

Socially Engaged Art, Critics and Discontents: An Interview with Claire Bishop
By Jennifer Roche

What criteria should we use to evaluate socially engaged art?

London-based critic Claire Bishop recently raised provocative questions and poked at the critical status quo about the discourse surrounding what she term, "relational" practices — socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based and collaborative art. In socially engaged art, critic Claire Bishop believes the aesthetic is being sacrificed on the altar of social change.

In her article for *Artforum* (February 2006), titled "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents," Bishop argues that the creativity behind socially engaged art is said to "rehumanize" a "numb and fragmented" society. However, she emphasizes that she believes socially engaged art has fallen prey to circumscribed critical examinations. The discourse, she argues, has focused mainly on the artist's process and intentions, or the project's socially ameliorative effects, to the neglect of the work's aesthetic impact.

"Artists are increasingly judged by their working process — the degree to which they supply good or bad models of collaboration," she writes. "Accusations of mastery and egocentrism are leveled at artists who work with participants to realize a project instead of allowing it to emerge through consensual collaboration."

"There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond," she continues. "While I am broadly sympathetic to that ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze, and compare such work critically as art."

Bishop draws on the notion of the aesthetic as defined by philosopher Jacques Rancière, who said that the aesthetic is the "ability to think contradiction." "For Rancière," writes Bishop, "the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative process." In other words, art heals. No need to hurry it along.

Bishop identified the writing surrounding the Turkish artists' collective Oda Projesi as emblematic of the way "aesthetic judgments have been overtaken by ethical criteria." When Bishop interviewed Oda Projesi for an earlier article, the collective — whose works include fostering community projects with its neighbors out of a three-room apartment in Istanbul — said they were interested in "dynamic and sustained relationships" not aesthetics. In fact, they said they deemed "aesthetic" to be a dangerous word. "This seemed to me to be a curious response," notes Bishop. "If the aesthetic is dangerous, isn't that all the more reason it should be interrogated?"

Bishop cites works by British artists Jeremy Deller and Phil Collins, Polish artist Artur Zmijewski and Brussels-born artist Carsten Höller as producing works that yield richer aesthetic possibilities. For example, she mentions Deller's "The Battle of Orgreave," which was a reenactment of a 1984 English miners' confrontation with police, complete with participation by a historical reenactment

society. She cites its ambiguous purpose and result, along with its many, often contradictory layers of meaning and interpretation, as yielding a deeper, multifaceted work. She argues that this occurs, in part, because the artist acted on his desires rather than according to particular ethical criteria.

"Their work joins a tradition of highly authored situations that fuse social reality with carefully calculated artifice," Bishop says of Deller and the others. Like Dadaism before them, they created "intersubjective relations (that) weren't an end in themselves but rather served to unfold a more complex knot of concerns about pleasure, visibility, engagement, and the conventions of social interaction."

Bishop clearly wishes to shed the recurring ethical themes in the critical discourse, which she often describes as Christian ideals of self-sacrifice and "good souls," in favor of embracing the contradiction that naturally arises from the artist's intentions.

"The best collaborative practices of the past ten years," she concludes, "address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work and in the conditions of its reception. It is to this art — however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear — that we must turn for an alternative to the well-intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on social collaboration."

Not surprisingly, Bishop's article generated considerable interest, including a full-page rebuttal by art historian and critic Grant Kester in Artforum's follow-up issue. CAN asked me to interview her to learn more about her about her thoughts on evaluating socially engaged art and her current work. I caught up with her in early July, and we conducted the interview via e-mail.

Jennifer Roche: Your article, simply put, seems to be a call to examine (or re-examine) the principles under which we evaluate socially engaged art. You say that most socially engaged art has been evaluated from an ethical viewpoint (good vs. bad models of collaboration).

Why do you think the discourse surrounding socially engaged art has lapsed in its critical examination of the field as you've described?

Claire Bishop: There are several reasons for this, and they range from the pragmatic to the ideological. On the one hand, in Europe at least, the influence of the art critic began to diminish in the early 1990s, and was replaced by the curator as the figure who makes or breaks an artist's career. And as we know, curatorial writing is on the whole affirmative and rarely expresses reservations about a given artist. When I embarked upon this research I was struck by the fact that most of the project documentation was written by curators. To an extent this is logistical: socially engaged and participatory art projects are so complex, sprawling and context-based that the only person with a handle on the overall project is invariably the curator. **But because curatorial work is so often concerned with fair mediation (between artists, audiences and institutions), it is perhaps unsurprising that curatorial writing is oriented toward ethical questions.** The rise of communitarian discourse in the mid-1990s was underpinned by a desire to promote a homogeneous and consensual view of society: an 'ethical community' in which political

dissensus is dissolved. **IS THIS TRUE OF KESTER? I ASSUME THIS IS WHO SHE IS TALKING ABOUT.**

On the other hand, we could also claim that an orientation towards the ethical is part of a larger trend in the 1990s, symptomatic of what has been called our "post-political" age. Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière and others have observed an "ethical turn" in philosophy (as evidenced in the resurgence of interest in Emmanuel Levinas, in Giorgio Agamben, and in the idea of "radical evil" amongst Lacanian theorists), and this is also reflected in contemporary politics. The rise of communitarian discourse in the mid-1990s was underpinned by a desire to promote a homogeneous and consensual view of society: an "ethical community" in which political dissensus is dissolved. **As Rancière points out in "Malaise dans l'Esthétique" (2004), this thinking also submits art and politics to moral judgments bearing on the validity of their principles and the consequences of their practices.** He is not speaking directly of socially engaged art, but these ideas can be carried across with great poignancy.

JR: In your description of what a better critical discourse would require, you argue that the answer might lie in the French philosopher Jacques Rancière's argument that the "aesthetic is the ability to think contradiction." Would you elaborate on what you think best collaborative practices exhibit (beyond those projects you describe in your article)?

CB: This is a complicated question. I would like to argue that the best collaborative practices need to be thought of in terms other than their ameliorative consequences; they should also question the very terms of these ameliorative assumptions. My view is inevitably influenced by living in the U.K., where New Labour have for the last nine years instrumentalised art to fulfill policies of social inclusion – a cost-effective way of justifying public spending on the arts while diverting attention away from the structural causes of decreased social participation, which are political and economic (welfare, transport, education, healthcare, etc). **In this context it is crucial for art practices to tread a careful line between social intervention and autonomy, since demonstrable outcomes are rapidly co-opted by the state.** Temporary Services once asked me which was worse: to be instrumentalised by the state or by the art market. I'm afraid I think it's the former.

I am also wary of the idea that there is a privileged medium for works of art. The mere fact of being collaborative, or participatory, or interactive, is not enough to legitimise a work or guarantee its significance. It is more important to observe how it addresses – and intervenes in – the dominant conventions and relations of its time. If we look at the proliferation of collaborative art practices today, it seems that many no longer have the oppositional and anti-authoritarian punch they had in the late 1960s and 1970s – when radical theatre, community arts and critical pedagogy emerged in opposition to dominant modes of social control. Today participation is used by business as a tool for improving efficiency and workforce morale; it is all-pervasive in the mass-media in the form of reality television; and it is a privileged medium for government funding agencies seeking to create the impression of social inclusion. Collaborative practices need to take this knot of conventions on board if they are to have critical bite.

JR: What do you think the heightened critical discourse you're advocating requires from the artist(s) engaged in socially collaborative art? From the communities considering socially engaged art or participating in it?

CB: It requires intelligence and imagination and risk and pleasure and generosity, both from the artists and the participants. For a while I have been tempted to write an article that pushes the ethical question a bit further, from a Lacanian angle. It would argue that the best socially collaborative art does not derive from a superegoic injunction to "love thy neighbour," but from the position of "do not give up on your desire." In other words, pursue your unconscious desire, as far as you can. The former (eg Grace in "Dogville") involves a sacrificial stance: it is the politically correct position of doing what seems right in the eyes of others. The logic of the latter is about taking responsibility for your own desire, rather than acting out of guilt (for example, about being an artist). In Seminar VII Lacan draws a link between this ethical position and the beautiful. I haven't written this article as I'm not convinced of its ability to tell us much about contemporary art. But has guided my reading of certain works – by Collins, Zmijewski, Althamer, etc.

JR: You talk in your article quite a bit about the role that the artist's "authorial status" plays in socially engaged art. Would you explain what you mean by "authorial status" and why you consider it so significant to socially engaged art?

CB: By "authorial status" I simply mean an original and distinctive voice. **I have found that socially engaged projects are on the whole rather formulaic and predictable, placing greater emphasis on the participants' creativity than on rethinking the conventions of participation, which are today somewhat orthodox.** There is a common belief that reduced authorial status is more "democratic" and "ethical" than an artist imposing their vision or will on a group of participants. I think we can question all of these assumptions. Overturning the very premises from which social engagement operates can be both artistically and critically invigorating.

JR: Your article stimulated a lot of conversation. One discussion on the Web, in LeisureArts blog, raised a compelling point. The writer said:

I think (Bishop) misses something very important ... namely that many of these practices might be better served by not considering them via art critical methodologies at all. There are a number of forms of cultural production that might call for new theoretical tools to interpret properly ... I suspect there are many people operating in the domain of art discourse because they have nowhere else to go, even though their interest in connections to an art historical lineage is ancillary at best.

What do you think of this?

CB: I completely agree that turning to other disciplines can help to sharpen our mode of discussion about works of art, particularly those that step into the social arena. Political philosophy and psychoanalysis have helped me to articulate my reservations about the political claims made for relational aesthetics. I am currently looking at sociology as a way to be more

precise about the idea of "inclusion" and "participation" in socially engaged art. The task is to bind these ideas together in a discussion of the work's overall meaning as art.

But what this quote implies – and which I resist very strongly – is the idea that art is the "last place" to go for engagement, that it is the only remaining "free space." This idea is dangerous and lazy. It signals a retreat from the political, rather than the invention and assertion of new territories. It is fine for socially engaged and activist work to operate within the domain of art discourse, providing it also contributes something to that discourse (which actually does have an art historical lineage – think of Situationism, Joseph Beuys, Group Material...). It is comparable to a practice-led PhD: the practical work and the theoretical text both have to be PhD standard, equally important contributions to the field. But if the claims for transdisciplinarity are to be taken seriously, then these projects should also function within other discourses too. **The situation I would want to avoid is of inconsequential practices that make no impact on either field.**

JR: Why does your argument require that the ethical evaluation of socially engaged art be described as Christian? What does that mean for collaborative work arising out of cultures that are not historically Christian?

CB: The argument doesn't require that the ethical evaluation of socially engaged art be described as Christian – this is simply my cultural reference point for a self-sacrificial position, especially one performed for the eyes of the big Other. This is not to denigrate Christianity per se – there are many things worth salvaging in that tradition, as Žižek has argued. What interests me is his critique of contemporary ethico-political responsibility as a form of ideological absolution: it saves us from having to take on board an "ethics of the Real," in which we are responsible for our own actions and the potentially traumatic consequences of these actions.

In terms of collaborative work arising from other cultures: this is complicated, and I certainly considered it before using Oda Projesi as a case study. But eventually the focus of my article was the discourse that presently surrounds this work in the West; regardless of where the artist comes from, the work (especially if it circulates here) can still be subject to critical analysis. **This doesn't mean ignoring the cultural context, just being alert to the way in which a reading overdetermined by this can swiftly become an excuse for not thinking through what it means for yourself.** I hear these excuses all the time – not in relation to religion, admittedly – but as a form of positive discrimination in which the artist's culture/identity is more important than what we encounter.

JR: We caught up with you while you were traveling in Thailand to visit The Land Foundation in Chiang Mai. What piqued your interest in visiting them at this time? What did you learn?

CB: I am immensely grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for a research grant. I decided it would be useful to visit the 'spiritual home' of relational art, Thailand. The Land in Chiang Mai is one of the most frequently cited examples of a socially engaged 'relational' project, and almost all accounts of it are written by curators (Obrist, Birnbaum, etc). I spent four days in and around The Land Foundation, talking to its co-founder, the artist Kamin Lerdchaiprasert, and to Uthit Athimana, Professor of Media Art Design at Chiang Mai University (on the board of the Foundation). My day with Uthit made the whole trip worthwhile as I learnt about Chiang Mai

Social Installation: a series of impromptu and participatory performance and live installation festivals in Chiang Mai during the 1990s. These began without knowledge of Rirkrit Tiravanija's work (he didn't return to Thailand until 1996), and yet there are clear overlaps.

The Land itself is quite small: a functioning farm allotment-cum-architectural park located a 40-minute drive outside the city. The map to find it is elaborate – like the instructions to reach Spiral Jetty or Double Negative. It is extremely peaceful, and the pavilions are attractively modest. Several things about the project surprised me.

Firstly, the way in which entropy has already taken hold of The Land: Tobias Rehberger's pavilion was made with Swedish wood for a show at the Moderna Museet, and is now rotting in the tropical climate. Philippe Parreno's Battery House, which is supposed to generate its own electricity through an "elephant plug," has never worked. (For Parreno's film "The Boy From Mars" (2005), the building was lit artificially and a water buffalo "performed" the role originally intended for an elephant.) The building was supposed to fulfil Kamin's request for a meditation hall, but the concrete floor is curved, and punctuated by many struts, and cannot be used for this purpose. The ratio of water to land on the farm is organised according to the principles of a Buddhist agriculturalist, Chaloui Kaewkong, but this too isn't really working: the water is stagnant rather than flowing. Ironically, all these "failures" really endeared the project to me.

Secondly, that the only people who live on the site full-time are peasant farmers, who keep the premises ticking over. The bulk of the Foundation's activities take place in a group of buildings on the edge of the city, in a leafy district called Umong. There is an exhibition space/yoga hall with two offices, a meditation hall, a guest house, and a house with an open kitchen. Rirkrit is building a house on the adjacent plot. Several young people live and work on site, answering the phone and dealing with enquiries. Just after I arrived some of them also accompanied Kamin on an agricultural research trip to the north of Thailand. The week after I left, a group of Singaporean street artists were coming to stay. Umong is the hub of social activities, in contrast to which The Land itself is rather static.

Thirdly, that The Land is the result of conflicting ideas. For Kamin it is essentially a spiritual project. He wants to create an experimental living situation that will help him understand his place in the world, one that will hopefully be good for other people too. He is drawn to an ideal of self-sufficiency (inspired by Chaloui Kaewkong). Rirkrit, I understand, is more interested in an experimental project that fuses art and the social; he is less interested in the spiritual dimension and more open to the possibility of buildings not functioning. Uthit is more sceptical, and has numerous reservations about the project. For example, he thinks that the engagement with experimental agriculture could be pushed much further (by collaborating with the agriculture department at the University, for instance), and that the Foundation should be more open about PR – in other words, that the rhetoric should be more adequate to the reality. The three are old friends, and it is clear that they have a constructive dialogue in which these differences can surface.

JR: What are you working on next?

CB: I've just finished editing a reader of key texts on participation in art since the late 1950s, which will be published in September. I've also been trying to order all my thoughts on the problem of socially engaged art into a book, but I'm struggling and still feel light years away from a coherent argument. My research fellowship ends in September and then I begin a new job as History of Art lecturer at Warwick University.

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Artforum plans to post Claire Bishop's essay, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents" (February 2006), on its Web site: <http://www.artforum.com>.