

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.

Installation at Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, Germany of *Free Range Grain*, Critical Art Ensemble, Beatriz da Costa, and Shyh-shiun Shyu, 2003. Photo: Courtesy Critical Art Ensemble.



Socially Engaged Contemporary Art: Tactical and Strategic Manifestations

By Nato Thompson

Artists who are committed to social justice through their work must navigate a complex contemporary art world characterized by numerous political positions and aesthetic expectations. In this paper, Nato Thompson observes two overarching approaches taken by artists—strategic and tactical—that operate against a political and economical infrastructure. Thompson describes successful examples in both categories, including sustained place-based work; culturally engaged radical pedagogy; engaged museums; engaged academic institutions; and a variety of work that raises questions rather than resolving them. Among the organizations highlighted as doing strategic socially engaged art are the Center for Urban Pedagogy and the Queens Museum; their efforts are infrastructural and sustained in a place over time. Artists highlighted as working through tactical and often guerrilla-style forms of intervention include Critical Art Ensemble and its Free Range Grain project and Paul Ramirez Jonas' Key to the City implemented in partnership with Creative Time.

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Translating art to politics is not easy. We live in an age where the products of culture—broadly defined to include film and television, software, radio, advertising, and the fine arts—are a major part of contemporary living, including electoral politics. As much as we intuitively understand that in politics one cannot forget the power of media, we often forget that media itself is fed on this thing we call culture.

For the sake of discussion let's refer to culture as the web of human relations that forms the basis for how we conceive our tastes, affinities, values, mythologies, and perversities. When I refer to cultural production I am referring to the dynamic in which culture is both generated by the large-scale economic machines (film, radio, television, internet) as well as reactive to the actual culture it is feeding. To put it simply, cultural production means we are produced by cultural machines and we in turn produce them.

As the dynamic of cultural production becomes an increasing part of lived experience and the basis for political decisions, the fusion between art and politics becomes all the more critical in generating social change. To understand this peculiar fact, endemic to the 21st century, we must overcome the contemporary idea that art and politics are distinct fields.

We have a difficult time both from the artistic and the activist side of things in understanding how the once-distinct spheres of art and politics can productively work together. It is a question at the heart of politics today and in order to explore it, we must approach it piece by piece.

I want to approach this question from the field of contemporary art. Admittedly there are limits as this particular field is but one sliver of the vast amount of cultural work across the globe. Yet, over the last decade we have begun to witness a sort of synergy between a number of fields that challenge dominant forms of power using similar methods including grassroots organizing, tactical interventions into media, and strategic forms of pedagogy. From the vantage point of contemporary art, I want to outline a few projects that demonstrate techniques encompassing both the deeply strategic and guerrilla-style forms of intervention. In doing so, I want to consider how these projects operate against a political and economical infrastructure that allows these artistic approaches to emerge.

In order to truly understand the idea of socially engaged art practice in the field of contemporary art, we must back up and gain a perspective on the contemporary art field itself, i.e. we must look at the game board before we can understand the game. By clarifying the forces that comprise the field, we can more clearly see both the limitations and the horizon of possibilities.

Art is supported by different institutions whose interests are often self-serving, thus capable of producing antagonisms as well as nuanced specificities. The academic institutions that study art have a particular investment in artistic research that varies

greatly from museums' investment in displaying the art, collectors' roles in buying and selling the art, and artists' commitment to producing the art. You get the point.

Each structure in art supports a particular idea of what art is. A gallery that caters to wealthy collectors who simply want to display their class position with beautiful art will support a definition that fits with the economic support this provides. An academic whose work involves the politics of art will focus on artists whose stated goals are political and the academic's definition of art will often gel with these goals. An artist who must make a living by selling art at craft fairs will often have a definition of art that accommodates such commerce. This is all to say that art is such a flexible term that it can be used to rationalize almost any kind of production.

So what is the infrastructure of contemporary art? In broad strokes, these conflicting entities in the art world consist of collecting and non-collecting museums, alternative non-profit art spaces, academic art history studies, visual culture programs, curatorial programs, academic studio programs, magazines (both trade and critical), newspaper art sections, galleries, book publishers, collectors, government-supported programs, foundations that focus solely on the arts, and foundations that have some discretionary funding for art. They also include artists who are broke, artists who have galleries, artists who hate galleries, artists who are faculty, artists who are administrators, critics who write for magazines, critics who are faculty, and critics who are bloggers. The art world also encompasses alternative spaces that are like commercial galleries, alternative spaces that refuse to sell, alternative spaces that are political, alternative spaces that are short-lived experiments, community art supported by left-leaning philanthropists, mural movements, and global biennials.

It is an exhaustive list, certainly, yet it is clearly an inadequate portrait of the complex configuration of players on the game board of the art world. Social and political positions on art are often framed by a person's position within this complex matrix. These positions are spread through print, broadcast, and social media and by word of mouth until we arrive at a point where the word "art" loses any discernible shared meaning. Much like the meaning of "freedom" or perhaps even "justice," the meaning of the word "art" is mangled by differing interests operating within the system of neoliberal capitalism.

Somewhere on the periphery of this complex matrix, and even at times in the center of it, lives artwork whose goal is social justice. At times in fashion and at times out of fashion, this kind of work struggles for purchase as it continues to make its way in the world. As artists navigate through different parts of the infrastructure, they must somehow manage to produce projects that they care about while simultaneously finding ways to support themselves. This may seem obvious but we must understand this basic fact in order to understand why there are fundamental differences in the approaches that different communities take. Each infrastructure comes not only with a set of political positions but

also a set of aesthetic expectations that an artwork must meet. So not only do artists have to find a place to get their work funded, but at the same time they must cater the style of their work to the needs and expectations of those who are paying for it, which might mean adapting an activist vision to a line of work that can be sold in galleries, or adapting an aesthetic vision to left-wing activism in low-income neighborhoods.

All of this might sound rather pessimistic but it is not meant to be for there is, in fact, good news: Even though many people think the arts are on the sidelines of contemporary American civic life, the relevance of the arts to contemporary life could not be greater. Contemporary politics, real estate, finance, advertising, and foreign policy are as much determined by the shifting terrain of culture as they are by supposed facts on the ground. One cannot discuss gentrification without discussing bohemian lifestyles and neither can one discuss the prowess of Karl Rove without discussing his clever manipulation of cultural symbols. These major forces in contemporary life pivot on produced sets of cultural assumptions, which Situationist Guy Debord dubbed the “Spectacle” in his 1950s studies of culture. The Spectacle—a social relation between people that is mediated by images—has now grown to consume the perspective of everyday people. The Spectacle is interwoven into the fabric of much of what the left likes to consider politics. No longer removed from each other, politics and culture have become the same and thus anyone who wants to effect social change must work in both arenas.

Many of the artists who work in socially engaged art are aware of this new political horizon. Artist Steve Kurtz wrote about the importance of what his collective Critical Art Ensemble calls “tactical media.” By tactical media, he means that those who want to achieve political goals must understand the cultural terrain upon which we rest and then approach their goals from a tactical position using whatever medium works best. (Kurtz has also written, “I will call it art if that is what the grant application asks for,” which basically implies that for Critical Art Ensemble, even the word “art” is a mere tactical position in the big game of Spectacle activism.)

CONTEMPORARY ART THAT IS STRATEGIC

Sustained Place-based Work

To fully consider what this all means, it might be helpful to provide some examples of projects from the socially engaged art field. I have decided to focus on projects that move along an axis outlined by the French theorist Michelle de Certeau as the strategic and the tactical. For all intents and purposes, the strategic comes more from a position of power in which the creative work is infrastructural and often long-term. The tactical is often temporary, guerrilla-style, and interventionist.

One of the more heralded projects in the realm of the strategic is Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses located in Houston's Third Ward. A long-term endeavor, the project came to life in 1993 when, as a post-graduate art student, Lowe considered applying the ideas of artists Dr. John Bigger and Joseph Beuys to a one-and-a-half block section of 20 row houses. He commenced a series of local discussions around the need for a space where social fabric could be built through good architecture and collective creativity. In essence, he embarked on civic and psychic social planning from the ground up.

Since its inception, Project Row Houses has been home to numerous art installations, local meetings, and community workshops. It has also expanded its mission by providing low-income housing through its Young Mothers Program, geared toward single mothers between the ages of 18 and 26, and the Row House Community Development Corporation, a separate branch dedicated to expanding affordable housing in the Third Ward based on principles of Project Row Houses. What makes Project Row Houses so significant is that it actually works. It is an open-ended, process-based experiment that builds community by treating people's desires as ends in themselves and, by doing so, it deepens an extended social fabric. In terms of the contemporary art world, Project Row Houses should be compared more to alternative art venues than to individual projects as its process is clearly long-term and its ambition is to effect structural change.

Culturally Engaged Radical Pedagogy

Project Row Houses has some crossover with an organization based in Brooklyn, New York named the Center for Urban Pedagogy. Established informally with a group of artists and designers in 1997, CUP emerged as a space to consider ideas of citizenship through a culturally engaged form of radical pedagogy geared to a student's immediate urban surroundings. The group, which became a 501(c) 3, partners with elementary and high schools, policy groups, government, and art organizations to think through participatory educational programming regarding the most basic of city planning issues including trash removal and recycling, incarceration, transportation, local produce, and numerous other issues that touch upon the basic experiences of living in a city. CUP works with numerous school children in building collaborative projects that basically allow students to interpret the world they live in, thus taking a page from educational theorist Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It is a model of arts programming that transcends traditional models in both art and activism. (CUP founder Damon Rich has since left CUP's staff to chair the organization's Board of Directors and to work as the Urban Designer for Newark, New Jersey, a move that testifies to the pragmatic capacity of the organization.)

Both Project Row Houses and the Center for Urban Pedagogy are more clearly geared toward social change and operate on a far more structural level than the majority of contemporary activist art practices at work today. They tend to use metrics for success so that progress can be measured. These qualities certainly make them not only more grant-friendly but also more easily understood as activist in nature.



There are more than 10,000 street vendors in New York City, many of whose first language is not English. The rulebook is difficult to understand and many vendors don't know their rights when approached by police.

In response to these issues the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) collaborated with graphic designer Candy Chang, [The Street Vendor Project](#), and street vendors around the City to develop the *Vendor Power!* poster so that vendors can understand their rights, avoid fines, and earn an honest living. *Vendor Power!* translates the most commonly violated rules into simple, comic-book-like illustrations to convey important information.



The advocacy poster includes personal stories from vendors, history, fun facts, and policy reform recommendations. Where there is text, it is provided in five languages—those most common among the city's street vendors. Thousands of copies of the poster were distributed free to street vendors in four of the five New York City boroughs.



The Vendor Power team: CUP's John Mangin, Street Vendor Project's Sean Basinski, and designer Candy Chang with the finished product. [Candy Chang](#) is a public installation artist, designer, urban planner, and co-founder of [Civic Center](#) who likes to make cities more comfortable for people. All photos: © 2009 Center for Urban Pedagogy

Engaged Museums

The sustained civic approach of Project Row Houses and the Center for Urban Pedagogy reflects the work of certain alternative and mainstream arts organizations that take seriously their mission to reach a diverse audience. Certainly the Queens Museum, under the direction of Tom Finkelppearl, could be considered a corollary because of its deep-seated commitment to social change and community. Using an on-staff community organizer, the Queens Museum works to engage the local audience in a borough with the greatest diversity in the United States. These community organizers are multi-lingual and operate as emissaries to local populations, identifying specific cultural, political, and social concerns; essentially, the job is to talk to members of local communities and get to know the different organizations. The community organizer is not there merely to market the agenda of the Queens Museum. Rather, the goal is to listen, learn, and act as a bridge to the complex arrangement of people in the complex matrix that is Flushing and Corona Queens.

The Queens Museum is not the only one of its kind. Numerous non-profit organizations around the country specialize in local community development through the arts. For example, the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh have compelling engagement programs. The Walker Art Museum hosted a series of thoughtfully conceived public dialogues and programs for local schools around the exhibition of artist Kara Walker, which provided the opportunity for a broad swath of the public to discuss issues of race. The Warhol Museum also took up issues of race with their exhibition *Without Sanctuary*, which featured postcards and photographs of lynchings. The Warhol mounted extensive public programs and trained artist educators to use the questions raised by this politically and socially charged exhibition to encourage public dialogue with targeted groups as well as museum visitors.

In fact, education programs at museums are often the backdoor for radical pedagogy. Because education directors are responsible for communicating with a broad public, they become well versed in the pragmatic post-modern realities of perception. People understand the world differently. They come from different backgrounds and are interested in different things. These obvious truths are often difficult for museum curators to understand but education directors, who see these diverse visitors first-hand, are best prepared to grasp the complexity inherent in linking the creative resources of the museum to political and social goals.

Engaged Academic Institutions

Across the United States, academic institutions have developed socially engaged art training programs and centers. The Future Arts Research program at Arizona State University, the Center for Art and Public Life at California College of Art, and the social practice programs at Queens College, Otis College, and Portland State College are leading examples. These contemporary art programs are built on the same "social sculpture" premise that Project Row

Houses grew from. They enable students and faculty to link their creative efforts in order to address community-based goals and concerns. Whether or not these programs lead to actual social change is another story. However, as college-based artistic programs continue to engage with the real world as part of their aesthetic program, the political complexities of daily life will continue to play a central function.

CONTEMPORARY ART THAT IS TACTICAL

Art That Complicates and Raises Questions

While there are certainly numerous examples of non-profit organizations making long-term commitments to a community or political condition, this work is more the exception than the rule when it comes to contemporary artists. Few artists are like Rick Lowe and few organizations are like the Center for Urban Pedagogy. They do not participate in long-term civic endeavors nor do their projects necessarily provide metrics for success. Their actions, projects and performances may be more ephemeral, gathering energy for a brief time and then dissipating. Their works may raise consciousness and visibility around an issue, they might enrich the dialogue or perhaps—at the furthest remove from ends-driven production—they may simply confound and beguile.

In considering contemporary art that operates on a more contingent level, it is helpful to move from the apparently political to that which is less clearly so. As mentioned, the art collective Critical Art Ensemble, although certainly political, is already one step removed from the kind of long-term community engagement done by Rick Lowe or the Center for Urban Pedagogy. Critical Art Ensemble's work is self-described as *tactical*. If the strategic is structural and long term, the tactical is contingent and short term. This art collective operates by identifying a specific discourse (biotechnology for example) and then using its own tools to reveal extant ideological codes. Over the last decade, the collective has focused on biotechnology as a political issue that has not yet been clearly divided into rudimentary political categories of left-right by the media and various political interests. The politics of biotechnology are often unclear to the average person and Critical Art Ensemble initiatives strive to open up the discussion through a more complex and expansive set of questions.

In their project Free Range Grain, the collective developed a performance laboratory to test organic food. The audience/participants were invited to bring foods that were labeled "organic" to the lab and the collective would test the food for genetically modified

organisms (GMOs). It became evident after numerous bags of chips, cereals, tomatoes, corn tortillas, and bags of rice were tested that the label organic does not ensure against the presence of GMOs. Winds carry seeds miles and miles. The laws of evolution do not listen to agricultural trade issues. The collective was interested in breaking the myth that food is a resource that the industry can simply choose to label organic or not, by showing that GMOs have infected a large portion of the extant food chain. In bringing the laboratory into the art space, and operating with a healthy skepticism about large-scale agricultural production, CAE made very apparent the impact of biotechnology on the food you eat.



Food testing at ESC Gallery, Graz, Austria for the project, *Free Range Grain*, Critical Art Ensemble, Beatriz da Costa, and Shyh-shiun Shyu, 2003. Photo: Courtesy Critical Art Ensemble.

Certainly many activists might ask what was the impact of this project? Critical Art Ensemble's practice reflects a larger tendency in contemporary political art toward the tactical. Unlike Project Row Houses or CUP, their work is not sustained over a long time but instead makes small insertions in the larger circuits of dialogue and media. Assessment of these projects often relies on anecdote and is therefore more elusive.

There are different audiences for the work including those that actually participate in the workshops and those in the art and activism community who learn

about the projects through Critical Art Ensemble's books and websites, in arts journals, and in various other media. These differing audiences undoubtedly take away different concepts, but some of the key political issues that CAE would like to raise with *Free Range Grain*—including the possibility of taking the tools of science into your own hands and the ubiquity of GMOs in our food chain—have begun to enter the public discourse.

It bears mentioning that this particular project was confiscated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation after a bizarre series of events following the unexpected cardiac arrest of Critical Art Ensemble member Hope Kurtz. After her husband (CAE member Steve Kurtz) called 911, the police discovered the laboratory and called the FBI to investigate potential bio-terrorism. A long drama involving a drawn-out court case, subpoenas, and thousands of newspaper articles about the politics of bioterrorism kept the project in the public eye. The provocative nature of the work combined with these traumatic events and the post-911 hysteria culminated in an extremely popular tactical art project. Obviously one could not plan for these kinds of events but they do point toward the capacity of the tactical to spark discourse about hot-button political issues.

A familiar task with political artwork is to tackle issues in a manner that skews the dominant political language. The artwork's message is open-ended; it encourages conversation and ultimately confuses the narrative surrounding a certain political issue. Often, I believe, social justice organizations neither respect nor quite understand this important element at work in contemporary political art. They instead want to adhere to an agreed-upon political language. Raising questions and confusing audiences tends to go against the means/ends logic that is the modus operandi of much activism.

Revealing Social Frictions and Civic Tensions of Public Space

In a tactical vein similar to CAE's, Estonian artist Kristina Norman exacerbated tensions in her native country with her work *After War* by making a gold reproduction of a bronze Soviet war memorial and placing it in the central Tallinn Square, from which the original had been removed in 1999. Her intervention was a clear provocation since removal of the original sculpture resulted in riots by the Russian community. As in many of the Baltic States, the post-Soviet environment in Estonia has resulted in a gradual move to remove any hint of their Russian past. The removal of the monument was, in essence, a removal of memory. The rub of course is that for many Russians, who are now in the minority, these symbols are part of their own cultural identity. The removal of the statue was in essence a display of power against them. The emergence of Norman's statue catalyzed a complicated public reaction by instilling a sense of pride in the Russians and a sense of tension for the Estonians. To many Russian-speaking Estonians, Norman's intervention ran counter to the dominant narrative of Estonia returning to its original cultural identity by revealing the inherent social frictions underlying public space. What is also compelling about Norman's intervention is that it wasn't so much working in the realm of advocacy (which activists often prefer to do), but instead pointing out and making more explicit already existing tensions between two cultures.

At my job as Chief Curator at Creative Time, I have had the great fortune of working on several socially engaged art projects. As part of a large exhibition titled *Democracy in America* in 2008, I worked with the artist Sharon Hayes on her project *Revolutionary Love: I am your worst fear/I am your best fantasy*, which consisted of performative interventions at the national nominating conventions of the Republican and Democratic parties. Taking advantage of the carnival-like nature of these gatherings, Hayes organized public readings of a love letter, written by herself to an undisclosed lost love and performed by a large group of self-identified LGBT and queer people. The group ranged from those dressed in over-the-top drag and brazenly out regalia to subtle trans individuals to fairly everyday looking queer folks. Reading together in the first person, they recited a love letter that could be read as deeply personal or as directed toward the political process itself, hinting at shame, betrayal, desire and affection. The work's politics, while complicated, produced a bizarre tension as the deeply personal made its way into the clearly public and staked a claim on civic dialogue while simultaneously operating at the heart of a political parade.

In 2010, I worked with the artist Paul Ramirez Jonas on *Key to the City*, which took on the ceremonial and symbolic key to the city that many mayors award to dignitaries, local heroes, and celebrities in honor of some public service. Ramirez Jonas turned the ritual on its head by offering the key to all people to award to whomever they deemed worthy in a temporary ceremonial space at the center of New York City's Times Square. The key that each person received was not only symbolic but also would open locks at various sites, including a secret door in the Queens Museum, a back locker in Brooklyn's oldest boxing gym, a locked box at the entrance to the Whitney Museum of Art, a walkway on the George Washington Bridge, and a Buddhist meditation center in Staten Island. Allowing access to sites ranging from those available mainly to people with power to those habituated by the more humble, made literal the concept of public space and citizenship. This interactive and participatory artwork allowed a vast public to engage in the physical space of the city while considering ideas of access, both real and symbolic.



Key to the City, Times Square, New York, Paul Ramirez Jonas. Photo by Meghan McInnis: Courtesy Creative Time.



Public participates in *Key to the City*, Paul Ramirez Jonas. Photo by Matthew Lange: Courtesy Creative Time.

The tactical interventions of Hayes, Ramirez Jonas, Norman, and CAE did not propose structural changes. They operated as interventions in the language around a political issue and their political portent derived from igniting a new political question, or re-igniting an old one. More often than not, contemporary artists work in the vein of the tactical while social justice organizations, activists, foundations, and social justice organizations prefer the strategic.

So why do artists tend to work in the tactical over the strategic? One part of the answer lies in the infrastructure of contemporary art. Operating in a format that is contingent, temporary, and tactical, artists are able to move on to the next idea/job more fluidly and thus pay for their lives since new ideas provide new opportunities for exhibitions. As the idea is gestated in the media and pondered by the general public, as articles are written and political discussion engaged, the initial action recedes as a contemporary project and becomes dated, antiquated, and finished. Its primary work is in shifting the public debate and altering perceptions. Using the tool of experience, participation and public space while addressing pressing political issues—from the privatization of space to queer politics to biotechnology—these artists allow an open-ended method of investigation in which a mass public can participate.

Other advantages accompany tactical work. Tactical projects have a very different relationship to power, and can make more pointed critiques. Producers of tactical art can obtain their bread and butter from gallery sales, lectures, and faculty positions, so they are freer to embrace radical positions and engender controversy.

If there appears to be a gap between the art appreciated by social justice organizations and contemporary art organizations, perhaps it is best to assess it by the different criteria of their respective infrastructures. Certainly many activists appreciate more structural approaches, but it is worth considering how this adoration for structural change inevitably results in softer critiques.

In Closing

The number of socially engaged artists is growing and this kind of work is emerging from fields besides those grounded in contemporary art. Finding a way to discuss this work in terms of efficacy, policy, and actual social change is clearly not easy, but nonetheless important. Considering artists' work along the axis of the tactical and strategic provides an opportunity to consider a variety of approaches, bearing in mind their nascent political economies. This type of lens may help shed light on the methods, intent, and efficacy of this vast emerging field known as socially engaged art.

Nato Thompson is a curator at the New York-based public arts institution Creative Time. Since January 2007 he has organized major projects such as Paul Chan's acclaimed *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* (2007), which included community engagement, free public performances of the Samuel Beckett play, theater workshops, and educational seminars. Thompson implemented a multi-phase national exhibition entitled *Democracy in America: The National Campaign*, a program investigating artists' relationship with and reactions to the historic roots and practical manifestations of the American democratic tradition. Previous to Creative Time, Thompson worked as a curator at MASS MoCA, where he completed numerous large-scale exhibitions such as *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* (2004), a survey of political art of the 1990s. His writings have appeared in numerous publications including *Art Journal*, *tema celeste*, *Parkett*, *Cabinet*, and *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*. In 2004, the College Art Association recognized him for distinguished writing in *Art Journal*. He holds a B.A. in Political Theory from the University of California at Berkeley and an M.A. in Arts Administration from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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