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Sarah O. Hull

Washington University in St. Louis

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Imagining New Possibilities Through Social Practice

Sarah Hull

College of Art, School of Design and Visual Arts

Washington University in St. Louis

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Abstract:

In my practice, I have significantly questioned the role of the arts in social change. I have explored various forms of social practice, especially political art, public art and community art. Social practice lives in-between the world of art and social action and can add an important voice to both. Still, social practice, (like all forms of art) is limited and cannot be the sole source of social change. It is by working with others already organizing for social change, but bringing in the unique skills and perspectives of an artist that social practice is most effective. In this thesis, I will be exploring the intentions, impacts and value of public, political and community art. I will look to artists working in each of these ways as examples to understand what makes social practice effective and valuable to larger social movements. Ultimately, I will use this discussion to identify the role of an artist contributing to social change, citing specifically artists' ability to invite people into the process of imagining alternate possibilities.

Introduction

In recent decades the rise of what can be called social practice has changed the landscape of the art world. In fact, critic and teacher Gregory Sholette claims that, "the tilt toward socially engaged art begins to look more like a full-blown pedagogical shift, at least in the United States" (After OWS,

Para. 3). Broadly, social practice is an intersection between imaginative artistic production and the desire to respond to social issues. Social practice “blurs the lines among object making, performance, political activism, community organizing, environmentalism and investigative journalism, creating a deeply participatory art that often flourishes outside the gallery and museum system”(Kennedy). Responding to social division has led me to explore different forms of social practice and question the role of the artist within broader political movements. To contextualize my practice I will discuss the intentions and impact of political, public and community art and their role in creating social change. I will then consider the role of the artist working in these modes, and what specifically the arts contribute to larger movements towards social change.

Political Art

Political themes have been present in art for centuries, from religious imagery meant to instruct to contemporary institutional critique. Croidhean defines three categories of political art; portrayal, promotion and projection. Portrayal, he explains, describes political situations, promotion presents solutions to social problems and projection takes disparate elements and combines them to present a new perspective on a social or political issue. Using these methods, political art draws attention to social problems and encourages viewers to enter public discourse about them. Ultimately, this can lead to action,

most effectively if used within the context of a larger social movement extending outside of the art world.

Much of my political work can be classified as projection. Collage, especially has been a method that allowed me to combine disparate stories and



Figure 1: Sarah Hull, *Ocean View*, 2014, Collage

histories to frame a political stance.

For example, in *Ocean View* (fig. 1), I

combined domestic, tourist and

activist imagery to illustrate the

silencing of dissenting political

voices in the portrayal of South Africa

as a tourist destination. Likewise, in

Classifications II, (fig. 2), I combined categorical botanical illustrations with noses

of different sizes and shapes. The

image is unnerving and demonstrates

the dehumanization that occurs when

bodies are systematically categorized

and ultimately devalued based on

race, as was structurally

implemented under the apartheid government in South Africa and continues to

be culturally enforced. These images draw attention to political issues by

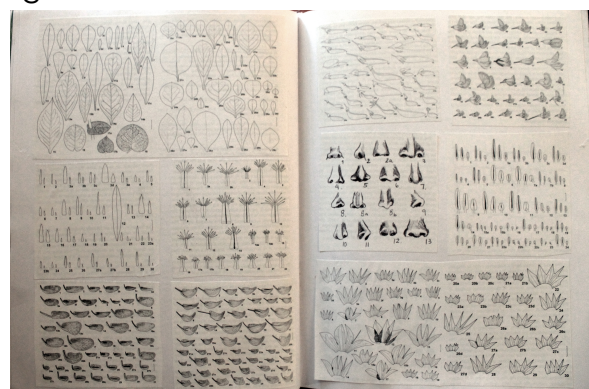


Figure 2: Sarah Hull, *Classifications II*, 2014, Collage

creating new ways of looking at mundane images that make the viewer uncomfortable. This discomfort draws the viewer into political discourse.

Informing this collage work, Martha Rosler's collages also use projection to frame political positions. In her early series "Bringing the War Back Home"

(fig. 3), Rosler's collages combine domestic scenes with images of the war in Vietnam. These images collapse into a single moment the American trauma of realizing the gruesome realities of war



Figure 3: Martha Rosler, *Cleaning the Drapes*, 1967-72, pigmented inkjet print

and the violence of complacent ignorance. This series, like my own work uses disparate imagery to create a new space in which a political issue, experience or perspective can be articulated quickly and provides an entry point into a larger conversation.

Other political artists and groups, such as Gran Fury, use political art and imagery in direct connection to larger social movements. Gran Fury's tactics impacted those far outside of the art community, and sought to educate about the impact of the AIDS epidemic, primarily on LGBT communities. In many ways,

these artistic actions resisted the label of “art” because it at times became inappropriate and had the potential to separate the work from the movement it so desperately needed to be attached to. In an essay by Avram Finklestein, creator of Gran Fury’s poster *The Government Has Blood on its Hands*, (fig. 4) Finkelstein describes this artistic production as outside of art completely.



Figure 4: Gran Fury, *The Government Has Blood On Its Hands*, 1988, Lithography on poster

Finkelstein states “Posters made during times of crisis are a call to action, a reminder of individual agency. They have a completely different set of goals. Political activism is not exactly cultural production. A community in crisis is not art” (“The Government Has Blood on Its Hands [One AIDS Death Every Half Hour]”). Here, because Gran Fury’s goal was to increase broader awareness, they used artistic skills and methods but

acted as activists, working with other groups fighting AIDS stigma and fighting for LGBT rights. Gran Fury, like many effective political artists and collectives had to work within broader activist movements to most effectively create meaningful change (Gran Fury).

My own piece, *Mapping Tension* functions educationally, raising awareness and presenting a new perspective on the history of division and inequality in St. Louis and the United States, while also pointing towards a growing activist movement to compel viewers towards action. *Mapping Tension*

(fig. 5) was created in response to the shooting and subsequent death of teenager Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson, in St. Louis, Missouri on August 9, 2014. The piece addresses the controversy surrounding Brown's death and the decision by a St. Louis grand jury not to indict officer Darren Wilson. In this piece, I arranged

newspaper articles about these events onto a map created by the Home Owner's Loan Corporation

in the 1930s. This map separated the city of St. Louis into racially based categories and used them to determine loan rates and eligibility, ultimately disenfranchising communities of color and segregating the city. Relating this history of racist policies to the Michael Brown case I created a new perspective with which to view the map and the articles. The piece therefore functions educationally, and raising awareness about this history and its long-term impact. Further, this piece relates to an ongoing movement of protests and political



Figure 5: Sarah Hull, *Mapping Tension*, 2014, Newspaper, Acrylic, Mod Podge on Fabric

actions, which emerged out of the Brown case. Created in St. Louis as protests were occurring, this piece points viewers towards the movement itself and hopefully encourages action towards social change.

These examples illustrate the power and limitations of political art. The pieces invite viewers to join a political discourse by clearly displaying complicated and disturbing relationships, such as the relationship between the isolated housewife and the war in Vietnam, or the racist history of St. Louis and the recent death of Michael Brown. When contextualized within broader movements, these pieces can inspire individuals to take action and are then catalysts to action themselves.

Public Art

When considering the impact of an audience, it is necessary to address public art, which almost always expands the audience. Public art can take on many forms or definitions. Cartiere claims that to be public art, something must be either maintained and used by the surrounding community, concerned with the public interest, in a public or visible place or paid for by the public (Cartiere). Though this accounts for a wide range of works, public art is tied together by its placement in public discourse. Whether it is engaging with a political issue or simply publicly owned, it becomes part of a discourse outside of the institution of the gallery or studio. Because of this, public art is inherently subjected to

questions of public interest. While art within a private or gallery space can choose to engage with social issues, public art attracts these questions to it. The breadth of the audience and heightened accessibility forces conversations about what it can or does contribute to a community or how it speaks to any given political or social movement. As stated on the Philadelphia Association for Public Art's website, "In a diverse society, all art cannot appeal to all people, nor should it be expected to do so... Is it any wonder, then, that public art causes controversy? Varied popular opinion is inevitable, and it is a healthy sign that the public environment is acknowledged rather than ignored" (Bach).

This is not to say that all public art is outwardly political, but rather to point out the way in which working publicly inherently pushes the artist into

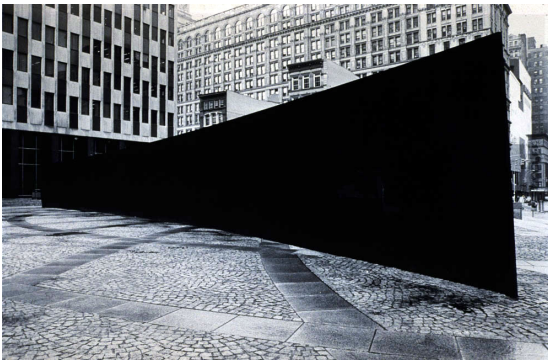


Figure 6. Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981, Steel

public discourse. In fact, even ostensibly apolitical work can still spark

conversation on public values and social

change. For example, the controversy

surrounding Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*

(fig. 6) did not necessarily spring from

any political statements inherent in Serra's piece, but rather from the life of the piece in the public sphere. Because the piece was publicly funded and disrupted people in a space that was not previously designated for art, it became the focal

point of a political conversation about ownership and power in public space and the value of art (Horowitz).

Still, like political art, public art that works more explicitly towards social change also must work in the context of broader social movements to be most effective. For example, the Guerilla Girls' work with public billboards (fig. 7) explaining the lack of women in the art world works within a framework of a broader feminist movement. They also focus primarily on education and awareness by presenting a framework for people to imagine futures where there



Figure 7: Guerilla Girls, Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Belfast Billboard, 2008, Paper on Billboard

is more representation of women in the arts, and do so in an incredibly public and accessible way. Stated by Cher Krause Knight, "In many ways, the Guerilla girls are

the consummate public artist: they work in the public realm; adopt media from the common culture such as posters and

stickers; address issues of wider social relevance; demand fairness from institutions disseminating public culture; and invite viewers to be co-conspirators" (Knight).

Within my own artistic practice, working publicly meant shifting my audience from my peers to members of the St. Louis community. For the University City Sculpture Series, my audience broadened to all residents of University City. The residents of U. City bring with them a diverse range of experiences and views on art and Washington University, which compelled me to reconsider the way I present myself as an artist and a student. I wanted my work to be relevant and related to the community to begin to bridge the cultural gap between University City and students from WashU. I also was considering an audience in the midst of a complicated political conflict, as the entire St. Louis metropolitan area was responding emotionally to the killing of teenager Michael Brown and the subsequent grand jury decision not to indict officer Darren Wilson, as discussed earlier. As a public artist, my work would be read in the context, regardless of how outwardly I addressed it. This changed my own practice, pulling me deeper into research on how University City has responded to activism in the past, eventually inspiring my piece, "Hands of Change," consisting of semi-transparent panels showing images of protests in University City history held up by concrete hands as if they were protest signs (fig. 8). In this way, the sculpture is both relevant to the current regional political discourse as well as the specific history of the community. Here, because of the expanded audience, public art adjusted my practice to be more focused on social change.

Further, after the piece had been installed, I had the pleasure of interacting with community members as they viewed and experienced the piece. One individual spoke to me for a half an hour about protests he had seen in University City during his lifetime, and the ways in which he had seen protest and active citizenship shape his community. Every time I have visited the piece, I have seen people viewing and discussing protest and social change. This alone can be seen as social change because these conversations, sparked simply by

encountering the piece in public, have challenged University City residents to consider their own relationship with protest and activism.

Because this piece was installed in April of 2015 following large-scale protests in St. Louis earlier



Figure 8: Sarah Hull, Hands of Change, 2015, Cement and Plexiglas

that year, the piece encouraged citizens to join in activism occurring around them. Like my earlier discussion of political art, the link to larger cultural movements gives the piece further power as an agent of social change.

Community Art

A third branch of socially engaged art, community art, is the most obviously connected to desired social change. Community art strives to include members of any given community in the creation and imagination process for the betterment of that community. Stated in a descriptive essay by Dewhurst, "community arts requires the ACTIVE participation of multiple stakeholders. There is no one artist.... Community artists are made and defined by the process of the work" (Dewhurst). Community art has the opportunity to elevate societal voices and create small, grassroots change.

In my practice, I've had the chance to engage in community art in a few ways. For example, in Fall 2014, I worked with a group called *Better Blocks* in St. Louis in order to plan activities for a neighborhood festival on a specific, undeveloped lot. The event was meant to inspire people to think of new uses for the lot and to imagine futures for the community. At the event, I created an interactive map of University City with small flags and tape on the grass to invite residents to create new ideas for what city space could be used for (fig. 9). I used my role as an artist to construct a framework for community members to participate in imagining new possibilities and express that. Again, in the Spring, we were invited to organize another follow-up event. Leading up to the event, we led workshops with students in middle schools nearby asking what they

envisioned for the lot and having them depict these futures on a pennant. The pennants were displayed among a pop-up sculpture garden in the space.

Community feedback from both events suggested and supported the idea of a permanent sculpture garden in the space, which is now the future for the site. In



Figure 9: Sarah Hull, Better Blocks, 2014, flags and spray paint

this way, our artistic engagement with the space and invitation for community members to join in the art making process provided direction for physical changes in the community.

In my work with the Ferguson Artbus, I will be doing the same. Here, I will be working with individuals from Ferguson Youth Initiative, UMSL, Florissant Valley Community College and Washington University in St. Louis to disseminate templates of a bus with instructions for community members to describe what they see Ferguson today to be like and their visions for Ferguson tomorrow. These designs will be exhibited by us as students and community members in an exhibit open to the public. Then, the designs will be combined into a design to paint on an actual city bus, which will circulate the St. Louis area. The painting

of the bus will take place in Ferguson and community members will be invited to come take part. This too functions as a framework to elevate community voices and invite individuals into the process of imagining new futures. This project also works with pre-existing community groups such as Ferguson Youth Initiative and seeks to fit into a larger cultural dialogue about regional unity and growth after the death of Michael Brown and non-indictment of officer Darren Wilson. By doing this, the project is able to be more responsive to community needs, insert itself into community functions and gatherings and have a more honest voice.

Another artist whose work seeks to elevate voices of a community is Krzysztof Wodiczko. Known for deeply engaging in any community he works with, Wodiczko's piece *Tijuana Projection* (fig.10) is a good example of the way in which a community artist can use their



Figure 10: Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Tijuana Projections*, 2001. Projection on Tijuana Imax Theater

skills as a maker to provide a framework for hearing unheard community voices. In *Tijuana Projection*, Wodiczko sought out women in the community of migrant workers and worked with them express their stories of "secret trauma." To do

this, Wodiczko projected their faces as they spoke onto the side of the Tijuana Imax Theater, in a public, confrontational and empowering way. This made public the voices of these often silenced women and gave them an elevated and empowered framework upon which to express themselves. Here Wodiczko co-created the content of the piece with community members and allowed his role to be a facilitator for creating this immersive experience where the public could visualize the voices society quiets (Parry, Medlyn, and Tahir).

Conclusion

Artistic social practice is clearly not the only means for enacting social change. Social workers, teachers, community organizers, activists, politicians, non-profits and religious organizations all work in their own way towards similar means. In this case, what is the role of the artist among so many others working towards similar goals outside of the label of art? In fact, working under the title of "artist" can limit the potential reach of the voice of an individual, if the statement is only read in the context of the art world. Because art is seen as a designated space for controversial assertions, it becomes easy to ignore its implications. For example, to protest the financial reliance of the 19th Biennial of Sydney upon detention centers that had a history of human rights abuses, artists used their power as individuals and business people to withhold their work (Garrett). Had the artists simply expressed this critique through their work, the

Biennial would not have changed. Because they stepped out into an unexpected realm and used their economic leverage, rather than their aesthetic voice, they were effective. Knowing, then that the voice of the artist is not always the most effective at addressing social change, when and how is it most useful? To answer this, I point to something that Rob Garrett calls the “unfettered imagination of the artist” (Garrett). It is this ability for artists to image and immerse those experiencing the art in alternative possibilities for the future that is art’s greatest strength as an agent of social change. In my own work, I make connections between history and social issues visible, which creates a new reality, or perspective in which both are clearly present and influencing one another. When one encounters my work, they enter into this perspective and are engrossed in the dialogue surrounding it.

In conclusion, public, political and community art all stems from the desire to engage in public discourse towards social change. All three ways of working have potential to reach new audiences and lead to action. In a world where many are striving for a better tomorrow, it is so critical to find the most effective way to use any set of skills. As artists, the skill set most valuable is the ability to imagine new paths and draw others in to that imagination- putting ideas into the world so that others can enter in. As Carol Becker so eloquently stated,

These actions needn't last forever to be effective. Just the fact of their existence affects consciousness and the possibility of humans to rethink their relationship to each other and to the State. It's not a failure when such movements devolve; I would say rather it is a triumph that they exist at all. Once ideas come into society they cannot be permanently erased and their existence, if only brief, still gives hope. Artists understand this, which is why they can be so essential at such times. (Becker)

As an artist working for social change, it is critical to know that this freedom to produce, to create and to imagine is the strength of what we do and that regardless of how easily measured, art does, in this way affect social change.

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Fig.1: Sarah Hull

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Fig. 4: <http://www.nypl.org/blog/2014/01/06/government-has-blood-its-hands-aids-death>

Fig. 5: Sarah Hull

Fig. 6: <http://blog.art21.org/2009/01/21/art-and-politics-an-introduction/#.VQw8sMb5X7U>

Fig.7:<http://www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/images/Naked%20Through%20The%20Ages/Belfast%20billboard%20Fall%202008.jpg>

Fig. 8: Sarah Hull

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