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ARE ETHICS BETTER THAN PURE AESTHETICS?

NOT THIS...

Away from the glitz of record-breaking auction prices and extravagant art parties, austerity has given strength to a new movement of socially engaged artists.
By Christian Viveros-Fauné

According to the poet W.H. Auden, artists have long been engaged with mankind's troubles: "About suffering they were never wrong/The Old Masters: how well they understood/Its human position." But if the Anglo-American bard was right, why is it that so much contemporary art avoids present-day adversity? Faced with walloping economic, social, and environmental crises, a robust counter trend has gained strength over the years among artists that prefer ethics and artistic engagement over the aesthetics of business as usual.

If the history of art and its long relationship to power appears to have taken an especially servile turn, it's not for want of better historical examples. Back in pre-modern times, portraits of kings and popes were emblems of wealth, prestige and position – a convention certain memorable artists used to razz their patrons (consider Raphael's scathing portrait of a pampered, materialistic Pope Leo X).

The 18th and 19th centuries ushered in the darkly moral visions of, among others, Hogarth, Géricault, Daumier and Goya (the Spaniard's *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid: the Executions on Principe Pio Hill* remains among the most durable protests against political violence). The 20th century, for its part, witnessed an unprecedented political role for artists amid larger upheavals. Radical experiments like the Soviet avant-garde, Mexican mural paintings, and the US government's WPA projects emerged, while Picasso's *Guernica*, 1937, became perhaps the greatest anti-war painting ever made.

Finally, at the tail end of the century, urgent issues such as the Vietnam War and the Aids epidemic drove artists and artist collectives, including Hans Haacke, Felix González-Torres, Gran Fury and The Guerrilla Girls, to address political and social inequities with a view to critiquing specific injustices.

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But in the new millennium, says Nato Thompson, the chief curator of New York's Creative Time art project production agency, the 2008 world financial crisis has moved artists to seek a larger social role for art and its relationship to power in greater numbers. "Part of it was the Occupy movement," Thompson says, "but what's really new is that many more artists than before have come to realise that the machine that drives the global and art economies is radically corrupt. Once you acknowledge that basic fact, it's psychotic to not try and effect change."

Making things happen

The knock-on effects of the recession in the US and Europe contrast starkly with record auction house prices and extravagant parties thrown by powerhouse galleries and private museums. "Most artists are broke today," Thompson says, "which tells you objectively that the way a lot of the art world operates doesn't reflect its actual composition." Instead, Thompson says, a new spirit of formal experimentation is upon us – one that is tied to the expansion of an existing framework of artists working outside the established system. Of course, the framework that he refers to is not exactly new (Thompson helped trace its origins in the 2011 exhibition and 2012 book *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*). Instead, this alternative history casts back to 1960s and 1970s process art, to Allan Kaprow's happenings and to Joseph Beuys's utopian ideal of "social sculpture".

Generally called either "socially engaged art", or, in academic argot, "social practice", this rejuvenated form aims to break with the art world's current love affair with high finance and its lavish taste for art for art's sake. A mix of hybrid, multidisciplinary efforts, several such enterprises have proven starkly effective at generating media headlines – think of Jeremy Deller's bouncy Stonehenge replica (*Sacrilege*,

MICHEL REIN PARIS/BRUXELLES
GMR

2012) in the UK and Thomas Hirschhorn's participatory work *Gramsci Monument*, 2013, in the Bronx.

But there's more to these community-driven works of art than good PR. When at their most radical, the actual content of these art activities fuses what the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas called "communicative action" with Deller's celebrated self-definition as a socially-conscious creator: "I went from being an artist who makes things to being an artist who makes things happen."

When asked to list successful examples of socially engaged art, Thompson immediately names Tania Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International (a bricks-and-mortar centre for art and civil rights that the Cuban artist started in 2011 in Queens, New York) and Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses (a six-block stretch of art-driven urban revitalisation in Houston, Texas, begun by the Alabama native in 1993). Both projects, says Thompson, are prominent examples of large-scale works of art that demonstrate an amplified social role for artists, as well as a hunger for "deep meaning". Not your run of the mill gallery exhibition or museum fare, these works constitute, Thompson declares new forms for newly difficult times. "Paintings and sculptures are great ways to communicate protest," he says, "but artists today are coming up with other ways to touch people's lives, and I think that's where the real potential for political art is today."

What Thompson describes squares neatly with artist Pablo Helguera's 2011 primer on the subject, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: a Material and Techniques Handbook*. Intended as a "reference book", Helguera's practical volume points out that this relatively new art form is made up of experimental borrowings from what many people would consider real-world

...BUT THIS

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disciplines: teaching, architecture, urbanism, real estate, and even finance. Helguera defines socially engaged art as "a form of performance in an expanded field" that does not merely try to assume the role of "amateur anthropologist, sociologist, etc". Instead, says Helguera, this kind of art identifies critical social subjects to be treated (say, the price of education, chronic unemployment or lack of housing) while making art "visible to other disciplines".

The key, says Helguera, is transforming art into an "actual and not a symbolic practice". Rather than representations, what Helguera is ultimately after – as seen in his own recent installation of Manhattan's only Spanish-language bookstore at Kent Gallery in Chelsea – exists "somewhere between art and non-art" and depends on "actual, not imagined or hypothetical, social action".

Deborah Fischer, the executive director of A Blade of Grass – the world's first non-profit funding organisation to focus exclusively on socially engaged art – is convinced that the kind of art her group funds, when taken as a whole, is "a game-changer". "What we're talking about is an avant-garde practice that's advanced beyond institutional critique and that's moving the dialogue forward," she says, drawing parallels between projects like Mel Chin's "Fundred Dollar Bill Project" – an artist-engineered environmental campaign that has included 400,000 participants to date – to the interdisciplinary problem-solving proposed by social entrepreneurship in the business and non-profit worlds. "In a nutshell," she says, "this is the first new art movement since the 1970s."

A Blade of Grass awards individual grants of $30,000 to $50,000. So how does Fischer judge the quality of socially engaged art? "There is a beauty in the quality of gestures with the best art," she says, "the same way that beauty exists in certain mathematical equations. But that beauty is also manifested ethically – in the compassion, collaboration and efficacy that drive these projects. For a work of socially engaged art, like Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument*, to be ethically beautiful it has to accrue to more than the artist's brand."

Fischer has instituted a set of pragmatic "assessments" to ensure that the projects her organisation funds reach their maximum potential: these include peer reviews, participant research and the use of independent evaluators. Fischer's diligence echoes the concerns of neo-documentary photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier, who is critical of artists fresh out of graduate programmes in social practice who have descended on communities like her native Braddock, Pennsylvania. "There's a huge disparity between them – in privileges, advancements and resources – and the working-class inhabitants of a disadvantaged city like Braddock," Frazier says about the rust-belt town for which she has become an artist laureate. "The white creative class can't just move into failed black communities and make them their own."

The great divide

Frazier's example flags up not only a racial divide, but also a gap in fundamental values between educated white graduates and the inhabitants of predominantly black, low-income communities. But there is another divide implicit in her criticism – a nascent split between the ascendant fortunes of socially engaged art and other traditional forms of representation that, Frazier maintains, document and give voice to disenfranchised populations. "I represent the people in my community," Frazier says, after invoking the example of American photographer Lewis Hines' century-old use of the camera for social reform. "I not only work with them directly. I basically function as a historian and documentarian to amplify their voices and points of view."

In Houston, Rick Lowe, who in the 1990s founded the now 40-property, community art venture that is Project Row Houses, says: "The funny thing is that in a lot of ways I work in the same way today as I did when I was a painter: what's really important is the symbolic and representative part of what we're doing."

Lowe is clear about the real-world limitations associated with using art to foment social processes. "Right now, economics has a greater impact on the work I'm doing than the work I'm doing has on economics," he says. While its not-for-profit status puts Project Row Houses on the same economic footing as museums and NGOs, Lowe says that what distinguishes his venture from conventional non-profits is the emphasis placed on "the value of creativity" in people's actual lives.

But still, the basic question remains: does art have a special responsibility to address the social, political and economic issues of its time? "Art is humanity's way of reflecting on the world," Lowe says, "but it has no magical qualities. Ultimately, it's all about values. For the art market the value of art is money. For us it's about reflecting on a common humanity."