

# The Shapeshifting and Boundary Crossings of Socially Engaged Art

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Volume 7, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088612ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29603>

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Publisher(s)

University of Alberta

ISSN

2371-3771 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Bourgault, R. (2022). The Shapeshifting and Boundary Crossings of Socially Engaged Art. *Art/Research International*, 7(1), 102–122.  
<https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29603>

Article abstract

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## THE SHAPESHIFTING AND BOUNDARY CROSSINGS OF SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART

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**Abstract:** Socially engaged art practices are understood to borrow from and overlap with several disciplinary territories, crossing over into contexts that, in the process of engaging in civic work and everyday actions, obscure their identity as art and aesthetic practices. The article examines the complications that result from co-existing in various ontological sets of properties, through the presentation of a socially engaged project rooted simultaneously in art, social work, education, and ethnography, and where the author acts and performs as an artist, scholar, and facilitator. Participants in the project embody multiple identities which are dependent on changing perspectives and conditions. Arguing for a relevant ethical orientation to research adapted to the transdisciplinary positions of such community-based projects, the inquiry further interrogates the wrangle between the expectations that symbolic capital is typically

accrued to artists engaged in these practices and the inconspicuous agency of quiet activism that offers potent alternative forms of resistance.

**Keywords:** : socially engaged art; artist-researcher; artist-ethnographer; *arte util*; quiet activism; social change

Socially engaged artists frequently define their practice through forms and actions that operate through real-life experiences. In practice, the relevance of these art forms is revealed through their modes of production where the labor and relationships associated with the process are the artwork. Historically, a large strand of these socially engaged art practices has been located at the intersection of social justice advocacy and activism, engaging collaborative creative processes with communities of participants who may or may not be aware of the work as an artistic proposition. Elements of critical pedagogy guide such contemporary projects defined through art as social action, or art for social change. These practices take forms through actions that are rooted in direct experience alongside any poetic and metaphorical infusions that can be read into the works as one seeks to interpret their conceptual aesthetics. Their transdisciplinarity and hybrid identities, however, complicate the ontological nature of these art forms by insisting that they belong to more than one category simultaneously.

I use socially engaged practices and social art practices interchangeably to reflect on a few key theoretical issues that continue to challenge how these practices can operate simultaneously in several disciplinary territories. I call upon many theoretical sources including Beuys' theory of social sculpture (Jordan, 2013) and Lippard's (2010) questioning of the slippage of community-based activist art into anthropology. Borgdorff and Schwab (2012) discuss the hybrid positionality of boundary works in artistic research, and Stephen Wright (2013) proposes that socially engaged works can occupy many ontological positions at once. These questions of classification serve as the groundwork to examine a socially engaged project configured as an open studio where I act and perform as an artist facilitator, a community volunteer, an initiator, an observer, and an art education researcher/scholar. As for participants whose intersectional identities may include but are not limited to that of women and English as an additional language speakers, they function as self-taught artists, service users, community members, homeless or house-insecure citizens, and low-income urban dwellers. All these identifiers, and the many others related to living, underline the entanglements and oscillating positions afforded by the group's actions and intentions.

Along with the issue of the shapeshifting identity of this type of artwork, I will address the visibility or disappearance of the artist's presence in and through the work, and question the societal distance or difference of positionality between artist and participants. The unique historical constitution and contexts, where artists' research and socially engaged art practices operate with "situational responsibility" (C. Wright, 2018, para 11), permit that the artists' privileged autonomy insists on preserving its baked-in safeguards for free speech, categorial indeterminacy, and ontological evasiveness (Sholette, 2016). Every engagement context, its specific social, political, and economic

situation, however, establishes different ethical boundaries. As academic artist-researchers engage in social art projects, any shift in the repositioning of identities foregrounds a different ethical stance. As an art educator, my position oscillates between that of the artist and the social scientist. I may favor the artist's identity at the time of performing the work, but in writing about it and examining what constitutes also my fieldwork research, I find my role slipping into the artist-ethnographer's identity with attendant epistemological traditions and ethical expectations.

The question of how an artist/researcher/educator is able to remain within the demands of participatory action and research ethics in one identity while simultaneously embodying the affective and relational role of community artist performing the same activity, points to a conundrum this reflection attempts to resolve. As ethnographers Emolf and Henderson (2002) have suggested, it might be possible to carve a third space of social art and research, an open stance that becomes "a space that encompasses how others inscribe structures and patterns upon us, [and] how we write these upon others" (p. 2). Such a gateway could be crossed by "living as form" (Thompson, 2012), a position I approach with my project, and that I propose to examine in relationship with the work of models and mentors, such as socially engaged community workers and activists Rick Lowe, Suzanne Lacy, Tania Bruguera, and Theaster Gates.

## **The Open Studio: Philosophy & Pedagogy**

For the last three years, I have been operating an open art studio at an urban shelter for homeless and impoverished women in New England, USA. As mentioned earlier, its many ontological roots include a community service, my version of what Bruguera calls *arte util* (Sollins, 2014, S. Wright, 2013), meaning useful art. As such, it is a performative artwork—my art education fieldwork, artistic research, and spiritual practice. Its identity as artwork is tactical in that participants and onlookers may not recognize it as such. Just as Sholette (2011) conceptualized in his introduction to *Dark Matter*, the work operates in the invisible social and cultural margins where I identify as an art worker or an artist outsider whose *modus operandi* exists outside the artworld's system of legitimation.

I refer to the approach I use in the studio as a pedagogy of presence. I use the term pedagogy in its broadest sense, encompassing a disposition to lifelong and experiential learning well beyond the art studio. A pedagogy of presence is grounded in an attuned, emergent, and responsive relationship with participants. The precarity of a homeless person's life renders this approach to the open studio both practical and

reassuring. Often, sharing does not need to be verbalized; it is part of the mutual experience of the relationship. The open studio does not offer art classes nor does it organize collaborative projects unless the intention spontaneously emerges from participants' engagement. What it provides is a grounding space, quiet, safety, the possibility of exchange or of silence, a selection of simple art supplies, a few art books, and material or technical advice upon request. The artists' presence is diffuse and the benefits of the open studio are accrued over time and determined by the participants. The terms of participation in the open studio are articulated by the participants who interpret its modes of address (Robbins, 2015), based on their immediate situations, temporal needs, and experience with artistic pursuits.

The intention behind the open studio is to trust people's creativity for placemaking and for finding their voices in their work. In its philosophical stance, the work is akin to quiet activism, which is associated here with a reluctance for the organizer/host to actively seek to empower participants, inherently engendering a power relationship. Rather, its activism is found in "small acts, such as the creation of interpersonal connections that construct social networks that represent the nascent stages of political action and movement formation" (Pottinger, 2017, p. 216). In its quietness and lack of outcome-oriented efficiency, the open studio supplies a kind of resistance to the external pressures of contemporary life that expect optimized productivity with everything we do (Odell, 2019), what Konstantinou and Anagnostopoulos (2019) also called the "tyranny of the deliverables" (p. 77). Insights gathered from activities at the open studio serve to "illuminate the affective, emotional and embodied dimensions of 'making' as they intersect with social ... action and critique" (Pottinger, 2017, p. 217). As a result, the pedagogy of presence that I cultivate allows participants to experience for themselves how small gestures of a creative nature can translate into the mindful recognition that agency exists at our living core and that the possibilities of personal self-advocacy and social activism emerge from that inner sense of agency.

When someone finds herself at a shelter for the homeless, it is often due to a life emergency. A sense of injustice, trauma, fear, social shame, anger, or failure may accompany the person as she moves to a shelter. Participants enter that space self-guarded and wishing to remain anonymous. A quiet time in the art studio provides space for slowing down, the possibility for an inner gathering of the pieces, without any conversation or need to explain anything. As Allen (2008) stated, "The studio is a place of possibility, where anything can be expressed as a moment on a life's continuum" (p. 11). We are just there. Self-compassion, in this context, unfolds as inner place-making where no one needs to perform, defend, excuse, argue, self-protect, fear, or fight.

In a conversation about mentoring community participants in a theatre practice, Irene White (2020) recalls her informant pointing out that a community's willingness to "imagine and make art, is already a community in change" (p. 160). Their mentoring philosophy proposes that if one comes with an awareness of being a victim or a disadvantaged person:

... we are not going to exacerbate that perception (or even self-perception) by taking it as our starting point. Come into the room and dream. Dream of a different world—maybe a better one ... . The fact is that the issues will inevitably follow you into the room in due course anyway. But why let them lead when they can just as easily follow? What I mean is this. The issues of class, race, gender, ability, and so on are part of the political backdrop which—dare I say it—defines us because it dictates to us. Politics is part of life. We inherit our labels, we absorb them, we resist them, we embrace them. They are as real as the trees and the houses. So, we cannot lock them out of the creative, imaginative process any more than we could lock them out of life itself. But we do not start with them. As artists, surely, we can see more in the criminal than his or her criminality; more in the victim than his or her victimhood. (I. White, 2020, p. 161)

The non-teaching approach stems, in part, from principles of critical pedagogy and adult education theories. It also echoes the Daoist concept of Wu Wei, the action of non-action, a state of being that seeks alignment with the ebb and flow of the natural world, where one responds to whatever situations arise (Reninger, 2019). In this immediate and intimate approach that finds its form in an alert presence, the positions of the leader and the follower are not neatly differentiated. As well, its enactment or way of being in the world is ordinary and uncomplicated (Flavel & Luzar, 2019). It does not negate what was referred to above as differences of perceived positionalities, but Wu Wei makes palpable a more profound layer of interrelatedness:

Such a receptive eye cuts through convincing and seductive intellectualism to access the pulse that is our inter-relatedness ... . Beyond the illusions of designation, we recognize that any particular identity of ourselves as this or that is therefore not who we ultimately are and that reality is something other than an idea we can compare to other ideas in our mind. (Wolf, 2010, p. 6)

Much has been written about the arts' ability to promote individual development while supporting fundamental human aspirations for freedom and self-nurturance (Katz, 1990). The approach expressed through the physical and relational format of the open studio precludes competition and reinforces self-confidence. Everyone can draw from

the knowledge each other brings, from their life, family, cultural traditions, and experiences. On this, O'Donoghue (2015) stated, "We can create an occasion ... to feel ourselves becoming or unbecoming. In other words, to recognize the learning self as an emergence—as a self and an intelligence that is always in the making" (p. 110).

## Research Ethics, and Overlapping Ontologies

As an artist-educator-scholar, I approach the actualization of my social-practice research from a philosophical and ethical perspective that eschews the scientist's distancing approach that would make the participants of the open studio the object of my study (Bourgault, 2020). Fundamental differences with participants, in terms of privilege, economics, educational training, and self-ascribed identities cannot be denied. Nevertheless, whatever circumstances have provided the opportunity of my current situation, circumstances—inequitable and undeserved as they may be—also brought the shelter participants where they are now (Adelstein, 2018). In a conventional research world, I appear to be the bearer of power, but I hold that "the sacred part of my work is to redistribute this power and to acknowledge the common humanity that transcends us all" (Adelstein, 2018, para 5).

This approach to relationality also infuses the art studio in its identity as a research project in art and art education. Springgay et al. (2008) coined the term *a/r/tography* to embody the multiple functions of practices that effectively combine art, research, and education as a unified proposition that exists simultaneously inside and outside the intersections of the three terms. Informed by feminist, post-structural, and hermeneutic theories that provide alternative ways of being in the world, *a/r/tography* rejects the Cartesian rationalism and objective vision used by science in examining phenomena (Springgay & Irwin, 2008). *A/r/tography* uses a methodology of situations that relies instead on sensorial, relational, and interconnected ways of knowing, where research is embodied and holistic (Springgay & Irwin, 2008). In this form of situated practice-based inquiry, "the role of the artist is shifted to become a facilitator, mediator and/or creative contributor within a community" (Irwin et al., 2008, p. 206). Social practice as research can be energized and given meaning with "lived interactions with individuals, participatory experience and embodied knowledge" (Desai, 2002, p. 311). In this type of artistic research, one does not gather data to publish results but aims to ask questions to deepen insight into the unbound possibilities that such inquiry opens up for everyone involved. From this perspective, and with Daniel (2011) in mind, my function at the open studio becomes that of a "context provider, avoiding representation, not speaking for others, but providing them with the means to speak for themselves" (p. 65). Interaction and dialogue work to create relationships based on empathetic dimensions.



Artists working in the community operate under an ethical code that is situational. The ethics necessary to these practices arise from a continuous process of negotiation with participants. Leavy (2017) suggested that socially engaged art projects touch upon three ethical dimensions: philosophical, practical, and reflective ethical, the latter addressing how power comes to bear. Arising from a process of collaborative engagement and renegotiated as context changes, these ethics are emergent, open, and adaptive (C. Wright, 2018). In the open studio, these ethics are governed by a sense of situational responsibility that is not predetermined but is connected to its particular context and changing relational dynamics.

Writing about one's social art practice in the context of scholarly fieldwork, however, raises a different set of questions. As the work moves into a new ontological territory, that of ethnography, different boundaries emerge. How might I write about participants and my observation of our shared experiences while maintaining ethical transdisciplinary responsibilities? When stepping into the researcher-writer mode, the storytelling work demands limiting one's "own positionality in the field by emphasizing it in the written account, thereby deconstructing the Self and its relation to the Other" (Mueller, 2012, para 8). As a result, the artist-ethnographer becomes the central figure of the study rather than the group. Staikidis (2020), an artist/educator/ethnographer who studied art with Maya painters, realized that, when presenting the stories of her painting experiences at academic conferences, her personal interpretation of the experience predominated. Pressed to find an equitable form of collaborative ethnography and relational accountability that would include her mentors fully in all forms of analysis and presentation of information, she integrated unedited video recordings of their conversations and teaching sessions. Aware of the historical misrepresentations of Indigenous cultures by anthropologists, her collaborators worked with her to identify ways to share in the construction of the story and of its presentation. For similar reasons, contemporary critical ethnographers hesitate to write directly about their experiences with others. As Mueller pointed out, it reveals a "real anxiety towards the ethics of representation" (para 9). This anxiety is particularly acute when working with homeless participants who are reluctant to be represented at this specific time in their lives and, above all, within the location of our encounter. From this ethnographic reporting point of view, participatory action research is the closest I come to belonging, even if, as Mueller suggested, I know that the real value of socially engaged art and of fieldwork happens in the embodied encounter and not in its written analysis.

In contrast to ethnographers, artists speak of their projects from their creative perspective; they write about their activist and dialogical goals from their own voices as artists, often pursuing their creative work in the writing mode. In referring to participants'

presence, Lacy (2010) in *Leaving Art*, for example, quoted participants directly if anonymously. As the artist-writer, Lacy offered her reflective interpretation and analysis of the performances she created and organized. Writing from an artist-ethnographer's stance allows me, at best, to focus on discourses, and the historical, economic, and social conditions of my practice (Desai, 2002). Lippard (2010) pointed out the problem of artists raising a civic dialogue with but not within a community. The artistic practice and reflexive social scientist writing that follows reveal, in my case, a shift of positionality that sets apart two identities—two epistemological processes—and a boundary-crossing that is not yet resolved in my research practice as it relates to academic expectations.

To work within a community as artistic practice, not just to explore it, but to hang in, stay, and effect change requires an engagement that goes beyond including participants, but implicates them (Lippard, 2010). Before the ethnographer distances herself through the reporting or the writing process, it is in this totality of public engagement that "living as form" (Thompson, 2012) can function and advocate most efficiently for the political critique and social justice goals of social art practices.

## **Living as Form: A Genealogy**

In the introduction of his edited volume homonymously titled *Living as Form*, Thompson (2012) suggested that socially engaged art is not a social art movement, like Situationism or Fluxus that preceded it, but is aligned with Beuys' broader legacy. The desire to live as form indicates "a new social order—ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theatre and the visual arts" (Thompson, 2012, p. 19). In contrast to the persistent understanding of art itself arising as a distinct practice based on profitable exchange within capitalist modernity (O'Connor, 2011; Walsh et al., 2014), social art practices seem intent on decommodifying art (La Berge, 2015). To live as form, one has to open to the expanse of intentions and social actions, which Freire (2007) referred to as social conscientization.

For social artists knowledgeable of their genealogy of practice in the Global North, much of what we understand by living as form has been inherited from Beuys who, in the 1960s, envisioned an activist and educational way for art to become a tool of social democratization and consciousness-raising (Jordan, 2013). Beuys called his activist form social sculpture, suggesting that "the concept of art could include the entire process of living—thoughts, actions, dialogue, as well as objects— ..." (p. 145). Social sculpture arises from one's sense of spiritual presence in the world and connects with

dialogic, pedagogic, and political goals. These goals are realized through one's creativity and work together to produce social change (Jordan, 2013). While Beuys' idea of social sculpture coalesced in the 1970s and corresponded to the arts' and activists' needs of that era, social art practices inspired by similar creative processes continue to operate to this day, morphing and adapting to their changing contexts, as these respond to political climates and issues of present-time concern.

Regarding present concerns, I began this paper in a time of pandemic, in the fall of 2020, when the business of the art world had all but ground to a halt. As galleries and auctions closed and the art market slumped, some art stakeholders attempted to predict how our cultural values could change as a consequence of the pandemic. Fisher (2020), for example, suggested that diminishing investments and lack of funding might encourage “art to become more integrated into the fabric of life” (para 8). Fisher proposed that:

The success of the work that comes out of this moment will rely on our newfound ability to value art that satisfies human needs within a community context, rather than market relevance ... . We should take this opportunity, as viewers, and supporters of the arts, to detoxify. We could learn to embrace nuance instead of craving spectacles. We could invest more in the history that connects art practice to community organizing. (para 8)

In examining the history of artists working in communities, one must acknowledge that not only are these practices not new to other traditions, cultures, and times, but may reflect “a turn back to community, a reintegration of art ... with the social worlds and practices from which it became detached since the European Enlightenment” (Wyatt et al., 2013, p. 83). In the same way that some Indigenous languages have no word for wilderness and therefore no concept or need for differentiating the self from nature (Matthiessen, 1995, as cited in J. White, 1995), distancing oneself from the boundaries set by the art world and the visibility it affords opens up a wider commitment to a living artistic inquiry.

In the open studio, I conceptualize a living as form that is anchored in human relations and inner experiences. As such, it stands opposed to art as object (Thompson, 2012). Following this essential characteristic, the open studio enables me to perform aspects of living as form in its participatory nature—its place, and identity in the real world—and in its offering of a quiet form of political activism strategically devised and supported through affect. Thompson (2012) opines that emotional responses to social art “is often geared towards emotive impact, [and] understanding how cultural projects

function politically and socially would benefit from an understanding of this poorly analyzed concept" (p. 32). The open studio engages in do-it-yourself approaches and, as a community practice, is invisible to the art market and ensures a self-determined sociality. This commitment, however, emerged from years of professional practice, exhibitions, and work as a college art instructor.

Similarly, socially engaged artists tell stories about how the impulse toward social practices arises from a personal artistic sensibility and life situation to a sudden realization or opportunity that propels them into action. I discovered an interest in community art through my art teaching practice with adults, in and outside of higher education institutions. When the opportunity was offered to create a long-term project for a community of transient adult women, it felt as if I was offered the opportunity for a free form synthesis of my hybrid practices. The attributes of the open studio would unfold in different creative modalities for everyone, but I hoped for an ecosystem in constant becoming.

The genealogy of the open studio and the appeal of a relational/pedagogical artistic practice from artists who have defined the canon for me include the work of Lacy, Lowe, and Bruguera, and more recently, the multimodal approaches of Gates. Lowe (Jackson-Dumont, 2018) discussed social issues as the impetus behind his celebrated 1990s community endeavor in Houston, Texas, titled Project Row Houses. Students visiting his studio remarked that his paintings provided a valid reflection of what was happening in the community, but "it was not what the community needed" (Jackson-Dumont, 2018, p. 21). This comment triggered for Lowe a definitive conscientization. From that point, the push for "critical relevance in the form of a creative solution meant that Project Row Houses would need to be [emphasis added]" (Jackson-Dumont, 2018, p. 21).

The entry point of Lacy's practice coincides with Beuy's idea of social sculpture. Lacy pioneered the organization of multiple New Genre Public Art events far afield, and "advocated the practice of bringing the voiceless into the public sphere with dignity through their stories" (Lippard, 2010, p. 29). Jordan (2013) describes the defining purpose of Lacy's performances as "a tool for healing and transformation, creating relationships in order to access the spiritual depths of the individuals she worked with" (p. 154). Lacy's projects, while still resonating in social and cultural memories today, were organized through careful research stages and preparatory events that preceded a conclusive and ephemeral manifestation as public performance. In contrast, Lowe's projects are long-term civic projects. Project Row Houses, for example, celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2018, and Victoria Square Project, which will be

discussed below, began as a Documenta 14 event in Athens in 2017, and continues to this day. Both artists represent what it means to create social sculptures, and to live as form. While both artists have created projects deeply rooted in community relations, Lowe's have gained strength and momentum by committing to ideas over time (Thompson, 2012) and distancing gradually from his initial visibility and presence.

## **Boundary Crossings, Authorship, and Visibility**

To live as form, an artist must integrate knowledge and skills from multiple disciplines. In a 2017 interview, Lowe confided:

Oftentimes, as an artist, you're trespassing into different zones. For instance, I began to work on a project recently in Korea, working with small businesses. But what do I know about small business? I know nothing. I have to force myself and find courage to trespass into that world, to explore it, to figure out how to apply myself in that situation. (Sholette, 2017, para 18).

Art history and its theoretical discourses provide the contextual framework for social practices (Helguera, 2011), and a conjectural placeholder for the study of the primary ontological structure of the art form if the work is to be received as art. In practice, as discussed above, socially engaged art is interdisciplinary. It often functions outside the bounds of historical art media, or at least, its genealogy might be best understood independently from the discipline of art history. As described, social practices and community arts have a more extended history than what the "contemporary western anglosphere" (Wyatt et al., 2013, p. 86) acknowledges and writes about. The context in which the practice operates connects to the ontological identities and epistemological domains it draws from, including anthropology, political activism, feminism, education, healing and spirituality, sociology, social work, cultural and gender studies, and other ways of knowing and being that emerge from the cultural traditions of the participants. While it is not governed by specific histories and traditions of art forms, we have seen that socially engaged art is sensitive to the ethics of collaboration and creative processes as these govern its operating principles. Connolly (2003) suggested that social relationships are of paramount importance to the practice and a relational ecosystem of transdisciplinary nature is usually called for. Recently, in a work on art and ecological activism, author Demos (2016) insisted that:

Some of the most ambitious artistic engagements are those that enact an intersectionalist politics and aesthetics where art ... emerges in close proximity to field research, creative pedagogies, political mobilization, and civil society

partnerships and solidarities, whereby interdisciplinary collaboration mirrors the very complex relations of political ecology. (p. 13)

Despite all this hybridity, the dissolution of borders between art, education, activism, and “the aesthetics of human togetherness” (C. Wright, 2018, para 1) remains an issue for an art world focused on market value. These questions of boundaries continue to trouble an entire economy system that trades in and commodifies art objects, their documentation, classification, epistemology, related theories, and traditions. Interested by these trans-pollinations of disciplines, Borgdorff and Schwab (2012) considered the question of boundary work, asking if, despite its obfuscated ontological roots, this type of work could carry “a stable identity that functions as a point of reference within different contexts; or are there more complex ontological consequences to be drawn from the concept of boundary works?” (p.120) Does the question of boundaries affect the authenticity and validity of socially engaged projects, and how might this inform their state of transgression? What happens to the artist's authorship and presence if the boundary work blurs the function of the work?

The exchange between symbolic, mediated, and practical applications of social art fluctuates from pedagogy to practice (Thompson, 2012) without a hierarchy of form. The quality of impact and function operates differently in each sphere. It seems necessary for social art to be examined in relation to its changing context, that is, to consider its presence as a situated process, remembering that art as context is also present when other aspects of life, social and personal, are newly envisioned as material for artistic process and actions (Rikou, 2018). Artist Bruguera argued (Sollins, 2014) that artists engaged in the spirit of *arte util* use their art as an instrument of social change, and “incorporate themselves as artists and civic servants into that [social] reality, with the knowledge that art can change some of those paradigms” (Sollins, 2014, para 3). *Arte util* can be described as operating on the “1:1 scale practice of usership” (S. Wright, 2013 p. 26), at all times retaining its double ontology. A first ontology is derived from what the activity is, while the second belongs to the artistic enactment of the same thing. Experienced as what they actually are—services, daily activities, events, whatever—and at the same time “artistic propositions of what they are, [these practices] can be described in different ways, depending on what set of properties (or allure) one wishes to emphasise” (p. 26). To Stephen Wright (2013), a focus simply “disappears from [an] ontological landscape altogether in order to gain traction somewhere else” (p. 26).

A practice of usership may also conceal the artwork and reduce or hide the visibility of the artist. Sholette (2011) wrote about this invisibility, suggesting that social

artists may, at times, "self-consciously choose to work on the outer margins of the mainstream art world for reasons of social, economic and political critique" (p. 4). In so doing, these invisible artists are challenging the norms of artistic values, the artistic ontological landscape of their practice being willed into inconspicuousness for a more radical purpose. Jordan (2013) pointed out that although Lowe is the artist and the image of the organization, acting as its conceptor, spokesperson, and receiving awards on behalf of Project Row Houses, he did not commit to being "its sole creative or controlling force" (Jordan, 2013, p. 161). The art world insists on attaching his name to the projects he initiates, but Lowe's approach is to step back and allow projects to evolve under different leadership. His artworks grow into self-sustaining organizations that inhabit various ontologies equally. They are artist studios, artworks themselves, living spaces, community centers, and urban renewal projects, to name a few.

In a review of Documenta 14, anthropologist Christopher Wright (2018) outlined the conspicuous relationship between art, anthropology, and activism as the author found himself bemused by their obvious overlap and interchangeable visibility. Wright used the example of artist Gates who runs various social projects in South Side, Chicago, using funding gained from his artwork to finance training for unemployed Chicago youth who become involved in a neighborhood revitalization endeavor. Gates is known for his recirculation of capital and his dedication and skills in "smartly upturn[ing] art values, land values, and human values" (Gates, 2019). In his review, Wright wrote that "the notion of 'the work' becomes stretched and altered" as does "the notion of the artist as the singular creative producer of art objects ... where the artist becomes one element of a more diffused creativity" (para 3), recognizing, in my view, the shapeshifting reality and partial invisibility of an artist fully implicated in a community and socially engaged work. In a similar position of relative artistic disappearance is Lowe's work (executed in collaboration with Maria Papadimitriou), entitled Athens Project (now Victoria Square Project) at Documenta 14, which took the form of a community center running a range of art-based workshops for immigrants and residents. In a meeting with the center support staff, who were careful not to act as art facilitators while remaining discreetly available, Wright wondered to what extent the center participants were aware that they contributed to Lowe's artwork. Recognizing that the reality of the project resides in its quiet intercession with the lives of people, Wright rhetorically mused, "What is the work that is produced by Rick Lowe in Athens? Is it necessary to produce 'a work'?" (para 10). As an anthropologist, Wright pondered how a work which is not entirely Lowe's making, but the community's, could be substantiated and reflected through ethnographic representation, attributing clear authorship and artistic capital.

Commonalities in the work of Lowe and Gates show up their focus on agency and community building, values that matter more than what the artworld may determine as notable and impactful (Coombs, 2021). These projects have accrued recognition from authorities in many fields such as civic engagement, local urban history, urban renewal, and architectural innovation, not to mention kudos for their fundamental social justice effort and continued support for political change. In my view, the strength of their work is in their dedication to being of service to others, redirecting their creative capital towards social equity, and in time, letting go of the leadership of the projects and transferring to others—youth, artists, community activists and organizers—the responsibility to innovate and ensure their continuance. Much of that pivotal and ongoing fulfillment, remains the work, in and out of visibility according to the viewer's knowledge and perspective.

The work can be art by virtue of its self-awareness as art (Wesseling, 2011), no matter its form and level of direct engagement. A symbolic artistic application might unveil an inequality in society and expose a need for change. Another more practical form finds artists using their social responsibility to engage directly with others to effect change. As Bruguera suggested (Sollins, 2014), specializing in creativity to imagine a different reality, building it, and making it exist for others is the work of the social artist.

Despite all of this effort at legitimation, the question of social intervention taken to be an aesthetic achievement (Robbins, 2015) will continue to persist and trouble, and despite the perennial demonstration of its validity, social art will still be seen in some milieus as "optimism for political efficacy in the real world" (Robbins, 2015, p.177), or fledgling attempts at effective activism. What matters, explicitly or implicitly, is that socially engaged art is a well-documented agent for social change. In addition, despite the temptation for measuring change to defend its potential, quantifying the efficacy of social practice would reduce it to rubrics and metrics, disregarding the intangible qualities of mood, affect, and agency that attend the complexity of social transformations (Bordowitz, 2016).

## **Towards New Perspectives**

I conclude by returning to the question of the diffuse artist presence. If the value of the open studio is determined by the participants' process of making and being, and if its aesthetics reside in the project's relational qualities, it is not necessary that the project accrue symbolic capital or recognition to the artist. We have seen that socially engaged artists may "relinquish a sense of their own creative priority or importance" (C.



Wright, 2018, para 14) in long term projects, or as Gates's work demonstrates, use their visibility to accrue benefits to others in the community. Blending into a wider commitment to an inquiry that is more inclusive, away from what Gielen (2015) termed "auto-relational art" (p. 229), is not the sole decision of the artist, but involves an art market and a public that craves models of individual success and celebrity.

Having begun this paper with a discussion about the multiple ontologies of socially engaged practices, and with the goal of examining how one could occupy many identities at once within the same project, we find that an artist's identity is intermittently visible as reflected by the art world mirror. What this means is that its inclusion into the artistic canon is a matter of politics, of values, and of changing art historical perspectives. Boundary works offer variegated, hybrid views that are co-constructed with onlookers and participants, themselves involved in shifting levels of engagement, dancing in and out of what Christopher Wright (2018) qualified as our "network of entanglements" (para 11). Social artists labor in communities that can provide an "unexpected hegemonic counterforce" (Gielen, 2015, p. 240) to envision alternative ways of life by not only raising issues through an art object but working within to effect change, at any level, from individual to social and system wide.

More recently, socially engaged artists, writers, and critics of the art form have observed a tendency in the field for a softening of the urge to categorize art forms (Coombs, 2021). The next step will be to investigate how our blended hybridities illuminate how creative works in a culture-as-process are more relevant today than any disciplinary classification (Cazden, et al., 1996). Moreover, hybridizing within and between modes of meaning, new materialist conceptualizations allow us to expand the circle of affect and imagine collaboration and social practices in terms of a dynamic assemblage of multiple agencies and processes "entangled with the shared materiality of all things" (Bennett, 2010, p. 13).

Finally, Mattingly (2019) suggested that artists must use the ethics of shapeshifting in their work. As artists, we have multiple social roles in the different communities and environments with which we interact. Switching roles might be part of how we feel, understand, and structure our practice, while this transmutation is ever changing and echoed through others' discourses.

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