



**NINE URBAN BIOTOPES**  
Negotiating the Future of Urban Living

# URBAN SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIAALLY ENGAGED ART PRACTICE

## TWO LITERATURE REVIEWS

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# Socially engaged art practices!

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## I. Socially engaged art practices

Since the 1960s the art world has witnessed the emergence of a series of disparate practices – happenings, interventions, performances, workshops and actions of different sorts – that challenge the basic notion of ‘art.’<sup>1</sup> Defying the modernist idea that an artwork is a material object created by an artist to be contemplated by an audience, these practices deemphasize the materiality of artwork, as pointed out by Lucy Lippard in *Six Years. The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (1973). By turning art’s matter and sensations into concepts or actions, “dematerialized” art practices started blurring the boundaries between art and life. Furthermore, as a corollary of this engagement with ‘real life’, art started focusing on political and ecological issues (ibid. 1973).

Since Lippard’s influential work, European and American artists, curators, art critics and historians have constructed different theoretical frameworks and terminologies to understand, systematize and find the common denominators of socially engaged art practices. These frameworks are extremely useful for making sense of what at first glance seems to be an array of very disparate practices. Yet each approach also tends to focus either on a prevailing aspect of art practice or on a characteristic that the author wishes to emphasize. ‘Dialogical arts’ for instance, focus on the communicative aspect of art (Kester 2004), whereas ‘relational practices’ focus on the creation of micro-utopias of social interaction (Bourriaud 2002).

For the following literature review we have chosen to present and discuss these different notions under the wider term of ‘socially engaged art practices’. Despite its looseness, it is a term wide enough to cover a series of different practices which, rather than being based on typologies of media, the site and its specificities or the quality of social interaction, are based on understanding the artwork as a process and on understanding the artist, audience and curator as co-authors of the piece (Lacy 1995). This two-fold focus on processuality and co-productiveness is why we believe the term to provide a suitable and common ground for all possible facets of artistic practice to be developed within *Nine Urban Biotopes* (9UB), which aims at developing a trans-local dialogue and knowledge exchange through art.

Practices subsumed under the notion of ‘socially engaged’ have clear political intentions – as does the project 9UB – and could thus also be coined ‘politically engaged’. However, their political impact comes from the artist seeking to create a direct relationship with the audience – often addressed as

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<sup>1</sup> Important precursors to socially-oriented practices are the Dada manifestations in Paris in the 1920’s (see Bishop 2006a:10).



'the community'<sup>2</sup> – by exploring different types of sociability, and engaging with relevant social and political issues, thus the term 'socially engaged'. At 9UB, artists and the project as a whole are seeking to create such 'concrete connectivity' – values identified by project partners to be at the core of 9UB<sup>3</sup> – among multiple audiences, topics, sites and cultural frameworks. This is the second reason why we suggest placing 'social engagement' at the centre under which to discuss the multiple facets of the art practices to be employed throughout the project.

### *Community arts*

According to Owen Kelly, in *Community, Art and the State: Storming the Citadels* (1984), community arts were born in the UK in the late 1960s from three strands: 1) the search for experimental art forms, epitomized by the Art Laboratories movement; 2) artists going away from galleries to the streets in order to find the 'original' public; and 3) the emergence of a new type of political activism that incorporated artistic creativity within their campaigns.

Although community artists worked using different approaches and media they all shared the view that community art was not a particular type of art, but a specific attitude to art (Braden 1978). Artists worked to achieve 'cultural democracy', that is, to celebrate all types of culture, eliminating the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, with the firm belief that achieving cultural democracy was a *sine qua non* condition for political democracy. Triggered by a clear political ambition, many community artists worked in deprived areas in order to use art as an education instrument and to empower people through participation in the creative process (Morgan 1995).

However, art's instrumental role in attaining social goals has to be critically assessed in light of the divergent, or even competing, interests invested by different stakeholders. For example, community arts were subjected from the outset to the question of funding from both public and private institutions (Kelly 1984). Community arts have left a strong legacy not only in today's art practice but also in cultural policy. In the UK, this can be seen in the widespread instrumentalisation of the arts for social purposes since the last decade.

### *New genre public art*

In the United States, the term 'new genre public art' comprises a series of art practices comparable to those championed by community artists in the UK. Miwon Kwon, in *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Local Identity* (2002), has provided an exhaustive account of the evolution of public art from the 1960s until today. According to Kwon new genre public art is based on an expanded concept of site including not only the physical context but: "different cultural debates, a theoretical concept, a social issue, a political problem, an institutional framework..., a neighbourhood or seasonal event, a historical condition, even particular forms of desire" (p. 29). Furthermore, new genre public art characterises itself by being process-based and by being primarily concerned with social and political issues (Kwon 2002).

In turn, in *Mapping the Terrain* (1995), Suzanne Lacy describes new genre public art as an art form that "is not built on a typology of materials, spaces or artistic media, but rather on concepts of audience, relationship and political intention" (p. 28), where the relationship and engagement with the public might become the artwork itself. Lacy, here, makes a very interesting remark regarding new genre public art as an art form. She states that in the 1990s new genre public art was beginning to challenge the accepted definition of art due to its nature of being "a process of value finding, a set of

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<sup>2</sup> As it has been pointed out by Miwon Kwon (2002), the definition of 'community' is in itself a political struggle. Whereas on one hand, artists can catalyse the creation of a community around a particular social or political concern, on the other hand, the artist might also 'invent' the community based on a series of unquestioned assumptions about their identity and social needs.

<sup>3</sup> See the value pyramid defined during the corporate identity workshop in August 2013 in Berlin.



philosophies, an ethical action, and an aspect of a larger socio-cultural agenda” (Lacy 1995:46). This is an expanded notion of art that underpins the increasing understanding of art to be a practice of research and knowledge production.

### *Dialogical art*

In *Conversation Pieces. Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), Grant Kester coins the term ‘dialogical art’ in order to describe a tendency in contemporary art since the 1970s.

Making multiple connections to the tradition of community arts in the UK and new genre public art in the US, and inspired by Kant’s and Lyotard’s notions of the aesthetic and the sublime, Kester describes ‘dialogue’ as an action that, within the framework of dialogical art, is fundamentally aesthetic. By freeing ourselves from our conventional perceptions, frameworks and obligations, dialogical art – which has the communicative act as its benchmark – allows us to find new and unexpected possibilities for knowing, being and acting. A liberation that is intrinsic to Kester’s notion of the ‘aesthetical’, and provides yet another basis for framing art practice as a practice of research.

Drawing on the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, Kester suggests the work in dialogical art to be a conversation: “a locus of differing meanings, interpretations, and points of view” (Kester 2004:10). In Dialogical art, thus, the artist does not aim at articulating a previously formed vision but to derive insights from the interaction with others and with otherness. Above all, they listen; and when they speak, they speak in response, not a priori, to what is being discussed. “[T]heir ability to catalyze understanding, to mediate exchange, and to sustain an ongoing process of empathic identification and critical analysis” (2004:118) is at the heart of the interactive character of their projects.

### *Relational practices*

‘Relational practices’ is a term coined in the late 1990s by curator Nicholas Bourriaud. Although his work *Relational Aesthetics* (2002[1997]) has been criticized for its lack of rigour and criticality (see Bishop 2004; Martin 2007), it has become a major point of reference for the characterization of contemporary art practice.

Inspired in Althusser’s statement that “culture does not *reflect* society, but *produces* it” (Bishop 2004:63), Bourriaud identified several trends in the art practices of the 1990s. One of its predominant characteristics is that these art practices were ‘relational’, i.e. consisted of the direct interaction between the artists and the audience in order to “achieve modest connections, open up (one or two) obstructed passages, and connect levels of reality kept apart from one another” (Bourriaud 2002:8). According to Bourriaud, by connecting levels of reality that in real life are wide apart, relational art practices create a series of social interstices that escape from the general marketisation and reification of contemporary society. In this way, the artwork no longer seeks utopian realities but creates real ways of living and models of action, albeit on a small scale (2002).

Sketching a sociology of relational art, Bourriaud suggests that it is the world-wide urbanisation of culture that led to the current expansion of the function, form of presentation and experience of art. Thus the artwork, he states, is now “the tangible symbol and historical setting of the state of society, that “*state of encounter imposed on people*”, to use Althusser’s expression, contrasting with that dense and “trouble-free” jungle which the *natural state* once was, according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a jungle hampering any lasting encounter” (ibid. 2002:15).

### *Art activism*

‘Art activism’ is a hybrid term devised in the 1970s that has a double origin. Firstly, it stems from the counter-culture movements and student revolts of the late 1960s where students used “aesthetic



tropes of play and creativity” to pose political questions to the political system from a realm outside political theory (Bang Larsen 2010:27). Alongside the instrumentalisation of art to articulate political demands, a new breed of activist artists went out to the streets seeking to engage with the audience in order to readdress urgent social, political, economic and environmental problems (Lippard in Bang Larsen 2010).

Secondly, art activism arose from the need of artists to make a critique of museums and galleries as mechanisms in the perpetuation of the capitalistic *status quo*. Championed by artists such as Hans Haacke, Robert Smithson, and Helen and Newton Harrison, institutional critique used art institutions as trenches to criticize from *within* the institution the reification and commoditisation of artwork and of artists (Kester 1998).

## II. Assessment of socially engaged art practices

Despite the fact that the term ‘socially engaged art practices’ can be very helpful when trying to embrace the disparate array of art practices arranged under the terminologies of ‘community arts’, ‘new genre public art’, ‘dialogical art’, ‘relational practices’ or ‘art activism’, this term also entails several assumptions.

On the one hand, although ‘socially engaged art practices’ could potentially take place at any point on the political spectrum, they generally imply a political position associated with the liberal or radical left (Lacy 1995). On the other, these practices tend to be ameliorative, i.e. they usually take place within contexts of deprivation and marginalisation in order to bring about social change inspired by the ideals of democracy, equity and equality.

The predominance of social and political elements in socially engaged art has generated intense debate. It is in fact the partial fulfilment of Beuys’ prophecy that art would become politics and politics become art (Lippard 1973). **Oscillating between political/ethical criteria and aesthetic judgment, artists, critics, art historians and curators do not seem to agree upon the framework for the assessment of this type of art practice, and therefore on whether or not they can call the practice ‘art’ at all.**

### *Socially engaged art and the expansion of aesthetics*

Already by the 1980s, Lucy Lippard had identified that “a new kind of art practice is going to have to take place at least partially outside of the art world... But it may be that these new forms are only to be found buried in social energies not yet recognized as art” (Lippard 1995:121). The assimilation of the “outside of the art world” into art’s core has been taking place through the challenge that socially engaged art poses to the premise of Greenbergian formalism: that ‘real art’ is the articulation of universal truth transcending social and political realities. According to Greenberg, by virtue of his/her genius and the practice of his/her freedom, the artist is able to grasp and convey the experience of universal truths through his/her artwork. Art’s moral authority relies, therefore, on the fact that it exists in a sphere of autonomy apart from the mundane (Kester 1998).

Inspired by the work of artists like Joseph Beuys, The Guerrilla Action Group, Suzanne Lacy, Martha Rosler, WochenKlausur, Group Material and Elizabeth Sisco among many others, several authors have embarked on the creation of theoretical frameworks where socially engaged art is assessed on the basis of an expansion of the meaning of the ‘aesthetic’ that includes the political and the social.

Grant Kester links the aesthetical and the political by understanding art “as a mediating discourse between subject and object, between the somatic and the rational, and between the individual and the social” (Kester 1998:8). For Kester, art is like a bridge that actually *links* the social with our individual realm. He also asserts that art deconstructs our preconceived notions and identities allowing us to see ourselves and the world in a different light: an ‘illumination’ that belongs to the essence of the aesthetical experience (Kester 2004).



In a fashion similar to Kester and with several elements from Kant's aesthetics in her arguments, Suzanne Lacy argues that beauty "results from reassembling meaning in a way that, at that moment, appears *new* and unique to the perceiver" (1995: 44). Thus beauty is no longer associated with truth and sensual pleasure, as in Modernism, but with knowledge that is contextual rather than universal. Lacy further argues that universality comes into the picture when the artist is able to touch the inner self of another individual through an act that brings afloat our common denominators as human beings (Lacy 1995). However, by declaring that activist art attains aesthetical universality by drawing on the need that *all* individuals have to attain social change (1995), Lacy assumes that *all* human beings desire social change.

### *Socially engaged art, antagonism and the public sphere*

Unlike Lacy, Kester and Lippard, who have embarked on expanding the term 'aesthetical' in relation to the political and social realm without critically questioning some of the artistic practice taking place in the field of socially engaged art, other authors such as Claire Bishop have undertaken a much more critical approach.

In "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", Bishop (2004) offers a strong critique of Nicholas Bourriaud who, disregarding the context wherein relational art takes place, assumes that all relational art is good and democratic *per se*. Later on in "The social turn: collaboration and its discontents" (2006b), Bishop analyses a series of socially engaged art practices such as Oda Projesi's and Superflex's work in order to demonstrate how their political imperative and the 'justice' of their ethical causes overshadow both art's principle of autonomy and the aesthetical judgment of art.

In this second article Bishop also offers a strong critique of curators who, having replaced the role of art critics, orient themselves almost exclusively to ethical concerns, dismiss elements of aesthetical judgment, and engage in affirmative and a-critical assessments of socially engaged art.

Bishop argues that in order to escape the predictability of the social imperative, art should contest the social by making visible the ideological operations of place and social organisation (Bishop 2006). Furthermore, drawing on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Bishop argues that, just as democracy is not about everyone thinking the same and agreeing on everything, socially engaged art – in particular relational practices – should embrace antagonism into their core (Bishop 2004). By incorporating antagonism and thus embracing contradiction into its core, relational art can fulfil its own aesthetic autonomy and at the same time engage with the complexity of political reality, without falling into the naivety of affirmative and idealistic political orientations (Bishop 2004).

Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere, developed in *The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere* (1991[1962]) is very useful in expanding upon Bishop's argumentation of relational antagonism. According to Habermas, the public sphere is an area of social life where members of society participate in a discussion that influences political action. In the public sphere it is not the social status of the participants that matters, but the quality of their arguments. Hence, everyone is entitled to participate in the public sphere and through it influence the direction of current political and social affairs (Calhoun 1992).

According to Habermas, the societal integration and practice of shared critical activity that characterised the public sphere during the 17th and 18th centuries was replaced in the 20th century by a depoliticized public sphere characterised by passive culture consumption of mass media and a-political sociability (Calhoun 1992). In this sense, socially engaged art practices, set out by Bishop as social spaces embracing antagonism, discussion and criticality, could be interpreted as attempts to examine the notion of the 'public' and recreate the ideal public sphere.

Despite the sharpness and depth of Claire Bishop's arguments, in trying to pin down the 'aesthetic' in socially engaged art and escape from the predictability of the social imperative, she ends up mak-



ing the same mistake that she criticises. By instrumentalising criticality as an imperative for art to be aesthetic, she leaves a fundamental question unanswered: what is ultimately the aesthetic in socially engaged art?

### **Socially engaged art, social change and praxis as research**

Going on from the controversies regarding the expansion of aesthetics and the criticality of art, a third line of argument has to be explored in order to give a comprehensive assessment of socially engaged art practices. This line aims at discussing the praxis itself as well the effect socially engaged art has (or does not have) on fostering social change.

In her much acclaimed essay *Art and Public Space: Questions of Democracy* (1992), Rosalyn Deutsche protests against the uncritical use of notions like 'public', 'democratic' and 'socially engaged' in the art discourses. Examining the relationship between art, architecture and urban planning on the one hand and the politics of space on the other, Deutsche highlights the implications that lie on the 'social side' of the society/community-art equation inherent to socially engaged art. Urban renewal projects increasingly make use of art practices in order to engage inhabitants and neighbours into the transformation of their habitats – to anticipate conflict as well as to attract new and financially stronger clients to buy into their business model.

Seen from the viewpoint of artistic freedom, such instrumentalisation of the arts has to be regarded critically. Their 'abuse', however, is carried out by all fractions participating in the struggle over space. Culture (here: art practice), as George Yúdice expounds in *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (2003), has become a "valuable resource to be invested in, contested, and used for varied sociopolitical and economic ends" by all commercial, state, non-governmental and activist actors.

Seen from the viewpoint of art's role in society, the second central question that arises is that put forward by Chantal Mouffe in her article *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces* (2007): "Can artistic practices still play a critical role in a society where the difference between art and advertising have become blurred and where artists and cultural workers have become a necessary part of capitalist production?" (2007:1). In other words, what is the effectiveness of art practices, if there is any, in bringing about social change?<sup>4</sup>

While many have come to claim that art has lost its critical power because any critique is immediately absorbed into capitalist reproduction, Mouffe comes to the conclusion that art continues to offer the possibility of opposition (ibid. 2007). She draws on Brian Holmes who suggests that "Art can offer a chance for society to reflect collectively on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its very consistency, its self-understanding" (2004:549). This productive reflexivity we find in particular in art's relationality and dialogicality. Art's democratic role, Holmes develops, lies precisely in making the production of collective imaginaries an issue of public concern and to experiment with and 'derail', adapt and reconfigure our societies' modes of communication – we can certainly hear the echo of the International Situationist's practice of *détournement* in Holmes's understanding of art's role, establishing a link back to the very beginning of art activism (Debord and Wolman 1956; Debord 2006:204–9; Holmes 2004:552).

Holmes continues framing art as the space and activity for creating an "experimental public sphere" (2004:555). Going beyond Clair Bishop's description of art as public space, Holmes draws our attention to the laboratory character of such space. This brings us to the praxis itself of socially engaged art practices, which is often referred to – and particularly so in the project 9UB – as artistic research.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on this question in the context of urban (art) interventions see the symposium "Wirksamkeit von Interventionen" (effectiveness of interventions) at HFBK Hamburg in November 2012, part of the DFG research project "urbane Interventionen" (HFBK 2013).



Graeme Sullivan, in his book *Arts Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (2005), demonstrates that arts practice is a form of understanding that privileges the role of imagination yet at the same time is sufficiently sound in theory and rigorous in method in order to satisfy institutional demands. He argues, that regardless whether practiced in the studio or in the community space, or wherever else artists work, the arts play a significant role in “constructing knowledge that is not only new but has the capacity to transform human understanding” (2005:xii). Artistic research thus describes a different yet complementary path to similar research goals as framed in the social sciences (Holmes 2004:xi; Merz Akademie 2012); and socially engaged art practices – path-oriented and co-productive, interdisciplinary and political, context-related and output-open in character – show particularly fruitful for revealing, documenting, theorizing, critiquing, and (potentially) changing issues of social and cultural relevance.

Evaluating the possibility of arts’ misuse mentioned above in light of art’s potential of (transformative) knowing, we can state with Antonio Negri, in *Art and Multitude* (2011), that artistic activity, as all productive activity, is of course the simple production of art (which, as commodity, is subjected to its use and abuse) yet is also a mode of being productive in general. This ‘artistic productivity’ in itself, he states, is a way of “being-creative in the world” of ontological importance (2011:109) as it allows asking elementary questions of existence.

The authors of the position paper on artistic research elaborated at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in May 2012 reinforce this potential of art. They write: “Artistic research allows society to continuously renegotiate the question “what is research?” It visualises the *poiesis*, the figures of movement of the processes of research, questions established methods and produces new forms of inquiry” (Brandstetter et al. 2012 own translation). In the case of 9UB, socially engaged art practices will show their potential for asking questions like: what is socially engagedness? What is (trans-local) negotiation? And what is urban sustainability and the future of living?

### III. The role of the curator and some thoughts on participation

The nature and claims of socially engaged art practices make the analysis of the functions of the artwork’s participants on all levels a necessary element of the overall assessment. Funders and institutional actors have already been addressed above, yet the role of the curator and the relationship between artist(s) and audience(s) – ranging from direct participants to neighbours to general and specific publics – need extra attention.

#### *The role of the curator*

Regarding the role of the curator in socially engaged art practice, Miwon Kwon (2002) points out that the “project manager” or curator has become an author in his/her own right. They organise the workshops, meetings and walks that make up the artwork (or parts of it). Moreover, Kwon suggests that curators have shifted from sedentary to nomadic figures travelling from site to site, creating exhibitions as discursive sites, rather than as static and passive formations (Arriola 2009).

Suzanne Lacy suggests that in the context of public art, the presentation of the artist’s project to the community has become an essential requirement (Lacy 1995:24), but that smoothing the path for social interaction is neither the strength nor the interest of many artists. As a result of this, Lacy points out that the mediation skills of the curator or, as she calls him/her, the “public art administrator”, have become key to the creation of the right conditions for the interaction between artist and community.

With his estimate that “although global in scope, [dialogical art] exists largely (albeit not entirely) outside the international network of art galleries and museums, curators and collectors” (2004:9), Grant Kester failed at that time to acknowledge the growing importance that curators such as Nicholas Bourriaud, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Barbara Vanderlinden were acquiring within the





field of dialogical art (Bishop 2004). Nicholas Bourriaud (2002), to the contrary, demonstrated this very importance acquired by curators – more and more exceeding that of art critics – in providing the framework for the interpretation, assessment and assimilation of what, at the beginning of the 2000s, was considered an anomalous art practice.

With the intention to offer some preliminary conclusions regarding the role of the curator in socially engaged art practices we can state that the constant interaction has helped to redefine as well as expand the limits and horizons of each of these practices, that of the curator and that of socially engaged art, both individually and in relation to one another. From the exhibition maker and public mediator that enters the stage not until after the art process, via the facilitator, executive producer and collaborator *during* the realisation of the artwork, to the artist's critical counter-part challenging the artwork even before it is initiated, the contemporary curator has functioned as a sort of cufflink between the two practices.

On the one hand, by the virtues of being process-based, collaborative, site-specific and having a 'social' construction as both their medium and their political and aesthetical ends, socially engaged art practices have triggered a radical transformation in art practice as well as in the definition of art, its functions, limits and horizons. Curators, on the other hand, whose practice has been under a constant process of redefinition since its shift away from the traditional curator, have become key to providing the conditions for these practices to take place, as well as for their legitimization as 'art' practices.

The malleability, fluidity and openness of curatorial practice allow curators to creatively respond to the unexpected challenges that are intrinsic to socially engaged art. Therefore, from being in charge of providing the material and human resources for an artwork or an exhibition to take place, curators have developed together with artists a special sensitivity to work in social contexts. They are able to respond creatively and promptly to unexpected circumstances that take place during the practice of socially engaged art. Furthermore, and also responding to the particularities of socially engaged art practice, curators have turned into key interlocutors with the artist in the creation process. Curators are collaborators and sometimes even co-authors of the artwork, as well being mediators between the artist, the audience, the participants, the art institutions and the art world.

### *Participation?*

Participation is a key notion to projects operating within the realms of socially engaged art. This is particularly the case if they are explicitly addressing concerns of urban regeneration or change, as in the case 9UB. As Claire Bishop suggests in the compilation *Participation* (2006a), edited as part of the Whitechapel Gallery series *Documents on Contemporary Art*, the notion of *social* participation, in distinction to participation in form of an activation of the viewer in interactive and installation art, emphasises the collective dimension of social experience and the proximity and physical involvement that sustains such experience (Bishop 2006a:10–11).

The participatory impulse found in socially engaged art practices since the 1960s, she expounds, is committed predominantly to three concerns: 1) the activation of the (political) subject fostering individual emancipation and empowerment; 2) shared authorship, as this is regarded to be a mode of more egalitarian and democratic creation (as well as a mode to open up the aesthetic benefit entailed in the unpredictability of collaborative creation processes); and 3) the restoration of social bonds in order to overcome the perceived crisis of the community and to provide means for resisting the alienating and isolating effects of Capitalism (ibid. 2006a:12). This agenda, Bishop continues, has to be seen as following Guy Debord in his critique of the spectacle, a social relation that is "the opposite of dialogue" (Debord 2006:§18). However, as Rosalyn Deutsche has shown in her detailed analysis of urban art practices (1992), the notion of (social) participation, as well as of other political terms, is often used uncritically and thus needs serious attention.



In his article “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” (2003[1969]), Sherry R. Arnstein develops a typology of three groups – participation, tokenism and non-participation – under which he subsumes eight levels, rungs, ranging from citizen control, delegated power and partnership in the top group, via placation, consultation and informing in the middle group and therapy and manipulation in the bottom group. Without going into detail, this classification provides a useful framework to challenge the levels of participation accomplished among artists, ‘immediate participants’, curators, stakeholders and audiences in socially engaged art practices (as well as in all forms of social interaction like, for example, the dialogue among project partners of 9UB).

Socially engaged art, not necessarily as an *ideal* public sphere but as an *experimental* one, not only as the production of art commodities but as the artistic expression of a way of being creative in the world, then, is both the site and the method to renegotiate precisely the very meaning of participation (in 9UB’s case: to renegotiate the meaning of participation in the urban and across cultural boundaries). Like the outdoor exhibition *Culture in Action: New Public Art in Chicago* from 1993, which Miwon Kwon refers to as one of the outstanding, and earlier, examples of new genre public art, socially engaged art in general is where and by which to test “the territory of public interaction and participation; the role of the artist as an active social force; artist-driven educational programming as an essential part of the artwork; and projects that exist[ed] over an extended period of time, not just as spectator-oriented objects for brief viewing” (2002:100). And even though genuine participation can not be guaranteed, at least steps four to eight of Arnstein’s ladder of participation allow an increase in ideas and the creation of new forms of commitment (Nikolai von Rosen in: Ring 2013:111).

Situating socially engaged art practices in the context of the discussion on cultural democracy and the use of art to effect social change, these practices and their intended/achieved levels of participation show the tensions between bottom-up cultural expression and local critical knowledge and the top-down practice of democratising culture through cultural provision based on predefined economic, aesthetic and social values (Hope 2011:1). 9UB, aiming at applying such practices in order to make (political) urban interventions, will have to be aware of this debate.

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