

FIELD

A JOURNAL OF SOCIALLY-
ENGAGED ART CRITICISM

Editorial

Grant Kester

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *FIELD*, a journal of socially engaged art criticism.¹ *FIELD* was created in response to the remarkable proliferation of contemporary socially engaged art over the past fifteen years. This is a complex, contradictory and unruly area of practice that is distinguished by its extraordinary geographic scope. Today we find socially engaged art projects under development around the globe, from India to Ecuador, from Senegal to Ukraine, from Cambodia to Ireland, and beyond. While otherwise quite diverse, this field is driven by a common desire to establish new relationships between artistic practice and other fields of knowledge production, from critical pedagogy to participatory design, and from activist ethnography to radical social work. In many cases it has been inspired by, or affiliated with, new movements for social and economic justice around the globe. Throughout this field of practice we see a persistent engagement with sites of resistance and activism, and a desire to move beyond existing definitions of both art and the political. However, to speak of a singular “field” is itself misleading, given the dramatic differences in geo-political context, artistic and activist traditions, vernacular languages of practice, and modes of address that frame work in any given setting and situation. At the same time, an often superficial concept of social engagement has become increasingly fashionable among many museums, art schools and foundations in Europe and the United States, leading to the emergence of the new genre of

“participatory” or “social” art practice commonly encountered in biennials, kunsthalls and art fairs.

This participatory turn is, of course, not unique to contemporary art. In fact, there is growing interest in new forms of public participation or interaction across a broad range of cultural and social fields, from debates over deliberative democracy in current political theory to new activist forms based on modes of crowdsourcing and collective mobilization via technology. Not surprisingly, this tendency has easily enough been trivialized or used to reinforce, rather than challenge, hierarchical forms of power and decision-making. In the arts I believe the renewed interest in social engagement and collaboration is the result of two related factors. The first is a sense of frustration with several decades of art critical discourse that has demonstrated an impressive vigilance about the various ways in which social or cultural resistance can be compromised by the hegemonic forces of capitalism, but a marked reluctance to learn from those moments in which social action can be productive, generative or transformative. And the second is the feeling, especially evident among a younger generation of artists, that it’s necessary to begin again to understand the nature of the political through a practical return to the most basic relationships and questions; of self to other, of individual to collective, of autonomy and solidarity, and conflict and consensus, against the grain of a now dominant neo-liberal capitalism and in the absence of the reassuring teleologies of past revolutionary movements.

There is clearly a need for more intelligent and nuanced analysis of this diverse field. However, it has become increasingly evident that the normative theoretical conventions and research methodologies governing contemporary art criticism are ill equipped to respond to the questions this work raises. *FIELD* was created in order to foster the development of new critical forms, capable of addressing a broad range of contemporary socially engaged, collaborative and participatory art practices. Just as these new practices often cross boundaries between art, activism, urbanism, anthropology and many other fields, the criticism and analysis of this work

requires a new, trans-disciplinary approach that moves beyond the traditions of existing art theory and criticism and opens out to other disciplines, including those which possess a more robust model of field research and a greater sensitivity to the complex function of social interaction at both the micro- and macro-political level. In this sense *FIELD* is intended as an experiment or a test, a *Versuch* as Brecht might describe it, to determine if dialogue across institutional, discursive and disciplinary boundaries can produce a more incisive critical and analytic frame for socially engaged art.

During the journal's initial phase we'll be publishing three issues per-year (fall, winter and spring), with plans for a more frequent production schedule in the future. In addition to our regular call-for-papers we are considering ideas for special editions devoted to key issues and debates in the field. We are especially concerned with facilitating long-term critical engagement with contemporary practice. This kind of research is both costly and time-consuming, so we're hoping to secure funding to support the travel, lodging and research expenses of critics seeking to spend an extended period of time at the site of a specific project. In the same manner, we want to encourage a critical analysis that can gauge the long-term effects of socially engaged practices, by allowing critics to revisit a community or site once a given project has been completed. We are also working to develop mechanisms to incorporate the insights of participants and collaborators involved in specific projects, which are rarely included in existing critical accounts. Finally, cognizant of the limited geographic scope of our first issue, we are working to identify a network of international contributing editors in order to enhance our coverage of work produced outside of the established circuits of US and EU-based art production.

It is in the nature of this practice that many projects exist on the boundaries of art and some adjacent domain of cultural or social production. We are less concerned here with what has become a largely sterile set of debates about the status of this work as "art," than with determining, through the close investigation of specific projects, the ways in which power and resistance operate through

a manifold of aesthetic, discursive, inter-subjective and institutional factors. This doesn't mean we aren't concerned with the artistic status of this work, only that we believe a deeper understanding of this status is unlikely to result from the crude opposition between ethics and aesthetics or singular and collective authorship that has characterized recent critical dialogue. Rather, it requires a sustained and immersive engagement with site, process and practice that is able to move fluidly from the power dynamics encoded in the physical proximity of individual bodies to the macro-political framing of local or situational gestures in the context of global neo-liberalism. Unfortunately, existing debates have been premised on a problematic conceptual reification, as critics assign *a priori* ethico-political values to generic concepts of "disruption" and "consensus," irrespective of their actual function at specific sites of resistance. We seek, instead, to develop a pragmatic analysis that can help us understand how the forms of critical, self-reflective insight that we have come to identify with aesthetic experience can be produced in contexts and through forms of cultural, social or institutional framing, quite different from those we associate with conventional works of art.

If traditional aesthetic experience was premised on a utopian viewer-yet-to-be who was sufficiently cultivated to adopt a properly disinterested attitude to the work of art, today's avant-garde is based on an equally hypothetical subject; the philistine viewer whose consciousness would actually be transformed by the now-programmatic forms of disruption delivered by the contemporary artist. The shift in contemporary socially engaged art practice to an aesthetic concerned with actual subjects and subjectivity, rather than rhetorical or hypothetical models of reception, poses a significant challenge to the conventions of the field. Critics frequently ignore the fact that those works most desperate to advertise their disruptive criticality are often just as likely to reinforce, rather than challenge, normative values and identities. At the same time, projects that incorporate moments of provisional consensus can also enact forms of intersubjective or institutional conflict that are directly

related to ongoing processes of both agonistic and antagonistic political action. One of our chief goals, then, is to overcome the imprecise understanding of resistance and criticality that is a typical feature of current art critical discourse. The art world is awash in theoretical *grand récits* and axiomatic declarations, but we are sorely lacking in any useful intermediary theories that retain a sufficient engagement with the materiality of practice to open up its complex interrelationship to larger political and economic structures. It is our belief that appropriate criteria for the analysis of socially engaged art can only emerge out of an epistemological inquiry that seeks to provide both a more comprehensive research methodology and a basic definitional language that would allow us to more confidently describe the scope and function of the work itself.

In This Issue...

Currently under arrest for her audacity in seeking to provide a forum for Cuban citizens to speak freely in the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, Tania Bruguera's work has consistently explored the nature of political speech and autonomy. *FIELD* 1 features an extended interview with Bruguera by *FIELD* editorial collective member Alex Kershaw in which she reflects on the changes that have occurred in her *Immigrant Movement International* (IMI) project in Queens. In developing IMI over the past five years Bruguera has long grappled with the question of sustainability, especially as IMI is now entering what she terms a transitional "political" phase. In her interview here she discusses the complex processes involved in the evolution of IMI, and reflects on the ways in which she has begun to withdraw from the project. We began this interview several months ago, prior to Bruguera's arrest by Cuban authorities. Remarkably, she was able to continue working with us to refine it even after her incarceration. We dedicate the inaugural issue of *FIELD* to Tania in the hope that she will soon be free and able to continue her work.

Existing writing on the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko focuses almost exclusively on the visual analysis of the images he projects, as they relate to specific urban and architectural contexts. As Wodiczko argues in this issue of *FIELD*, this form of criticism, while important, ignores what is for him an absolutely central aspect of his practice: the process by which he organizes constituents and collaborators to generate the material for his projections. In his essay here, Wodiczko describes a nested series of social and collaborative relationships that evolve to produce what he terms the “Inner Public” of each of his projects. Here the personal and political itineraries of specific collaborators, in this case in the cities of Tijuana and Londonderry, provide the essential foundation and performative content for any given projection, as it is later presented to, and perceived by, an “Outer Public” of viewers, critics and media. We hope to make contact with some of the Tijuana project’s original participants for a follow-up report in a future issue.

The essay, “A Week in Pasadena,” by anthropologists George Marcus and Christine Hegel and designer Luke Cantarella, outlines a new working methodology that they have developed at the intersection of ethnographic research and the design charette. The “Creative Encounter” is their term for a heuristic system of collaborative research that seeks to circumvent what can often become the monological inwardness of conventional scholarly inquiry. By formalizing epistemological impasses through a shared design process it opens up new insights into complex cultural problems, as evidenced by their work together at the World Trade Organization. What is of particular interest here is the capacity of the Creative Encounter to generate new, situational, theoretical models. These *petits récits*, to use Lyotard’s phrase, evolve out of the experience of practice itself, and provide a useful model for how we might reconceive the creation of art theory.

Artist and critic Greg Sholette writes for us on the tenth anniversary of the influential Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) exhibition *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*. Sholette, collaborating with MASS MoCA

curator Nato Thompson, edited the widely circulated catalog for the exhibition (*Users Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*). For Sholette *The Interventionists* marked a watershed moment in the evolution of activist or socially engaged art, when new forms of tactical media retained a meaningful connection to a “long range vision of political transformation.” In his observations on the vicissitudes of socially engaged or activist art since the early 2000s, Sholette reflects on the rapidly shrinking space for political dissent and opposition under a triumphant neo-liberalism, and speculates on the relationship between this impoverished public sphere and the turn towards gestures of superficial, de-politicized conviviality in contemporary art.

The questions of sustainability and transformation that are raised in Tania Bruguera’s interview return again in Sue Bell Yank’s study of Jeanne van Heeswijk’s *Freehouse* project in Rotterdam. The project began in 1998 as an effort to survey existing economic and cultural resources in Afrikaanderwijk, a largely immigrant community in south Rotterdam. The goal was to facilitate the development of a self-organized and mutually supportive local economy among small businesses and cultural organizations in the area. As the project continued to grow and evolve over the intervening years it became apparent that it would have to acquire a new and more ambitious organizational form, involving its transformation into a larger Wijk or neighborhood cooperative. As Heeswijk begins to distance herself from the operations of the new Wijk it finds itself facing a central, and symptomatic, political challenge. How do you encourage people to participate in a cooperative enterprise if it involves some sacrifice of their immediate economic self-interest for the sake of the community’s long-term, collective wellbeing?

Independent scholar, activist and writer Marc Herbst, in his essay “Thoughts On the Cultural Policy of a Failed State,” draws on his experience living in Leipzig to reflect on the relationship between the anti-capitalist values of many artists affiliated with the anti-globalization movement in the 1990s and the experience of actually-existing socialism in East Germany. While residing in Leipzig

Herbst was struck by the imaginary legacy of East Germany, as conveyed by the “printed detritus” associated with state sponsored cultural programs. In this essay he negotiates the uneasy relationship between the utopian promise of socialism and its material reality. In particular, Herbst is concerned with the “wobble room” that might exist between a given political system (whether state socialist or neo-liberal) and the potentials of cultural action within that system.

While it is now customary for museums to attempt to de-contextualize conventional works of art by placing them in settings defined by their class or race difference from art world norms (e.g., Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Musée Précaire Albinet* in 2004, which brought “master” works from the Pompidou to the banlieues of Paris), the expansion of social art practice is leading to a growing tendency to reverse the flow of cultural capital, by bringing varieties of vernacular culture (including the culture of activism) into the museum. In Sebastian Loewe’s essay, “When Protest Becomes Art,” the German critic examines the tensions that accompanied efforts by Documenta and the Berlin Biennale to appropriate or exhibit the Occupy movement as part of their programming in 2012. The ensuing collision of projection, misinterpretation, fetishization and opportunism reveals a great deal about the nature of both Occupy as a movement and current curatorial practice.

In her interview with *FIELD* editorial collective member Noni Brynjolson, Canadian artist Althea Thauberger discusses her project *Murphy Canyon Choir*, which was produced in San Diego and Tijuana as part of the 2005 inSite exhibition. The choir was composed of the spouses of active-duty sailors and Marines living at Murphy Canyon, a large military housing complex in San Diego. Thauberger was surprised to discover that many in the military enlist for economic reasons, and that their families often live at or below the poverty level. In her conversation with Brynjolson, Thauberger reflects on her own ambivalent relationship to military culture as well as the complex formation of the audience for the choir’s performance, which combined art world cognoscenti associated with inSite along with the friends and families of the military spouses. Since active

duty military families relocate regularly we've been unable to locate any of the original participants to provide their own insights into the project.

Our inaugural issue also includes the first in an occasional series which we call "Re-posts." These are essays written by scholars outside the disciplines of art history and theory that shed light on key issues in our field. In this issue we are pleased to re-publish Francesca Polletta's essay "How Participatory Democracy Became White: Culture and Organizational Choice," which originally appeared in the June 2005 issue of the journal *Mobilization*. Polletta is the author of *Freedom is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), a penetrating study of the deliberative processes employed in the Civil Rights movement. In this essay Polletta explores a key transition period in the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as it came to disavow the non-hierarchical and consensus-based decision-making techniques on which the group was founded. By the mid-1960s, as Polletta notes, "participatory" forms of organization were increasingly associated with white, middle-class, student-based protest organizations. Polletta's essay provides an illuminating historical context for the current interest in non-hierarchical decision-making in contemporary social art practice, with particular relevance for work produced in the United States.

FIELD will regularly feature reviews and reports related to new publications, exhibitions, symposia and other forums for debate and discussion associated with socially engaged art. The current issue includes reports on two recent conferences. The first, by *FIELD* editorial collective member Stephanie Sherman, examines the June 2014 "New Rural Arts Seminar," organized by the Littoral Arts Trust in England and the second, by Megan Voeller, responds to the "A Lived Practice" symposium, organized by curator Mary Jane Jacob at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in November 2014. We are also pleased to publish a review by *FIELD* editorial collective member Paloma Checa-Gismero, focusing on an exhibition by Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves at the Museo Universitario Arte

Contemporáneo in Mexico City this past fall (*On the Return of the Lake*).

Finally, we want to express our sincere gratitude to Jorge Munguía and Blair Richardson of Buro Buro for their extremely generous donation of design and website building labor (including the design of the *FIELD* logo), as well as Jonathan Walton and Seth Ferris for their help with fine-tuning the website and formatting materials for our first issue. We also want to thank the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts as well as the University of California, San Diego Division of Arts and Humanities and Visual Arts department for their support. Most importantly, I want to thank the members of our Editorial Advisory Board and Editorial Collective (Michael Ano, Noni Brynjolson, Paloma Checa-Gismero, Julia Fernandez, Alex Kershaw and Stephanie Sherman). Without their passion, dedication and hard work over the past year the realization of *FIELD* would have been impossible.

Grant Kester is the founding editor of *FIELD* and Professor of Art History in the Visual Arts department at the University of California, San Diego. His publications include *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Duke University Press, 1998), *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2004) and *The One and the Many: Agency and Identity in Contemporary Collaborative Art* (Duke University Press, 2011). He has recently completed work on *Collective Situations: Dialogues in Contemporary Latin American Art 1995-2010*, an anthology of writings by art collectives working in Latin America produced in collaboration with Bill Kelley, which is under contract with Duke University Press.

Notes

1. We've chosen the term "socially engaged art" because we believe there is some value in retaining the concept of "engagement," but we aren't overly invested in terminology and view the proliferation of terms to describe various forms or aspects of this practice (social, participatory, activist, and so on) as the healthy sign of a field that has not yet been subject to art historical closure.