, to their ancestor's relocations from various homelands. Later, these migration stories became part of an oral history archive that Menjivar disseminated through exhibitions, print publications, and a project website (Menjivar, 2016).

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This work is one of many examples of a field of contemporary art loosely classified as “socially engaged art” or “social practices” by artists and art critics in North America. Like performance art before it, socially engaged art focuses on the creation of experiences, not art objects (Helguera, 2011, p. 2). Socially engaged art also reconstitutes relationships between ‘audiences’ and artworks by inviting traditionally passive art viewers to become participants and collaborators in the execution of a work. Art galleries and museums across the United States have embraced this participatory field of art with increasing frequency over the past twenty-five-years, mirroring the fevered uptake of social practices by artists throughout the country. Despite its prevalence, little scholarship has addressed why art institutions have embraced socially engaged art, nor what benefits they gain from supporting it. Here I attend to this absence through the development of an emergent conceptual framework that illustrates how the forms of socially engaged art—service, dialog, education, entertainment and performance—align with the evolving values and priorities of the 21st century museum.

Values of the 21st century museum

Western art and museums have been in an entangled relationship since the 1700s when princely collections (such as the Louvre) were first converted into public galleries that presented art using temporal and regional categorizations (Duncan & Wallach, 2012, p. 49). These early museums sought both to illustrate a Eurocentric narrative of how art had changed over time and to create quiet, thought-evoking spaces devoid of distractions so that viewers might best absorb the brilliance before them. (Duncan & Wallach, 2012, pp. 49–50). As Hooper-Greenhill explains, these curatorial decisions were based on modernist ideals of knowledge and education that saw audiences as passive-learners who might be bettered through the viewing of high culture (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 15). Though the creation of contemplative contexts for looking at art is still common museum practice, the conceptions of learning that underpin this method of display have been under attack since the late 20th century, challenging both the authority of the museum and the meta-narrative of art history on which it has relied (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, pp. 15–17). Since the 1980s countless museum scholars and practitioners have used different terminologies and foci to articulate the issues and possible solutions for these historic

museological practices.¹ Grewcock describes how this wide body of scholarship, positions 21st century art museums as, “connected, plural, distributed, multi-vocal, affective, material, embodied, experiential, political, performative and participatory...” (Grewcock, 2014, p. 5). Art museums across the United States have taken-up the challenge of reformulating their relationships to their audiences with varying degrees of implementation, from the addition of visitor-centered tours and events, to the fundamental restructuring of their approaches to curation, most notably through the inclusion of live, time-based art, like social practices.

Though there are clear parallels between these audience-centered museological objectives and the participatory aims of socially engaged art, there is an absence of literature that connects social practice artwork to contemporary museum scholarship. Marstine’s (2017) recent work on socially engaged art and museum ethics is a notable exception. In this publication Marstine outlines how social practice art can comply with, or undercut, the ethically fraught sites of what she terms “discursive museums” (2017, pp. 157–185). Though Marstine’s work offers important insights into the politics and power dynamics of social practice art and institutions, she does not attend to the particular importance of form in social practice. As Purves (2016) points out, questions of form, particularly social form, are often eschewed in literature on socially engaged art in lieu of examination of the conceptual foundations of artistic practice. Drawing upon the work of German sociologist Georg Simmel, Purves argues that consideration of the social forms of socially engaged art are crucial because it is through recognition of the form of a work (for example; a shop, a shared meal, or a conversation) that viewers are able to anticipate and thus engage with a piece (Purves, 2016, p. 108). In short, the forms of socially engaged art are integral, not incidental, to the ways a work is manifested because form dictates a projects capacity to solicit participation. Understanding how the forms of socially engaged art reflect the needs of the reimagined, participatory museum is therefore critical to understanding why museums are taking up this form of practice.

¹ Various terms have been used to describe this shift in museology toward inclusive and participatory practices including; Critical Museum Theory (Marstine, 2006), New Museology (Vergo, 1989), the Post-Museum (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000) and the Participatory Museum (Simon, 2010).

This emergent conceptual framework outlines how the five most common forms of socially engaged art intersect with contemporary museum studies scholarship. This framework draws upon literature on social practice art and critical museology, as well as my own experiences as a maker and frequent participant in social practice art projects and events. I began this research by analyzing and coding artist project examples from the most cited publications on socially engaged art, first identifying institutionally situated projects and then categorizing these works into broad categories. I examined these works in concert with projects that I learned about through word-of-mouth and at conferences, looking for overlaps and then developing a list of common features of these projects. The forms of socially engaged art identified here are broad categories which drawn upon the key concepts and vocabularies used by academics, artists, and institutions in their articulations of social practices. For instance, the terms “performance” and “conversation” (a synonym for “dialog”) are chapter titles included in Helguera (2011) and which I use to describe the forms of social practice art. Similarly, like Bishop (2004), I identify service-oriented projects as an important form of social practice art. This list does not, therefore, assert a new conceptualization of socially engaged art, but rather coalesces the identified interests, aims, and approaches of socially engaged art in relation to 21st century museology. As I argue in this framework, the social practice forms of service, dialog, education, entertainment and performance offer a revealing lens for interpreting how, when, and why museums might take up social practices and who benefits from this institutional embracement. As socially engaged art grows ever more popular it is crucial that artists and the museums who support them understand the relationships between their fields so that they can make more informed decisions about their collaborations.

Service

Service-oriented socially engaged art projects aim to fulfill a pre-existing, unmet need of a community or population by providing a service related to that need as part of an art project. Services offered through socially engaged art often address urgent social needs by delivering necessities such as clothing, housing, health care, childcare, and/or nutrition (Purves & Selzer, 2014). Other works offer less urgent services such as: the testing of food for genetically modified content provided by Critical Art Ensemble as part of *Free Range Grain* (2004), and the free therapy sessions offered in Pedro Reyes’s installation *Sanatorium* (2014). Audiences of these projects assume different levels of participation

depending upon the work, from nominal participation, such as acting as a recipient of a particular service, to operating as collaborative partners who co-authors the identification or delivery of a service. Examples of this form of work include, *Women on Waves*, (Thompson, 2012, p. 250–51) an oceanic women’s health project that offers free abortions to women in international waters near countries where abortion is illegal and Simone Leigh’s *The Waiting Room*, a residency and installation at the New Museum in which Leigh explored “the rights and roles of women of color in expanding notions of medicine within a socio-political state of deferred health justice.” (The New Museum, 2016, p. 2) As a part of the project, Leigh collaborated with black, female, alternative health care practitioners to offer free health services within the museum.

Service-oriented projects situated at museums take different durational forms, from short-term projects that run for a discrete amount of time to long-term projects that run for numerous years (sometimes indefinitely) and which can require dedicated staff and space. While Leigh’s *The Waiting Room* was open from June 22 to September 18, 2016, the Hammer Museum’s long-term partnership with *Art + Practice*, a social-service project for foster youth in Leimert Park, Los Angeles, is running for several years (“Art + Practice - Hammer Museum,” n.d., “New Museum: Simone Leigh – The Waiting Room,” 2016). The duration of these projects plays a major role in shaping what kind of social needs an artwork can fulfill. While a Black Lives Matter meditation that took place during Leigh’s project made an important, temporary intervention into the museum, the singular nature of the event is not necessarily conducive to building long-term relationships with participants, and thus sets specific limits on the capacity of the service offered as well as what types of relationships it creates between the audiences and the institution. As a long-term collaboration, the Hammer’s work with *Art + Practice* and foster-youth hinges upon the building of trust over time, and establishes different kind of relationships between participants, the museum, and the community. Critically, both these works and many other service oriented projects, leverage institutional resources to provide services for communities who have a history of being excluded from art spaces—poor people, black, brown and racialized people, immigrants, people with disabilities, and Indigenous populations, to name just a few.

Why museums take up this form

Service-oriented socially engaged art is singular in its ability to fulfill museum’s increasing focus on serving their self-identified “communities” (American

Museum Alliance, 2016).² Most art museums in North America have an interest in diversifying their visitor base, increasing their attendance numbers, and generating long-term relationships with their visitors (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Service-oriented socially engaged artworks allow museums to support their constituents, draw in new audiences and create more dynamic types of institutional engagement. Silverman (2010) outlines the recent museological shift toward a client-focused, social-work, needs-based approach to museum programming. “They [museums] are layering a foundation of service to the relationship needs of all people, including those in circumstances of risk, through client-centered empowering relationships and museum resource-based interventions that foster planned change.” (Silverman, 2010, p. 147)

Though Silverman’s use of the language of social work is not pervasive in museum scholarship, the service-oriented shift in museum programming is echoed throughout the literature on contemporary museum practices. The American Alliance of Museums, the national governing body for museums in the United States, now emphasizes the important role that museums have in providing services to their communities (American Alliance of Museums, 2016, secs. 3-5) In this service-oriented context, socially engaged art offers art museums the dual benefit of serving their community and supporting contemporary art.

Potential risks

Ironically, service oriented socially engaged art projects can also be used as a balm to create an illusion of change within institutions that are unwilling to meaningfully address societal issues. For example, a social practice project that offers legal aid to asylum seekers crossing into the United States through Mexico might cast an institution as being invested in immigrant and human rights, while the same museum fails to provide educational materials and tours for Spanish speaking visitors, or hire and promote Latinx staff. Furthermore, service oriented projects may obscure the underlying imbrication of art museums in political and economic systems that produce social need within

² *Community* is a term frequently called upon by museums and museum-governing bodies to refer to their visitors, desired audiences, and/or local stakeholders—whether or not a particular population considers themselves a part of a museum’s community is often not addressed in public facing documents.

their communities. These tensions, or alignments, between the politics of service oriented works and the institutions that host these projects are, therefore, always at play. Artists who collaborate with museums should be mindful of how these conditions impact their work, the museum, and the public audiences they want to serve.

Dialogical

Dialogical socially engaged artworks aim to instigate connections between people through discussion. These projects tend to view conversation as both the form and outcome of social engagement—the conversation itself is the work of art (Kester, 2013). For example, Broken City Lab's 2011 artwork *City Counselling Session #1* was an open-invitation, public conversation about local political issues staged in the parking lot beside City Hall in Windsor, Ontario. While some socially engaged art projects may have additional outcomes in mind (such as the recognition of a political issue or the inspiration to act on a particular injustice) other works have more therapeutic goals, such as the sharing and/or valuing of underrepresented voices and perspectives, as was the aim in *City Counselling Session #1* (Broken City Lab, 2011). Audiences can have varying levels of participation in dialogical works, from acting as an observer of a conversation to guided participant or collaborative co-authors. For instance, in Bass's *Tea Will Be Served* participants were divided into pairs and invited to answer a series of questions related to their daily activities in an effort to give the everyday experiences of museum visitors a place of reverence within institution walls (Bass, 2011).

Why museums take up this form

The outcomes of dialogical socially engaged art echo the constructivist approaches to learning asserted by museum theorists and museum educators who believe participatory museum experiences are more pedagogically beneficial than passive art viewing (Hein, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; Leinhardt, Crowley, & Knutson, 2002). In her research into museum conversations Leinhardt argues dialog is an *essential* component of museum learning because it draws upon visitors prior experiences to support them in connecting with exhibitions and/or artworks so that they produce new knowledge (Leinhardt, 2014, p. 19). Dialogical socially engaged art like Bass's *Tea Will Be Served* exemplifies how this form of social practice mirrors 21st century museum aims. Furthermore, the discursive capacities of social practice projects create an

avenue through which spaces that are typically oriented around the display of art objects, can be reconfigured to better support their visitors in making meaning.

Potential Risks

Despite the exciting potential for dialogical socially engaged art to assist visitors in forging new knowledge within museums, this form of social practice raises interesting questions about if and how museums are obliged to respond to discussions, particularly in instances when they concern challenging or political topics. Though Marstine proposes socially engaged art may have the capacity to reconcile museums with their communities, she goes on to caution that institutions need to be mindful of *how* they build their discursive relationships (2017, pp. 169–170). Similarly, Simon (2015) asserts the important role of *listening* in relationship development between museums and communities, particularly with populations who have been historically excluded from and/or disinterested in their spaces. She goes on to explain that community input cannot be relegated to a single conversation/event because such truncated, brief listening leads to problematic and ill-conceived programming that does not reflect community interests (Simon, 2015, p. 22). Since much dialogical socially engaged art is structured as a single conversation or event, Simon’s argument suggests that while this form of art may foster important conversations, institutions should view these exchanges as openings to potential future discussion rather than interpreting their content as a base for new programming.

Education

Education-focused socially engaged artworks go beyond employing dialogue as a means of learning to address questions of pedagogy and knowledge as a subject matter in its own right. Educational projects take many forms from the organization and delivery of courses, curriculums and schools to symbolic, experimental and de-schooling works that broadly address the dissemination and exchange of information (O’Neill & Wilson, 2010). Most educational socially engaged artworks endeavor to build, share, or create new knowledge with a group of people who normally would not have access to that information. Audience participation in educational social practice projects can manifest in a number of forms, including, collective co-authorship of educational activities, directed participation, or passive recipient of educational experiences. For instance, *The Teacher as Conceptual Artist* an ongoing work by Mexican-American artist Jorge Lucero considers how a teaching practice can be

reframed as artistic practice (Amsterdam University of the Arts, 2016). *Visit Palestine: Change Your View*, an artist-developed travel agency by Public Studio, offered free tours of Palestine to artists, curators and architects visiting/based in Israel in order to educate them about Palestinian culture and heritage (2014).

Why museums take up this form

Educational socially engaged art and contemporary approaches to museum education share many of the same ideological values and forms. Both emphasize experiential learning and strive to create opportunities for personalized experiences of art based on the interests of the participant. This overlap is no surprise since museum education scholars like Hein (2004) and social practice scholars like Finkelpearl (2013) call upon the same theorists, particularly John Dewey and Paulo Freire, in their conceptualizations of their fields. Numerous social practice artists work within museum education departments, perhaps most notably, Pablo Helguera, whose *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2011) is one of the most cited publications on social practices.

These converging aims, theories, and even involved parties, make educational forms of socially engaged art a natural fit in the art museum. Education departments at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) have all commissioned and collaborated with artists to stage educational social practice art projects as a part of their departmental offerings (Agsten & Allen, 2010; Hamilton, 2012; Museum of Modern Art, 2016; Smith, 2012). From 2010 through 2012, Allison Smith ran *ARTS & SKILLS Service* at SFMOMA, a series of free, public, educational craft-technique workshops restaging World War Two era museum programming that was developed for convalescing veterans (Smith, 2012).

Potential risks

While many artists like Smith are keen to leverage the resources of museum education departments to stage their educational social practice projects, others are wary of collaborating with non-curatorial museum staff for an assortment of reasons including; concern that projects will not be understood as artworks, disparity in the cultural capital bestowed on works by curatorial and museum education departments, and discomfort with the potential instrumentalization of their artistic practice. Similarly, some museum staff may be cautious about working on educational socially engaged art projects because they do not want to ask social practice artists to take on roles akin to ‘discounted’ museum educators who are afforded neither the security or benefits of formal

institutional employment. Whilst, the shared interests of educational socially engaged art and pedagogically centered 21st century museums offer tremendous collaborative potential, it behooves artists and museum staff to ensure that they communicate any possible issues early in their projects so that they can generate projects that meet institutional and artist expectations.

Entertainment

In 2014 the artist collective VSVSVS staged *How Hard is Your Art* an interactive project at the Art Gallery of Ontario where visitors like me were encouraged to create and then smash assemblage sculptures in an improvised-looking device made of two-by-fours, cinder blocks, and rope (VSVSVS, 2014). This project reflects the shared interest of entertainment espoused by socially engaged artists and museums. Entertainment-focused socially engaged art is often situated in environments where such experiences are unexpected or unavailable, such as a suburban street corner, or in the case of *How Hard is Your Art*, in a section of the museum that normally doesn't house artwork (VSVSVS, 2014). Though many may consider socially engaged art as entertainment less avant-garde than other forms in this field, the creation of sites of pleasure can be a political act, particularly when it occurs in a location where pleasure has been previously denied, or for an audience who does not normally have access to that type of encounter. For instance, in Sita Kuratomi Bhaumik's collaborative work *Estamos Contra El Muro (We Are Against the Wall)* visitors to the gallery, many of whom entered the United States by crossing the US-Mexico border, were invited to smash a piñata version of Trump's proposed border wall, creating space for participants to express their anger over the US's proposed immigration policies through the enjoyable act of breaking a piñata ("Estamos contra el muro (We Are Against the Wall)," 2016).

Why museums take up this form

Audience involvement in entertainment-focused socially engaged artworks includes both non-participants who watch others generate a work and collaborative co-authors who bring entertainment into being. Many projects make space for both these forms of participation like Stephanie Syjuco's *Money Factor (An Economic Reality Game)* in which museum visitors could create or view counterfeit currency made by the public (Syjuco, 2015). These different types of participant engagement can be particularly significant in works that are

politically fraught because they provide audiences different ways of interacting with a topic they may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with.

Potential risks

There are, however, numerous critics and academics who contend that entertainment focused social practice art is driven by the ‘experience economy’ which repositions cultural experiences as consumable products, often targeted towards white, wealthy, young-professionals who are taste-makers and potential future patrons (Bishop, 2004, p. 52; Kundu & Kalin, 2015, p. 42). Similarly, Hooper-Greenhill argues that the increased use of evaluative metrics (such as attendance numbers) has resulted in the museological uptake of pleasure-centered programming. Socially engaged projects that emphasize entertainment are therefore in a distinct position—while on the one hand they may be seen as being mere tools in an institutional attendance game, they also have the opportunity to demonstrate the importance of pleasure, and its potential for connecting with people who may otherwise be intimidated by museums and their codes of conduct.

Entertainment-focused social practice art has been fashionable with museums since the early 2000s popularization of socially engaged art and is often the first foray an institution makes take into participatory art. Whether it is due to its alignment with museum attendance and entertainment goals, because of its value as art, or a works political potential, socially engaged art as entertainment has been arguably taken up by museums across North America with more enthusiasm than other forms of social practice. Entertainment centered socially engaged art may therefore be an ideal avenue for artists to begin working with institutions, provided they are comfortable with the potentially nebulous nature of the museum’s motivation to host them.

Performance

Performance is perhaps the most contestable form of socially engaged art included in this framework. Socially engaged performance aims to address social or political issues through performance and/or performative action. Not all socially engaged art is performance, nor is all performance art socially engaged. The distinction I make here between performance art and socially engaged performance art is based upon both the subject matter that the performance addresses, how the artist(s) classifies the work, and the role of audience participation in the creation of a project. For example, in their 2015 socially

engaged art performance *The Powers That Be* the artist Cassils staged a violent two-person fight in the parking garage of The Broad and required all attendees to film the performance on camera phones (“Tip of Her Tongue: Xandra Ibarra ‘Nude Laughing,’ Cassils ‘The Powers That Be,’ Shirin Neshat ‘Possessed,’” 2015). *The Death of Performance Art* by Basil AlZeri, in which the artist reenacted seminal moments from performance art history for a passive audience, is not a socially engaged artwork (AlZeri, 2014). While Cassils’ aim was to address how violence is mediated by implicating participants in their performance, AlZeri’s aim was not necessarily concerned with any social issues, nor did it involve any audience participation.

Why museums take up this form

My study of museum-based social practices has revealed that socially engaged performance art is taken up less than other previously mentioned forms of this field. I believe socially engaged performance art is less popular with museums because, on its surface, it does not embody the values of the reimagined 21st century museum. Socially engaged performance art does not guarantee service to community, interactive learning, or develop new audiences like the forms of service, dialog, education and/or entertainment-based social practice art. Works such as Suzanne Lacy and Meg Parnell’s *Cleaning Conditions* highlight the apparent incongruity between this form of practice and aims of the 21st century museum. In their piece “...teams of ‘sweepers’ from labor and immigration organizations cleaned the [museum’s] galleries each day, and redistributed a very visible ‘litter’ of political printed materials onto the floors.” (Lacy & Parnell, 2013, para. 1). Though the impetus of this work is based on a social issue, the information being distributed by the performers was placed on the floor and, by design, has little chance of being picked-up, let alone read by a museum visitor.

Despite their apparent misalignment with contemporary museological aims, performance-based social practice projects are still invited to institutions across North America simply because of its value as art. This belief in the cultural importance of art and the celebration of its producers continues to be foundational to art museums in the wake of other shifts in museum practice. In 2012 a group of museum experts developed a panel and accompanying written materials explaining why and how museums could support experimental art projects like socially engaged performance art (“The Elastic Manifesto or Why Museums are Ripe for Experimental Projects,” 2012). As the authors explain, experimental art is important to museums because it furthers, “...a conversation with contemporary work: these projects directly engage with new art forms.”

(Mortati, Shultz, Diachisin, & Parrish, 2012, p. 1) The inclusion of the term *new* in this description highlights why socially engaged art does in fact espouse the 21st century museological goal of relevance—because it pushes the boundaries of art and is, therefore, artistically relevant. While the other forms presented in this framework share this merit, they also tend to offer ‘tangible’ outcomes that mirror the service-oriented, dialogical, educational, and entertainment goals of contemporary art museums which explains why socially engaged performance may be less popular than its counterparts.

Potential risks

Due to its limited alignment with some of the values of the 21st century museum, artists who want to work on performance-based social practice projects may find it difficult to find opportunities to collaborate with museums.

Conclusion

When I participated in Menjivar’s *Migration Stories* (2016) I did not anticipate the intense, personal, and emotional information that passersby would be willing to share with me about their family’s experiences of migration. The museum support of the work faded far into the background of my mind, almost entirely forgotten, except for the few moments when I first began an exchange with a stranger by calling up the name of the museum to give my unusual behavior context and legitimacy.

As I outlined in this framework, the five most common forms of socially engaged art—service, education, dialog, entertainment, and performance—are uniquely aligned with the participatory, discursive, community-centered, and artistic objectives of the reimagined 21st century museum. Each of these forms offers distinct benefits, from addressing community needs, to drawing new audiences into museums and supporting artists in their execution of projects. However, socially engaged art also comes with potential ethical and artistic risks that institutions and artists should attend to before and throughout their collaborations. Given the expanding number of social practice post-secondary programs and the surge of activists, educators, and traditional makers turning to socially engaged art as a way of responding to political issues within the United States, it is critical that practitioners and museums further develop their vocabularies and strategies for scrutinizing their shared projects. Similarly, it behooves viewers of institutionally supported socially engaged art to ask; How does the work I am viewing reflect the values of the museum? What might the

aims of these artists be in staging this project? And; How does this work reflect or respond to me or my community?

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