

Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good

ed. by Johanna Burton, Shannon Jackson, and Dominic Willson. MIT Press, November 2016. 536 p. ill. ISBN 9780262034824 (cl.), \$44.95.

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The publication of *Public Servants: Art and the Crisis of the Common Good* seems especially prescient given the current political landscape. The editors state in their introduction that their aim is “to ask key questions about the role of art and culture in light of such radical economic, political, and global shifts as they reconfigure both the meaning of the ‘public’ and our modes of address toward it.” To this end, they have carefully formulated a series of rigorous considerations of the intersection of art and public service in a manner that pushes the discourse forward. The editors and contributors move beyond merely defining “social practice” or “activist art” in order to unpack the implications and expectations of such work/service as well as the realities of operating within the public sphere as an artist.

This volume is part of the newly revived series *Critical Anthologies in Art and Culture* and is co-published with the New Museum, New York. It is

divided into six chapters that mimic government structures, such as “Public Works,” “Department of Labor and Economy,” and “Department of Culture.” Each “department” includes contributions by a variety of artists, theorists, critics, and historians; more than half of the essays are new work, commissioned by the editors. At the end of each essay is brief contextual information indicating whether the contribution is a new, expanded, reformulated, or reprinted essay. Additionally, there is a more detailed publication history for all reprinted essays at the back of the book. Biographical information is included, followed by a detailed index. Illustrations are scattered throughout the volume but are clearly not the focus. *Public Servants* also contains a “Portfolio” section comprised of projects and statements by artists who each grapple with the issues that form the foundation of this publication. This includes

artists such as Mel Chin, Andrea Fraser, and Gregg Bordowitz, among others. With its central location in the volume and its focus on artistic practice, this section presents itself as a kind of bridge between the conceptual or theoretical and the more practical elements in this publication.

The editors have taken great care to include a wide range of voices in the conversations, giving the volume a global perspective. While the book does not provide answers to the questions it raises, it often forces readers to continue to question issues that surround politically and socially engaged art production and consumption. As such, it is highly recommended for all academic and research libraries, especially those that support research in the areas of contemporary art, curatorial practice, art history, and theory.