INTERVIEW

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The lure of diglossia: A conversation with Grant Kester

ABSTRACT

This interview with Grant Kester touches on the main issues surrounding socially engaged art. Kester, one of the leading voices in the configuration of a specific critical approach to collaborative, socially led artistic processes, depicts in this conversation a broad panorama of practices spanning from the 1980s to the present moment, a time when mainstream art institutions have begun embracing social practice. Attentive to that process, Kester reconstructs some pivotal experiments oriented to the concretion of social change through artistic means. He also aims to frame the global purchase of socially engaged art, paying attention to how this expansion affects the critical approaches to specific artistic projects, and disclosing how socially engaged art projects can still hold an emancipative potential.

In an essay published in 2016 under the title ‘On the relationship between theory and practice in socially engaged art’, the art historian and critic Grant Kester points out that the analysis of socially engaged art necessarily
involves more than the question of nomenclature and definition. The difficulties that art critics and academia have had in identifying a proper name that designates a set of practices more easily recognizable than catalogue-able is, he argues, a positive symptom, even more so at a time when the professionalization of various forms of socially engaged art is taking place (at least in the United States) with remarkable rapidity. This openness suggests the social saliency of the debate on social practice.

The academic trajectory of Grant Kester has been determined by an interest in both expanding and grounding the theory and analysis of social art practice. Long before the recent social practice ‘boom’ that rendered socially engaged art fashionable, Kester was exploring questions of autonomy, collective agency, location and aesthetic and political value in a variety of projects taking place in widely differing contexts. His research into dialogical art and artistic collaboration has sought to closely engage specific works while at the same time acknowledging both the complexities of the critic’s own position, and the need for a research methodology capable of grasping the pitfalls as well as the possibilities of collaborative creativity. More recently, he has explored how art activism and collective creativity are being used to challenge neoconservative politics in Latin America. Aware of the effect that the recent interest of contemporary art institutions in socially engaged art can have in reconfiguring radical artistic practices, Kester compares mainstream appropriations of the potential of artistic collaboration with more autonomous artist-centred processes. He concludes that despite the many transformations socially engaged art is recently undergoing, it remains a relevant tool for addressing political action and social transformation in the present moment. As a result, Kester has been consistent in his concern with the complex relationship between theory and practice, through his commitment to a situational, contextual analysis of their interconnection.

Kester’s recent research into socially engaged art projects taking place worldwide is driven by a process of thinking through practice and stepping away from often futile discussions of branding and definition. A close analysis of reality and a continuous interest in ‘testing’ the effects of theory and practice are a key feature of his writing. In *Theory from the South*, the South African anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff acknowledge that ‘for the global south, the refusal of theory has long been an unaffordable luxury’ (2012: 48). They define theory as ‘a respect for the real that does not conflate the empirical with empiricism. And a respect for the abstract that does not mistake theory-work for theoreticism’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 48). Arising from a similar perspective, this interview, the result of a long conversation starting in San Diego in May 2016 and continuing through digital means in subsequent years, addresses the importance of configuring an alternative methodology to examine long-term processes of artistic collaboration. The result is a nuanced historical overview of the evolution of cultural criticism on socially engaged art, one that can also be read in line with more recent transformations related to the neoconservative political turn in the Americas and the articulation of (artistic) activism as a response.

**Carlos Garrido Castellano (CGC):** How did you become interested in socially engaged art?

**Grant Kester (GK):** The first review I wrote was probably in 1982 or so. I was working as an art handler at the High Museum in Atlanta and I went to see an
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exhibition by a photographer who did a lot of portraits of people in the south. They were in this gothic, William Faulkner mode that, in my view, tended to exoticize southern people, especially poor southern people, and I found the work problematic for that reason. I felt moved by the work and ended up writing a review of the show that was published in *Art Papers*, an Atlanta-based regional arts magazine. That was my first experience of writing about art, and it was well before I thought about going to college to study art history or anything else. I'd attended community college for two years prior to this but dropped out to work in commercial photography. So my first experience of writing about art involved addressing differences of class, race and ethnicity. I wanted to analyse some of those power differentials as they were performed at the level of representation. This wasn't ‘socially engaged art’ per se, but it does reflect a set of basic concerns in my research that come up again in my subsequent writing.

I eventually went back to school to get an undergraduate degree in photography at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore. At that point I was doing photography and installation-based work, but I was increasingly interested in writing about art, so I co-organized an exhibition with Ann Fessler, a very supportive faculty member at MICA. This was in 1986 and the exhibition (*Expanding Commitment: Diverse Approaches to Socially Concerned Photography*) focused on various forms of activist photographic practice. In the 1980s that would’ve included people like Hans Haacke, Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler, Conrad Atkinson, Carrie Mae Weems, Esther Parada, Lisa Lewenz and Krzysztof Wodiczko. This would be termed ‘socially engaged’ art today, but that phrase wasn’t as widely used back then. That experience got me further interested in writing and thinking about art, especially activist forms of art. After a year in the Whitney Independent Study Programme I worked as the mid-Atlantic editor for a now-defunct journal called the *New Art Examiner*, which was trying to challenge the NYC-hegemony of art publications in the United States, and then I worked as the editor of the journal *Afterimage*, published by the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York. I did that while getting my Ph.D. part-time at the University of Rochester. A lot of my early writing focused on the visual culture of political reform movements between the 1890s and the 1930s, especially as it related to the use of photography, as well as issues of urban politics, race and class during this period and the 1960s.

**CGC:** How were issues of activist art being framed at that time? They weren’t as popular in criticism as they are now, right?

**GK:** Yes, at that time there was a fairly clear boundary between the mainstream art world and the world of activist or engaged art. You’d see artist-run spaces presenting and discussing this work, like Artists Space or the Alternative Museum in New York or any of the myriad of artist-run spaces around the country, but it was seldom addressed in the mainstream art press or featured in the mainstream museums, except as a nuisance. Most of the books on the subject were published by artists or critics, rather than academic art historians. Lucy Lippard had published *Get the Message* in 1984 and Diane Neumaier and Doug Kahn’s book *Cultures in Contention* came out around 1985. The *Art for Whom?* exhibition at the Serpentine, another key reference point, was in 1978. This was long before the ‘relational aesthetics’ phenomena and the emergence of the biennial as a key platform for contemporary art and branding. You have to recall that most of the art discourse at this time was
concerned with postmodernism and issues of representation in the media or visual culture. In the wake of the expansion of the art market in the 1980s, this seemed to allow artists to square the circle quite nicely; they could continue to imagine their work was presenting a devastating critique of power, while at the same time selling it to rich collectors through their New York galleries. This was the pre-Internet era, so the hegemonic power of handful of journals and editors was profound. There was, however, a very strong alternative art press, which is where journals like *Afterimage* and the *New Art Examiner, High Performance* and *Atlanta Art Papers*, among many others, came from. This intellectual eco-system was the only real counterbalance to the world of *Artforum, Art in America, October*, etc., but it was largely killed off due to the de-funding of contemporary art by state arts councils and the NEA during the ‘Culture Wars’ of the 1990s.

**CGC:** What was your experience at *Afterimage* like?

**GK:** *Afterimage* was started by Nathan Lyons, the founder of the Visual Studies Workshop, after he left the George Eastman House (GEH), a major photo museum in Rochester. In its early days the journal was meant to be a kind of counterpoint to the mainstream art press that tended to ignore photography (as well as to *Image*, which was the title of the GEH journal that Nathan had previously edited). It presented a mode of photographic criticism, and later on film and video criticism, that was more informed than the writing you would typically find on photography or film at the time (during the late 1960/70s). There were a series of editors before me, including Catherine Lord, David Trend and Michael Starenko, who began to open the journal up to a more expansive, and often activist set of art and media practices. It became a leading platform for new modes of criticism associated with critiques of gender, sexuality, class and so on, with a particular focus on work that operated in a public context. This was a tendency that I continued to pursue when I was the editor from 1990–97, and early on with Nadine McGann as co-editor. That was the basis for the anthology I published in 1997, *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*. Our goal, in part, was to cover the remarkable range of new work being developed during the 1980s/90s that was outside the canon of postmodern photography (Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, etc.). New forms of activist video, film and photography were emerging not just in the United States, but throughout North America, Latin America and Europe that had relatively little to do with postmodern appropriation, and were more concerned with class or labour issues, radical pedagogy, gender and racial politics, and community-based activism. We focused on work that was not very popular with the existing constituency of art photography in the United States. We conducted a reader’s survey of our content sometime in 1992 and got a very divided response, with about half of the readers praising us and the other half complaining about our ‘excessive’ coverage of issues around race, class, gender and so on.

**CGC:** By then Institutional Critique was consolidated, as authors such as Benjamin Buchloh started applying the term to the work of people like Haacke, Buren, Asher and so on. To what extent did that concern with institutional power, value and regulation affect work associated with issues of collaboration and activism in the subsequent decades?

**GK:** To begin with, the institutions that activist artists were working through tended to be far more diverse, especially in ‘embedded’ practices that involved
working with specific constituencies. Art world-type institutional critique often relies on a fairly reductive concept of the institution, in which the museum or the gallery simply serve as spatial or symbolic placeholders for a broader system of repression. In this case, the artist’s job is pretty straightforward; they imagine they are in the position to ‘critique’ that institution from a position of cognitive externality. There was a famous Barbara Kruger quote from the late 1980s or so, in which someone questioned her about moving to Mary Boone Gallery, implying that she had sold out in some way by doing so. Her response was something along the lines of ‘there’s nothing outside the market […]. not a piece of lint’, which meant that there was no point in looking for a site of practice that was free of co-option or contamination by the market. While this is a useful argument as far as it goes, it can also be used to completely flatten out the range of sites that exist under the larger influence of neo-liberal capitalism and the differing levels of transformative potential, cooption, etc., that any specific site entails. This doesn’t mean that one can’t, also, attempt to critique the market from the context of the commercial gallery, which is what I imagine Kruger hoped to do. But repression and resistance are never uniformly distributed. Every site has its own unique axes of power. Further, you don’t have to naively assume that any given site is entirely free of co-option to realize that some sites have the potential to link artistic action and social change with a more complex set of political dialogues in a way that can challenge the artists own preconceived notions of both the political and the aesthetic.

I think the dramatic success of institutional critique during the 1980s/90s was due in part to the fact that it allowed conventional art institutions, like museums, to safely assimilate a kind of therapeutic self-critique without fundamentally challenging their underlying institutional imperatives, donor class interests and so on. Museums had been subject to a series of critiques and attacks since the mid-1960s targeting their elitism and complicity with dominant forms of economic power, so institutional critique was an ideal way for them to undergo an act of public contrition, while simultaneously associating themselves and their brand with avant-garde artistic practices that were very much in vogue and widely endorsed by the art critical establishment. Since Afterimage was only tangentially concerned with art based in museums and commercial galleries, this was a much less urgent issue for us. One effect of the emergence of institutional critique was to produce some degree of cross-over in the 1990s between the activist or engaged art and the mainstream art world.

CGC: After that phase you start writing on socially engaged and collaborative art, including two books in which you try to define theoretically and methodologically how to approach those kind of projects…

GK: I’d written quite a bit on activist or socially engaged art for Afterimage and New Art Examiner, dating back to the mid-1980s. My first longer essay, on what was called ‘New social documentary’ photography, was published in Afterimage in 1987, before I was working there. Much of the writing for Conversation Pieces began in the mid-1990s; it just took a while to find a publisher willing to accept it. I had attended an important conference in Manchester in 1994 or so (Littoral: New Zones for Critical Art Practice) organized by Ian Hunter and Celia Larner where I met Helen and Newton Harrison, Wolfgang Zinggl and Pascale Jeannée from Wochenklausur (Pascale, sadly, has since passed), Alejandro Meiten, Silvina Babich and Rafael Santos from Ala Plástica, Jay Koh and Chu Yuan, Suzanne Lacy (I believe she was there), among many other folks. I found the work presented
there to be really challenging and I was struck by the fact that very few people were writing about it, at least not with any real depth.

It wasn’t that any of these projects were perfect, whatever that might mean, but I felt that they were asking the right questions, and if they failed, they were failing in interesting, rather than predictable ways. They seemed to offer the possibility, via practice, of moving beyond some of the impasses I saw in the ways in which contemporary art was figuring the political, especially in things like institutional critique or various forms of postmodern appropriation, which generally involved a very attenuated understanding of the work’s actual reception by an audience or public. These artists and groups were raising issues that suggested that the nature of artistic practice was changing in some fundamental way that the field wasn’t yet cognizant of. That’s why *Conversation Pieces* has a strong historical component and a focus on the aesthetic. I believed that there was something about the nature of contemporary practice that was, and is, being rearticulated in this work. I also felt that these projects required a very different critical methodology that required us to link an understanding of the micro-level of individual bodies and intersubjective experience with the macro-level of the neighbourhood, the city or the region, in terms of the disposition of power.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s there just wasn’t much interest among academic publishers in this work. Not long after *Conversation Pieces* was eventually published in 2004, the ‘social practice’ boom really started to take off in the United States, along with the relational aesthetics boom. It’s at this point that you begin to see a bifurcation between ‘art world’ social practices, like the work that Nicolas Bourriaud writes about, which is primarily coming from male European artists (Sehgal, Parreno, Huyghe, Höller, Sierra, Hirschhorn, etc.) who rely on a combination of state sponsored biennial commissions and the sale of documentation and other work through private galleries, and the ongoing evolution of socially engaged art that had little or no relationship to the mainstream art world of art fairs, biennials, private dealers and so on. Eventually, even *October* comes around and anoints Thomas Hirschhorn as representing an acceptable version of the kind of community-art practice they would have disdained in the past because his discursive strategy involves a very self-conscious effort to reiterate conventional notions of aesthetic autonomy at the rhetorical level. I became increasingly interested in the kinds of implicit and explicit political and aesthetic claims that were being made for this new biennial-based social art practice, which could be roughly divided between the artists associated with Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’ approach and Claire Bishop’s ‘agonistic’ model (although there is quite a bit of movement across these divisions).

The relationship between this body of work and the existing traditions of socially engaged art was treated in a fairly reductive manner in most writing at the time, which tended to be oriented through binary oppositions like ‘ethics’ vs ‘aesthetics’, ‘dissensus’ vs ‘consensus’, and so on. This was the starting point for my second book, *The One and the Many*. The debate, such as it was, often involved the claim that I was advocating that we simply ‘dissolve’ the aesthetic into the ethical, and arguing that a work of art was ‘good’ simply because it exhibited a non-coercive form of collective action. That might have been a more convincing critique were it not for the fact that the alternative position – that art should somehow disrupt or unsettle the viewer’s perception of the world – depends on exactly the same principle. That is, avant-garde art is ‘good’ when it produces an ethically salutary effect on the viewer (in this case, disruption is
supposed to shock us out of our tendency to instrumentalize difference). This is self-evidently an ethical position, and it’s no more or less ‘aesthetic’ than my own approach, in the absence of some philosophical argument about the nature of the aesthetic, which was never evident in the critical responses to my work. I did try to provide the foundations for a re-constructed concept of the aesthetic in *Conversation Pieces* and again in *The One and the Many*, but this is the part of my research that most critics failed to engage with.

What attracted me to this work wasn’t the question of consensus per se, but the fact that the consciousness of participants and collaborators was transformed in some meaningful way, which is, of course, the *raison d’être* of most art. It was also quite common for critics to impose a synchronic fixity on projects that clearly evolved diachronically through moments of both consensus and dissensus. This suggested to me some of the methodological limitations of current models of art criticism, and laid the groundwork for the eventual emergence of *FIELD*. A further problem, for me, was that the ethical disruption of the viewer that avant-garde art claims to produce is almost entirely hypothetical. ‘Shock’ and disruption were long ago subjected to a kind of aesthetic re-sublimation. The lesson from this for me was that it can be really hard for art historians and critics to grasp the normative nature of their own discursive traditions, or to even see them as ‘traditions’ in the first place, rather than the self-evident truth of artistic meaning.

**CGC:** How do you think the projects you discuss in *The One and the Many* relate to the issues that came up in *Conversation Pieces*?

**GK:** This is a complex relationship. I think one of the things that really scandalized people about *Conversation Pieces* was that I was willing to treat the work of a group like The Art of Change in East London as existing on the same plane as the work of a highly successful blue-chip artist like Rachel Whiteread. I wasn’t arguing that either one was superior to the other, only that they represented distinct modalities within contemporary art practice, each of which carried specific implications about the artist’s relationship to the world. The response was to argue that the work of Art of Change, to use one example, was invalid as art because it was complicit with the privatization of social services under Blair and New Labour. This is a perfectly reasonable argument, and there’s an extended version in the ‘Aesthetic evangelists’ essay back in the mid-1990s that appears in expanded form in *Conversation Pieces*, but it still doesn’t address the aesthetic question. It also implies that the work of a gallery-based artist like Whiteread is itself politically neutral or immune to charges of another kind of cooption, in this case, by the commodity fetishization of the collector class. There was also a tendency at the time, based on a provincial understanding of contemporary art, to treat the neo-liberal transition taking place in the UK during the 1990s as a universal constraint, rather than dealing with the geopolitical specificity of distinct practices around the world. That was the second goal of *The One and the Many*.

What I found interesting about figures like Navjot Altaf in India, Park Fiction in Hamburg and NICA in Myanmar was that they didn’t operate as if the generative energy in their work derived entirely from their own process of contemplative self-reflection, while the site at which they worked was an essentially passive receptacle. Rather, the site, in its discursive, intersubjective and social aliveness had a real shaping influence in the creation of a given work. You see this in Navjot’s approach to Bastar. She arrived with one intention,
to study bell metal sculpture, but she was also open to the ways in which the social ecology of the space, and the effect of her own extended presence on that ecology, guided her in new directions. I think this openness, this drift, this receptivity, to site and situation, this willingness to look beyond the boundaries of our existing sense of self and the norms that every singular self inevitably accumulates and relies on, has tremendous importance. It’s important to note that acknowledging the dialogical nature of creativity in this manner is not the same as arguing for the destruction of the author or of authorship. This is another common response to this analysis, which is to see authorship as a kind of zero-sum equation in which it is either held in stasis by a single, privileged agent, or ruinously ‘dissolved’ into a de-authorial flux.

CGC: You have also connected the socially engaged projects that you discuss with a long tradition of European, primarily French, philosophy that privileges a form of negation, and a kind of radicalism that never fully materializes or fulfils itself. How do you connect biennial or exhibition-based participatory art with that tradition?

GK: That’s a good question. It’s hard to answer that without a bit of a detour into the history of aesthetics. This discussion is also central to the book project I’m working on now, in which I return again to the question of the aesthetic in order to develop a more substantial theoretical model for dialogical practice. I’ve already alluded to the un-self-conscious reliance of contemporary art criticism on a set of conventions associated with the aesthetic and aesthetic autonomy more specifically. This is a problem from my perspective because contemporary socially engaged art practices are engaged in a broad re-definition or re-articulation of precisely the norms of aesthetic autonomy. Without a critical engagement with these conventions it’s not possible for us to really understand what is changing or shifting in contemporary art. There are many ways to approach this question, but I would begin by noting that it’s problematic to think of the relationship between aesthetics and politics as somehow antithetical, or opposed, so that we have to zealously guard against the intrusion of a foreign ‘ethical’ or ‘political’ impulse into the sanctified domain of the artwork. In fact, the political itself is always already ‘aesthetic’ at its very point of origin, if we think of the ways in which the modern concept of the political has been constituted in the traditions of Enlightenment thought. At the same time, the aesthetic is also an explicitly political and ethical construct, promising the virtual realization of the Hegelian Absolute, or the Kantian sensus communis. The idea that there is a strict division between the aesthetic and the political is an artefact of the philosophical discourse itself. Hegel’s idea of the realization of the Absolute, the utopian moment when self and other, or subject and object, are reconciled without violence is premised on the Hellenist concept of the aesthetic state. The aesthetic state is a society in which everyone has absolute freedom, but rather than devolving into atomized isolation, they are bound together in a non-coercive ethical harmony or Sittlichkeit, epitomized by the work of art. The paradigm for Hegel was Periclean Athens, which combined an egalitarian democratic system that allowed individual freedom, with a shared culture of beauty. But of course, Greek society was based on slavery, so freedom wasn’t truly universalized yet. Eventually Hegel will claim, in the Philosophy of Right, that the Absolute was finally realized in the modern Prussian state. Marx, in turn, will criticize Hegel on this point and argue that yet another cycle of the dialectic is necessary to finally reach utopia.

In the Marxist tradition, the utopian moment of the aesthetic state is simply projected into the period of ideal social harmony that will follow the
Dictatorship of the Proletariat. The history of the aesthetic and the history of the modern political vanguard coincide at precisely this point. Both rely on amessianic concept of utopia in which all inter-subjective violence will magically disappear through the agency of some metaphysical binding cultural force. Lenin famously felt that it wasn’t really necessary for revolutionaries to devote much time to considering the specific forms of state or public institutional structures that might be appropriate to a post-revolutionary moment because once the foreign scourge of capitalism had been eradicated entirely from our collective consciousness human nature would be fundamentally changed, and society would more or less run itself. Since we still haven’t made the transition to a universalized freedom, the vanguard tradition has essentially redefined the ‘political’ as an endlessly sustained gesture of negation; a kind of holding pattern prior to the final, positive, moment of reconciliation that we have yet to reach. This negation, of all existing forms of power, social change and so on, functions as an implicit protest against the ongoing failure of modern society to universalize freedom. It’s also presented as the only legitimate form of ‘critical’ thought.

In the arts, the avant-garde tradition will challenge the idea of beauty as yet another instance of the ‘premature’ claim that freedom has been universalized. In response, avant-garde discourse will simply invert the paradigm of beauty as a pre-figurative experience of the reconciliation of self and other, and instead devote itself to strategies intended to prevent this premature reconciliation, by punishing or ‘disrupting’ the viewer to remind them of their class specificity, rather than offering them a spurious class transcendence. This is the philosophical foundation for the ‘agonistic’ concept of art that was popularized several years ago. Thus, the avant-garde is defined in terms of a perpetual negation or critique of all aspects of existing reality, while refusing to provide any ‘positive’ or alternative approaches, which would only ever by used to legitimate the status quo. This is also why various form of socially engaged art that actually exhibit some concern with what might be seen as ‘positive’ social change here and now are anathema to this tradition. The result is to normalize a discursive system, in both art and critical theory, which argues that generative forms of thought or insight can only be based on a principle of radical negation.

One of the most powerful strands of the twentieth century avant-garde tradition has been based on precisely this idea; it’s something Badiou has talked about in his own writing as well. What is excluded from this approach is any concern with the material, social and inter-subjective processes, and modes of affect, necessary to actually produce political change. The concept of ‘resistance’ or revolution is abstracted out of the material conditions of practice and instead becomes a purely cognitive capacity, sequestered in the consciousness of the theorist or artist. By the same token, any form of political action that is based on democratic principles or affinity or solidarity, or which attempts to work through non-hierarchical forms of decision-making, are equally naïve and complicit with a process of bourgeois de-politicization (that’s why Trotsky talks about all those forms of affect, such as friendship, love or sympathy, that ‘we revolutionists feel apprehensive of naming’). Unfortunately, political action depends on many of these process and forms of affect. So critical theory has essentially been de-skilled when it comes to analysing actual processes of social or political change. The same is true of lot of art criticism directed towards socially engaged art practices, which is based on a similar political paradigm.

This is due in part to the Adorno-ian legacy, and his sense that the repeated failure of the proletariat to perform its historical duty and overthrow the capitalist system meant that ‘real’ change was impossible in the
current historical moment. It is also due to what Adorno saw as the entirely monolithic power of capitalist instrumental reason, which provides no space for meaningful, practical resistance. When Barbara Kruger talks about there being ‘nothing’ outside the market, no space that is immune from its co-optive powers, she’s simply reiterating the same melancholic argument that Adorno and Horkheimer make in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As a result, revolutionary consciousness has to be decanted into the consciousness of the artist or theorist, to be preserved for a future historical moment when ‘objective’ change was possible. I would want to argue that practice itself has the capacity to produce new forms of insight, new forms of creativity and new forms of criticality. Art does possess a unique value that can be compromised if it’s turned into a simplistic form of propaganda. But this doesn’t exhaust the nature of the relationship between art and social change. It simply represents one modality taken by that relationship. And it doesn’t mean that art’s only other option is to withdraw from practice entirely in order to offer what it imagines is some sort of meta-critique from a position of absolute sovereignty that reproduces, rather than challenges, cultural and political hierarchies.

**CGC:** What about practice? What kind of agencies can socially engaged art help to facilitate?

**GK:** This is something that will vary a great deal from one project to the next. I talk in *The One and the Many* about the *Offering of Mind* project in Myanmar, in which the collaborators wore miniature Stupas, filled with their written desires for the future and posed on the streets of Yangon. They had to be photographed from behind so their faces wouldn’t be visible, since this was during a period when any sort of anomalous public behaviour could get you arrested. There was no real space for autonomous expression within Burmese civil society and the point of contact between the state and the individual was almost entirely direct and unmediated. As a result, the agency that they exercised in this performance was highly constrained, but it was also critical and transformative. The simple gesture of acting out like this in public constituted a form of meaningful resistance, and in fact, NICA was able to use these kinds of exercise to help create a new sense of solidarity among various artists and artist groups that had previously been divided by mutual suspicion.

You could contrast that with the mode of agency involved in a larger project like Park Fiction, in which the artists and their collaborators were able to insert the Hafenstraße community’s interests into the governmental planning process in a way that actually circumvented the commercial redevelopment of some very valuable waterfront property in Hamburg. In Hamburg the space of civil society was much denser and more complex, and the mediation between the state and the individual allowed for a much greater range of action. As a result, agency took on much more complex form, allowing for the physical creation and protection of a space that challenged the process of gentrification, and has continued to provide a platform for cultural and political resistance in the city. The continuum between these two projects is huge, but I believe that political change always occurs through a kind of capillary action that runs from individual consciousness to collective action and resistance, and that involves the emergence of new solidarities, and their subsequent dissolution, and moments of both provisional consensus and dissensus.

**CGC:** I’m glad you mentioned NICA and Park Fiction. One of the things I found especially valuable of your critical position is the way in which you are attentive
to context, to how issues are developed according to the specific needs of each location. This represents for me a rupture with some criticism on social practice that has developed a universalist approach to engagement and transformation, elaborating a rather uncomplicated genealogy from which all the practices derive …

GK: I would argue that something happens that is ontologically transformative, epistemologically generative, and creative, when bodies and minds come together in practices of resistance, and that it’s crucial to pay attention to what happens in these spaces and moments. We can understand resistance here as marking an opposition to the existing disposition of power in a given social system, which can take a myriad of forms. This means that we need to pay attention not just to what is being said, or not said, in a given practice but also to the distribution of individual bodies, to the gestures, to the framing space or context, to the relevant political discourse and the institutional setting. ... You have to pay attention to all of those factors if you want to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between art and social or political change. If, like Adorno, you believe that decisive change is foreclosed or if you think the only legitimate model of change involves an absolute overturning of capitalism in a single, glorious insurrectonal moment, then the methodical work of thinking through practice, resistance and creativity at the situational level is irrelevant. But this approach, as a framework to mobilize people politically, has proven singularly un-compelling over the last 30 years. In this sense the left has struggled to provide a narrative that matches up with people’s experience and aspirations.

We have an endless shelf of books from left cultural theorists writing on revolutionary change, and a veritable cottage industry of Zizekian Leninism, but this conversation is conducted at such a level of abstraction, and is so focused on offering judgements about the various ways in which existing forms of political resistance are insufficiently radical, that it has had little real effect on political praxis. For myself, I think that what is unfolding, not just in contemporary art practice but more broadly in the domain of activism today, is an attempt to re-think the nature of the political from the ground up, and in the absence of the metaphysical guarantees of conventional Marxist discourse. As Susan Buck-Morris wrote in ‘A commonist ethics’, ‘Never, in my lifetime, has the Marxist critique of capital and its global dynamics seemed more accurate. And never has it seemed more wrong to go back to Marxism in its historical forms’ (2016). This doesn’t mean that we don’t need to closely study, and learn from, the traditions of Marxism or Communism, in both their positive and negative dimensions. But it does mean that we have to determine for ourselves how to reinvent those traditions for the current moment and context, and to be frank about their limitations. I think this reinvention, this rethinking of the political, that is going on in artistic practice, represents a series of practical experiments with the form and modality of change; experiments that also have a speculative and prefigurative dimension. The idea of communism, and a communist revolution, whether in real or imaginary form, has been the implicit ground for avant-garde art for almost a century. It’s been the prism through which most of our key ideas about the nature of advanced art, the forms of resistance and critique it provides, the roles it assigns to the viewer, the artist and the work of art, have been refracted. I think we are only now beginning to come to terms, at the theoretical level, with the broader implications that follow from the loss of this ground. It can’t help but lead to changes in the form of art itself. In retrospect it’s not surprising that the defining characteristic of advanced art during the 1990s was a new exploration of
concepts of self and other, of community or collectivity, of social or political change, even at the ‘micro’ level. These questions could no longer be deferred or outsourced to the discursive system of ‘communism’.

**CGC:** To what extent do you think that the mainstream version of social practice, evident in the work of figures like Hirschhorn, is influencing socially engaged art?

**GK:** I believe that the art world, or that part of the art world that is driven by commercial gallery sales and biennial commissions, is a fundamentally conservative place. It’s important here to recognize the necessary interrelationship between these two institutional sectors. The highly publicized, ephemeral, process- and performance-based projects that you see in biennials and art fairs provide the necessary public corollary to the much less visible economic transactions that occur through the artist’s gallery and on the auction market, where various images, physical objects, sketches and documentation related to these events is sold. The event-based work exists in order to be re-monetized in this manner, in order to ‘build the brand’, as the dealer David Zwirner has argued. This is where the real money is being made. This is also why you often encounter a kind of symbolically over-coded, artisanal intellectual practice in contemporary art, which involves the artist making various speculative pronouncements about the nature of contemporary political reality. I’m not saying that an artist who operates primarily in this context can’t make interesting art, but I think the deck is stacked against them. The mainstream art world tends to reward work that reinforces its own self-image as a space of bold experimentation and risk-taking, so long as the risks involve the same predictable forms of pseudo-transgression and the experiments don’t pose any real threat to the economic foundation or cultural authority of the system itself.

The ‘mainstreaming’ of social art practice, which is especially advanced in the United States, is a reflection of the fact that foundations, museums and other public and private institutions are willing to spend money on collaborative, participatory or community-based projects. So you have to begin by asking what motivates this investment? When the Dia Art Foundation, for example, funded Hirschhorn’s *Gramsci Monument* vs any number of other potential artists or projects, how did they benefit? Certainly their association with Hirschhorn’s brand helped to advance the careers of the curatorial team involved with the project, who moved on to prestigious jobs at the Museum of Modern Art and the LA Museum of Contemporary Art after the Gramsci Monument. They were seen as capable of leveraging a great deal of very positive media attention for a project developed by their employer. The Dia Foundation is an interesting case study in this respect. Beginning in the late 1980s, when a series of bad investment decisions led to significant losses in its endowment, Dia sought to rebrand itself as having a commitment to forms of art practice that were more public or more egalitarian than the esoteric minimalist gestures it was originally dedicated to, like De Maria’s *Broken Kilometer* or *Earth Room*. This was, in part, because they were now forced to go to public funding agencies to supplement their operating budget, and state arts councils and the National Endowment for Arts required some evidence of public benefit.

This isn’t to ignore the good intentions of the Dia programmers who brought the *Monument* into existence, but it’s important to be realistic about the material and ideological constraints that they operate under, and how these constraints work to privilege specific types of art practice and specific artists. In particular, funders like this tend to prioritize projects that are
relatively short-term, that have a clear and predictable starting and ending point, that are highly mediagenic and can be well documented in a way that appears to illustrate the creation of certain positive social effects, and so on. This set of biases necessarily excludes projects that evolve in a sustained, dialogical and tactical relationship to processes of resistance or transformation, which may not be documentable in the same manner, and which are not so easily containerized in terms of their spatial or temporal boundaries. These projects might also piss people off, which is something that most foundations have no interest in doing.

The mainstreaming of social art practice has tended to encourage a form of art that can often be superficial, press-friendly, unsustainable and disconnected from the temporal and cultural messiness of change or resistance. *Gramsci Monument* in Forest Houses was a great example of this, as it was widely lauded in both the mainstream and art press, while the actual residents were left, in some cases, feeling as if their economic and cultural difference was reduced to a kind of photo op. Since Hirschhorn invoked the proper name of a famous Marxist theorist, the project becomes immediately palatable to the art critical establishment, as well as the mainstream media. That’s the institutional equivalent of a double word-score in Scrabble. However, Hirschhorn made no effort to learn about, and from, the various modalities of resistance and repression operating in the Forest Houses community, in a way that might have allowed Gramsci’s theory to seem relevant or alive to them. The working-class residents of Forest Houses can be spatially juxtaposed, or ‘collaged’, in the same social space as Marxist theory in order to excite the interest of the art world, but they can never be placed in a meaningful dialogue with each other. This is because Hirschhorn was adamant about the aesthetic ‘purity’ of *Gramsci Monument*. For Hirschhorn, the purity of *Gramsci Monument* and his own critical autonomy as an artist, rests on his ability to refuse any responsibility for the actual effect the work might have on the Forest Houses community ‘after’ the project was completed.

About a year after *Gramsci Monument* closed, a critic named Whitney Kimball visited Forest Houses and talked to a woman who described the disappointment and frustration of young children in the community who, for a brief period of time, had access to art classes, computer labs, and an incredibly engaged and supportive staff, and who kept wondering when it would return. This is the cost of Hirschhorn’s ‘purity’. Here the fundamentally monological orientation of his practice is evident. In order to preserve his own autonomy, Hirschhorn must refuse any answerability to the site and to the unfolding social processes that might be catalysed by his presence there. By leaving the community with no sustainable model of creative resistance, Hirschhorn can preserve his own image as an uncompromising critic of capitalism who refuses to compensate for the failures of the state, while syphoning off the cultural capital provided by working-class residents, whose social and economic difference is a narcotic to wealthy arts institutions and funders anxious to demonstrate their social commitment without calling into question their institutional privilege or their hegemonic function. I’m more interested in artistic practices that are engaged in a critical re-coding of aesthetic autonomy rather than its reiteration. This work has really begun to expand over the past several years in the post-OWS period, in response to new forms of protest associated with Black Lives Matter and even more recently, the Standing Rock action and mobilization against the Trump administration. I think this is where the most significant new practices are emerging, at least in the United States.
CONCLUSION
A certain kind of presentism dominates the analysis of activist and socially engaged art. Long-term evaluations are rare, and recent initiatives are privileged and disconnected from previous experiments in social and creative imagination. In this interview, Grant Kester counters this critical trend by offering an exhaustive examination of the debates that gave way to a broader appreciation of socially engaged art aesthetics. More than that, this conversation urges us to relativize the vocabulary we often use to describe those artistic practices, suggesting that only through a truly global engagement with the uses of art as a tool of social transformation could we be able to understand which options remain alive and which are no longer operative.

REFERENCES

SUGGESTED CITATION

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