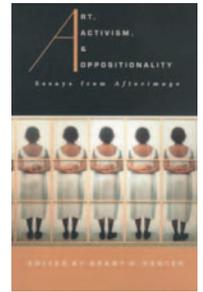


Grant Kester

We should also keep in mind what values underpin the term “engaged,” since it defines the origin of an artwork and thereby could be said to perpetuate artistic subjectivism. As the artist and writer Jorgen Michaelson has argued, it is merely another “fundamentalism” on behalf of the artistic subject, whose essentialist privileges in this way range historically from classical formal mastery and modernist expressivity to activist “engagement.”

Lars Bang Larsen, “Space Campaigns and Living Work”
(Artist’s Newsletter, March 2003)



The questions presented in the conference (“How do you do your work,” etc.) pertain more to artists than to historians or critics; however, I will use them as an opportunity to reflect a bit on historical or critical writing around engaged art as itself a form of “practice.” These reflections are very much unstructured at this point, but will provide some idea of the direction of my current research. I wanted to begin with the somewhat provocative quote from Jorgen Michaelson (above) by way of framing my own relationship to socially engaged art practice. As a writer, I’ve tried to work through the impasse that exists between supportive, but often superficial, advocacy journalism on the one hand, and the reductive dismissal of engaged art encountered among more traditional historians on the other. In some cases, the critic may question the very status of this work as “art” in the first place, arguing that it is both practically and theoretically indistinguishable from political or social activism. A related response is to provisionally accept its identity as art but to limit critical engagement to a straightforward calculation of political efficacy. Here the critic’s job is to simply search out points at which a given work seems to be compromised in some way (if it fails to achieve its stated intention; if it can be seen as complicit with some broader, possibly antithetical, political or cultural agenda, etc.).

More supportive critics can, on occasion, lapse into their own variant of this political reduction. If the specific social issue that the work addresses is seen as laudable or sympathetic (the AIDS crisis, environmental degradation, homelessness, etc.) then the work itself is defined as successful by sheer contiguity. By the same token, criticism of these works is often constrained by fear that one will be seen as disparaging the issue or community involved. This failure to differentiate the work as such from the issue it addresses is not surprising, given the highly charged terrain on which many socially engaged art projects operate. At the same time, from a critical and analytical perspective, I feel that it is necessary to treat these concerns separately. In my own research, I’ve sought to understand engaged art as a specific form of art practice with its own characteristics and effects, related to, but also distinct from, other forms of art and other forms of activism as well. My research has focused primarily on collaborative, process-based projects by groups such as Wochenklausur, Platform, Suzanne Lacy, Stephen Willats, Littoral Arts, Helen and Newton Harrison, Temporary Services, Park Fiction, and others. The works produced by most, if not all, of these groups and artists involve a deprivileging of conventional artistic identity (defined by a wholly autonomous capacity for critical reflection, unproblematized claims to cultural or social exteriority, and traditional models of agency and expressivity). However, this destabilizing of the artist’s ontological-expressive security does not result in an emptying out of artistic practice into some Adorno-like negation or refusal. Rather, each of these practitioners has worked to reconstruct artistic identity through collaborative exchange.

I’m particularly interested in identifying the specific ethical and epistemological effects of collaborative interaction on both the artist and their co-participants. While the spatial relationship between self and other is a well-established area of theoretical inquiry, the temporal nature of this relationship has been less frequently explored. In my current research, I’ve begun to examine the status of duration within collaboration. In his *Confessions* Augustine writes, “What is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is; if someone asks me, I no longer know.” The moment that passes between posing a question and receiving a reply is marked by both risk and possibility. The risk of doubt and uncertainty, and the possibility of an opening out to the other; a movement from self-assurance to the vulnerability of intersubjective exchange. How can we conceive of this openness and vulnerability as creative and generative, rather than passive? I’m pursuing this inquiry in two related areas. The first concerns the effect of shared labor (physical as well as discursive) in generating a sense of collective identification that resists closure. I would argue that the poststructuralist tradition has displayed a singular inability to confront the actuality of human social exchange (due in part to the long shadow cast by Saussure’s exclusion of parole as a legitimate area of theoretical inquiry). Even within the phenomenological tradition, intersubjective experience has proven notoriously difficult to theorize.

The writing of Levinas, which has come into vogue in recent art criticism, provides an apposite example. On the one hand, Levinas does seem to focus on the material specificity of the other (experiences such as “the caress” and the “face to face” encounter play a central role in his work). It is precisely this specificity that Levinas fears will be sacrificed by conventional reason, which seeks to impose an a priori conceptual framework on the potentially infinite complexity of the other. Here the “I” sees the other as a mere resource, seeking in it a reflection, and confirmation, of self. But in order to avoid this sort

of conceptual violence, the Levinasian subject is precluded from communicating with the other (the act of communication assumes that the other occupies a provisionally finite point of elocutionary authority and receptivity) or, in fact, from having any “knowledge” of the other at all (which would, again, require fixing the other’s identity within determinant conceptual or descriptive limits). The other is less an interlocutor for Levinas than an intuition: an amorphous and undifferentiated event about which we can know nothing, and before which the only form of “communication” we can risk is the mute gesture of submission. In fact, the “face to face: encounter is defined by a necessary temporal disjunction between the self and other (it is a “relation without relation” as Levinas writes), who can never be “contemporaneous” with each other. Language, as such, is less the basis for reciprocal exchange between self and other than a kind of “prayer” or supplication, in response to which the “I” can expect or anticipate no answer.

Even within the hermeneutic tradition of Gadamer and Habermas, which is clearly more congenial to the possibilities of dialogical interaction, there is a conspicuous lack of attention to the specific aesthetic conditions that facilitate discursive exchange across boundaries of difference. Instead we encounter an arid proceduralism that exiles the physical, somatic, and nonverbal components of collaboration. I want to ask, then, how collaborative work, extended through time, can generate new insights into difference and new modes of solidarity. This requires a revised theory of labor defined not through the connotative projection of “self” into the world but through shared experience at the intersection of individual and collective identities, a model of exchange based on proximity rather than presence. I hope to explore some of these theoretical questions through my exposure to new projects and practices at the conference.