

In May, InCUBATE attended the Open Engagement conference, an initiative of Portland State University's Art and Social Practice MFA concentration. It was organized by Jen Delos Reyes and planned in conjunction with Harrell Fletcher and an organizing committee of Social Practice MFA students and other Portlanders. In addition to going to and speaking on panels, we organized a Trivia Night in PSU's art gallery to raise funds for an Artist-Run Benefit Society, a mutual aid association and collective fund raising mechanism to be made up of artist groups and spaces in Portland. Attendees organized themselves into trivia teams and we sold six varieties of beer brewed by Eric Steen, a graduate of the program, and herbal infused vodka made by Sam Gould of Red76. Posters designed by Chicago artist duo Hideous Beast hung on the walls of the gallery and described what the ARBS is and how it might function. Randall Szott, another Chicagoan in town for the conference, served as trivia host dressed in a bright orange and green suit. After paying for costs, the money made selling drinks went straight into a seed fund for the ARBS. The prize for the winning team was a case of beer. We were happy with the amount raised and grateful for the generosity our close and long-distance collaborators on the event (especially Portlander Katy Asher). Most of the intentions we brought with us to the event were met with a warm reception and desirable outcomes. However, one reaction people had to the event that seemed trifling at the time has grown in importance to us since returning from the conference and gets at one of the key conflicts of the gathering itself.

If you have ever been to a trivia night at a bar, you know that questions are drawn from many places within a general knowledge base. Success might require knowledge of any number of aptitudes: Super Bowl statistics, New Wave song lyrics, a photographic memory of the Periodic Table, or a familiarity with sordid details from the lives of American Presidents. A successful trivia team balances its members' expertise. Each person's depth is made up for by the group's breadth. Trivia draws out the details of this expertise, creating situations where members of a team might learn about some shared enthusiasm they have in common or a unique competency that may belong to one member of the group. Formal academic conference this is not, but the joy and camaraderie (not to mention the frustration and competition) that attend trivia contests are no excuse to write them off as not serious, as trivial.

The reaction that many people at the trivia night had was that the questions were in fact too broad, and that they had very little to do with the sort of knowledge the conference itself was organized around, specifically socially-engaged art practices, that just about all of the sixty or so people in the room shared. This assumes, of course, that there are not an infinite number of other subjects on which the people in the gallery might also share knowledge. With tempers ratcheted up in the heat of competition, many teams flailed for answers and were frustrated by the fact that the questions were not geared toward their expertise in and around art. The romantic comedy picture round was the primary target of this collective ire. In this round, a sheet of paper was handed to each group with images from ten romantic comedies. Points were scored by correctly identifying each movie. The results were grim, with most teams handing in nearly blank answer sheets. This was by no means the rule, however, as a few teams got more than half of them right. We were questioned multiple times why we bothered asking question on this presumably lowbrow subject when everyone in the room already had a more obvious subject in common. As if the vast majority of people in the room had never seen a romantic comedy before!

To be sure, the stakes of romantic comedies are much different from the stakes of socially-engaged art. However, the annoyance people felt with the trivia – that it did not represent their own knowledge or speak accurately of their own competencies – seemed to mirror a sort of general friction between tendencies of conference attendees and a trend towards talking past one another during panel discussions. This trend belongs to the discourse of socially-engaged art in general, and so it comes as little surprise that it should pop up during a gathering like Open Engagement. Coming to the table with a highly specific and mostly pre-packaged set of expectations, knowledge, skills and rhetorical sound bytes has the tendency to severely limit the generation of fruitful communication. For example, one panel called “History and Critique of Social Practice” began with a general overview of the recent activity of an alternative art space in New York City and ended with a critique of “theanyspacewhatever,” an exhibition of so-called relational artwork at the Guggenheim in 2008. In between, a pair of Portland-based artists who have gripes with the program at PSU gave a purposefully incomprehensible Powerpoint presentation and handed out microwaved Easy Mac. The different experiences and ideas that could have been exchanged on the panel became isolated and spoken by remote voices behind the lectern.

There were, of course, dozens of other sessions and keynotes, and none that we attended resulted in the same confusion and exasperation discussed above. In the end the socializing that took place outside of official conference activities became the most important and rewarding part of the conference. The credit for this goes to the convivial attitude of the people in attendance and to the conference’s organizers for creating the opportunity to get all of these people together in one place. At the same time, we think it is important to embrace rather than chafe at the plurality of voices and viewpoints available at gatherings like Open Engagement. Especially in a general field of art practice that longs for and actively seeks out strong connections between living beings, it is important for practitioners not to be painted into theoretical corners and, instead, work to strengthen the connections between we producers of culture. In the words of Mark Dion, one of the conference’s keynote speakers, to show that “the separation between disciplines is neither inevitable nor irreversible.” By starting from our own particular places and circumstances and building outwards, let’s hang together with some of the same enthusiasm and thoughtfulness that permeated the hangouts and discussions in Portland at places like the queue at Voodoo Donut, the bar at the Red Hat, and the picnic tables outside the Candlelight Lounge.

The question of what social practice art actually is, who is defining its parameters and to what end seemed to permeate every aspect of the Open Engagement conference, from the keynotes to the panels to every informal conversation we had. As a means of further pursuing this question we have decided to organize and share a set of historical and contemporary texts and artists’ projects that have influenced our way of thinking in an attempt to provide another window into what we mean when we say social practice. We chose the format of a syllabus specifically because we hope that it will become an actual resource for teaching ourselves as well as for others to adapt and use as they see fit. Naming the new is always political and problematic, yet it provides an opportunity to critically assess the potential of its practices and call into question its ethical, political and social ramifications. Because our hopes are also mixed with suspicion about what it means to professionalize these practices through MFA programs, we must hereby

acknowledge that many of the people included in our syllabus wouldn't even want to be part of this conversation - we feel pretty ambivalent about it too. Yet we stuck them in there anyway, for the simple reason that they inspire us by bringing up the necessary and difficult questions about how such work operates in the world. Lastly, this syllabus is by no means meant to represent a comprehensive art historical survey, instead it is more of an attempt to map a field of practices that have happened and are happening in the country we live in and to share what we are reading while thinking and doing.

SYLLABUS

Art / Life

Since the 1990s, a number of mostly European and North American art critics and historians have struggled to understand a notoriously messy set of practices, under an ever changing set of names including new genre public art, socially-engaged practice, relational art, dialogical aesthetics, etc. This course brings together a constellation of topics that refer to what can be loosely "social practice" and attempts to critically interrogate how this term operates.

Hierarchical distinctions are often made between artists in art school and an ordinary people with creative hobbies and interests that don't necessarily have anything to do with a career. What are the differences between an artist whose work is community gardening and someone who works in a community garden on the weekend? Why call oneself an artist and how does this added layer detract or benefit from the work? How might we critically assess disciplinary and professional boundaries in order to provide new insights into everyday creativity? This syllabus is also Chicago-focused as much as possible in order to highlight the local history of these practices.

Week 1: *Isn't everybody a social practice artist?*

Joseph Beuys famously proclaimed that "everyone is an artist," but does everyone want to be one?

Readings:

Allan Kaprow, "The Artist as a Man of the World," 1964.

John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1934.

Essays by Carrie Lambert-Beatty, Claire Pentecost, and Lori Waxman in *Talking with Our Mouths Full: New Language for Socially Engaged Art*, edited by Elizabeth Chodos, three walls and Green Lantern Press, 2008.

Discuss:

Joseph Beuys, *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, 10-day lecture tour of America, 1974.

Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*, presented by Creative Time and the New Museum, three week road trip across America, 2009.

Week 2: *Trial and Error: a methodological inquiry*

If social practice does not privilege object-making and claims an existence out in the "real world" i.e. outside of traditional exhibition spaces and art contexts, then how can we take another look at empirical knowledge? In other words, what are the philosophical and ethical underpinnings of an art practice that skips across disciplinary boundaries and claims a meaningful experience with ordinary people outside of institutions? Here we will take a look at the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, discuss the notion of experience as revelation, and ways of learning in public and with different publics.

Readings:

William James, "What Pragmatism Means," 1907.

John Dewey, "The Search for the Great Community" & "The Problem of Method" in *The Public and its Problems*, 1927.

James T. Kloppenberg, "Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?" *The Journal of American History*, 1996.

Stuart Bailey, "Only an Attitude of Orientation," Edited and published by Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Oslo, winter 2009/10 2009.

Discuss:

Claire Pentecost, *The Public Amateur*, thepublicamateur.wordpress.com, ongoing.

Week 3: *The arts of living: Cooking for yourself and others, gardening and growing*

These artists, activists, and thinkers will serve as a jumping off point to consider what constitutes "the good life." In addition to considering the perceived divide between art and everyday life, we hope to highlight how ordinary creative strategies in day to day life might enhance one's living conditions.

Readings:

Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America*, University of California Press, 2005.

Michel de Certeau et al., *The Practice of Everyday Life 2: Living and Cooking*, 1980.

Midwest Radical Cultural Corridor, *A Call to Farms*, The Heavy Duty Press, 2008.

Discuss:

The Library of Radiant Optimism, *Book of the Month Club*, ongoing

Nance Klehm, *Urban Forage Walks*, ongoing

PLAND (Practice Liberating Art through Necessary Dislocation) residency, New Mexico, ongoing

Week 4: *Leisure Time vs. Work Time*

When is a dinner party just a dinner party and not a social practice art project? What might mark the difference between thinking of art as your life "work" and living life creatively? When do social practice artists stop working?

Readings:

Josef Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, 1952.

Work Ethic, curated by Helen Molesworth, Baltimore Museum of Art, October 12, 2003 - January 4, 2004

Mladen Stiljinovic, "In Praise of Laziness, <http://www.guelman.ru/xz/english/XX22/X2207.HTM>

Randall Szott, "More Tailgating, Less Curating," <http://badatsports.com/2010/off-topic-randall-szott/>

Randall Szott, "Art Work-Leisure"

<http://thedepartmentofaesthetics.wordpress.com/2009/12/02/art-work-leisure-2/>

Discuss:

"Art Work: A National Conversation about Art, Labor, and Economics," a newspaper project organized by Temporary Services, supported by SPACES in Cleveland, OH, 2010

Public Collectors, administered by Marc Fischer, <http://www.publiccollectors.org/>

Week 5: *Is bad business good art?*

Andy Warhol once said, "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art. Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art." Yet for artist-run businesses that are run more as conceptual enterprises, there are perhaps more open-ended standards of success. But what is the difference between an ethically minded, creatively organized small business and an artist who basically is starting the same thing yet making money is besides the point? How can we talk about the privilege to experiment in this way and also appreciate creative failures?

Readings:

Robin Hewlett, "Small Business as Artistic Medium" Art Work newspaper project, 2010

Lori Waxman, "The Banquet Years: FOOD, a SoHo Restaurant in the Early 1970s" <http://as-ap.org/waxman/resources.cfm>

Ben Schaafsma, "OTHER OPTIONS: A closer Look at FOOD," Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, Issue 6

Discuss:

Michael Rakowitz, *Davisons & Co.*, 2006

Les Levine, *Levine's Restaurant*, 1969

Martha Rosler, *Garage Sale*, 1973

Claes Oldenburg, *The Store*, 1961

David Hammons, *Bliz-aard Ball Sale*, 1983

Week 6: *Artist as community development corporation*

This week's discussion could take up another entire course, suffice to say that artists have played an important role in the gentrification process. Instead of tackling the larger question of urban spatial politics in just one discussion, we would like to focus on artists specifically taking up the language and mimicking the infrastructure of CDCs in their work. What are the critical differences between them in terms of long-term commitment and conceptions of responsibility to local communities?

Readings:

David Harvey, "The Right to the City" *New Left Review* 53, September-October 2008

Sally Webster, *Fashion Moda: A Bronx Experience*, 1996.

Lucy Lippard, "Real Estate and Real Art a la Fashion Moda," 1980,

lehman.cuny.edu/gallery/talkback/fmwebster.html

The Think Tank that has yet to be named, *22 Readings on Artists & Gentrification*,
thinktank.boxwith.com

Discuss:

Watts House Project, Los Angeles, wattshouseproject.org/wp

Project Row Houses, Houston, projectrowhouses.org

Not an Alternative, New York City, notanalternative.net

Baltimore Development Cooperative, Baltimore, baltimoredevelopmentco-op.org

Parallel Lines: a critical project in and around the High Line, New York City,

parallellinesproject.com

Theaster Gates, *The Dorchester Project*

Week 7: *On the inside: attempts at participatory democracy in art institutions*

A history of institutional critique practices has surely informed artists practicing today. While one perspective on the acceptance of institutional critique by institutions grimly assesses this development, there have been many notable critical exhibitions that have utilized and leveraged institutional resources and publicity to different ends. As there are many ways to work outside institutions, there are many ways to inhabit them strategically from the inside.

Lucy Lippard "The Art Workers' Coalition: Not a History*." *In Get the Message? : A Decade of Art for Social Change*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970.

Group Material, *Democracy: A project by Group Material*, 1989.

Chin Tao Wu, *Privitazing Culture: Corporate Art Intervention since the 1980s*. London: Verso, 2002

Chris Gilbert, Carlos Basualdo, T.J. Demos, and Gregory Sholette, "Dark Matter into Light: A Round Table Discussion," 2005.

Discuss:

Sholette, Nato Thompson and Gregory, ed. *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*. North Adams: Mass MoCA, 2004.

Headquarters: Investigating the creation of the ghetto and the prison industrial complex, The Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, May - August, 2006.

Pedagogical Factory: Exploring strategies for an education city, Organized by the Stockyard Institute with Programming by AREA Chicago, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, July - September, 2007

Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960s to now, organized by Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee, Exit Art, September - November, 2008

Week 8: *The art world strikes back*

In these notable and often snarky dust-ups over social practice art amongst its most prominent critics, what does it say about the anxiety of the privileged role of the critic and curator?

Readings:

Grant Kester, Response to Clarie Bishop's article "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents" in Artforum, May 2006.

Liam Gillick, "Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 115, Winter 2006.

Claire Bishop, "Public Opinion: on Creative Time's summit "Revolutions in Public Practice." artforum.com/diary/id=24062

Leisure Arts, "Grant Kester - Artforum - Claire Bishop (The Continuing Saga)"

leisurearts.blogspot.com/2006/05/grant-kester-artforum-claire-bishop.html

"Chris Gilbert's resignation over the Venezuelan Exhibition," www.metamute.org/en/node/7834

"Liam Gillick on Chris Gilbert's resignation," www.metamute.org/en/node/8396

Week 9: *On other spaces: experiments, new models, inspirations*

What other models and experiments, both long-lasting and ephemeral, are available as motivation, both inside and outside the art context?

Readings:

Jane Addams, "On a Function of the Social Settlement," 1899.

Mike Wolf, "Can Experimental Cultural Centers Replace MFA Programs?" *How We Learn*, AREA Chicago, 2007 2007.

Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the house of the people*, Cornell University Press 2004.

Dan S. Wang, "Downtime at the Experimental Station: a conversation with Dan Peterman," 2004.

Nato Thompson, "Contributions to a Resistant Visual Culture Glossary," *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, Issue 3

Brian Holmes. "Do-It-Yourself Geopolitics: Cartographies of Art in the World." In *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, edited by Gregory Sholette and Blake Stimson, 273-93. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

An incomplete list of classics and other influential things:

Nicolas Borriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*

Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces*

Leo Steinberg *Other Criteria*

Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" in *October*

Steven Henry Madoff, "Service Aesthetics"

Ted Purves, ed., *What We Want is Free*

Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation*

Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, and Lars Nilsson, eds., *Taking the Matter into Common Hands*

Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," from *The Anti-Aesthetic...*

Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make believe: Parafiction and Plausability," in *October*

Nato Thompson, *The Interventionists and Experimental Geography*
Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972*, 1973.
Lee Lozano's notebooks
Adrian Piper's Funk Lessons
Don Celender, *Opinions of Working People Concerning the Arts*, 1975.
Temporary Services, eds., *Group Work*
Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, 2009
Gran Fury
Axe Street Arena
Mess Hall
Julie Ault, ed., *Alternative Art New York 1965-1985*, 2002.
"Street Works Supplement," in *TO 9* no. 6, 1969.
Group Material, "Caution Alternative Space"
Brett Bloom, "Radical Space for Art in a Time of Forced Privatization and Market Dominance"
Greg Shollette, "News from Nowhere: Activist Art and After" (1998)
Martha Rosler and Brian Wallis, *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism: A Project by Martha Rosler*, Discussions in Contemporary Culture, Dia Foundation, 1989.
Lucy Lippard. *Get the Message? : A Decade of Art for Social Change*. 1st ed. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984.
Critical Art Ensemble *Digital Resistance: Explorations in Tactical Media*. New York: Autonomedia, 2001.
Francis Frascina. *Art, Politics, and Dissent : Aspects of the Art Left in Sixties America*. New York, NY: Manchester University Press 1999.
David Harvey *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
Blake Stimson and Gregory Shollette, ed. *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.