

Locating Art and Community in Temporary Democracies

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“It can seem impertinent for the privileged to claim that they assert on behalf of those whom they neither know nor seek to know. There is something improper about the well-heeled seeking to represent the disadvantaged; it is an unacceptable invasion of territory.” (Pam Gems, 2003)

The discursive criteria of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anticapitalism and the Christian “good soul.” In this schema, self-sacrifice is triumphant: The artist should renounce authorial presence in favor of allowing participants to speak through him or her. This self-sacrifice is accompanied by the idea that art should extract itself from the “useless” domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis. (Claire Bishop, 2006.)

With London’s more ‘socially engaged’ art scene continuing to burgeon, artists find funding by assuming the role of surrogate and simulacral service providers delivering cheap but cosmetic substitutes for welfare provision. [...] From the task of ‘beautifying’ the inner city with anodyne public art to the social work and community-oriented projects favored by its ‘New Genre Public Art’ successors, artists are paragons of regenerate citizenship, not least in their capacity to work for free while generating that marketable ‘buzz’. (Benedict Seymour, 2009)

In this essay I will attempt to knit together several divergent and messy arguments about art and its relative agency within community settings, particularly where it touches on housing and the paradox of artist-led gentrification. This is pertinent to help locate the project Temporary Democracies, and also (hopefully) as an aid to unpack the messy lines entangling the expectations that shape our interpretation of “art and community” and “art and engagement”. Temporary Democracies might serve as a useful lens to amplify some of the shifting contradictions within these various positions.

These complications, which emerge along a spectrum of political approaches, are coloured by a legacy of critical art theory that includes: the conception of art as a democratic tool for community engagement; the anxiety haunting a potential erosion of aesthetic criticality in the execution of participatory and site based interventions; and the instrumentalising of art in the context of neoliberalism and the design of cities and housing. And of course, these debates never fall far from the

tree of knowledge about “what is art?” or in its more antagonistic chime “But, is it art?”

The debate about where art ends and real life begins or by what aesthetic merits we measure ‘art’ and whether criticality is malign or exhausted, flaccid or worse still, recuperated back into the machine, has occupied us for a seemingly exhausting period of time. It sometimes feels this is all we have to talk about. Over time, its adherents and the examples have shifted and changed shape—rearing its new head in different ways, with an old familiar haircut. This essay does not propose to resolve these debates, but rather offers a provocation in the context of Temporary Democracies, to hopefully spark a conversation about the behaviour of art and politics in the pursuit of social practice and community engagement by artists.

To be straightforward, I am more interested in how art behaves in the context of community, and thusly how communities behave within the political economy of capitalism—as opposed to any self assured fixed doctrine on the correct position of art regarding its autonomy from prevailing systems, or the capacity of art to trigger transformation or agency.

Is art that announces itself as political in its line of questioning, less art? Or is art which buries and obscures its questioning, less political? And are those that claim to be exemplary of the tension or antagonism balanced between the two, really just sitting on the fence? And who is measuring this, anyway? And what does their measuring stick look like?

Much like the Australian electorate, for any vote to be effective it needs to be tied into the concerns of the local population in order for it to gain traction; but these concerns are ripe for manipulation, and are relative when other factors are taken into consideration. In many ways, the inherently provisional lines drawn around ‘community’ and ‘art’ make it impossible for them to exact any determining point outside of themselves. However it gets constructed or dressed up, a material issue still needs to resonate with the community (be it the artists or the

'other') and their concerns need to be tied back to context; there needs to be some traction. But how it gains traction can tell us a lot about the efficacy of the question, and who is asking it.

Community, like the word art and performance, is one of the more contested notions of our contemporary vocabulary. Open up a dinner party conversation among your arty friends using the phrase "community art", or "socially engaged art" and you can forget desert. Several more bottles of w(h)ine later, and the discussion inevitably shifts to what is the art for, whom is it helping, does it need to help anyone, and the more pernicious line of questioning, 'But, is it Art?'

Of course the last question is either completely irrelevant, or absolutely everything, depending on where you stand, and perhaps more importantly, who you stand with. And these sides can be determined by your stance on what you consider the purpose of art. Is it about economy, entertainment, professionalism, or community? Or is it a hybrid of all of the above? And if so, how does community "participate" - and by how much, and in what ways?

In 2004 and 2006, Claire Bishop published two articles that caused a stir among practitioners of social practice, critics and advocates, and those artists whose work became the object of her analysis. In some ways, Bishop is a contradiction, decrying the lack of standards and pointing out the lack of aesthetic rigor in social practice work she perceives as being judged merely for providing "ethical comfort", but also bailing up those works that would be too prescriptive and in her view lacking effect, for being too easily recuperated into the service of the community or simply allowing the audience to feel good. Her position draws from Ranciere's aesthetics and Laclau and Mouffe's theories on antagonism; Bishop suggests that for efficacy, artists must occupy the tension in the relationship between the aesthetic and social praxis in order to "remain outside the instrumentalist prescriptions of the social." (Jackson, 2011: 138)

In her response to Grant Kester's reply to her 2006 essay she says: "According to this perspective, we can no longer speak of old-fashioned autonomy versus radical engagement, since a dialectical pull between autonomy and heteronomy is itself constitutive of the aesthetic. Good art would therefore sustain this antinomy in the simultaneous impulse to preserve itself from instrumentality and to self-dissolve in social praxis." Her preference is for an art that is necessarily comfortable in its discomforting.

Shannon Jackson in her book 2008 'Social Works' talks about the genealogy of social practice, and in particular how differently disciplined practices have bearing on the specific ways that spatial cues structure our expectations of work. As Jackson puts it "The inclusion of an artist's body in a gallery is formally innovative to some viewers; to others, it is just bad acting" (Jackson: 18)

Jackson also raises several pertinent arguments, where it concerns the autonomy or heteronomy of art, and the discipline of performance where collaboration and interdependence is built into practice. In particular relation to theatre, the relationship to the audience/viewer/spectator has always been necessary to the construction of the work, and significant as a site for experimentation. This problematizes the assertion of arts autonomy, and is difficult to conceive of the possibility of theatre ever existing "autonomously".

Bishop's main contention lies with the argument for arts autonomy or the maintenance of a kind "antagonism" that will prevent it from sliding into the feel good reverie that would otherwise neutralize arts critical capacity, or worse still "instrumentalise" art through its absorption into a service economy, performing the role of remediating social dysfunction. (Bishop, 2004) Bishop takes issue with Grant Kester whose analysis of collaborative social practice she states, affectively amounts to a politically correct version of a familiar identity politics argument lacking a commitment to aesthetics and ultimately rejecting any art that would foster a level of discomfort. Kester in his response reproaches Bishop for policing the boundaries of political aesthetics

saying:

“For Bishop, art can become legitimately "political" only indirectly, by exposing the limits and contradictions of political discourse itself (the violent exclusions implicit in democratic consensus, for example) from the quasi-detached perspective of the artist. In this view, artists who choose to work in alliance with specific collectives, social movements, or political struggles will inevitably be consigned to decorating floats for the annual May Day parade.” (2006)

Pertinent to this essay, is Bishop’s coupling of anti-capitalism and the Christian “good soul” as opposite ends of a discursive spectrum, of which Shannon Jackson half seriously remarks is considered “the fastest route to damnation in critical humanities circles” (139), and prompts Kester to comment somewhat derisively that “the lowest circle of hell in [Bishop’s] essay is reserved for "the community arts tradition.””

So where does this leaves us in our discussion of socially engaged practices, in relation to Temporary Democracies? Perhaps it is interesting to start with the name and location of the work which points to the temporary, to the contingent and provisional, for ways into an analysis of the work that would help illuminate some of these prior positions. If one acknowledges where one is standing and with whom, these might provide useful cues for understanding the expectations of the work, in seeking a position from which to understand or evaluate the work. This is also a useful place to start particularly if one is not merely seeking to understand it as ‘art’. It shifts our expectations to those shaped by the encounter-as-social, and enables different criteria to be applied, when drawn directly from the context within which the event is encountered.

For residents at the estate in Airds, it is perhaps less important that the artwork performs a critical contribution to expand arts practice or extend the boundaries of critical discourse (although their tacit participation in this is nonetheless present and of significance). However, perhaps let us consider briefly the site-specific component of

the event.

As each artist responds to site, how much of the 'public' is configured in their design is a kind of yardstick useful for an evaluation on their own personal disciplinary background more than the efficacy of their art, in terms of its transformation of the viewer/participant, or whether it is an attempt to be anything other than a response to site. Within this is also the tacit alliance between art workers and public housing residents whose relocation from Airds makes for an interesting backdrop to common issues of housing stress shared by both groups. Complicating this is the problematic participation of artists in urban renewal processes, where the valorization of land value divests them of their own value, displacing them through the process of gentrification, the values of which they helped generate. This paradox is further heightened by the fact that Temporary Democracies locates the artists within a public housing estate at a time when housing wait lists for Western Sydney have escalated from two years to more than ten years, just in the past year. (Wood, 2013)

For the first iteration of responses to site, artists Elizabeth Woods, perhaps the more experienced of the artists in working with participatory practices and community, has created an installation in its own right, fictionalising a sports academy within a house. Imbued with her own family history of playing table tennis, Elizabeth knows there are very few barriers to participation when it comes to table tennis. It's a hard game to hate, requiring no professional skill and guaranteed to illicit a playful response. A wall is preserved for immortalising local residents in a picture gallery of photos, mimicking the fame and glory of a real sports academy. As one resident remarked, an oddly charming but ill-fitting metaphor, as Airds is not exactly renowned for its sporting talent.

A contrasting performance work by Brian Fuata opened a different door to participation through observation, or witness. Durational over several hours on three days, Brian's presence made strange the normal suburban scene by marking out a performance score on an A4 sized

concrete slab forming the footprint of a house on a recently demolished housing block. Over the course of the performance he methodically itemized the number of house moves he has made since birth, mapping the movement to a grid, and underscoring the repeat pattern of transience and precarity experienced by inner city artists in an overvalued housing market.

Robert Guth worked with the Men's Shed to reconfigure a camper van trailer into a mobile cooking unit, useful as both catalyst for community gatherings, a point of education on healthy eating choices (by providing the option of gas cookers for the boiling of food as opposed to frying), as well as a practical tool for future fundraising activities. Over the course of its construction it enabled conversation and interaction between the artist and the community of men who volunteer their time at the shed.

Tanya Schultz' wall papered house as installation triggered a mix of memories and desire; it appealed to local residents and their immediate appreciation of new colourful wallpaper inside a neighbouring home, while the images making up the design of the wall paper consisted of a collage of residents' favourite objects, arranged in emblematic candy coloured patterns. The simple act of walking through the house to admire the "art on the wall" was an uncomplicated activity that made sense in the context of a house, and also mimicked the act of viewing art on the wall. The process of pulling together the imagery for the wallpaper also provided Tanya with many opportunities to connect with the local residents, through storytelling around an object, an experience she clearly enjoyed.

Temporary Democracies is an ongoing artwork continuing into 2014, with another lot of residencies starting in November late this year. How the residents and broader community experience the different works, and how these encounters effect the artists' practice, can serve as a useful lens to examine the messy and provisional lines drawn around the resolutely imprecise terms of art and community.

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