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# Uncharted Territory: Critical Social Artistic Practices in the 21st Century

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Uncharted Territory:  
Critical Social Artistic Practices in the 21st Century

By  
Kyra M. DeTone

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
Honors in the Department of Visual Arts

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## **Contents**

Acknowledgments.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	v-vii
Chapter I: “The Stuff of Everyday Life”– The Influence of Activist Art on Socially Engaged Critical Practice.....	1-28
Chapter II: Challenging Authority - Socially Engaged Critical Practice as Cultural Production.....	29-54
Chapter III: Footing the Bill - Financing Socially Engaged Critical Practice.....	55-72
Conclusion: Impact Evaluation, Assessing Socially Engaged Critical Practice.....	73-78
Bibliography.....	79-82

*With Profound Appreciation and Affection*

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## ABSTRACT

DETONE, KYRA

Uncharted Territory: Critical Social Artistic Practice in the 21st Century

Since the early 1990s, the American art world has witnessed the rise of critical social artistic practices that are largely collaborative projects driven by participatory experiences between artists and community. With its roots in the activist, protest, and public art movements beginning in the late 60s, socially engaged art steps out of traditional viewing spaces like the museum and directly confronts society's object-based and monetary understanding of art. Driven by process and dependent on coalition building, creative problem solving, and public service rather than profit, socially engaged critical practice is complex and demands a new vocabulary through which to critique art. Examples of socially engaged art vary as artists engage with complex issues in their chosen zone of impact. Generally, projects deal with issues of global climate change, race, economic disparity, sexuality, and gender. While incredibly different in their implementation, all visualize socio-political anxieties for broader audiences. This study traces the evolution of these practices in the United States from their historical origin in the 1960s on through contemporary case studies. Looking at a range of issues, notably the alternative locations and funding of projects, my thesis proposes frameworks and new vocabularies for understanding, critiquing and assessing socially engaged art.

## **Introduction**

Socially engaged critical practice is a newly emerging art form characterized by its synthesis of service, activism, and public engagement in the art making process. With its roots in the activist, protest, and public art movements beginning in the late 60s, socially engaged art steps out of traditional viewing spaces like the museum and directly confronts society's object-based and monetary understanding of art. Inspired by coalition building, creative problem solving, and public service rather than profit, socially engaged critical practice manifests in a variety of projects addressing a broad spectrum of sociopolitical issues such as environment and global climate, race, poverty, labor, and gender. Socially engaged art is about providing a platform through which members of public or a community can serve as collaborators, rather than passive observers of art. Thus, artists creating socially engaged art are invested in fostering artistic collaboration that directly promotes change. This participatory element and devotion to giving voice to underserved communities through art, separates socially engaged art from the earlier artist movements. Furthermore, it produces a variety of examples of socially engaged art vary as artists address complex issues specific to the communities in which they work. As a result, socially engaged critical practice demands development of new vocabularies to discuss the way projects manifest within the public sphere.

*Uncharted Territory: Critical Social Artistic Practices in the 21st Century* examines existing communities of socially engaged critical practice and how they fit into pre-existing notions of artistic practice. Looking at a range of issues, notably the historical precedents, shared strategies between different social critical practices, and sources of funding for these works, my thesis proposes frameworks and new vocabularies for understanding, critiquing, and assessing socially engaged art. This study is divided into three chapters, "The Influence of Activist Art on

Socially Engaged Critical Practice,” “Socially Engaged Critical Practice as Cultural Production,” and “Financing Socially Engaged Critical Practice,” each intended to contextualize current examples of socially engaged art within sociopolitical and art historical discourse. Chapter 1, “The Influence of Activist Art on Socially Engaged Critical Practice,” addresses precedents of socially engaged art from the 1960s through the 1990s. Examples of activist and protest art from the Black Panther Party, Chicano/a, and Feminist art movements analyzed in this chapter reveal patterns of artistic ideologies and practice that are later replicated in social critical practice. This chapter also presents the writings of John Dewey, 20th century philosopher, as an important theoretical foundation for social critical practice’s rejection of the commodified art market.

Chapter 2, “Socially Engaged Critical Practice as Cultural Production,” addresses the following questions: What does socially engaged critical practices look like and what distinguishes it from other forms of participatory art? This chapter identifies shared strategies and common goals of socially engaged critical practice through two detailed case studies of the Beehive Design Collective and Jan Mun’s *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project*. This discussion highlights overarching goals with social critical practice in order to establish a system through which we can examine it as an emerging art form.

Chapter 3, “Financing Socially Engaged Critical Practice,” discusses the development of alternative systems for financing socially engaged art works. Because the conceptual, participatory, and experiential nature of socially engaged critical practice, it cannot be defined by monetary or aesthetic value. This creates challenges in funding such projects. Examination of past systems of federal funding for the arts and new organizations that developed in response to growth in social critical practice demonstrate that these abstract art forms can operate outside of the commodified art market. This chapter will also discuss how processes of funding established

by these non-profit organizations significantly contribute to the developing a framework for socially engaged critical practice and provide guidelines that aid in creating methodology for critiquing and assessing these works.



## **Chapter I**

### **“The Stuff of Everyday Life”: The Influence of Activist Art on Socially Engaged Critical Practice**

Following the conclusion of World War II, the United States entered a temporary state of calm. Families benefitted from a booming economy, but these social advances were reserved for white Americans who fit into the status quo. As a result, the late 50s and 60s saw a rise of activism aimed at equalizing inequalities between the majority, in most cases white, heterosexual men, and the oppressed minorities. Starting with the Civil Rights Movement, a variety of social movements peppered this period of American history. Due to the growing socio-political tensions, the post-war years marked a revival of progressive-era social concerns amongst marginalized populations and the rise of an artistic energy that ignited visual and creative responses as a new form of activism.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the political landscape of 1960s America revealed a growing divide between these emerging ideas and the policies being established by national leaders. The separation of national politics and public demand for justice caused social pressures that would result in nearly two decades of protest and activist movements, from which socially engaged critical practices have their roots.

Lyndon B. Johnson’s signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 catalyzed cultural tensions between conservative Americans and protesters by proving that the persistent civil disobedience of the Civil Rights Movement could result in political change. When Richard Nixon came to office in 1968, however, he turned to the conservative population. Nixon sought to reverse progressive policies and reward the “forgotten Americans,” the “non-shouters, non-demonstrators...those who do not break the law, people who pay their taxes and go to work, who

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<sup>1</sup> George E. Hein, *Progressive Museum Education: John Dewey and Democracy*, (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2012): 155.

send their children to school, who go to their churches.”<sup>2</sup> As Nixon’s policies continued to favor the white middle-class American family, they drove a larger wedge between social majorities and minorities. Tensions between these groups continued to intensify with the Republican domination of the presidential seat for the majority of terms between Nixon’s 1968 election ended by the victory of Bill Clinton in 1992.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the political and social backdrop during this period laid the foundation for many vocal protest and demonstration groups. The multitude of oppressed identities lead to a wave of simultaneous protest throughout to country addressing issues linked to race, sexuality, class, and gender. The dissemination of activist ideologies through art began with movements like the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of the Black Panther Party, the Chicano/a Movement, and Women’s Liberation and Health Movement set the precedent for present day art activism in America. In his book *The Art of Protest*, American scholar T.V. Reed provides a definition of social movement that successfully frames the connection between protest and art. He writes, “Social movements [are] the unauthorized, unofficial, anti-institutional, collective action of ordinary citizens trying to change their world.”<sup>4</sup> In proliferating art created outside of the commercialized art world, these movements also questioned the long prejudiced social institution of artistic expression. The utilization of art making within public social movements questioned the longstanding doctrine of art as commodity within American society, an action that is as “unauthorized, unofficial, and anti-institutional” as the movement itself.

The logos, posters, buttons, and other visual elements generated as part of these social movements served to unite the groups under a visually articulated identity. Some groups, like the

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Nixon quoted by Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Hall, *American Patriotism*, 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xiii.

Black Panther Party, were so prolific in their artistic production they included positions within their ranks specifically for their artists. The art of Emory Douglas, the Black Panther Party Minister of Culture, defined the ideals and goals of his party and exemplified the aesthetic and spirit of activist art of this period. As an artist and social justice advocate since the rise of the Black Panther Party in the mid 60s, Emory Douglas saw his work as “art for the people’s sake.”<sup>5</sup> Douglas’s prints appeared in newspaper broadsides and posters easily accessible to the public. His simple compositions made his iconographically complex comprehensible to outside audiences and demonstrated a keen awareness of the icons and caricatures that dominated the American public’s visual vocabulary. These characteristics are demonstrated in “Death to the Fascist Pigs” (September 1970) (figure 1). Douglas depicts an armed man and woman standing erect under the text “We Will Not Hesitate to Either Kill or Die for Our Freedom.” Both figures wear garments reminiscent of the clothing worn by African slaves. The woman’s clothing, a long, printed skirt and headscarf, evoke the image of the “mammy,” a southern caricature of a female domestic slave (figure 2). Douglas consciously employs these symbols to tie the figures to the history of slavery. He arms the man and woman with the rifles, the same carried by members of the Panther Party, and with Black Panther Party buttons. In doing so, Douglas ties the struggle for freedom also to the Panther’s present battle against the U.S Government.

Though the image contains only two figures, Douglas provides commentary on the hundreds of years of oppression faced by the African-American community. In a statement published in a May 1968 issue of *The Black Panther* newspaper, Emory articulates his artistic intentions: “...this kind of art enlightens the party to continue its vigorous attack against the

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<sup>5</sup> Sam Durant, “Introduction,” in *The Revolutionary Art of Black Panther Emory Douglas*, ed. Sam Durant (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), 23.

enemy, as well as educate the masses of black people.”<sup>6</sup> Douglas’s compositional and iconographic aesthetic went against typical art making standard. Instead of a refined, elegant piece of art, intended for purchase in the art market, Douglas’s works were bright and replicable. Party members could make multiple productions of the prints and community members could access them on the streets or through newspapers distributed by activists throughout numerous cities. The democratization of the art making process through such activist efforts not only proliferated the messages of the Black Panther Party, it also gave other movements a point of reference for their own graphic campaigns.

Though not exclusively influenced by Douglas’s prints, activist art emerging alongside his publications demonstrated similar characteristics. The images were bold, poignant, and compositionally simple. Take for example, a poster printed in 1972 for a service honoring the students killed in the Kent State protest in 1970 (figure 3). The poster is a simple print with an isolated group of several figures taking arms juxtaposed next to the quote “what are you doing to defend the ideas we gave our lives for?” Although other text on the poster identified the image as related to the events at Kent State, the print used for the poster is based off an image taken of one of the first shots fired during the outbreak (figure 4). The visual on the poster, while not an exact reprint of the photograph, employs the same compositional relationships as the original photograph and thus, evokes the memories and emotions associated with the event. By making a print of the image rather than replicating it, the artists maintained the same simplified aesthetic seen in Douglas’s prints and at the same time created an easily replicable poster. This style of art facilitated the dissemination of a movement’s ideologies as well as provided social justice

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<sup>6</sup> Emory Douglas, “Revolutionary Art/Black Liberation,” *The Black Panther*, May 18 1968 quoted in Amiri Baraka, “Emory Douglas: A ‘Good Brother,’ a ‘Bad’ Artist,” in *The Revolutionary Art of Black Panther Emory Douglas*, 178-180.

movements with viable strategies for community building across community, regional, and state borders.

Though these activist art practices emerged as part of sociopolitical movements across the United States, their democratization of the art making process called into question the ideologies of the contemporary art market. Members of activist movements proved to the art world that art was no longer reserved for the quiet corners of polite society, but was something that could be multifaceted, loud, and uncomfortable. The use of the visual for simple, mass-produced prints contended the strict formalism that dominated the fine art market until this period.<sup>7</sup> Within the context of these early social movements, art became a universal method of communication, an invaluable tactic for activist efforts. Within the context of the art world, art was an object intended to be bought and sold for a fixed market value. Because the posters, prints, and other ephemera produced during activist movements of the 60s held more conceptual value than monetary value art critics and dealers saw them as “low art” forms.<sup>8</sup> This distinction between art for a cause and art for profit began bifurcation within the art world that defines how we, as a nation, consume art today.

The polarization of the public art sector and the private art market during the 1960s also gave rise to early models of socially engaged critical practice. Up until the 1960s, art had a very singular definition an object - a painting, a statue - possessing a rare, one-of-a-kind quality that gave it a quantifiable monetary value. This interpretation, of art as object, has long defined the relationship between art and the public. Since the sophistication of private art collecting during the 15th century European Renaissance, acts of art studying, collecting, and displaying “fine art” remain closely tied to the status of the social elite. With the rise of the merchant class, art quickly

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<sup>7</sup> Nina Felshin, “Introduction,” *But is it Art: The Spirit of Art as Activism*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Nina Felshin, “Introduction,” *But is it Art*, 21.

became a valued item to be commissioned, traded, or sold and art ownership and appreciation became a symbol of status for the highest tiers of polite society.<sup>9</sup> Refinement of an artistic eye became a skill set dictated by art academies, scholars, and prized by members of polite society. Owning a private art collection not only meant possessing a large amount of money to finance commissions, it also meant that one was well educated and sophisticated enough to curate his own collection.<sup>10</sup>

The formalization of the art collecting process continued from the 15th century until the 18th century, when large, private princely collections of art became the basis for museum collections. The opening of the Louvre as a grand, public institution of art personified the dissonance amongst art and class, something art historian Andrew McClellan describes as the “microcosm of the modern social order.”<sup>11</sup> In his discussion of the Louvre as an early museum model, Andrew McClellan notes how critics’ accounts express a particular anxiety of the democratization of art appreciation. He cites the complaints and worries of John Scott, a noted art collector and traveller of the time: “[I] recognized with regret that the Louvre would fundamentally change the way people engaged with works of art: the days of the Grand Tour and pleasures of private viewing were coming to a close, replaced by something new and *public*.”<sup>12</sup> Scott’s writing clearly demonstrates the elites’ fear that publicizing the art museum would remove the longstanding exclusivity, and thus specialness, of the art world.

Early American public art museums, based off the Revolutionary model of the Louvre Museum, evolved from hierarchies of artistic knowledge developed through techniques for private art collection. Organizational plans for painting and sculptures within these public

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew McClellan, *The Museum from Boullee to Bilbao*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 157.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew McClellan, *The Museum*, 157-8.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew McClellan, *The Museum*, 159.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew McClellan, *The Museum*, 161

Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 91-92.

institutions originated from “artistic schools” developed by art connoisseurs and collectors and were often incomprehensible to the working class public.<sup>13</sup> These categorical formalities, meant to preserve the doctrines of sophisticated art appreciation developed by Salons and art connoisseurs, preserved the divide that existed, and still exists in many cases today, between the “educated” and the uneducated within museums. As a result, even public institutions of art, such as the museum, remained the territory of polite society.

Part of the division within the American art sector during the 1960s originates in this very hostility between the public and private elite; that art appreciation, even within public institutions, is something that is reserved only for the formally educated. Furthermore, that such an association placed “fine art” at the top of a cultural hierarchy as something considered to be above the ordinary citizen only to be admired by the elite classes who understand them. In many cases, as McClellan and other scholars of art history suggest, access to such education is limited, once again, by access to funding. As in the 18th century, art education today is available to members of the upper class by means of school curricula. Thus, large portions of the population, specifically within America, often rely on public institutions of art to provide educational supplementation to their collections.

In the United States discussion of a system that reflected a more democratic approach to artistic display did not predominantly appear until the early half of the 20th century.<sup>14</sup> During this early period, oppressed social groups began progressive movements to assess American society, much like the movement of the 1960s. Reforms in labor management, housing, sanitation, and food processing aimed to settle demands from the public linked to corrupt

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew McClellan, *The Museum*, 120, 123.

<sup>14</sup> George E. Hein, *Progressive Museum Education*., 10-11.

Charles Wilson Peale, founder of one of the United States’ first museums in Philadelphia, spoke of museum education as vital to the sustenance of a strong democratic society. Peale’s and Peale’s colleagues’ work with American education policy in the late 18th and early 19th centuries set a precedent for much of John Dewey’s work in the beginning half of the 20th century.

government policy. Amidst such tension and action, the question of education and the public surfaced, and with it a questioning of the responsibility of private and public institutions to educate the masses. John Dewey, an American philosopher, educator, and activist, became one of the leading voices in closing the gaps between elite institutions of art and the general public. Dewey's writings on art incorporated analyses of American society, democracy, and process philosophy, what scholar of museum education George Hein refers to as philosophies "relevant to ordinary life and inclusive of all its attributes."<sup>15</sup> Dewey's essay *Art as Experience* (1934) acknowledges the link between art, class, and economics and the schism it created between appreciation of art and the public.<sup>16</sup> Though Dewey's analysis of museum education is vital to an understanding of reforms made within these institutions, his assessment of the typical American's view of art are more relevant to the divide within the art world from the 1960s onward.

In his first chapter for *Art as Experience*, Dewey explains that fine art set on a pedestal results in the false appreciation of the work of art. "So extensive and subtly pervasive are the ideas that set Art upon a remote pedestal," he begins, "that many a person would be repelled...if told the he enjoyed his casual recreations...because of their esthetic quality."<sup>17</sup> The practices to which Dewey refers are a result of theories of aestheticism. Appreciation of art depends on the belief that fine art does not exist purely for its appearance, rather the beauty of a masterpiece exists through an understanding of its technical superiority. Dewey importantly recognized the relation of such artistic expression to an understanding of art production as an economically driven act. He claims:

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<sup>15</sup> George Hein, *Progressive Museum Education*, 18.

<sup>16</sup> George Hein, *Progressive Museum Education*, 152.

Dewey's *Art as Experience* was first delivered as a part of the William James lecture series at Harvard University in 1932.

<sup>17</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Minton, Balch & Company, 1934), 5.



The contents of galleries and museums [of the time] testify to the growth of economic cosmopolitanism... As works of art have their indigenous status, they have acquired a new one - that of being specimens of fine art and nothing else. Moreover, works of art are now produced, like other articles for sale in the market.<sup>18</sup>

Dewey's argument further highlights the prevalence of a growing divide in American perceptions of art. At that time, the growing dominance of the gallery and the museum as the "proper" houses of art, as the sole reference for how one should view or assess art, limited the public's accessibility of enjoyment of art. He adds that the categorical display of art within the confines of institutional walls in a way kills the vitality of the piece, further disassociating it from the audience. These phenomena, when occurring simultaneously within the art viewing experience, ultimately result in the inhibition of art's educational potential. In this way, Dewey's observations provide contestation that the school of thought dictating the consumption of art, the elite art museum and institutions, is flawed in its basic understanding of what constitutes art.

Unlike many of his art connoisseur contemporaries, Dewey felt art needed to be connected to human experience, as the act of experiencing served as the basic factor connecting people across all socially constructed boundaries.<sup>19</sup> In his perception of worldly operations, the experience was what provided social balance and enhanced understanding. For this reason, Dewey maintained that art that is both aesthetically pleasing and reminiscent of daily operations was the art that most effectively engaged, and in turn, educated the public. He reflects on these ideas:

The arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts...For the popular notions come from a separation of art from the objects and scenes of ordinary experience that many theorists and critics pride themselves upon holding and even elaborating. The times when select and distinguished objects are closely connected with the products of usual vocations are the times when appreciation of the former is most rife and keen.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> George Hein, *Progressive Museum Education*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 5-6.

Here Dewey's close analysis of public interest in art depends upon an expanded consideration of what exactly constitutes art. In his statement, Dewey puts forth a definition of art that strays from the traditional idea of art as object. Instead, he alludes that art is tied to the viewer's experience than its overall demonstration in skill. Thus, art's potential to communicate specific ideas, feelings, or memories, and in turn its accessibility to the public, becomes jeopardized as a consequence of its display. This concept plants the seeds for the later development of art production that is accessible even outside the museum and provides a foundation for alternative forms of display and interaction as well as public participation.

Clearly, John Dewey's theories of art expressed in *Art as Experience* offer a broader, more accessible platform through which a person can interact with or even create art. His criticism of systematic, categorical, and economically hierarchical displays of art within museum emphasize his unique belief that an object or image becomes art through the experience a person impresses upon it. The main failure of museums, according to Dewey's interpretation, was not the division of audience based on economic class, but instead the presentation of art solely as object. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey's conclusion experience defines art echoes the democratization of the arts seen in the development of activist art in the 1960s. Just like Dewey suggests, the art of social movements like the Black Panther Party or Anti Vietnam War movement draws inspiration from the experiences of the masses. Images disseminated through posters and other print materials specifically targeted public memory linked to social reality, for example race struggles or the violence of Kent State. Though employment of such poignant visuals represented a breaking from the commodified, object-based art market, the art of early activist movements lacked the experiential and participatory components seen in socially engaged critical practices.

Dewey's concept of democratization of art included the experiential aspect of art making processes. He suggests that art defined by its existence as an aesthetic object limits its to singular categories of understanding. By labeling the art object as something to be looked at or examined, the museum or gallery restricts the audience's experience to esthetic.<sup>21</sup> Philosopher D.W.

Gotshalk's writing on art in *Art and Social Order* (1947) offers an analysis of such limitations.

He states:

The construction of objects for aesthetic experience...will be the distinguishing property of fine art...and human activities approach fine art in the degree that this type of construction is central or eminent in them. This property enables us at once to distinguish fine art from such different pursuits in their characteristic instances, at least, is a different property, e.g., to make an instrument of "action" (utilitarian), to communicate with God (religious), to describe events for the record (historical), and the like, not primarily to construct objects for their intrinsic perceptual appeal.<sup>22</sup>

Similar to Dewey's criticism of art in a museum as void of experiential meaning, Gotshalk suggests that the association of fine art with "intrinsic perceptual appeal" allows institutions of art to judge that which can be considered art and that which cannot. Just as Dewey suggests, this removes any object or tool linked to experiential usage, or in Gotshalk's words "action," from the hierarchy of fine art. In considering Dewey's defense of experience, as art there appears a connection between the early stages of progressive museum education and the activist art movement beginning in the 1960s. Many of John Dewey's theories on a more inclusive approach to art, that is an art used for social learning rather than art as entertainment for a select few, influenced the movement of artistic expression to public venues in the 60s and 70s. Though philosophers like Dewey and Gotshalk attempted, and in many ways succeeded, to eliminate the exclusivity of the American art sector through promotion of alternative understandings of art, the definition "fine" art still remained tied to objecthood rather than experience or action. While

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<sup>21</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> D.W. Gotshalk, *Art and the Social Order*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1947) 31.

museums and other institutions of art provided more educational resources for their visitors towards the latter half of the 20th century, it was not until the social movements of the 1960s that the conventional definition of art as object was once again questioned.

In his introduction to *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties*, historian Simon Hall quotes Alexander Bloom's "Why Read About the Sixties at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century," "at the start of the third millennium Americans were 'still debating issues that emerged during' the 1960s, and 'still living in the conscious aftermath of its events and transformations....'"<sup>23</sup> The "conscious aftermath" Bloom refers to is not only apparent in present day politics, but also in the treatment of artistic expression outside the venue of a gallery or museum. For many of the "events and transformation" the historians speak of incorporated new democratic art making processes that emphasized social experience.

The selection of movements chronicled in the following passages is based upon the prevalence of visuals as a part of the movement as well as the evolution of activist efforts across multiple decades. In comparison to other social movements of the time, coordinators of the Chicano/a movement and Women's movement developed and proliferated very specific media associated with their causes, leaving it impossible to analyze the socio-cultural politics without considering the art and vice versa. Furthermore, the practices used in the creation of such works stepped beyond the use of the visual, as discussed in the analysis the art of the Black Panther Party and Anti Vietnam War movement, and into the experiential, and truly democratic, public realm Dewey imagined. The conscious effort to include the public within the art making process to promote self-produced change within activist communities separates the art of the Chicano/a Movement and Women's Movements from earlier examples of protest art. In defining their

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<sup>23</sup> Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest*, 2.

artworks by their participatory components, the artists of the Chicano/a and Women's movement laid an early foundation for socially engaged critical practitioners.

The Chicano/a Murals across Los Angeles and other parts of Southern California serve as an example of Dewey's democratization of art as well as early examples of socially engaged art. Inspired by their ties to indigenous populations in Mexico and famous muralists Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and José Orozco, Chicano/a muralists of the 60s, 70s, and 80s crafted mural programs carefully tied to their cultural heritage and contemporary social struggles.<sup>24</sup> Examples across all periods of the multi-decade movement incorporated iconography from various events in Mexican history. The art of the Chicano/a Muralists, in this way, remains closely tied to tenets of participation and human nature described by John Dewey in *Art as Experience*. Not only are the murals dependent upon the experience, as they are scattered throughout urban spaces that one must actively seek out, they also rely on iconography and symbolism heavily rooted in past and present human experience. The sophistication of muralism in connection with the Chicano/a movement epitomized in Judith Baca's *The Great Wall* speaks to the evolution of participatory, community-based arts of this time (figure 5). Additionally, Baca's dual identity as Chicana and Feminist provided her with the platform to incorporate the messages of both movements in her work.

Judith Baca began work on her mural in 1976 in the Tujunga Flood Control Channel in the San Fernando Valley as part of the city's "beautification project" for the space. During the project's working period, Baca served as the coordinator through her involvement with the Social and Public Art Resource Center, soliciting the support of governmental organizations, city committees, and outside community-based programs to synthesize a group of artists and

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<sup>24</sup> Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 1-2; 209-210.  
T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest*, 106.

“mural makers.”<sup>25</sup> *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* is a representation of the history of the community it is located within, in this case a history of Los Angeles from prehistory to present. The mural spans over half of a mile and purposely tells the stories of several marginalized groups within the city: Asian American, Native American, African American, Anglo American, and Chicano/a youth. Baca outsourced her work to various groups across the community. Representatives from each of these racial and ethnic groups participated as mural makers, learning the histories of groups outside their own cultures.

Judith Baca speaks on the importance of this interaction as part of the mural’s overall message in a 1996 interview with Frances Pohl for the *Women’s Studies* journal. She states, “It was important for me when I got the group together that I represent each of the ethnic groups and then, and then put them into a whole, and to move them between learning about each other’s cultures so that Chicano kids were not encouraged to work only on Chicano history.”<sup>26</sup> As part of the participation in the creation of the mural, students from the Los Angeles area were also enrolled in history courses led by teams of historians, community storytellers, and community leaders and were encouraged to engage with the material covered in the mural through discussions amongst the student groups (figure 6). In this way, Baca’s mural served three purposes: to create accessible, meaningful art in the community, to educate the community on multicultural histories and social realities, and to equip at-risk youth with new skill sets and connect them with influential community leaders. By outsourcing the work within the community extends the

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<sup>25</sup> “The Great Wall of Los Angeles,” Social and Public Art Resource Center - SPARC, Accessed January 17, 2016. <http://sparcinla.org/programs/the-great-wall-mural-los-angeles/>

“The Great Wall History and Description,” Social and Public Art Resource Center - SPARC, Accessed January 17, 2016. <http://sparcinla.org/programs/the-great-wall-mural-los-angeles/>

<sup>26</sup> Judith Baca quoted by Frances Pohl in “Judith Baca: Community and Culture in the United States,” *Women’s Studies* 25, no. 3 (March 1996): 230. Accessed January 17, 2016. EBSCOHost.

Whereas other Chicano/a muralists' work embodies John Dewey's idea of art as expressive of a particular set of human experiences, Judith Baca's work with *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* completely encapsulates the concept of experience. Though the mural stands as a permanent testament to the project itself while also bringing artistic expression to a once bland concrete channel, the planning and decade of work that went into the piece's creation extended the opportunity of inclusive experience to members of the community. In this way, Baca's mural perfectly outlines the beginning of what would become socially engaged critical practice. By including community leaders and youth in the art making process, Baca blurred the boundaries between artist and spectator. Furthermore, in acting both as artistic visionary and coalition builder, she equipped her participants with a network of resources and skills to address the systematic oppression the iconographic program of *The Great Wall* confronts. In a speech delivered at the 30th annual conference of the Association of Moral Education in 2004, Baca described her work as "*art and community education*," priding her transformation of artistic education through her site-specific workshops.<sup>27</sup> She continues:

The Great Wall of Los Angeles production began with 80 youth recruited through the juvenile justice system and paid by a program to employ economically disadvantaged young people. When completed, this project had employed over 400 youth along with 40 historians, 40 artists, hundreds of historical witnesses and thousands of residents involved in the production of a half-mile narrative mural. The work became a monument to interracial harmony as methods were developed to work across the differences of race and class.<sup>28</sup>

Baca's speech reflects her understanding of *The Great Wall*'s meaning beyond revitalization of urban spaces and instead highlights the crucial vernacular of "interracial harmony" and building of ethical, community based practice. Moreover, in developing a methodology for the production of mural scenes and enabling the passing down of skills through generations of muralist

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<sup>27</sup> Judith Baca, "The Human Story at the Intersection of Ethics, Aesthetics, and Social Justice," *Journal of Moral Education* 34 (No.2, 2005): 155; EBSCOHost, accessed February 1, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Judith Baca, "The Human Story," 158

participants, Baca systematized her art making process, not only making it replicable, something greatly important for ensuring the longevity of the project, but also democratized artistic expression and transcended sovereign artistry. The breakdown of formal barriers between artist, participant, and audience observed in the on-going work of *The Great Wall* and the Social Public Art Resource center Baca's address at the Association of Moral Education conference communicates *The Great Wall's* never-ending impact on the families within the *barrios* of Los Angeles, "Through this process [mural making], they, as the original teams, will understand what their families contributed to the building of America and be able to counter the prevailing story of privilege and power."<sup>29</sup> The coalescing of participatory artistic strategy, community building, urban revitalization, and action based resolution to cultural misrepresentation and oppression in combination with Baca's efforts to perpetuate the storytelling of *The Great Wall* through the work of multiple generations, precedes but also mirrors the defining characteristics of socially engaged art works today.

While Judith Baca's mural projects across Los Angeles bring life to the once silenced stories of Mexican and Latin American immigrants across the United States, the Feminist Movement brought the "private" body politics of the female experience into public forum. The Women's Liberation and Health Movements of the 1960s dealt mainly with deconstructing the longstanding objectification of the female body in American culture. The close association of the ideology of these movements with the treatment of women's bodies in visual culture and art inspired the founding of the Feminist Art Movement in the mid 1960s. Suzanne Lacy, feminist activist and artist emerging from these movements, employed different non-traditional art forms to bring forward issues of gender and violence hidden from her community. As one of the first

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<sup>29</sup> Judith Baca, "The Human Story," 161.



students enrolled in Judy Chicago's Fresno Feminist Art Program, Suzanne Lacy developed her artistic identity against established models of "proper" art making.<sup>30</sup>

What Chicago envisioned as an artistic collective meant "...to challenge every type of cultural limitation placed on women artists - from low expectations for female achievement to traditional definitions for the subject matter of art," Lacy absorbed and re-configured into a performance-based, socialized body of work.<sup>31</sup> Like the many of early projects of artists in the Fresno Feminist Art Program, Suzanne Lacy centered her work on the concept of "consciousness-raising." Developed as a part of the Women's Liberation and Health movements beginning in the late 1960s, consciousness-raising encouraged women to re-connect with own experiences through group discussion in order to re-interpret these personal experiences as politicized.<sup>32</sup> This making "the personal political" addressed the "socially constructed female experience" and the oppression women faced on the fronts of economics, sexuality, bodily perceptions, labor, and motherhood.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the influence of consciousness raising on much of the art produced in the Fresno Feminist Art Program manifested in the growth of collaborative art processes. As a result, Lacy's work, like that of many of the other students,

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<sup>30</sup> Judy Chicago's Fresno Feminist Art Program originated from criticism of the masculinized, patriarchal nature of the art world and higher art education system until 1970. Before Chicago's founding of such program, art education favored detached, modernist aesthetics seen as masculinized and void of emotional inspirations. Furthermore, the upper echelons of artistic knowledge and practice were heavily dominated by male artists as female artists remained absent from the art historical canon. Chicago's inspiration for the Fresno Feminist Art Program came out of her own experiences as a female student of art and was further influenced by tenets of the emerging Women's Liberation Movement and feminist discourses of the late 1960s. The development of the art program at Fresno State College was a conscious decision on Chicago's part because of the college's isolation from the formality of the art world.

<sup>31</sup> Laura Meyer, "Judy Chicago, Feminist Artist and Educator." *Women & Therapy* 17 (1-2, 1995): 130. Accessed January 28, 2016. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/216239671?accountid=14637>.

<sup>32</sup> Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, "New Organizational Forms," in *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

Vivien Green Fryd, "Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May*: Feminist Activist Performance Art as "Expanded Public Pedagogy," *NWSA Journal* 19 (no. 1, 2007): 24-25. Accessed January 27, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317229>.

<sup>33</sup> Laura Meyer, "Judy Chicago," 130-131.

brought awareness to previously invisible or ignored issues through the synthesis of the shared experiences of her peers', of women's, or of other oppressed social identities.

Because the work of the Fresno Feminist Art Program and of the Feminist movement as a whole sought to give a voice to female experience within a society that constantly met such experience with belligerence and apathy, Chicago pushed her students to adopt atypical art making processes. Materials often included items used for "craft," art forms deemed inferior and feminine, whereas for some artists, including Lacy, the experience itself became the medium and performance art or dance communicated the message.<sup>34</sup> The immediacy of performance as a form of artistic expression became the pinnacle for feminist art of this time and especially of Lacy's work. Described by Chicago as a "radical break" from the "...curriculum [of art schools] and of the patriarchal institution..." performance art represented the antithesis of the popular modernist aesthetic of socially praised art of the 1970s.<sup>35</sup> Suzanne Lacy's work offers an attack on such institutions through her focus on body politics, society, and rape. The evolution of her works from questioning of systematization of violence and oppression within the private confines of a studio space, as seen in her collaborative piece *Ablutions* (1972), into public demonstration, most effectively demonstrated in her pieces *Three Weeks in May* (1977) and *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977), show Lacy's recognition of the power of spectacle (figures 7, 8, 9). While *Ablutions* and many of her other earliest work demonstrate the same collaborative, kinetic artistry that make feminist art from this era similar to future socially engaged art works, the employment of guerilla tactics observed in Lacy's signature work *Three Weeks in May* is a more fitting reflection of strategies characteristic to socially engaged critical practice.

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<sup>34</sup> Laura Meyer, "Judy Chicago," 131.

<sup>35</sup> Faith Wilding, "The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-75," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 32-35.

Art historian Josephine Withers describes the work of Suzanne Lacy as, "...major steps in the development of performance and feminist practice." She continues, "Feminist performance in California began as privately performed catharsis, and with *Three Weeks in May* and *In Morning and In Rage* came out into the open as public media events."<sup>36</sup> *Three Weeks in May* was a multifaceted series of artistic events coordinated by Suzanne Lacy intended to "dramatize the frequency of sexual violence against women" within the city of Los Angeles.<sup>37</sup> The three-week program featured over thirty events including artistic readings, guerilla campaigns in the streets of Los Angeles, informative discussions on the increasing violence towards women, and performances by various feminist artists across the city.<sup>38</sup> Like Judith Baca and *The Great Wall* project, Lacy stepped back from her role as artist during *Three Weeks in May* to orchestrate the coming together of city activists, community organizations, governmental entities, and media outlets. Each day she would collect confidential rape reports from the Los Angeles Police Department and bring them to a team of women who would then record the locations of each rape on large city maps installed in a public shopping mall beneath City Hall (figure 10).<sup>39</sup> In a video detailing the evolution of *Three Weeks in May*, Suzanne Lacy describes this component of the project as "...a time based image; it had to do with the way that rapes continued to occur, out of sight, out of mind, relentlessly, inevitably, and ongoingly in the city of LA."<sup>40</sup> To communicate these ideas in a visual, Lacy and her team marked locations where assaults

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<sup>36</sup> Josephine Withers, "Feminist Performance Art: Performing, Discovering, Transforming Ourselves," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 170-171.

<sup>37</sup> Josephine Withers, "Feminist Performance Art," 170-171.

<sup>38</sup> Suzanne Lacy, "Three Weeks in May (1977)." *Suzanne Lacy Early Works*, Accessed February 02, 2016. <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/three-weeks-in-may/>

<sup>39</sup> Suzanne Lacy, "Three Weeks in May (1977)," <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/three-weeks-in-may/>

<sup>40</sup> Suzanne Lacy, "Documenting Three Weeks in May, Suzanne Lacy, 1977." *Suzanne Lacy*, 8:39, Accessed February 01, 2016. <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/three-weeks-in-may/>

occurred with a four-inch stamp reading “RAPE” spelled out in red, capital letters.<sup>41</sup> Participants would then surround those areas with faded “RAPE” stamps to symbolize the nine rapes estimated to occur for every one rape reported.<sup>42</sup> Juxtaposed next to the map of attacks was another map of Los Angeles marked with resources for victims of sexual assault. Lacy asserts that this map was meant to counter the ubiquitousness of the sister map. She states, “If you just show where women are victimized...you will continue to contribute to the problem of women experiencing themselves as victims.”<sup>43</sup> By providing resources for women, through the second map and also through informative brochures and leaflets describing the rape reports and available services for victims handed out during rallies, Lacy and the other collaborators aimed to not only bring the epidemic rape crisis of LA to public knowledge, but also directly addressed the silencing of such violence through coalition building amongst advocates, activists, and victims.

Over the course of the three weeks, the amount of attacks built up, visibly overlapping one another and creating a web of chaotic red lines. The women also took their guerilla art making to the streets where individuals would mark the sidewalks where rapes took place (figure 11). These guerilla tactics and the other events coordinated as a part of *Three Weeks in May* took accessibility and publicity as a condition through which to gage success. Lacy and her team sought to bring the invisible, ignored realities of negligence and improper handling of rape cases and victims into to the public consciousness. For this reason, *Three Weeks in May* acted in the same capacity of demonstration characteristic of activist art, or what Vivien Green Fryd sees as definitive of “New Genre Public Art.” The “... ‘hijacking’ of mass print and electronic in order to mobilize institutional power and confront social and political mechanisms that negatively affect

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<sup>41</sup> Vivien Green Fryd, “Suzanne Lacy’s *Three Weeks in May*,” 29.

<sup>42</sup> Suzanne lacy, “Three Weeks in May (1977).” <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/three-weeks-in-may/>

<sup>43</sup> Suzanne Lacy, ““Documenting Three Weeks in May, Suzanne Lacy, 1977.”

people's lives," that Fryd offers as new genre public art at the same time depended upon the same types of resource building, service-based action, and community networking as seen in socially engaged critical practice.<sup>44</sup> When questioned about this atypical art making process, Lacy reflects, "I began to make relationships convincing people that this was an area of public concern."<sup>45</sup> It is this component of bringing awareness while simultaneously constructing a series of networks aimed at providing grassroots solutions to community, societal or global problems that pose the early works of Judith Baca and Suzanne Lacy as foundations for or even formative examples of socially engaged critical practices.

From the 1960s onward, artists like Baca and Lacy set the precedent for future socially engaged works of the late 20th and 21st centuries by providing examples of artistic performance, collaboration, and installations outside of traditional art viewing spaces. Joseph Entin quotes scholar Murray Edelman in an article for *Radical Teacher* journal in 2007: "works of art enhance, destroy, or transform common assumptions, perceptions, and categories, yielding new perspectives and charged insights, although they can reinforce conventional assumptions as well."<sup>46</sup> Edelman's words simultaneously speak to both sides of the American art divide. Art created outside of the institution as part of a social movement or counter culture worked against common assumptions not only of identity, but also of art itself. Art within the market, the items created with the intent of being bought, sold, and/or collected, while having the capacity to question the operations of the art sector, is greatly influenced by the conventional assumptions Edelman mentions. Commodified art, or "fine" art, exists within the realm of formalized, systematic judgment and critique.

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<sup>44</sup> Vivien Green Fryd, "Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May*," 23.

<sup>45</sup> Suzanne Lacy, "'Documenting Three Weeks in May, Suzanne Lacy, 1977.'"

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Entin, "Teaching the Experimental Arts of American Protests," *The Radical Teacher* no. 79, (Fall 2007): 5, accessed January 12, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20710405>

As the divide between market art and the emerging socially engaged art expanded, artists realized that in order for an artwork to be deemed “successful” it needed to appeal to a certain audience. Thus, there remained some form of limitation of artistic expression. As the nation turned away from the rebellious fervor of the 1960s, art that strayed from the socially proscribed tastes became less accepted within the contexts of the sector. In contrast, activist, public, and socially engaged artists possessed the freedom to step further outside the boundaries because of their lack of economic motivation. As certain artists became less concerned with the monetary factor of their creations and more concerned with the social impact of their piece, they entered into a realm entirely dependent on engagement and experiential outcome. For this reason, the line of judgment drawn between a successful and unsuccessful project became less clear.

The unifying factor between the visual culture of these movements, and what ties them to the development of socially engaged critical practice, is clearly iterated by Nina Felshin in her introduction to *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*. She states, “Shaped as much by the ‘real world’ as by the art world, activist art represents a confluence of the aesthetic, sociopolitical, and technological impulses...that have attempted to challenge, explore, or blur the boundaries and hierarchies traditionally defining the culture as represented by those in power.”<sup>47</sup> It is clear that the artworks produced during the social movements of the 60s and 70s pushed the boundaries of the art world then, and by using them as a lens to examine the atypical artist processes of the end of the 20th century into the 21st century one can gain a better understanding of the characteristics of socially engaged critical practice.

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<sup>47</sup> Nina Felshin, “Introduction,” in *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995,) 10.



**Figure 1:** Emory Douglas, “Death to the Fascist Pigs,” *The Black Panther: Black Community News Service*, September 26, 1970. Accessed March 10, 2016. <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/fb/cd/37/fbcd37f2fb9edb77569a2b5799399c07.jpg>.



**Figure 2:** Advertisement for Aunt Jemima's Pancake Flour, *Good Housekeeping*, December 1916. Accessed March 10, 2016. Artstor.





**Figure 3:** A poster and itinerary for a service honoring the students killed by National Guardsmen during an Anti-Vietnam War protest at Kent State in 1970, May 1972, The Art of Protest Collection San José State University Library. Accessed March 10, 2016.  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/08/protest-posters-from-the-vietnam-era/243029/#slide21>



**Figure 4:** John Darnell, Photograph of the first shots by National Guardsmen at Kent State, 1970. Accessed March 10, 2016.  
[http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/05/activists\\_press\\_government\\_for.html](http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/05/activists_press_government_for.html).





Figure 5: Judith Baca, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, 1976-1988, Tujunga Flood Control Channel, San Fernando Valley, California. Accessed January 18, 2016. Social Public Resource Center. <http://sparcinla.org/programs/the-great-wall-mural-los-angeles/>



Figure 6: Judith Baca and Crew at *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, Social and Public Art Resource Center. Accessed January 17, 2016. <http://sparcinla.org/the-great-wall-part-2/>



Figure 7: Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani. *Ablutions*. 1972. Accessed February 02, 2016. Source: <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/ablutions/>



Figure 8: Suzanne Lacy. *Three Weeks in May*. 1977. Accessed February 02, 2016. Source: <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/three-weeks-in-may/>





Figure 9: Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz. *In Mourning and Rage*, 1977. Part of *Ariadne*. Los Angeles, California. Source: <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/in-mourning-and-in-rage-1977/>



Figure 10: Suzanne Lacy. *Three Weeks in May*, 1977. Los Angeles, California. Source: <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/three-weeks-in-may/>

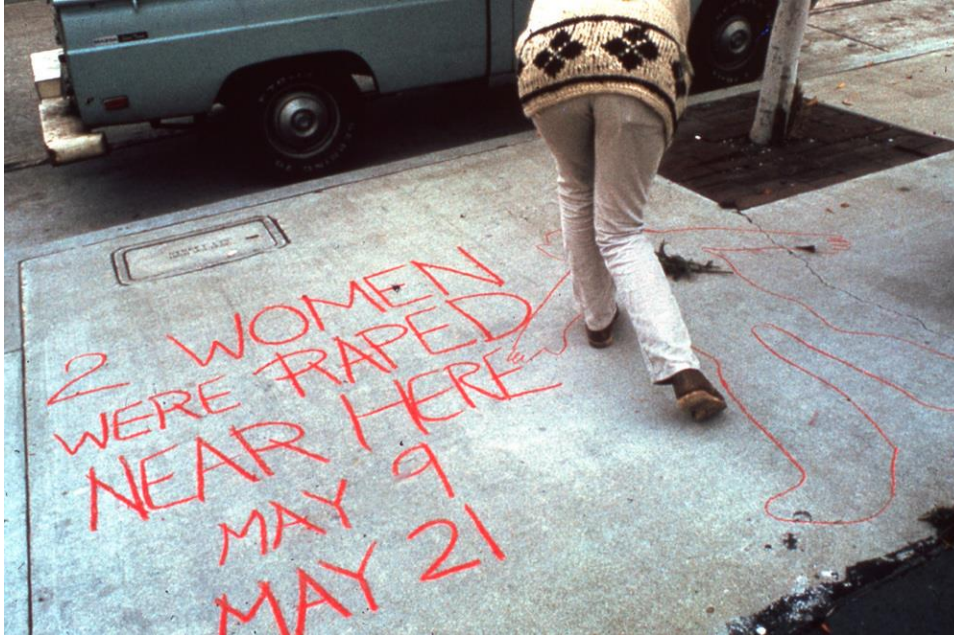


Figure 11: Suzanne Lacy, Marking a Location of Assault, *Three Weeks in May*, 1977. Los Angeles, California. Source: <http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/three-weeks-in-may/>

## **Chapter II: Challenging Authority Socially Engaged Critical Practice as Cultural Production**

Many of the tactics developed during the various American social movements from the 1960s onwards serve as a foundation for socially engaged artists today. From the 1960s until the 1990s, when socially engaged critical practice first emerged as an art form, the boundaries between art and activism were in question. Fine art remained defined by its marketability and the posters, logos, and other graphics produced by social movements held little value in the growing art market. As members of the private art market contended these “low” art form, activist artists pushed back evolving their art forms alongside changing culture, politics, and society of its times. As artists started experimenting with collaborative, participatory, and experiential based art forms, much like the work of Judith Baca and Suzanne Lacy, the binary between art and activism weakened. Art historian Michael Brenson discusses these shifts through work of Joseph Beuys, a German artist active in the 60s and 70s. He writes, “Beuys’s view of art as life, and life as art, leads to a notion of time...If art is life, then there is really no beginning or end to it. There is no frame around it. Nothing about it is fixed....”<sup>48</sup> As Brenson iterates, Beuys perspectives on art and the art making process stray from the traditional idea of the art object. The comparison of art to life transforms art into something connected to experience and participation. Just as John Dewey explained in *Art as Experience*, as one separates an understanding and appreciation of art from objecthood, society beings to appreciate experiential interactions generated by art production as the art form itself.

These specific and important precedents for socially engaged art depended upon others who saw art as having potential beyond being an aesthetically pleasing object, and rather,

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Brenson, “Healing in Time,” in *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture in Chicago*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 31.

something that could play a role in broader social and critical engagements with viewers and spectators. The work of these artists and philosophers, the further separation of the artist from the commodified art market, and a growing interest in art for social change ultimately led to the synthesis of socially engaged critical practice. Like activist art, socially engaged critical practice is deeply rooted in artist and audience experience with a particular phenomena or instances surrounding them. However, unlike activist art, socially engaged art derives its meaning directly from action and experience rather than a visual communicating the ideologies of an activist group. Combining community service with the ephemerality of performance art, socially engaged critical practice is art production meant to create change. Art historian and critic Claire Bishop elaborates: “[Socially engaged art] emphasizes process rather than end result, and basing their [socially engaged critical practitioners’] judgments on ethical criteria (about how and whom they work with) rather than on the character of their artistic outcomes...”<sup>49</sup> In this way, socially engaged critical practice directly challenges object-based understanding of art as it derives its value from the creation process rather than a tangible, sellable piece.

Nato Thompson, Chief Curator at Creative Time, a New York based organization for funding public and socially engaged art projects started in 1973, believes the comparison of socially engaged art to living as artistic form represents a transitional period for our definition of art that the art world has difficulty grasping.<sup>50</sup> He provides a quote from philosopher Michel Foucault to contextualize this conflict: “What strikes me is the fact that in our society, Art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized of which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t

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<sup>49</sup> Claire Bishop, “Participation and Spectacle: Where are We Now?” in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991 - 2011*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 38.

<sup>50</sup> Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991-2011*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 18-24.

everyone's life become a work of art?"<sup>51</sup> As Thompson, Bishop, and Foucault elaborate, the labeling of life, action, or experience as art unravels the market-based system on which art critique is based. Because these practices exist temporarily as experience, they do not hold a monetary exchange value. The complex origins of socially engaged critical practices and their constant evolution as artistic practice leave them abstract to the art world. For this reason, there has not been much writing done on the topic and only a handful of notable critics and scholars, one of the most prolific Nato Thompson, have tried to tackle describing the practice.

In his writing, Thompson approaches complexities of socially engaged critical practice by assessing our understanding of art. He encourages artists, governments, and audiences to question the nature of art, because just as Foucault suggests, art goes beyond objecthood for it is not its objecthood that distinguishes it. Art does not exist in a vacuum. It is something created out of experience and influenced by movements, events, and work being done all around the world. Thompson reflects on this further:

Perhaps in reaction to the steady state of mediated two-dimensional cultural production, or a reaction to the alienating effects of spectacle, artists, activists, citizens, and advertisers alike are rushing headlong into methods of working that allow genuine interpersonal human relationships to develop. The call for art into life at the particular moment in history implies both an urgency to matter as well as privileging of the lived experience.<sup>52</sup>

Much like activist art, socially engaged art largely involves a multitude of smaller interactions working together to form a single project. As Nato suggests, the value is something determined by the artist and participants. The artist could see a project's value as its ability to bring change while a participant could find more value in the skills s/he learned while working with the artist.

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<sup>51</sup> Nato Thompson, *Living as Form*, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Nato Thompson, *Living as Form*, 21.

In highlighting the experience of creation over the formulation of aesthetic, socially engaged critical practice incorporates a wide range of skill sets pulling from interdisciplinary focuses. Nato Thompson explains how this same fluidity in defining socially engaged critical practice leads to confusion in its perception:

If there is confusion of what constitutes art in the emerging realm of socially engaged art, that is understandable. As not only artists, but architects, city planners, grass-roots organizers, environmentalists, graphic designers, and many others grab at the numerous tools made available through the arts, we find ourselves in a jumbled realm where the descriptions of what things are seem to be turned around. As many artists in contemporary art have begun to turn their attention toward that thing we call the social, we, as a matter of necessity, must borrow equally from disciplines in order to make their work more effective.<sup>53</sup>

The importance of coalition and community building through artistic expression is a recurrence in progressive art movements. By encouraging the involvement of people living in the communities in which a socially engaged critical practice is based many critics refuse to recognize these works as art. The indistinction between who is “the artist” and the produced “art object” strays from the doctrines of the commodity-driven art world; something equally threatening to the status-quo of this privatized market because it equalizes the hierarchical structure around which the art world operates. Socially engaged art eliminates monetary exchange from art making processes. While artists require money to execute a project, it does not become a status symbol for the artist or for the people receiving the services from the work. In this way, socially engaged critical practice continues the democratization of art and art making Dewey discussed in *Art as Experience* not only by allowing “non-artists” to engage in the process, but also by using the project as a way of solving a community need or bringing awareness to a social inequity.

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<sup>53</sup> Nato Thompson, “Socially Engaged Art is a Mess Worth Making,” *Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good*, 2012, Accessed January 20, 2016, <http://www.spontaneousinterventions.org/reading/socially-engaged-artis-a-mess-worth-making>



As Nato Thompson's texts on socially engaged critical practice reflect, socially engaged art is a collaboration of ideas and ideologies inseparable from one another because of their dependence on cooperative action. It follows an approach relevant to several art movements before it, those being activist, performance, and public art, but creates a "product" dramatically isolated from traditional understanding. This "re-think[ing] [of] the offering between commodity and experience," as Kansas City artist and activist Sean Starowitz articulates, leaves critics searching for something to judge and as result, often leaves the practice unnoticed to the greater art world, and in turn, the greater public.<sup>54</sup> For these reasons, socially engaged critical practices are often seen as conflated with community service or utilitarian projects, something, as D.W. Gotshalk remarked in *Art and the Social Order*, the "fine" art world systematically separated itself from.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the question of the art world's recognition of socially engaged critical practice as a formally recognized and appreciated artistic movement remains debated.

Socially engaged art can take many different forms. Similar to many of the activist artworks created in the United States during the social movement period of the Sixties, Seventies, and early Eighties, socially engaged art is an extension of socio-political issues affecting a certain community or population. Whereas much of the activist art produced symbolized the actions of a particular movement, for example Judith Baca's *The Great Wall* and its chronicling of Chicano/a history, the emergence of socially engaged critical practice cannot be attributed to one movement. This factor may be a result of the contemporaneity of the practice or the lack of formality in the social movements taking place. The result is a spattering of diverse projects covering a large variety of issues across all sectors of society. Nato Thompson refers to this component of social art as "the new politics," which "involves particular groups and

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<sup>54</sup> Blair Schulman, "The Self Fulfillment of Socially Engaged Art," *The Huffington Post*, June 04, 2014, Accessed January 20, 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/blair-schulman/the-selffulfillment-of-socially-engaged-art\\_b\\_5079231.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/blair-schulman/the-selffulfillment-of-socially-engaged-art_b_5079231.html)

<sup>55</sup> D.W. Gotshalk, *Art and the Social Order*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1947) 29-31.

individuals emerging in response to highly specific circumstances.”<sup>56</sup> Because of the variability in the circumstances addressed within socially engaged critical practices, Thompson argues that, in order to properly reflect on the collection of works one should approach them as a “...range of affinities of methods” rather than attempt to fit them into one all-encompassing mold.<sup>57</sup> The dependence of a socially engaged artwork on interaction within the community leaves much of the outcome to chance. The public’s willingness to participate in the project, the success of the project to aid a community in need, the way the project will take shape all lack predictability. Thus, on-the-spot creative problem solving becomes an essential component of social critical practice. To attempt to create a singular definition of socially engaged art would be to eliminate the elements that distinguish socially engaged critical practices from all other existing art forms.

While Thompson’s “range of affinities” provides a useful framework to begin to understand socially engaged practices, it fails to encapsulate other affinities outside methodological approach. Examining these practices from a broader perspective, one can also observe that the large variety of projects operate within specific zones of impact. These zones of impact are composed of specific community types, both large and small, and the issues, needs, or inequities present within that zone. In this way, zones of impact can be described as existing on a local-global scale with the innermost zone being “local” and the outermost zone being “global.” Consider a diagram of four concentric circles (figure 1). The smallest circle, at the center, is labeled “local.” The following three, regional, national, and global, radiate from this common center gradually getting larger and larger. Within each of the circles are smaller circles representing target groups or audiences within the zone of impact. Looking at the diagram every

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<sup>56</sup> Nato Thompson, “Socially Engaged Art is a Mess Worth Making,” <http://www.spontaneousinterventions.org/reading/socially-engaged-artis-a-mess-worth-making>

<sup>57</sup> Nato Thompson, “Socially Engaged Art is a Mess Worth Making,” <http://www.spontaneousinterventions.org/reading/socially-engaged-artis-a-mess-worth-making>

single target group, no matter which zone of impact it exists within, appears within the global zone and thus, is always connected to the bigger picture. The general overarching goal of such projects is to incite change within a particular community in some capacity, which as the diagram attempts to convey, is interconnected with a broader global issue. In simultaneously addressing local and global concerns, socially engaged critical artist projects become multiplicitous in nature and demand the creation of a contemporary vocabulary to describe, understand, and assess them.

For this reason, Thompson's view of socially produced works also represents the process' movement away from the formalism of traditional art making and consuming techniques. In seeing the socially engaged artistic practice as multifaceted there is a recognition of the indefiniteness of its existence. As Thompson suggests, socially engaged art is reactionary. It matches action to issue and as social dynamics in a community shift, so does the art. Consequently, an understanding of socially engaged art can only come about examining similar characteristics of various kinds of projects across the local-global spectrum.

Social practices in action are as diverse in form as they are in issues, however, one way to frame the way we think about them is to break up by types of global issues most frequently addressed in social critical practices. Because some of the first socially engaged critical practices dealt with global climate and environmentalist issues, the two projects chosen for case studies, the Beehive Design Collective and Jan Mun's *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project*, focus on these areas. The initiatives presented in this discussion provide context for the numerous ways artists, coalitions, or communities execute socially engaged art projects and identify the shared strategies between such practices that allow them to transcend an exclusively service-based existence into the realm of artistic expression. Each case study considers the locations, intended

audiences, and artistic techniques employed in the arts' implementation and later, discuss the shared tactics between each project that aid in characterizing them as a socially engaged critical practice. Tracing each project from origin to present contextualizes its evolutionary progress and aids in identifying the goals within the artist's/group's plan. At the same time, long-term project review provides a mechanism through which the public can understand and assess success of a particular project completed or ongoing.

Many of the earliest examples of what constitutes contemporary socially engaged critical practice developed alongside the environmental protest movements beginning in the 1990s and early 2000s. Due to the sheer volume of environmental topics of discussion, specifically in the past decade, there exist many socially engaged artistic works manifesting such topics through a variety of methods and techniques. A complication that arises with such variety, as Nato Thompson addressed in his lecture "Socially Engaged Art Outside the Boundaries of an Artistic Discipline," some of these works become so far removed from an artistic practice that they become more akin to symbols of activism than art.<sup>58</sup> For the purposes of this paper, and its focus specifically on art within socially engaged critical practice, the selected works utilize artistic and creative thought, production, and installation as tools for the communication of their overarching messages. Furthermore, the projects discussed in this section, a series of graphic murals by the Beehive Design Collective and Jan Mun's *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project*, represent two examples of socially engaged art and practices that address ongoing issues of environmental change or policies from two different points of origin and mediums.

The Beehive Design Collective, started in the early 1990s by a collective of artists in Machias, Maine came together around the shared concern regarding the effects of globalization,

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<sup>58</sup> Nato Thompson, "Socially Engaged Art Outside the Bounds of an Artistic Discipline." Lecture, School of Art at the Cooper Union and Creative Time, 2011. <https://vimeo.com/27289754>

the free trade market and corporate financial institutions.<sup>59</sup> Though each member has a shared interest in such overarching global issues, the Beehive Design Collective first manifested itself as a group in the restoration of a local community hall, Machias Grange Hall. The result was a four hundred square foot stone mosaic installed in the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners exhibition hall celebrating the history and future of biodiversity sustained within the local farming community.<sup>60</sup> From this original group of artisans, Kim Grier, local mosaicist and activist, founded and organized the Beehive Design Collective. Operating as a non-profit organization, the Beehive Design Collective aims to educate the public on political issues and provide accessible meeting spaces in which to run educational and artistic workshops to the community. Grier and her team chose to open new communal space in the Machias Grange Hall because it opened the piece to public interaction, something Grier sees as vital. She states, “There is a real desperate need for more imagery about political issues because they are so complex,” and since the first mosaic project, this has been the impetus that led the collective to imbue their powerful images with political messages.<sup>61</sup>

Though the hive’s involvement with local environmental education drove its evolution from individual artists to a design collective, each artist’s initial ties to activism, mainly through the anti-globalization protest movement of the late 90s, manifests within the graphic aesthetic the collective is known for today. Over the past two decades, following the Beehive’s founding, the “Bees,” as they are known for, have proliferated their messages through guerilla tactics similar in nature to the feminist artist activist organization Guerilla Girls. Like Guerilla Girls, the Beehive

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<sup>59</sup> The Beehive Design Collective, “Our Story,” *Beehive Design Collective*, Accessed January 29, 2016, <http://beehivecollective.org/about-the-hive/story-of-the-hive/>

<sup>60</sup> Mary Ann Clancy, “Artists Collective Revive Grange Hall Machias Landmark Host to Creation of Mosaic for Unity Exhibition Hall,” *Bangor Daily News Maine Archive*. Originally Published July 26, 2001, *Bangor Daily News* (Ed. 1): B3. Accessed February 01, 2016. <http://archive.bangordailynews.com/2001/06/26/artists-collective-revives-grange-hall-machias-landmark-host-to-creation-of-mosaic-for-unity-exhibition-hall/>

<sup>61</sup> Mary Ann Clancy, “Artists Collective.”

Design Collective chooses to produce graphics, flyers, and posters identified only as a single collective rather than drawing attention to an individual artist. In this way, the message becomes the most important aspect and the work is allowed to speak for itself. In an interview with an *Earth First!* journalist, an unidentified Bee expressed the group's attraction to individual anonymity, "We're working to take the 'who made it and how much did it cost?' out of art. Instead, we see ourselves as 'cultural workers' who serve the crucial need for explanations of the complicated issues that our society faces..."<sup>62</sup> This notion of the artist as "cultural worker" is one often connected with socially engaged work. Within the context of the Beehive Design Collective, the symbolism of the labeling of the artist as a cultural worker becomes an act of protest against the traditional, elevated statuses held by fine art and celebrated artists within our society. Rather than participate in the commodified art trade, the coalition chooses to produce art works with anonymity, dissolving the individual into the collective and its mission. The Beehive Design Collective runs art workshops locally to produce graphic materials for environmentalist protest across the country as well as develop collaborative, large-scale graphics for use in public mural lectures. Not one of the artists credits himself or herself to a particular graphic and the Beehive Design Collective further removes itself from the "worldwide profit-driven Empire" by providing all of their works online as free, non-copyrighted downloadable files.

These accessible graphic designs represent the Beehive Design Collective's mission of democratizing art-based education and promotion of visual literacy. The coalition's production of graphics, posters, and brochures for the Anti-Globalization movements of the early 90s resulted in a decision disseminate their messages through metaphorical images of nature and ecosystems under attack. These graphics took shape in small flyers and posters aimed at raising

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<sup>62</sup> "Cross-Pollinating the Grassroots: Ten Years of Dismantling Monoculture with the Beehive Design Collective." *Earth First! (Winter 2010)*: 60-63. Accessed February 03, 2016. Proquest. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/896735248?pq-origsite=summon&accountid=14637>

awareness on various forms of ecosystem destruction (figures 2 and 3). *Resist Biotechnology*, one of the hive's first posters, addresses concerns about the rise in bioengineering of plants, fruits, and vegetables (figure 2). The poster is compartmentalized much like a comic strip, each sectioned box filled with an image of the effects of biotechnology on agriculture and on human life. The artists utilize visual repetition to connect the images and text to their overarching message while also presenting their material in a manner easily comprehended by a public audience. In the first section, the bioengineered "monoculture crop" fields are juxtaposed next to images labeled "suburbia," "car culture" and highways, and "chain stores." With each image, the artists' use repeated horizontals and sectionalization of the image plane to mimic the orderly rows of a crop field. The same layout is echoed in the configuration of rows and columns of image boxes within the poster as a whole.

A later poster titled *Biodevastation 2000*, made for the Biotechnology Industry Organization's annual convention, utilizes a similar didactic composition to communicate the concerns of the mobilization of anti-biodevastation protesters (figure 3).<sup>63</sup> While *Biodevastation 2000*, like *Resist Biotechnology*, came out of the artists of the Beehive Design Collective foundational years as protest artists, it also marks a turning point in the collective's mission and aesthetic. Unlike *Resist Biotechnology*, the composition of *Biodevastation 2000* consists of one larger image composed of numerous metaphorical details pertaining to the overall message. At first viewers are confronted with a group of monarch butterflies wearing gas masks entering a corn field. Upon closer examination, we realize that the cornfield is toxic; the cornstalks are dead, ears of corn are syringes dripping out chemicals, and caterpillars lay lifeless on the soil. The butterflies surround a single, live stalk breaking through the ground. The absence of syringes

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<sup>63</sup> Beehive Design Collective, "Other Graphic Campaigns: *Biodevastation*." Accessed January 29, 2016. [http://beehivecollective.org/beehive\\_poster/other-graphics-campaigns/](http://beehivecollective.org/beehive_poster/other-graphics-campaigns/)

and the deeper shading, meant to imply a “greener” or healthier plant, indicate that this stalk is one untouched by biotechnology and give reason for the butterflies’ frantic entry. The roots of the grass underneath the butterflies transforms into “Grassroots Gathering Against Genetic Engineering” accompanied by an iteration of the gathering’s goals for the protest, “resistance and solution to the commodification of life; counter conference to the largest convention of the biotech industry to date...join farmers, scientists, and activists from around the world for a week of education, strategy, and creative opposition.” Along the borders, the artists included the names of activist groups involved in the protest and locations and times of gatherings during the conference as well as provided resources for participants to access further information about the group’s’ missions. The recognition of the collective of activists in this project is significant as it is something consistent with their work and blurring the line of activism and art.

In a piece published by *Earth First!* a radical environmental advocacy group, the work of the Beehive Design Collective was said to be “a holistic and productive way to understand and deconstruct the complex issues unfolding around them that were transforming the social and ecological fabric of our world.”<sup>64</sup> Today, the body of work produced by the Beehive Design Collective exemplifies the dualistic nature of socially engaged critical practice in occupying both the local and global zones of impact. Following their involvement in broader environmental and ecological protests, the Beehive Design Collective continued to produce graphics for protest conferences while developing many of the educational components of these posters into what the group refers to as “picture-lectures” or “graphic campaigns.”<sup>65</sup> Just as the artists aimed to join protesters through “education, strategy, and creative opposition” in 2000, they also educate the

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<sup>64</sup> “Cross-Pollinating the Grassroots,” (Winter 2010).

<sup>65</sup> “Cross-Pollinating the Grassroots with the Beehive Design Collective  
Beehive Design Collective, “What We Do: Our Graphics & Collaborative Process.” *EarthFirst!* (September/October 2003). Accessed January 30, 2016. <http://beehivecollective.org/about-the-hive/what-we-do/>



public through strategy and creative opposition today. The work of the Beehive Design Collective has taken shape as socially engaged critical practice though their early works started activist art, mainly posters and graphics for protests around the United States.

The Bees see story-sharing as the lifeblood of their process as it allows individuals and communities come together to frame their immediate issues with larger, global concepts. Many of the correlations between characteristics of socially engaged critical practice and the work of the Beehive Design Collective exist within the collaborative and educational tactics of “story-sharing” and “cross-pollination” employed in the graphic narratives. On their website, the collective describes these projects as tools “using cartoons and storytelling to break down big issues from the overwhelming world we live in and present them in accessible, engaging formats.”<sup>66</sup> In order to locate and interpret big issues, the collective partners with local, regional, statewide, and international activist groups hoping to utilize a creative outlet to propagate their concerns and missions to a larger audience. Thus, a large part of the process of constructing these narratives consists of listening and personal interaction. A writer for *EarthFirst!* describes the intricate process:

Extensive travel and dialogue with communities directly affected by the myriad faces of corporate globalization and empire provides stories, history, and inspiration that comprise the imagery. Even the specific species of animals and plants depicted in the graphic are extensively researched.<sup>67</sup>

Rather than assume the role of commissioned artists, the members of the Beehive Design Collective team up with organizations in the areas where they work and participate in a non-monetary, grassroots exchange of stories for skills. During the conceptualization of one of the pieces, the members of the collective meet with residents, community leaders, and activists in order to capture the “personal” element of each project and “to amplify their voices and struggles

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<sup>66</sup> Beehive Design Collective, “What We Do.”

<sup>67</sup> “Cross-Pollinating the Grassroots,” (Winter 2010).

for social and environmental justice.”<sup>68</sup> Resultantly, the collaboration between the Beehive Design Collective, the national organization and the local, regional, national, or global zones of impact the attend to, and the significance of the process of the project.

The art-making and art-sharing process employed within the body of work produced by the Beehive Design Collective, and their partner organizations, equalizes small and large issues. Their work represents opportunities for apparently small-scaled issues to become amplified and connected to the global spectrum. Not only does this synthesis represent a contextualization of important environmental issues but also the prioritization of collectivized artistic efforts over individualistic art making. This socialist element, being a characteristic feature of socially engaged critical practices in connection to its public and activist art predecessors, provides the public with greater access to these resources. Furthermore, in illustrating these stories within a graphic narrative, the Beehive Collective gives organizations struggling with reaching audiences beyond their zonal borders a platform through which to communicate their messages. This is done primarily through the Beehive’s conferences, presentations, and workshops. Because the murals are done on large sheets of fabric, made from repurposed plastic bottles, they become portable lesson plans.<sup>69</sup> Constructing the murals in this manner is key to the Collective’s success as a socially engaged critical practice. By structuring their lesson plans so they can be replicated, the Beehive Design Collective extends the life of their project making it a more impactful for reaching a wider audience. Once a piece is completed, the Beehive Design Collective takes it on tour visiting activist coalitions, colleges and universities, community centers, and any other group or organization that desires their services (figure 4).

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<sup>68</sup> Beehive Design Collective, “What We Do.”

<sup>69</sup> “Cross-Pollinating the Grassroots,” (September/October 2003).

During a workshop, members of the Beehive and volunteers travel to a site, set up the mural series, and use the metaphorical images within the mural to guide the audience through issues being addressed. In this way, the information being shared is accessible to viewers of all disciplines, not solely political analysts or environmental experts. The collective further enhances the accessibility of these programs by making all necessary materials free through their website and by running a lecture or workshop free of charge. In eliminating the barriers often set by financial resources capability, the collective generates a greater impact, intentionally distancing their practices from corporative, commodified practices. Another major part of the Bees educational program includes the incorporation of local issues within their broader discussions by incorporating brainstorming and mind mapping workshops into their lectures. By tailoring each workshop to the site-specific needs of the community, the collective provokes unique discussion and prompts its participants to devise solutions or approaches for these issues most pertinent to them and their community. Thus, the workshops further extend the participatory element of the collective's function. Much like the Judith Baca's approach to reconstructing the narrative of American history, the Beehive Design Collective uses these "picture-lectures" to aid in public re-evaluation of major issues outlined in the discourse of environmental activism. Furthermore, the Collective expands the capacity of visual art as a form of activism by incorporating their murals in an experiential and participatory program. In doing so, the Beehive mural series allow participants to engage directly with art and walk away from the program not only with an appreciation for the graphic itself, but also with a set skills necessary for tackling the issues addressed in the lecture.

The Beehive Design Collective's "cross-pollination" of globally pervasive environmental concern with immediate local issues serves each community in a very similar capacity as Judith

Baca's murals or Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May*. The combination collaborative solution making and participatory education through the mural lectures not only presents audiences with contexts for local-global connections, but also equips them with the skills to insight change within their own zones of impact. This idea of "cross-pollination" also applies to the Bees dissemination of issues outside a community to new sites through their tours. By carrying the idea of various activists and groups wherever they go, the Bees encourage global impact and network building. In this capacity, the Beehive Design Collective serves as a socio-political mediator, a middleman organization representing both local and global concerns simultaneously, and proliferating these concerns through action, problem-solving, and printed media. The hive's collective systemization of cultural production through the formerly discussed guerilla art making and educative practices offers a concretized culmination of numerous strategies associated with contemporary socially engaged critical practices.

While the work of the Beehive Design Collective concurrently operates within multiple zones of impact on the local-global spectrum, environmentalist artist Jan Mun's *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project* represents a smaller-scale address of localized and nationalized environmental issues. Mun's project addresses the removal of hazardous wastes or toxins from the environment by naturally occurring microbial systems, a process also known as mycoremediation, within the Newtown Creek Superfund site in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, New York (figure 5).<sup>70</sup> Unlike the broad collaborative practice of the Beehive Design Collective, Jan Mun generally operates primarily as a solo artist. Though she, like the collective, conducts her art making practices outside of the realm of the commodified art market, she maintains her

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<sup>70</sup> Bioremediation is the process through which long-chained toxins, in this case large hydrocarbons, are broken down into simpler, non-toxic compounds. The process Jan Mun replicates in her project is referred to as mycoremediation. This process harnesses the natural remedial phenomena in different varieties of fungi to purify long-chained toxins from contaminated soils.

individual artistic identity. Thus, the socially engaged critical practices she oversees rely more on her artistic vision rather than the socialist approach of art making demonstrated in the Beehive Design Collective visual narratives. Nevertheless, Mun's project incorporates the same grassroots community planning seen in the collective's construction of their graphic narratives.

In a video about the A Blade of Grass foundation, a non-profit organization funding socially engaged critical art by means of grants, Mun describes her project is "working less on creating object, and more on creating relationships and creating information that can then be shared to a larger public and can be utilize natural systems to remediate urban contaminants."<sup>71</sup> Her *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project* is a series of site specific art installations called *Fairy Rings* informed by collaborative research conducted by various local activist and labs groups. The current location of Mun's project, 400 Kingsland Avenue, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, is part of an industrial gasoline and oil site established in 1924 that was discovered to be the source of a large oil plume in 1978.<sup>72</sup> The discovery of the plume came about from a growing national concern regarding the treatment of land and water contaminated through hazardous industrial wastes. In 1980, the United States Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, passed the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, or CERCLA, "to address the dangers of abandoned or uncontrolled hazardous dumps by developing a nationwide program for emergency response; information gathering and analysis; liability for responsible parties; and site cleanup."<sup>73</sup> CERCLA setup federally financed trust funds to subsidize cleanup programs and offer large corporations responsible for these contaminations or spills monetary incentive to move forward in the process. The sites for the projects became known as superfunds.

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<sup>71</sup> A Blade of Grass, "Fieldworks: Jan Mun, Greenpoint Bioremediation Project," A Blade of Grass Video, *Vimeo*.

<sup>72</sup> Jan Mun, "Fairy Rings 2.0," *Jan Mun Personal Website*, Accessed February 05, 2016. <http://janmun.com/fairy-rings-mycoremediation2/>.

<sup>73</sup> "Superfund History," *EPA: United States Environmental Protection Agency*, December 09, 2015. <http://www.epa.gov/superfund/superfund-history>

From the passage of CERCLA, there have been numerous Superfund sites identified including the site at Newtown Creek in Brooklyn, New York where Mun began her project. The Newtown Creek site has been a concern for the EPA since its discovery in 1978. Since then, it has been declared one of the most contaminated waterways in the United States and in 2009 the EPA placed Newtown Creek site on the National Priorities List of hazardous waste spills.<sup>74</sup> In 2011, the EPA issued an “administrative order of consent” to six corporations with locations along the Newtown Creek site holding them potentially responsible for the damage incurred; one of these potentially responsible parties, PRR, is ExxonMobil.<sup>75</sup>

Jan Mun’s *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project* existed as a collaboration with the ExxonMobil corporation from its inception in 2013. Mun explains in her description of the project that the idea for mycoremediation came about as a form of “creative problem solving” within this remediation project overseen by the ExxonMobil Corporation (figure 6).<sup>76</sup> In 2012, she partnered with the Newtown Creek Alliance, a grassroots activist group established in 2002 aiming to combat the toxicity levels of the creek, to create the first form of her *Fairy Rings* (fig. 6). Constructed from burlap, soil, and a strain of oyster mushrooms known as *Pleurotus Ostreatus*, the team placed the *Fairy Rings* in the contaminated water allowing the microbes to disassemble recalcitrant toxins into simple non-toxic compounds. Recognizing the success in the first *Fairy Ring* project, Mun and her team partnered with ExxonMobil in 2013 to develop the *Fairy Rings @ ExxonMobil Greenpoint Petroleum Remediation Project Site* along the edges of the Newton Creek (figure 7).

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<sup>74</sup> “Site Information for Newtown Creek,” *United States Environmental Protection Agency*, December 09, 2015, <http://www.epa.gov/superfund/superfund-history>.

<sup>75</sup> “Site Information for Newtown Creek,” *USEPA*

<sup>76</sup> A Blade of Grass, “Fieldworks,” A Blade of Grass Video.

Mun describes her project as an insertion of natural processes into the ongoing interactions of urban life. She sees the project itself representing the dynamic of these two separate systems and human's attempts to offer thoughtful, natural-based solutions to the harsh city landscape because, "in urban areas, we are always negotiating with our environment."<sup>77</sup> In this way, Mun's self-pronunciation within the context of her project offers an alternative perspective from which one examines socially engaged critical practice. The adaptation of the fairy rings from water to land, to Mun and her team of volunteers, represented much more than an artistic change in medium. Rather, it symbolized the synthesis of the seemingly unrelated disciplines of art, technology, and biology through the mutual effort of activists, corporations and artists. According to Mun, the cyclical regeneration of beneficial compounds produced through mycoremediation represents, "...the interface to help us visualize a better symbiotic relationship between humans/nature and large corporations/community groups to work together."<sup>78</sup>

The beauty of Mun's artistry is that she creates webs of activists, cultural workers, artists, and community members as part of the overall product of her efforts, much like Judith Baca and Suzanne Lacey did with their work. Mun's project creates ties to local activist groups like the Newtown Creek Alliance, scientists studying these processes like the Environmental Science Analytical Center at Brooklyn College, and corporations involved with remediation projects around the United States like ExxonMobil expand the meaning of her work beyond a form of artistic expression into the same cultural capital seen as byproduct of socially engaged art. Because the majority of Mun's current work directly affects the ExxonMobil Superfund Site in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, the *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project* lacks the same extensive spectrum of environmental issues addressed in the touring picture lectures of the Beehive Design

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<sup>77</sup> A Blade of Grass, "Fieldworks: Jan Mun, Greenpoint Bioremediation Project."

<sup>78</sup> Jan Mun, "Fairy Rings 2.0," <http://janmun.com/fairy-rings-mycoremediation2/>

Collective. Instead, Mun remedies this broadness of scope through her acute focus on the global issue of environmental contaminants within the local context of the ExxonMobil Superfund site in Greenpoint. By including collaborative project building into her artistic repertoire, Mun creates an exchange of knowledge and skills commonly associated with socially engaged art.

The work of the Beehive Design Collective and Jan Mun and her team of volunteers exemplifies socially engaged critical practice in the 21st century because of their turning of service into performance. While the graphic lectures of the Beehive Design Collective rely more on illustration and art-making, Jan Mun's *Greenpoint Bioremediation* demonstrates the same effort to use creative practice to bring awareness and change to a local issue. In examining these two socially critical works, there appear three main shared strategies that are also characteristic of all socially engaged critical practices. The first shared strategy is that projects operate within multiple zones of impact on the local-global spectrum (figure 1). The Beehive Design Collective runs educational workshops and general operations from the Machias Grange Hall in their town of origin in Bangor, Maine and at the same time addresses the harmful impact of globalization and biotechnology on Earth's ecological systems. Furthermore, the Collective's travelling mural series have created partnerships with activist communities both nationally and internationally. Jan Mun's mycoremediation directly deals with local environmental disasters in Brooklyn, but the remediation processes and fairy ring structures produced as a part of her work can be applied to Superfund sites all across America. The impact of socially engaged critical practices across multiple zones of impact on the local-global spectrum reflects the variety of ways artists respond to community needs. Some, like the Beehive Design Collective, work from inside out beginning locally and evolving to address issues globally. Others, like Jan Mun's *Greenpoint*



*Bioremediation Project*, think globally and act locally through development of long-term creative solutions on a smaller, local scale.

The second shared strategy is that projects raise awareness around community issues of concern by making visible the invisible. Social inequalities, climate concerns, or other issues typically addressed by socially engaged critical practices need to be brought to public attention because they are issues often overlooked. Thus, socially engaged art works to simplify complex issues by providing their target groups with visual educative tools or by helping them construct tangible solutions. The Beehive Design Collective's graphics and picture-lecture bring awareness to local and global environmental issues through visual allegory. As seen in their works *Resist Biotechnology* and *Biodevestation*, the Beehive Design Collective uses simple graphics and familiar imagery, for example insects and animals, to create visual narratives explaining complex environmental issues like the biotechnology's destruction of ecosystems. Jan Mun's *Fairy Rings* visualize the destruction of nature as part of industrialization and expansion of urban landscapes. The planting of the *Fairy Rings* remedy this destruction, but also revitalize the dead plots of land damaged by the toxic waste lingering in the Newtown Creek nearby the Superfund site. Mun's re-insertion of natural systems into this industrial environment make visible the ancient ecosystems silenced and erased by years of urban development.

The third shared strategy is that projects are experiential and participatory and depend upon direct interaction with their target communities for success. The Beehive Design Collective becomes part of locally-based activist communities around the world during the planning and touring stages of their mural series. By meeting with the groups affected by the environmental issues depicted in their mural, the Beehive Design Collective helps groups strategize and implement reform within their movements. The Collective's practice of "cross-pollination," take

these issues and disseminate them throughout activist communities across the globe. More importantly, the picture-lecture workshops that address these topics teach visual thinking strategies and build visual literacy. Jan Mun's bioremediation project also collaborates with local institutions, including the Newtown Creek Alliance activist group and Brooklyn College, to develop methodology for mycoremediation. Furthermore, Mun then simplifies and formats her research to create remediation workshops and river clean-ups. In these workshops, Mun and her volunteers teach community members simple ways to purify the land near their homes, schools and parks. Unlike many other forms of art, socially engaged critical practice relies on artist-audience collaboration throughout the entirety of the project. Socially engaged art works are intended to make audience members active participants in devising solutions for their communities' needs. The effects of social critical practice continue beyond completion of a project and ultimately help community members maintain the project after the artist leaves or to create new social justice initiatives. For this reason, this strategy is the most common throughout all forms of socially engaged critical practice and plays an important role in complications related to financing socially engaged art discussed in the next chapter.

Socially  
Engaged  
Critical  
Practice

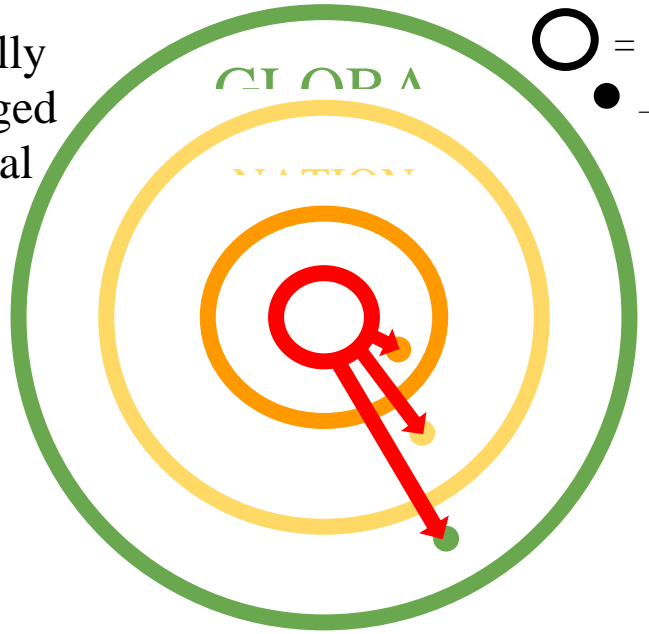


Figure 1: Socially Engaged Critical Practice Local-Global Spectrum by Original Figure by Author. March, 2016.



Figure 2: The Beehive Design Collective. *Resist Biotechnology*. Graphic Poster. Source: [http://beehivecollective.org/beehive\\_poster/other-graphics-campaigns/](http://beehivecollective.org/beehive_poster/other-graphics-campaigns/)



Figure 3: The Beehive Design Collective. *Biodevastation*. Graphic Poster, 2000. Source: [http://beehivecollective.org/beehive\\_poster/other-graphics-campaigns/](http://beehivecollective.org/beehive_poster/other-graphics-campaigns/)

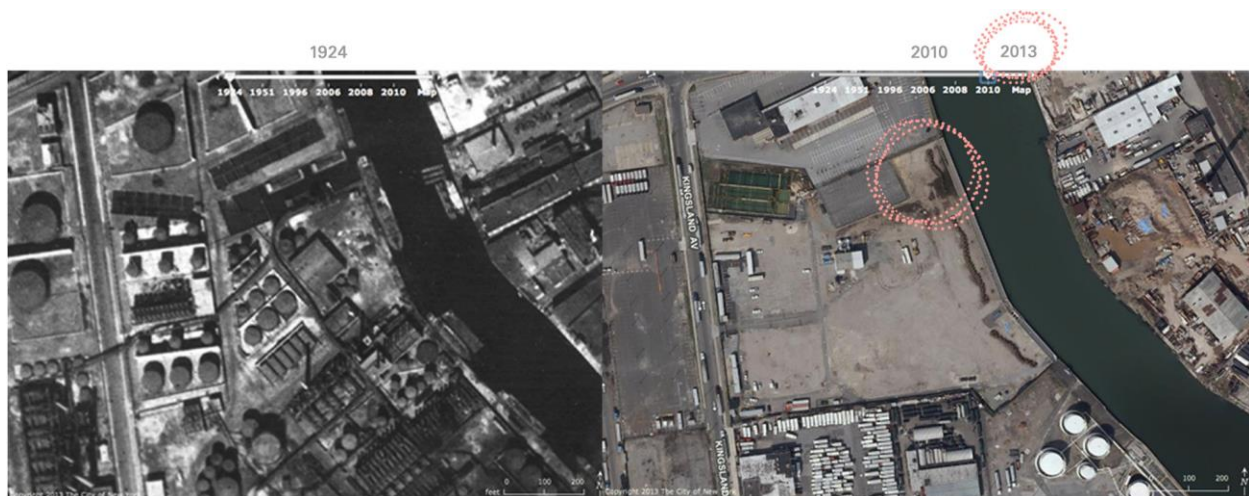


Figure 4: The Beehive Collective, Bee explaining component of a Beehive Design Collective Graphic Story at an outdoor public workshop. Source: <http://beehivecollective.org/tours-booking/workshops-and-presentations/>





**Figure 5:** The Fairy Rings at the ExxonMobil, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, Newtown Creek Remediation Project Site. Photo by Mitch Waxman. Source: <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/fellow/sea-fellow-jan-mun/>



**Figure 6:** Aerial shot of the Exxonmobil site in Greenpoint, Brooklyn in 1924 and 2013. Circles added by Jan Mun to represent the location where the mycoremediation project was placed. Source: <http://janmun.com/fairy-rings-mycoremediation2/>



Figure 7: Jan Mun, *Fairy Rings*, in collaboration with the Newtown Creek Alliance, Newtown Creek. Source: <http://janmun.com/fairy-rings-mycoremediation/>

### **Chapter III**

#### **Footing the Bill: Financing Socially Engaged Critical Practice**

The dependence of socially engaged critical practice on experiential and participatory processes of art do not fit the usual channels or pockets of support. Socially engaged art represents art that gives versus art that sells. Because socially engaged critical practice exists to give services to the public through art, the exchange exists between the socially engaged critical practitioner and community members. At the same time, the public must also give to the artist or artist group their time and labor in order to execute the project. In the case of the Beehive Design Collective, the Bees give a vision and a voice to the environmental issues of a community through creating and touring with their mural series; the communities meet with the Collective to share stories and aid in constructing the narrative. With Jan Mun's *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project*, Mun designs the mycoremediation fairy rings and develops the network of volunteers, activist, and scientists who then conduct research and execute the planting of the mushrooms at the site. This conscious diversion from the commodity-driven art market forces socially engaged critical practitioners to locate alternative methods to finance their projects.

Examining the mechanisms used to finance socially engaged art must offer flexibility as these projects refuse to comply with the monetary exchange of the capitalist markets. The abstract process of developing funding for socially engaged critical practice posits it in a liminal space between the private and public spheres. Though socially engaged art is, by definition, public art, lack of funding from federal entities, for example the National Endowments of the Arts, compels artists and artist groups to turn to private funding. Artists working within the realm of socially engaged critical practice must then seek out such private sources either through grants or corporations and convince them to become investors in their work. In effect, the process

socially engaged artists go through becomes the converse of the object-for-cash exchange observed within the art market. Whereas contemporary art is first created and then valued based on a comparison to other works in the market, socially engaged critical practice must be considered for funding case-by-case before project can be executed.

In order to begin a project, the artist or group must secure the necessary funds to make purchases, pay artisans or workers by essentially proving the importance of their work to potential funders. Thus, advertising, advocating, and networking with private financiers merges into the overall process of socially engaged critical practice. This piecing together of a project budget from an array of sources reflects the collaborative nature and grassroots efforts of socially engaged critical practice itself. Unlike purchasing a piece of art, financial sponsorship of socially engaged critical practice is not a symbol of ownership. In earlier examples of this type of funding, for example the temporary installations created by public artists Christo and Jean-Claude, small pieces of the project were developed to raise money for its execution. Like socially engaged art work, Christo and Jeanne-Claude's many installations derive their meaning from the networking and community building necessary to receive permits and permission to create the projects. Each project is funded entirely by the artists without sponsorship or donation, however, pieces of the installation are archived and sold to raise money to defray the costs.<sup>79</sup> In *The Thousand Gates* (1979-2005) installed in Central Park in New York City from February 12 to February 27, 2005, early drawings of the piece and swatches of the saffron fabric adorning the gates were sold (figures 1 and 2).

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<sup>79</sup> "Information: The Gates," *Christo and Jeanne-Claude*, 2016, Accessed March 20, 2016.

<http://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/the-gates?view=info#.VvW5lhIrL-Y>.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude, "The Gates Information Guide," (New York: City of New York, 2005), 2-5. Accessed March 20, 2016. [http://christojeanneclaude.net/\\_data/thegates\\_kit.pdf](http://christojeanneclaude.net/_data/thegates_kit.pdf).



Because socially engaged critical practices do not produce profitable objects, projects cannot be self-funded in the same way as Christo and Jeanne-Claude's work. Instead, investors must choose to contribute funds to the project because of a desire to create change. In this way, these individual contributions act as donations and represent the participation of these corporations or grant-giving organizations in the overall process. In this way, socially engaged artists once bypass traditional money-for-product exchange associated with the art market. While this adaptation facilitates practitioners' evasion of the art market, it creates a tension between artists choosing to fund projects only through grassroots fundraising and those who receive funding from a combination of grants and private investors. Decisions for funding often reflect an artist's or a group's mission and goals for their projects. Jan Mun's *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project* and The Beehive Design Collective each operate through one of the two types of funding systems and provide a framework through which to discuss their operations.

Jan Mun's *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project* has been funded by a variety of grants, community, and corporate sponsorships, most notably by a fellowship from the the A Blade of Grass Foundation. A Blade of Grass is non-for-profit organization founded in 2011 dedicated to "nurturing socially engaged art" by "[providing] resources to artists who demonstrate artistic excellence and serve as innovative conduits for social change."<sup>80</sup> A Blade of Grass offers two fellowship options. A year long \$20,000 grant and a three-year long grant of \$50,000 each year. Unlike many other funding organizations, however, A Blade of Grass also provides the artist with "strategic support" offering them "assessment tools, video documentation, and other tailored resources" throughout their fellowship with the organization.<sup>81</sup> Artists applying for funds

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<sup>80</sup> "Our Mission," *A Blade of Grass*, 2016, Accessed March 22, 2016.

[http://www.abladeofgrass.org/who\\_we\\_are/mission](http://www.abladeofgrass.org/who_we_are/mission).

"People," *A Blade of Grass*, 2016, Accessed March 22, 2016. <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/people/>.

<sup>81</sup> "Apply," *A Blade of Grass*, 2016, Accessed March 20, 2016. <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/apply/guidelines>.

through A Blade of Grass must present projects to the organization that adhere to funding guidelines that reflect the core mission of the organization. The 2016 Fellowship overview states the organization will fund: “Socially engaged projects in which art is a catalyst for social change,” “Dialogue-based projects that emphasize sustainable partnerships with communities,” “Projects in which artists engage community members as equal partners,” and “Projects in which co-creation with non-artists is part of the process.”<sup>82</sup> These guidelines parallel the shared tactics of socially engaged critical practice outlined in the previous chapter in their emphasis of inciting social change, community engagement, and giving voice to often silenced social issues.

The application process for the A Blade of Grass Fellowship demonstrates an understanding for the eccentricity of social critical works, an understanding that extends to the application reviewing process. In the 2016 overview of the decision process, the A Blade of Grass foundation emphasizes the diversity of their review panel. As of 2016, the panel consists of “an artist, a community organizer or participant in a community-based art project, a curator or arts administrator, an educator or scholar, and an ABOG representative.”<sup>83</sup> A Blade of Grass selects panelists based on their pre-existing understanding and open-mindedness of socially engaged critical practice. The organization emphasizes that its mission is to provide funding and support to nurture socially engaged art, but also to establish a coherent framework for socially engaged critical practice as an art form.<sup>84</sup> The significance in A Blade of Grass’ efforts is two fold. Firstly, they provide logical guideline for funding socially engaged critical practice that foster organization within projects. As non-profit organization, A Blade of Grass is responsible for consolidating pre-existing federal funding and allocating funds from private investors and

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<sup>82</sup> A Blade of Grass, *2016 ABOG Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art, Overview*, 2016, Accessed March 22, 2016, [http://www.abladeofgrass.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ABOG\\_FellowshipOverview2016.pdf](http://www.abladeofgrass.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ABOG_FellowshipOverview2016.pdf).

<sup>83</sup> A Blade of Grass, *2016 ABOG Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art, How We Decide*, 2016, Accessed March 22, [http://www.abladeofgrass.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ABOG\\_HowWeDecide2016.pdf](http://www.abladeofgrass.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ABOG_HowWeDecide2016.pdf).

<sup>84</sup> A Blade of Grass, *2016 Fellowship Overview*.

sponsors. Secondly, they act as a third-party organization for funding socially engaged art not only allowing artists to focus on project production, but also preventing entities uneducated on socially engaged critical practice to bar artists from receiving funding. By creating a non-profit organization based on ideals of social change and community building through artistic production, A Blade of Grass offers artists a like-minded venue through which to fund their projects. These third party organizations, like A Blade of Grass, have become necessary for funding non-conforming artistic practices such as socially engaged critical practice because of the complex history of federal funding for the art in America.

The history of public, governmental funding for the arts in America begins with the creation of the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. In some instances, one can argue that the Works Progress Administration didn't see the art as the governmental responsibility, but rather the care and keeping of the American people as the responsibility. This is evidenced in the employment of novice or untrained artists and the development of art education and apprenticeship programs across the country. Through the funding of such programs, the American government demonstrated its valuing artistic practice as well as the Dewey philosophy about the democratization of art. Following the dissolution of the Works Progress Administration, a great amount of the purchasing and display of art fell back into the hands individuals and private institutions. The National Endowment for the Arts, established in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson, sought to rekindle governmental support for the arts mandating that state and federal government allocation of taxpayers' dollars to the promotion of the arts.<sup>85</sup>

In 1967, the NEA established a branch known as the Arts in Public Places Program, the A-i-P-P. The Art in Public Places program allowed communities to apply for a matching grant,

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<sup>85</sup> Cher Krause Knight, *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism*, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 14.

meaning that if they applied to the program with a certain amount of money, the government would match that raised amount. An important component of the A-i-P-P, the matching grant allowed the government to ensure there was a “[dependence] on extensive community participation.”<sup>86</sup> Because any art created through the A-i-P-P resulted from community efforts, pieces funded through the A-i-P-P became the property of the neighborhoods or cities that put forth the application, rather than belonging to the NEA or federal government. While the division of financing between government sponsored and community sourced funding places part of the financial burden on the community, the A-i-P-P offered artists and groups a great amount of flexibility. In this capacity, the match-grant secured the autonomy the project proposers had over the artist creating the commissioned work and the location of the work. In this way, the public art supported through the A-i-P-P could serve as an early predecessor to socially engaged critical practice because it maintained a sense of art “by the people, for the people.” Furthermore, in encouraging the use of the match-grant program, the A-i-P-P helped public projects to create financing networks through their communities, towns, cities, and regions. The partial funding component, in this way, is the same as the array of financial investors or resources necessary to produce socially engaged critical artworks as it required not only project planning, but project justification, advertising, and fundraising. However, unlike projects funded by the A-i-P-P, socially engaged critical practice is often further removed from the governmental institutions because of ties between federal grants and censorship of artistic expression.

When President Ronald Reagan came into office in the 1980s, the freedom provided to artists funded by the NEA came under attack and forever changed the face of federal funding of the arts. With the governmentally funded arts and the economic boom feeding the private art markets there appeared a schism between art for social cause and art for profit. The bifurcation

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<sup>86</sup> Cher Krause Knight, *Public Art*, 18.

of artistic production became contingent upon on the ability of an artist to profit within the market. Artist and critic Robert C. Morgan reflects on this transgression in his discussion of postmodernist aesthetic in “The End of the Art World”:

Whether the struggle is an internal or external one, there are important artists who are not being show, promoted, or advertised in the delimited infrastructure of today’s art world. There is a problem when art becomes an overtly market-driven enterprise, contingent upon mystique as it has become sign the eighties.<sup>87</sup>

As result, if an artist failed to successfully sell works within the private market, his/her livelihood would be lost. With the growing popularity of a pop art postmodernist aesthetic, art and mass production blended.<sup>88</sup> The idea of the “art superstar,” birthed alongside “pop” and “kitsch” artists like Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons, drove the wedge between the private and public sectors of the art market even further. Also engaged in these “fine” art debates were the art critics. Operating generally from perspectives within the art market, critics like Hilton Kramer and Alan Bloom bemoaned the proliferation of democratic artistic practice. Kramer, specifically, felt that the “radicalism” of the 1960s drove down the standard of natural, artistic beauty to something accepting of mediocrity.<sup>89</sup> As the privatized art enterprise grew, fueled by hungry investors and championed by critics’ thirst to return to values of fine art, socially critical, public artists saw themselves being pushed away from artistic opportunity into the cross-fires of the culture wars of the 80s and 90s.

Amidst the controversy of artistic quality, the 1980s also marked a conservative political attack on publicly funded arts. Under the guise of Ronald Reagan and other conservative politicians of the time such as Republican Senator Jesse Helms, the NEA struggled to maintain

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<sup>87</sup> Robert C. Morgan, “The End of the Art World,” in *Modern Art in the USA: Issues and Controversies of the 20th Century*, ed. Patricia Hills, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001): 349.

<sup>88</sup> Robert C. Morgan, “The End of the Art World,” 351.

<sup>89</sup> Philip Glahn, “Counterpublic Art and Social Practice,” in *The 1980s: A Critical and Transitional Decade*, ed. Kimberly R. Moffitt and Duncan A. Campbell, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 257.

its clout as a valid allocation of American taxpayer dollars. In his introduction for *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, art educator Philip Yenawine contributes the crumbling of the program to conceptions of art as cultural elitism. The lack of understanding, and consequently of appreciation, for art spurred ideals amongst the American public that art was “patronizing or dismissive,” and as Yenawine emphasizes promoted “...the lingering tradition of anti-intellectualism that undergird[ed] it [art]....”<sup>90</sup> Additionally, negative critiques of art put forth by conservative politicians and journalists fueled the attack on artists and the funding they receive from the government for promoting unsolicited sexuality, vulgarity, blasphemy and unpatriotic messages in their art. Though many of the conservative’s claims connected to the notion that taxpayers should not have to pay for “inappropriate” federally funded art, the majority of their contention lay in artists addressing of issues, such as homosexuality, poverty, women’s rights, and systemic racism, that went against their family values.<sup>91</sup>

Kathleen M. Sullivan, international trial-lawyer, testified at oversight hearings on content restrictions placed on federally funded NEA art projects in 1991. A large portion of her trial testimony traces the skillfully worded barriers included in provisions for the NEA in order to block out art deemed “obscene” by the advising committee. In calling into question politicians’ debate between “decent” and “indecent” art Sullivan successfully highlights a key component in the bifurcation of commodity-driven and publically producing art markets. She introduces her argument, “When government acts as art patron, it is bound by the First Amendment. Private art patrons may impose whatever content restrictions the wish on their protégés, for the Constitution in way fetters private taste or fancy.” In creating biased standards in the federal funding application process, the NEA spurred an economically based attack on creative license. In her

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<sup>90</sup> Phillip Yenawine, “Introduction,” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>91</sup> Philip Glahn, “Counterpublic Art and Social Practice,” 256.

report, Sullivan highlights the troublesome intentions of NEA legislation by citing the responsibility of the NEA Chairman as recorded in a 1990 revision of its guidelines. It states that the NEA Chairman must ensure that “artistic excellence and artistic merit are the criteria by which applications are judge, taking into consideration general standards of decency and respect for the diverse belief and value of the American public.”<sup>92</sup>

While not explicitly limiting, the former excerpt of the NEA reflects the freedom given to the NEA advisory board in determining what artworks are accepted for funding. The effect of this was two-fold. Artists chose to create “safer” works, straying away from controversial, political themes in order to comply with the NEA interpreted guidelines or artists pushed back separating themselves from the restrictions of the NEA and producing art through alternative means. Philip Glahn explains that some artists, he uses Bronx based artists Tim Rollins and the *Kids of Survival* or K.O.S program, found a way to integrate public, service-based art into a profit. For example, the K.O.S program worked with underprivileged Hispanic and black youth to develop their critical reading and visual literacy through communication of their experiences in relation to the plots of the books they read.<sup>93</sup> While the artworks produced through this program represented the students’ development in understanding the texts and ability to express their own emotions outside of the educational environment, they also became part of the commodified art circuit (figure 1). Exhibited in galleries, museums, and acquired for the public collections of museums including the Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museums of Art, and the Dia Foundation, Glahn posits them “...visible among the narratives of high culture.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Kathleen M. Sullivan, “Are Content Restrictions Constitutional?” *The Journal of Arts Management and Law* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1992), 323-7, in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, Philip Yenawine, (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 235.

<sup>93</sup> Philip Glahn, “Counterpublic Art,” 258.

<sup>94</sup> Philip Glahn, “Counterpublic Art,” 258.

The conflict existing between artists like Rollins and artist protesting such “aesthetic integration” and “dangers of cooptation,” as influenced by K.O.S’s and other artworks’ involvement with the commodified art market, preempts the conflicts of the economics of socially engaged critical practice.<sup>95</sup> Artists like Tim Rollins, knowing the importance of the work he was doing and the importance of including the voices of the youth he worked with in the narrative of America’s arguably most selective market, were willing to sacrifice the separation between public-service based art with commodity. Other artist groups such as Political Art Documentation/Distribution (1980) or Bullet Space (1985) segregated themselves from the art world in order to produce “alternative modes of knowledge and fantasy” to counter the “appropriation of the public sphere by private interest” (figures 2 and 3).<sup>96</sup> The work of PAD/D and Bullet Space, just like K.O.S, aimed to counter and critique particular social issues within their community through art making processes. Though these two groups approached their work more through guerilla tactics, much like Suzanne Lacey and her *Three Weeks in May*, whereas Rollins critiqued through the his utilization of the system. What makes these groups similar despite their attempts to distinguish themselves from the art market is the need for capital. Whether to make a profit or finance a project, money becomes an unwelcomed necessity to any public artist or art group. How do artists navigate a system from which they need monetary support and that they are publicly critiquing? This is the dilemma socially engaged critical practice was and is faced with in its various facets and operations. Just as PAD/D, Bullet Space, and Tim Rollins devised mechanisms of supervision or compliance within this system, socio-

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<sup>95</sup> Philip Glahn, “Counterpublic Art,” 258.

<sup>96</sup> Philip Glahn, “Counterpublic Art,” 259.

For a brief history of Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) see Tiernan Morgan’s 2014 article “Art in the 1980’s: The Forgotten History of PAD/D” on *Hyperallergic*. For more information on Bullet Space see their website <http://bulletspace.org/site/>.



critical practitioners and organizers seeing the great potential for change within this art form have developed alternative sources of funding to support these works today.

Budgetary cuts to the NEA, made alongside cuts in education budgets for arts, left the program unable to supply the necessary funding to every organization or system that required financial support. For this reason, independent, business oriented groups stepped in as third-party organizations in hopes of preventing further stunting of artistic growth in America. Yenawine describes the course of action as conforming to the free enterprise of the capitalist market and “...pulling your own freight...” what groups like PAD/D and Bullet Spaces saw as the jeopardizing to critical, artistic integrity.<sup>97</sup> The rise of third-party non-for-profit organizations for funding public art and socially engaged artistic practice, for example Creative Time and A Blade of Grass, allowed communities of practitioners to remain separate from such enterprisal affairs. In creating partnerships with artists through commissions and fellowship funding by taking on the responsibility of sourcing funding from both federal and private donors, these organizations have simplified the economic ventures of artists. Furthermore, the development of this kind of co-dependency has commenced the formalization of alternative systems of financing for socially critical art works. By working with these “middlemen” organizations, socially engaged artists can focus more on the community and public impact of their work, rather than profit and market value.

There do not exist many organizations, other than A Blade of Grass, that have definitive missions to fund socially engaged art because it is still emerging as an art form. Instead, organizations funding other non-commodifiable art forms, such as public, installation, and performance art, often finance works that cross over into socially critical practice. One such organization, and arguably a model for a Blade of Grass, is Creative Time. While funding at

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<sup>97</sup> Phillip Yenawine, “Introduction,” 10-11.

Creative Time is commissioned-based, rather than fellowship-based as with A Blade of Grass, the basic framework of the organization can help to contextualize alternative systems of funding emerging for socially engaged critical practice.

Developed in 1973 as part of a revitalization period for the public arts in New York City, Creative Time was part of an early foundation for a new art form, much like A Blade of Grass is for socially Engaged Critical Practice. Creative Time was founded as non-profit organization that celebrates the proliferation of artistic idea and thought throughout public spaces.<sup>98</sup> The establishment of Creative Time occurred during the beginnings of the culture wars between Nixon's conservative contingencies and the vivid counter-cultures birthed by the social movements of the 1960s and 70s. Public art, a new form of art coming out of these movements, thus proved vulnerable to governmental attacks on funding for the arts. Creative Time serves as an early example of art organizations creating alternative systems for funding projects. Devised of an executive board of business, scholars, and curators, Creative Time constructed a space to nurture public art both in practice and as a new art form. The environment Creative Time provides to artists is removed from the politics of the federal system and is instead governed by people who see value in this art form. The development of a framework for public art in New York City through the evolution of Creative Time is a model for the A Blade of Grass Organization. Furthermore, updated guidelines and policies for Creative Time commission demonstrate a standardization of socially engaged critical practice as an art form.

Though Creative time does not explicitly seek out socially engaged critical art works, their emphasis on “engaging broad audiences” and transcendence of socio-political boundaries

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<sup>98</sup> “Backgrounder,” *Creative Time*, accessed March 15, 2016, 1. [http://creativetime.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/CT\\_backgrounder.pdf](http://creativetime.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/CT_backgrounder.pdf).

reflect the same ideologies from which socially engaged art originated.<sup>99</sup> Projects funded by Creative Time have the same ephemerality, publicness, and at times, participatory engagement as socially engaged art, however, only some of the works cross over into the realm of service-based community impact commonly incorporated in socially engaged critical artistic practice. Reading through materials published by Creative Time, there is a clear emphasis of the production of a physical art object or artistic space, though the organization has co-sponsored more performative, symbolic works in recent years, take for example Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International* (2011) or Paul Ramirez Jonas' *Key to the City* (2010).<sup>100</sup> Creative Time's consciousness to these issues in making selections for the art projects they commission leads to a blending of contemporary public art with socially engaged critical practice in a form of hybridized art experience. Furthermore, Creative Time's projects from the early 2000s to present demonstrate a similar emphasis on community partnerships seen in socially engaged critical practice as projects more frequently feature collaboration with pre-existing cultural institutions in the city of New York.<sup>101</sup> Some examples include *Tribute in Light* (2002), a piece commissioned by Creative Time and the City of New York to commemorate the six month anniversary of the attack on 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, and most recently, *Drifting in Daylight* (May-June 2016), a multi-artist multi-platform artistic intervention in Central Park co-commissioned with the Central Park Conservancy.<sup>102</sup> While the guidelines for Creative Time

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<sup>99</sup> "About Creative Time," *Creative Time*.

<sup>100</sup> "Backgrounder," *Creative Time*, 2.

For more information on Bruguera's and Jonas' works see: "Projects: Immigrant Movement International," *Creative Time*, accessed March 22, 2016, <http://creativetime.org/projects/immigrant-movement-international/>; Tania Bruguera, "Immigrant Movement International," *Immigrant Movement International*, 2011, <http://immigrant-movement.us/wordpress/>; "Projects: Key to the City," *Creative Time*, accessed March 22, 2015, <http://creativetime.org/projects/key-to-the-city/>;

<sup>101</sup> "Backgrounder," *Creative Time*, 1.

<sup>102</sup> "Projects: Tribute in Light," *Creative Time*, Accessed March 22, 2016, <http://creativetime.org/projects/tribute-in-light/>; "Projects: Drifting in Daylight," *Creative Time*, Accessed March 22, 2016, <http://creativetime.org/projects/drifting-in-daylight/>.

projects do not specify that commissioned works need to take shape as socially engaged critical works, the organization only finances public art works reflective of Creative Time's three core values: art matters, artists' voices are important in shaping society, and public spaces are places for creative and free expression.<sup>103</sup> These distinct guidelines provide a framework for the continuously developing public art program in New York City, just as A Blade of Grass is doing for socially engaged critical practice.

Creative Time and A Blade of Grass both emerged as solutions to the lack of federal support for arts outside the commodified art system. Both organizations, unlike the National Endowment for the Arts and other federal funding programs, represent a like-minded community of artist, scholars, businessmen, and philanthropists that value the artist ideologies of socially engaged critical practice. Some socially engaged artists, like the Beehive Design Collective, prefer to operate independent from such organizations depending on grassroots fundraising in order to remain completely separated from the capitalist system. Other artists, for example an early socially engaged artist and creator of the acclaimed *Project Row Houses* Rick Lowe, turn their longstanding works into non-profit organizations.<sup>104</sup> In doing so, however, artists further blur the line between socially engaged art and service-based cultural production, something curator of Creative Time Nato Thompson emphasizes in his writings on 21st century socially engaged critical practices.<sup>105</sup> Despite the split between strategies of funding seen throughout various examples of socially engaged critical practices, third party, non-profit organizations offer

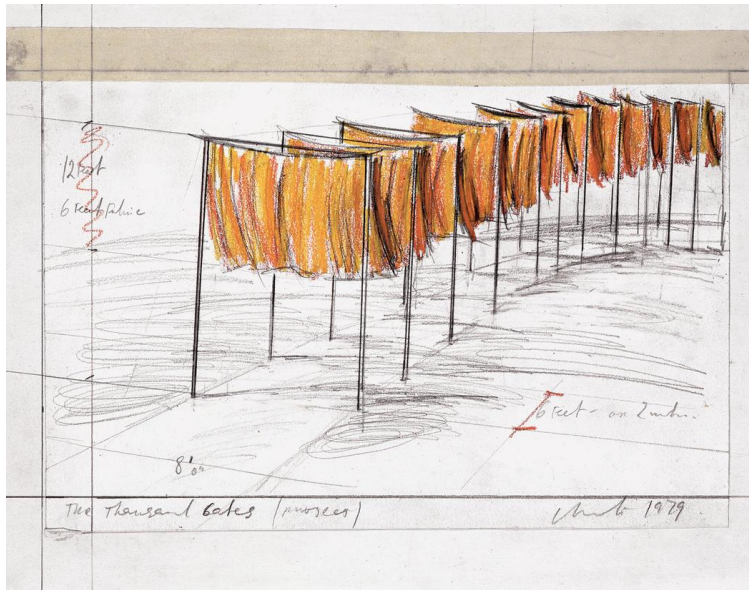
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<sup>103</sup> "About Creative Time," *Creative Time*, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://creativetime.org/about/>.

<sup>104</sup> *Project Row Houses* is a Houston-based artistic community created by Rick Lowe in 1993. Lowe purchased a row of "shotgun" homes in a historically black neighborhood at the edge of Houston. With the help of resident artists and community members, Lowe created a series of installation based galleries, low-income residences for young impoverished families, and education programs for underserved African-American communities in the area. Today, the *Project Row Houses* is classified as a non-profit organization. For more on this work see the website: "About," *Project Row Houses*, Accessed March 22, 2016, <http://projectrowhouses.org/>.

<sup>105</sup> Nato Thompson, "Socially Engaged Art Outside the Bounds of an Artistic Discipline," a talk delivered at The School of Art at Cooper Union, moderated by Doug Ashford, 2012, accessed March 1, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/27289754>.

a glimpse into the future of socially engaged art. These organizations allow artists and communities to focus on project development rather than financing and simultaneously advocate for socially engaged art through documenting and advertising their work to the public. These organizations' dissemination of the missions of socially engaged artists to broader audiences extends the impact of the work outside the community. When people see how these projects shift and enhance communities and people's lives, there emerges an understanding of how they operate and creates opportunities for investors to finance new projects.



**Figure 1:** Christo, *The Thousand Gates* (Project), Drawing 1979, Photo: Eeva-Inkeri. Accessed March 20, 2016. <http://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/the-gates#.VvW25RIrL-Z>.



**Figure 2:** Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *The Gates*, Central Park, New York City, 1979-2005, Photo: Wolfgang Volz, 2005. Accessed March 20, 2016. <http://christojeanneclaude.net/projects/the-gates#.VvW25RIrL-Z>.





Figure 3: Tim Rollins and K.O.S., *Workshop for Amerika IX*, 1987, Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina. Source: <http://fryemuseum.org/exhibition/3315/>.



Figure 4: Mimi Smith, "No Taxes for Bombs" (1981), xeroxed collage and drawing, on display on the Lower East Side, exact location unknown (courtesy Mimi Smith) Source: <http://hyperallergic.com/117621/art-in-the-1980s-the-forgotten-history-of-padd/>



**Figure 5:** 292 East 3rd Street in 1991 (photo courtesy of Bullet Space); 292 East 3rd Street 2011 (following the move of Bullet Space to a New Location) Source: <http://gvshp.org/blog/2011/09/19/a-hidden-east-village-gallery/>.



## **Conclusion**

### **Impact Evaluation, Assessing Socially Engaged Critical Practice**

The diversity of works existing under the umbrella of socially engaged art makes its assessment complex and difficult. The nature of socially engaged critical practice involves the creation of site specific, goal oriented projects with the overall purpose of inciting change within a particular community. The communities involved, interpreted as zones of impact on the local-global spectrum, vary according to a particular group's or artist's vision for the project. Assessment becomes more complicated as many of these socially engaged critical works simultaneously address several zones of impact, or evolve and expand to incorporate other zones of impact during the lifetime of a project. For example, Jan Mun's *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project* operates within a local zone of impact, as it immediately deals with Greenpoint residents, activists, educators, and laborers in the nearby areas of the Newtown Creek. At the same time, however, Mun has reached into the national zone of impact in her addressing of national Superfund projects and her partnership with the ExxonMobil Corporation.

Reflecting on the range of participants, audiences, and creative practitioners involved in organizing and executing a work of socially engaged art, the dilemma of measuring success is made more prevalent. The network of people involved in these projects convolute the role of critic or juror and fail to distinguish a single voice through which success is gaged. Does the responsibility lay in the hands of the artist or group whose vision is executed in the project? Do the communities for which the projects are created hold the power to define the work's success or does it depend on the voices of outside critics? What complicates this component of socially engaged critical practice is the restrictive system through which we consider and critique art as a society.

Though socially engaged critical practice has been a part of an artistic dialogue since the 1990s little has been done to contextualize it within discourses on contemporary art. Historically, writing on art by scholars, practicing artists, and critics have coalesced to produce an agreed upon system of artistic critique, yet writing on socially engaged art tends to stray from these themes. Instead, a great deal of writing on socially engaged critical practices focuses on discussing various works executed around the world and communicating them to the public in a comprehensible nature. There also exists confusion amongst the writings on socially engaged critical practice as to whether or not these works should be considered art. Interpretation greatly varies as some see these works more as cultural production, for instance Creative Time Nato Thompson, while others, including the artists and members of A Blade of Grass, perceive them as art. Clearly, systems for assessing socially engaged art demands flexibility. Attempting to understand these works from a singular perspective proves impossible because it is innately multifaceted. Thus, two conflicting perspectives on a social critical work could both be correct in some capacity. Much of this depends on the systems through which an individual or group critique a project. The blending of methodologies and techniques from protest art, public art, and participatory art with the utility and practicality of a service project within socially engaged art often confuses critics because it is conceptual. At what point does a public art work crossover into the realm of socially engaged critical practice? If it is seen as art, what about it is contemporary or artistic?

In “Socially Engaged Contemporary Art: Tactical and Strategic Manifestations,” an essay written for *Animating Democracy*, Nato Thompson attempts to posit analysis of socially engaged artwork within the dialogue on contemporary art.<sup>106</sup> He begins “Translating art into politics is not

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<sup>106</sup> *Animating Democracy* is a program run by the non-for-profit art organization and advocacy group Americans for the Arts.

easy,” he continues discussing the growth of “products of culture,” things he cites as television, fine art, film, advertisements, and the influences it has had on the way society understands the art world:

As the dynamic of cultural production becomes an increasing part of lived experience and the basis for political decisions, the fusion between art and politics becomes all the more critical in generating social change. To understand this peculiar fact, endemic to the 21st century, we must overcome the contemporary idea that art and politics are distinct fields.<sup>107</sup>

Nato’s statement definitely holds true to many forms of art, the contemporary art that is “tactile” as Thompson refers to in his piece and the nebulous entity that has emerged as socially engaged critical practice. Artists, like people, live within a society that constantly impresses upon them subliminal messages through use of the visual. Thompson’s explanation of contemporary art thus reflects the many artistic works of the past two decades that encompass issues proliferated throughout communities, countries, and international spaces for cultural production.<sup>108</sup> Here, even Thompson a curator of such socio-culturally engaged works appears torn. What exactly distinguished socially engaged critical practice, art, work from socially engaged contemporary art? Comparing his writing in this essay with a lecture he gave in 2012 for The School of Art at the Cooper Union and his published anthology of *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, it seems that Thompson’s ideas on these works fluctuate and become contingent on projects’ specific manifestation within society. This case-by-case consideration of socially engaged critical practice and the confusion that results in attempting to posit these practices into a broader, categorical framework are the result of the informality of social critical practice as an emerging art form.

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<sup>107</sup> Nato Thompson, “Socially Engaged Contemporary Art: Tactical and Strategic Manifestations,” *A Working Guide to the Landscapes of Art for Change*, America for the Arts, 2011, 2, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://animatingdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/NThompson%20Trend%20Paper.pdf>.

<sup>108</sup> Nato Thompson, “Socially Engaged Contemporary Art,” 2-3.

Socially engaged critical practice pulls from numerous art forms that developed over the last six decades including activist art, participatory art, performance art, and public art. All socially engaged art works demonstrate the shared strategies that distinguish them from these other art forms: operation on the local-global spectrum, bringing awareness to an issue by making visible the invisible, and community engagement. However, other tactics utilized by an artist in executing a project may reflect an affinity for one of the several influencing art forms. For this reason, the types of projects produced by social critical practitioners appear on a fluid spectrum. The murals and illustrations by the Beehive Design Collective, for example, echo the graphic works of activist movements and protest art coming out of the 1960s. Jan Mun's *Greenpoint Bioremediation Project*, on the other hand, is much more conceptual and like participatory art, relies greatly on interpersonal relationships built through artist-audience interactions. Artist's individual identities and the identities of community members also influence the way approach of a socially engaged artwork. Since these projects deal directly with the community, they must respect the diversity of the people with whom they interact. As a result, the site specificity of socially engaged critical practice adds another layer of complexity to its definition.

As the previous chapters of this study show, and Nato Thompson's writing reflects, it is extremely difficult to label a socially engaged artwork as successful or unsuccessful because it lacks a singular definition. Social critical practice is an art form that rejects sweeping judgments because, unlike an art object, it is a culmination of many smaller interactions, projects, and elements working together to solve a larger, community issue. The transformation of service in art and the exchange that takes place between artist and community through participation in a socially engaged critical practice does not have a monetary value because they are ephemeral and

conceptual. While socially engaged art sometimes manifests in an object, for instance the Beehive Design Collectives murals or Jan Mun's *Fairy Rings*, these objects exist as tools to allow others who may not be artists to continue work on the project. In this case, traditional methods for aesthetic assessment are superficial because the object is not the end goal for socially engaged critical practice. Rather, the shared goals of social critical practice are the development of new skills across disciplines, cultural and artistic exchange, and most importantly, the project's ability to incite change within its zone of impact. In this way, the success of a project is, like the project itself, multifaceted in nature. Because social critical works are so far removed from the formalized system of evaluation utilized in the commodified art market, there is no one group that can pass judgment on socially engaged critical practice as a whole. All parties participating in the execution of a socially engaged artwork, the artist, the community, the investors or sponsoring organizations, contribute to this judgment.

Despite having the ability to assess social critical works, artist and participating communities also face challenges. Socially engaged art works, like most art works, require planning, and thus go through a series of stages from planning, to fundraising, and then to implementation. Seeing as socially engaged critical practice as a form of artistic problem solving, these stages represent the cycle of trial and error throughout the span of a project. Socially engaged critical practice is similar to a biological feedback mechanism in this way; changes in the community or environment during the course of project execution demand specific responses making the outcome of the work more or less unpredictable. Thus, the missions of socially engaged art works are in a state of constant evolution and resultantly, demand continuous reassessment.

With the rise of new organizations focused on providing funding and sponsorship to socially engaged art, the ambiguity of socially engaged critical practice and process will subside. The application process and review procedures established as part of the A Blade of Grass Fellowships program emphasize the shared strategies that loosely thread the various strains of social critical practice together. As one of few organizations directly dealing with socially engaged critical practice, A Blade of Grass sets a precedent for the way this art form will manifest in coming years. The organization's focus on "process over product," capacity to create social change, and viability in daily environments as "valuable" assets to a socially engaged art work communicates preservation of the values of community engagement and social impact on which this art form is based. As socially engaged critical practices and organizations like A Blade of Grass sophisticate and mature, so will the vocabulary for discussing and critiquing these art forms. Until then, we must continue to make room for alternative process-based art forms by addressing the relationship of art and objecthood and developing broader understandings for conceptual artistic practices.

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