Selections from Pablo Helguera’s *Education for Socially Engaged Art* ...

Examine these excerpts from Chapter 3 of Helguera in light of *They Say / I Say*, notably Chapter 4 (“Yes / No / Okay, But: Three Ways to Respond”), Chapter 5 (“And Yet: Distinguishing What You Say from What They Say”), and Chapter 6 (“Skeptics May Object: Planting a Naysayer in Your Text”). Some passages are highlighted (by Dr. Bassett); consider the perspectives implied by them.

An artist—let’s call her Joanna—is invited by the local arts council of a small American town—we’ll call it Row Creek—to do an art project. Joanna wants to do a socially engaged project that will help empower the town’s citizens and gain visibility for the area. She arranges for artist friends of hers to perform/install site-specific pieces in different storefronts and public spaces in the town over one weekend and calls the event Row Creek Show. The projects are conceptually intricate and many appear to be aimed more at an art world public than the townspeople, but the event acquires a big buzz, including reviews in the mainstream press. The residents, at first bewildered by the artworks, become excited by the media attention. The next year, the town wants to do another Row Creek Show. Joanna has moved on to other things and is not interested in reprising the project, and she tells the town leaders so. Very well, they say, we’ll do it on our own, but this time we will have local artisans and craftspeople show their work. Joanna now has a conflict: barring returning to Row Creek and organizing the year’s event herself, she must either entirely give up her authorship of the weekend and ask the town to disassociate her name with the project, losing credit for the original work, or become tangentially involved and endorse something that, to her, lacks artistic integrity. She can’t make a strong case against extending the invitation to the craftspeople because the conceptual aspect of the original project was never discussed. What kind of miscommunication took place? Should Joanna have proceeded differently in the conception of the piece?

A second scenario: an international curator creates a series of artist residencies in an isolated indigenous community in Peru. He convinces the town to allow the artists to present a variety of projects there, and gives the artists free rein to respond to the local environment. The community members, who have a very distant or nonexistent relationship with art, find it hard to see the artists as more than crazy tourists or missionaries. The artists gradually decide to take an altruistic approach and start doing things for the community: fixing roads, volunteering in social services, etc. The community is very appreciative, and the artist’s projects, in varied degrees, help improve the life of the town. However, the curator and the artists share a sense that the experience as beneficial as it was to the town, did not really create interesting or relevant artworks, which was the implicit goal. Did the artists sacrifice too much in the process? (Helguera, pp. 27-28).

A common problem with SEA is that most communities don’t understand what a conceptual artist does or the complex demands our profession makes on our activities—for example, documentation and its legal implications: if we videotape an activity, do the participants understand that their images may wind up in a museum collection? Also, more generally, most people don’t consider social interaction to be part of the realm of art, and this can cause miscommunications. Part of the frustration felt by the organizers of the Peruvian residency program and the Row Creek Show was that they were unable to communicate the importance of regarding their activities as artwork and what that meant in terms of the engagement they were anticipating. While it is perhaps not possible or appropriate to explain the history of conceptual art to someone who is new to it, honesty and directness are important in establishing relationships of trust, and trust is key in engaging in productive activities with others (Helguera, p. 33).
A common inquiry I receive from art students regarding the relationship between social work and social practice often takes this form: “If I just want to help people, why should I call it art?” Conversely, a non-artist at a recent SEA conference I attended said to the speaker, “I have been unsuccessfully trying to create a business that supports sustainability. If I call it art, might I have a greater chance of success?”

These questions emerge from the perception that social work and social engaged art are interchangeable or at least that an action in one area may successfully become meaningful in another. It is true that in some cases a social work project that effects change in a positive manner in a community could also fall under the rubric of artwork. Similarly, an artist may share the same or similar values with a social worker—making some forms of SEA appear indistinguishable from social work, which further complicates the blurring between the two areas.

However, social work and SEA, while they operate in the same social ecosystems and can look strikingly similar, differ widely in their goals. Social work is a value-based profession based on a tradition of beliefs and systems that aim for the betterment of humanity and support ideals such as social justice, the defense of human dignity and worth, and the strengthening of human relationships. An artist, in contrast, may subscribe to the same values but make work that ironizes, problematizes, and even enhances tensions around those subjects, in order to provoke reflection.

The traditional argument against equating SEA with social work is that to do so would subject art to direct instrumentalization, relinquishing a crucial aspect of art-making that demands self-reflexivity and criticality (remember the hypothetical children’s community mural from the previous chapter). This argument, however, is weak; it precludes the possibility that art can be deliberately instrumental and intentionally abandon any hopes of self-reflexivity, ideas that some artists are interested in. The stronger argument is that SEA has a double function that social work lacks. When we make a socially engaged artwork, we are not just offering a service to a community (assuming it is a service-oriented piece); we are proposing our action as a symbolic statement in the context of our cultural history (and/or art history) and entering into a larger artistic debate. Artist Paul Chan explicitly articulated his project Waiting for Godot in New Orleans (2007) as one that aimed to service the local community while also servicing the art world, in a quest to find a symbolic action that would reflect on issues raised by Hurricane Katrina—such as the social invisibility of a substantial segment of American society. While SEA works do not have to be that explicit in their purpose, there is always a clear desire by their authors to engage a second interlocutor (or “client,” to use social work terminology), other than the community of participants—that is, the art world, which evaluates the project not just for what it has accomplished, but also as a symbolic action.

Some artists are adamant that their work blurs the boundaries between social work and art work, and others are not concerned whether their work is defined as art or non-art, thus taking a strictly noncommittal position. But in cases like the latter, the simple referencing of the possible dichotomy between art and non-art is already an acceptance that the activity is operating to a degree within the realm of art. Similarly, where the work appears, where the story is told, and if, whether, and how the artist “profits” from the work (whether just in the reputational economy or by selling objects related to the project as artworks) are telling signs of the work’s relationship to art and the art world.

Having established the distinction between social work and SEA, it is useful to now turn to the similarities between the forms (Helguera, pp. 35-37)....