



Too Careful: Contemporary Art's Public Making

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What is the role of public art commissioning—and the commissioning of culture more generally—at this very precise time of political, economic, and cultural transformation, when the organizational model of European democracy, with its attendant and historically embedded welfare state provision, is being discarded in favor of privately capitalized and mixed economy models of cultural and social organization? Although this process of transformation is taking place on a global scale, it is having specific local effects. It is rooted in historical, transnational and often colonial shifts affecting the mechanisms of labor, rights, and wealth production, and it redefines the lines of separation previously relied upon to perpetuate territorial certainties and divisions such as those between public and private, between social and anti-social, between doctor and client, between teacher and student, between union and worker, between law enforcer and protestor, and between artist and audience.

The disintegration of these markers of certainty, so clearly anticipated by the philosopher and activist Claude Lefort thirty years ago, leaves us stranded: on the one hand we celebrate new flexibilities and immaterialities, and new forms of capital in art and elsewhere, while on the other we witness the emergence of new forms of exploitation and inequality, and new forms of racism, homophobia, and gender reification that are ushered in to our lives under the auspices of freedom of choice. These new oppressions are much more difficult to predict and critique than their predecessors. Old forms of political action are incapacitated as power is rendered unlocatable: it can be neither disposed of nor redistributed. The actors in any given situation are at once agents and attendants in their—our— participatory regimes. This flexibility between actors, agents, and attendants is pernicious, since it contains both a promise and the base mechanics of contemporary oppressions. As I will explore, any attempt to “commission” art in this context must therefore take cognizance of, and work through, these invisibilities wrought through dispersion. As Neil Smith has pointed out, “[the] invisibility of the alternative is calibrated according to the invisibility of the target.”¹

1 Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*, third edition (London: Verso, 2010), 241.

Welfare

The assertion at the beginning of a reassessment of care in the public realm—and its affective relation to art commissioning—that the welfare state is disintegrating needs qualification. The term “welfare state” belongs, nostalgically for some, ideologically for others, to a previous era of social organization. Certainly in the UK the welfare state was destroyed institutionally in the mid to late 1970s along with the unions (Margaret Thatcher famously declared that there was “no alternative” to capitalism). With them, a certain conceptualization of state-driven care for citizenship was erased. Rather than having been eradicated completely by the coming of Thatcher in 1979, the understanding of welfare as an undifferentiated financial, medical, and social support system available to all—and as a safety net for those on or below the poverty line, underpinning the ethos of state care—has been slowly but methodologically transformed both rhetorically and pragmatically. Peter Osborne argues that in the UK:

The Seventies crisis was thus primarily a crisis of a particular state form: a crisis of the welfare state. More broadly, it was a crisis of the residual, compromise form of social democracy that was constructed in Western Europe after 1945, for which “welfare” became the privileged signifier. In this context “welfare” was thus at least in significant part a sign of inclusion; rather than, as in the USA (as it is, increasingly, in Britain today), of marginalization, social exclusion, and a distinct, almost abject economic sub-culture.²

The “ideological crisis of state form” Osborne diagnoses in the 1970s crisis in welfare state provision and its association with the Labour Left and social inclusion is long since past in the UK, as elsewhere. Now, the residual of that provision—free national health services, state education provision at primary, secondary, and tertiary level, free school meals, and unemployment

2 Peter Osborne, “Elmgreen & Dragset’s *The Welfare Show: A Historical Perspective*,” in *Verksted, no. 7: Art of Welfare*, ed. Marta Kuzma (Oslo: OCA, 2006), 21.

benefits, along with, of course, no-questions-asked state art funding—has evaporated significantly. Aspects remain, but are under reformulation through volunteerism and public–private partnership agreements in all quarters. Hospitals are being privatized (made into businesses), schools are being allowed to opt out of the state system in order to cater to the specific needs of social sets, interests groups, and the poor are being categorized—and thus assessed in terms of their economic contribution—as either “deserving” or “undeserving”; in the new regime, and in the spaces produced by the new regime, not everyone is equal.

The welfare state as imagined and produced is/was also a realm of enclosure. As such it is a national rather than transnational state model, broken down in part through the demands of migration and the inflexibility of nation states to imagine transnational forms of, for instance, health provision in the new milieu. You receive welfare if you belong within the enclosure of the state; this is increasingly enforced through asylum and immigration policy (the space of asylum is a good example of a space that is not imagined as public—how could it be so?).

This image of dissipation—the dissipation of locatable power, rights, identities, agencies, and even forms of work—while crucial to any discussion of the future shape of public space and its attendant confirmation and/or criticism in both art and concepts of care, is both profoundly Occidental and produced through transnationalism. As such, while Europe’s borders are enforced at the same time as its internal mechanisms of support for its citizen–subjects are collapsed, transnational capital produces both the “problem” (financialized porosity, migrations of peoples and goods, and networked global credit and debt mechanisms) and the “solution” (the same).

Care

These shifts are marked through recalibrations of care. If care is what state-funded arts have always been supposed to do, either indirectly through psychic and experiential transformations in the viewer or directly through participation in programs of community cohesion, it is clear now that such narratives of amelioration and healing of publics fits neatly into the concept of care that was governmentalized by the welfare state (that “the people” need to be looked after, as they cannot

manage themselves). In this concept of care, power is retained by the doctor and/or the artist. With the dissolution of the welfare state and its ideological structures, a new concept of care is ushered in, one of participatory individuality and client choice. Interestingly, in its move from monumentalism to dispersed and participatory practice, especially in the field of art in the public realm, artistic practice has either followed suit or provided the avant-garde for such narratives—perhaps both (in the form of the cultural industry). In both milieux—art and healthcare—and as such care as an idea itself, power is not redistributed.

If the welfare state was premised on the idea of distributing in a hierarchical and standardizing form the profit made through power-relations under the aegis of democracy (while not actually distributing the power in itself), the regime in which we are now fully immersed is structured in such a way as to retain both power and the profit from power within a political and economic elite. And while this eradication of the state is a violent affront to the fact of social welfare (and an eradication of funding for health, education, and the arts), for artists and the financial-reputational mechanisms of production and marketeering that they require, it is not such a change. Artists may make work that attempts to reframe concepts of equality, justice, and human rights but, as has been recognized across political polarities, they also form the vanguard of capitalism, exploiting their own and others' immaterial labor, inventing novel formats to fund and produce their work, existing within or on the borders of elite circuits, profiting by distinctional, non-standardized, and deregulated pricing indexes, and raising and spending buoyant cultural capital.

So if liberal democracy is understood generally to be a politics founded on implementing care for its citizen-subjects on the basis of individuality and self-authorship, and the welfare state interrupted this narrative through the implementation of equal (but nevertheless hierarchized) rights to social welfare (care), then neo-liberal democracy returns us to a previous regime of politics in which care is individualized, thus based on the privilege of access. Art production, in this changing context, loses its ability to rely on state funding and so must reinvent itself within and as part of neo-liberal capitalism. So far it has done very well in this regard, making a viable market for itself through mechanisms of mixed financialization—and not looking

too carefully at where this new private money is coming from. This raises questions about art's role within the social realm—a role that many artists and curators hold in principle.

The subjects of healthcare and contemporary art are politically and philosophically linked through their relation to this post-welfare situation. The infrastructures of funding for the arts that have developed in the West since the Second World War are rhetoricized largely through concepts of care: art, particularly art in public, serves to ameliorate the lives—and expand the horizons—of its citizen–subject audience. Now that state funding for the arts is in question, a section of artistic production can be otherwise made through newer versions of care (currently in the UK, these range from the “Big Society” government initiative wherein groups of interest groups and volunteers are promoted to take over the running of schools, medical aftercare, social organization, etc.) and the index for “well-being” (in which “happiness” is measured as a contribution to GDP). Here, the political instrumentalization of art is clear and artists and commissioners must thus ask themselves not only in whose name they speak publicly through their work but also—and perhaps more critically in the current context of participatory, collaborative production—if it matters whether they do not (only) speak in their own name?

Publics

For too long the claims made for art's connection to a public sphere have been made on the basis of art's distinctive and separable qualitative function from any broader social and political purpose within that same “space.” Indeed, the very notion of the public sphere as a spatial idiom, a territorial separation—complete with a group of people assigned the title of “the public”—has been, on the whole, maintained by art, usually by artists. Where artists have sought to blur these boundaries or make them less distinct, curators, commissioners, and—perhaps most emphatically—funders, have sought to maintain them. The maintenance of this separation is performed on a number of levels ranging from the bureaucratic to the ontological: just as art institutions are reliant on the identification of publics in order to maintain their structural rationale (to present art to this public in various ways), so the ontology of any artistic gesture, object, performance, or event is

produced and maintained through the recognition of its object-based and image-based separation from everyday public life. In this regard, both institutional and artistic autonomy produce a model of financial and cultural capital that is also reliant upon—and productive of—just such a version of “publicness.” If we are to think through the real implications, therefore, of art’s connection to the construction and maintenance of publics and their spaces, we need to be prepared to take up the potentially dissolutive implications of our findings. What, in other words, is art’s part in the organization of cultural civility? Meaning, directly and indirectly, what role has it played in the upholding of aesthetically organized divisions and compartmentalizations of civic life: what role has it played in the formation of the public realm within which such civility is largely imagined to take place?

The geopolitics of the conditions of artistic productions of space are significant. As European governments follow the North American model of cultural funding provision, and cut central government spending on the arts on the expectation that those “survivor” individuals and institutions will manage to attract private and/or philanthropic investment, so other parts of the world begin to lobby, forcefully, for rights to shared discursive public space. The direct violence used to repress spatial occupations and claims to shared public space in the Middle East and Far East is matched by the indirect violence caused by the eradication of welfare and its correlative public spaces in, for example, the UK and the Netherlands. The geopolitics of calls for democracy are deeply implicated in this cross-cultural shift: as one territory asserts rights to public space and their creative use in the name of democracy, the other, in protesting the shrinking of discursive, public rights, asserts, however indirectly, a claim to space that is in itself formatted through paternalistic liberalism—a space that has come to be known as public but is nevertheless made public for certain types of acting, certain types of sanctioned performance. Art, however, is normally seen to perform across these territorial divides, as an elite transnational commodity that, uniquely, can care and at the same time accrue value (perhaps not uniquely: the same claim can be made for drugs produced by multinational corporations). Who are the actors, who are the agents, and who are the attendants in both these milieux?

The series of public research platforms *Actors, Agents and Attendants* was set up at SKOR | Foundation for Art and Public Domain in order to investigate the relation between the macro-cultural and economic questions outlined above, in the context of the specific values and practices promoted by SKOR. Over a long period, SKOR has worked with a range of artists and architectural practices to develop an increasingly diversified but nevertheless consensual model of the production of public space. In this model, artists, architects, and designers are commissioned to produce work, often in collaboration: they produce new spatial plans for public environments, new events for communities, new sculptures for public space, and so on. All of these, while diverging critically within their specific content, maintain the concept of public space as an idiomatic construction of verisimilitude. This process is not only endemic to SKOR (and its many fellow organizations produced by models of public arts funding largely based in Europe and North America) but also constitutive of the idea of public art itself as a governmentalizing condition for art production.

For an organization such as SKOR the link between art and healthcare in their changing formats comes partly through a history of commissioning artists to make work within and around the Dutch healthcare system.³ Like many other contemporary art organizations, SKOR is caught in a web of making that in itself has become historically formatted in such a way as to produce art that cares for a public in the ways described above. How do artists, curators, and commissioners take on, interrogate or replicate the spatial and social conditions of capital-friendly culture? How do they use terms like “art in the public realm” to naturalize ways of behaving within the arts and outside of them, as an advocacy tool for relations and collaborations?

While healthcare upholds certain conceptualizations of, for example, the body and its birthing and aging process, art articulates the idea of the public as a static and homogenized mass, often repeating a discourse of public infantilism in the same way that certain types of healthcare treat patients. Art located in the public realm affirms a paradox: while for many

3 Tom van Gestel and Liesbeth Melis, eds., *The Collection. 25 Years of Art Projects in Care Institutions 1985–2009* (Amsterdam: SKOR | Foundation for Art and Public Domain, 2009).

philosophers, social activists, media practitioners, and politicians, the concept of a public has been eroded so successfully as to render it a ghost of an idea, political systems and their attendant cultural methodologies still maintain its existence. Art, and its market (from which it is wrong to assume that public art is immune), takes advantage of this paradox, often performing critical gestures without changing the roles and formats through which such gestures are made, rendering critique ineffective.

□ Social is *nowhere* in particular as a thing among other things, but may circulate *everywhere* as a movement connecting non-social things...⁴

The interventionist model of public art, no matter how collaborative or dispersed the practice, affirms the fact of a social site in need of adjustment, alternation, decoration or adjudication. It affirms places and spaces where there are attendants in need of actors, agents prepared to negotiate between the two in a process of amelioration, a process of care. This model casts artists as doctors and audiences as patients. And, just as in our newly privatized hospitals, the model is dramatically—and financially—affirmed even as those patients become clients. Throughout this process, the concept of a single public (rather than a series or competing, antagonistic and opportunistic publics) is founded on the promise of a unified sense of the social, of a recognizable society in which the public is formed or takes place. Here are the spatial conditions of the public.

Art Care

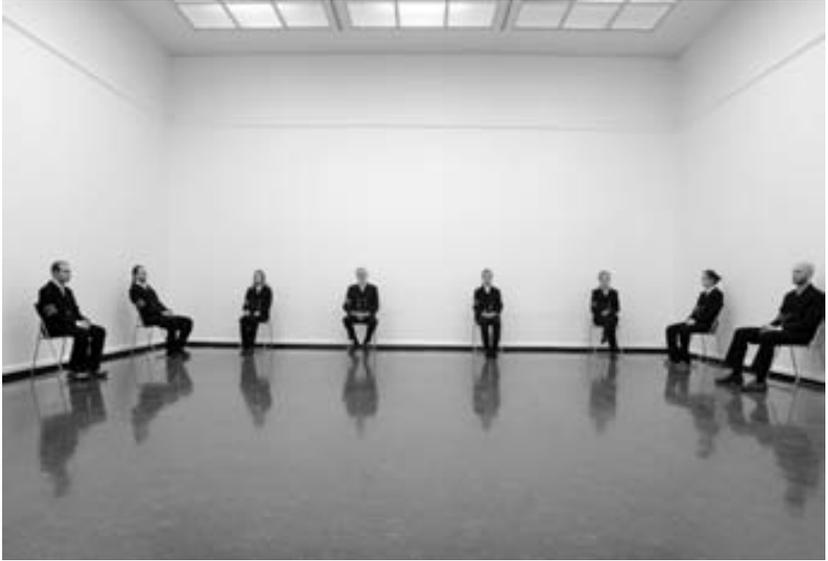
□ If an artist has an idea about how to decrease poverty in their area, should they first become a politician to realize their vision, or should they drop the idea because it's apparently not up to them to deal with these sorts of issues?⁵

4 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 107.

5 Pascale Jeannée interviewed by Jason E. Bowman and Rachel Bradley, *Variant*, no. 16 (Winter 2002). www.variant.org.uk/16texts/Concrete_Interventions.html.

A number of examples serve to illustrate different approaches artists make to the concept of care and the question of its publicity. These examples range from exhibitions commissioned for galleries in which the subject matter is a critique of histories of welfare to projects that activate temporary care facilities for particular communities. In each, questions of art's publicness and its aspirations to care for a public—whether through the implementation of service or through the representation of critique—differ wildly in their register. What methodology might be seen to implement care, if this is the claim of—and the rationale for the funding of—such commissions? In what ways can each example be said to offer “care?”

Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's *The Welfare Show* (produced in 2006 by Bergen Kunsthall; Bawag Foundation, Vienna; The Power Plant, Toronto; and Serpentine Gallery, London) was an absurdist or sardonic response to the dwindling conditions of welfare state social provision in Northern Europe. The exhibition comprised a number of installations, linked thematically through their reference to sites of social and populist culture. Most rooms in the exhibition shared the aesthetics of hospital and community care. In one gallery a set of chairs stood along one wall next to a ticket dispensing machine and a potted plant, with used tickets scattered on the floor (*It's the small things that matter, blah blah blah*); in another, a set of stairs are destroyed from the bottom upwards disallowing access to a platform and double door set in the upper half of the wall marked 'administration' (*Social Mobility*); in another a baby in a carry cot, presumed abandoned, lies at the base of a cash machine outlet (*Modern Moses*). *The Welfare Show* itself is a neon sign placed over a glossy black platform with two swivel chairs and more lights, resembling the set for a celebrity interview TV show. At the Bergen installation a staged queue of client-visitors stood all day outside the gallery waiting patiently to access the services inside the building. In various versions of the touring show, a room contained sets of seated uniformed security guards (*Reg(u)arding the Guards*) and inaccessible spaces containing trolleys of mannequins wrapped in blankets waiting for operations, visible only through circular windows in hospital corridor swing doors (*Interstage*).



Re-g(u)arding the Guards, 2005 /
Modern Moses, 2006 / *Interstage*, 2005.
 (Courtesy Galleri Nicolai Wallner. Photo Thor Brødreskift.)

The installation invited the viewer to reflect on the relations between histories of welfare—the prison, the hospital, the unemployment office—and their relations to powerful structures of subjectification and control. In this sense it repeated a Foucauldian refrain and suggested to the viewer that the structure of welfare in liberal democracy contained violent fault lines. Peter Osborne comments:

The space of politics in *The Welfare Show* is as empty—as vacated—as the administrative space it depicts. *The Welfare Show* is a show, a presentation of emptiness, in which the presence of the Guards serves only to highlight the emptiness of the space—an administrative space

emptied of the social [...] it is the space of a politics of welfare in contemporary art that is an empty space.⁶



Work No. 239: *DON'T WORRY*, 2000.
(Copyright Martin Creed. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.)

The artists call this and other of their objects and installations “powerless structures” and in this there is an acknowledgement not only of the powerlessness of the citizen in the face of state care but also of the artist.

Martin Creed, whose neon work *DON'T WORRY* was installed in Chelsea & Westminster Hospital, London, in 2000, as part of a large group exhibition in the institution, plays with a similar sense of powerlessness. The work, troubled and touching precisely because it is ineffective and supplementary, performs in capsule form one version of art's relation to care: it is, quite literally, an empty signifier in which its own inefficiency (in this case, its inability to actually stop people worrying through cure) is matched with an empathetic but inattentive brightness.

The obvious difference between *The Welfare Show* and *DON'T WORRY* is that the former takes place in a gallery and the latter in a hospital (installed on the wall opposite the coffee

6 Peter Osborne, *op. cit.*, 38.

bar used by patients, visitors and staff). *DON'T WORRY* was commissioned initially for the hospital but has since been shown in a number of different locations, in and outside galleries. One of the experiments of the group exhibition in which it was placed (named after the Creed work, *DON'T WORRY*, curated by Tamsin Dillon and including a number of other new commissions) was to bring works by artists not normally associated with community art into the institution to test, as it were, their legitimacy and purchase on the spaces and functions of a hospital environment. The Chelsea & Westminster Hospital itself is designed to be very open and to encourage use by patients, visitors and passers-by alike. Here, the users of the hospital (patients, their visitors, hospital workers) are treated in much the same way as the audience of *The Welfare Show* in that they are expected to view and understand the works on offer in relation to the visual arts economy of distinction in which they belong: unusual and special objects with no use value.

A significantly different approach comes from Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol—working together as Bik Van der Pol—who in 2007 created a landscaping project for Lindestede, a healthcare center and nursing home for the elderly in Friesland, the Netherlands. Working in collaboration with landscape architect Thijs van Hees, the artists sought to “co-produce” the landscape design with local community groups and users—the elderly people in the home. This co-production involved the collaborating experts listening to the needs and suggestions of the users and responding with sympathetic designs. These included the laying out of walking trails around the rural environment, constructing a farm outside the buildings and locating a new children’s playing area next to the institution to encourage more connection between the very young and the very old. Local people were encouraged to use the surrounding land to grow flowers and vegetables. The project was designed in order to “stimulate interaction and communication between the residents and life outside Lindestede in a logic [sic], natural way.”⁷ The artists and their commissioners were committed to assessing the effect of the project over a long period, this being measured, presumably, though the reactions of

7 www.bikvanderpol.net/?book=1&page=1992.

the inmates and the sustainability of the environment. Bik Van der Pol states:

Evaluation of the project was envisioned (but not realized yet) minimum a year after its completion. Assessing the garden is essential; the intended effects of the design need to be able to “root” first. “Observers,” residents, staff, visitors, artists and architects plan to record experiences to be published as publication or documentary, including reflections of others with specific knowledge, experience or vision related to the project.⁸

What is different about this concept of co-production? An initial analysis would suggest that co-production comes in the form of consultation with the users of Lindestede as well as the collaborative and potentially co-written aspects of the forthcoming book. This form of co-production is service-orientated: it attempts to improve the spatial and aesthetic conditions of the elderly rather than to transform its structures. It is a co-production of amelioration in which each actor retains his or her part.

In 1993, the group Wochenklausur, through the offer of a residency at Secession, Vienna, produced a mobile clinic to provide health services for homeless people in the city (Karlplatz, the square in front of Secession is a well-known gathering place for homeless people). The clinic continues today, providing free advice and treatment to 600 homeless people per month. The project was financed through sponsorship—the size of sponsors’ logos reflected the size of their donation:

WochenKlausur sees art as an opportunity for achieving long-term improvements in human coexistence. Artists’ competence in finding creative solutions, traditionally utilized in shaping materials, can just as well be applied in all areas of society: in ecology, education, and city planning. There are problems everywhere that cannot be solved using conventional approaches and are thus suitable subjects for artistic projects. Theoretically, there

8 *ibid.*



WochenKlausur, *Medical Care for Homeless People*, Vienna, 1993.
(Copyright WochenKlausur.)

is no difference between artists who do their best to paint pictures and those who do their best to solve social problems with clearly fixed boundaries. The individually selected task, like the painter's self-defined objective, must only be precisely articulated. Interventionist art can only be effective when the problem to be solved is clearly stated.⁹

Here, the art institution, Secession, “situates” the mobile clinic in the art world as much as on the plaza in front of its doors. A similar thing could be said of the planned book by Bik Van der Pol. Both book and exhibition, even if not taken up or authored autonomously, are units of cultural capital. WochenKlausur use the institution to facilitate the mobile clinic. The status of art confers exceptionality upon the clinic (however much the actors involved attempt to avoid this), distinguishing the care from other more mundane social services—making the practice of care evental and affective instead of everyday, making the care *exemplary*. This may or may not matter to the homeless who receive treatment from the clinic; the artists would argue

9 www.wochenklausur.at/texte/arbeitsweise_en.htm.

that the successful rendition of art money for viable social use eliminates any concern for how the funding has come about.

Describing WochenKlausur's work in 2002, founder member Pascale Jeannée said:

Understanding what can constitute art changes when the term is used less to subsume fetishistic characteristics and mercantile aspects, and instead designates immaterial works that contribute to the transformation and improvement of ecological, political, and social conditions. If WochenKlausur works at the invitation of art institutions, the institutions are acting to anchor Activist art practice in human consciousness.¹⁰

The design consortium Participle, founded in 2007 in the UK, has as its mission to “reimagine” and “redeliver” the public realm. Working mainly in social service partnerships Participle has, over a number of projects, attempted to redesign the working relationships between individuals, communities and governments—because this form of design is understood to be a way of restructuring the delivery of health, education, and other forms of welfare within the contemporary political climate. One project, *Social Health*, takes as its subject the contemporary epidemic of chronic disease in Western culture (obesity, diabetes, heart disease) and, in the recognition that current approaches are economically unsustainable, suggests that:

It's no longer about treatment: it's about supporting a new way of life. And to be sustainable, that life must be lived in society, not inside a medical framework; [...] We just don't think this can work with more of the same—improving clinical pathways is just tinkering at a system that is flawed in its very nature: an industrial, acute, condition-focused model being personalised to fit a situation that is all about the individual emotions, motivations and relationships that drive or hinder lifestyle change. We believe that a move from a system burdened by demand to one strengthened by

10 Pascale Jeannée, *op. cit.*

participation will depend on a significant paradigm shift: from medicine to motivation, needs to capabilities and clinical expertise to self-determination and peer support.¹¹

Participle's approach is practical and structural. For *Social Health* they recommend—and lobby for the integration of—conditional change in the institutional framework and monetization of healthcare. Such policy recommendations might include the practical recognition of the financial benefits of supporting emotional, psychological, physical, and social issues for those learning to live with a chronic condition, teaching lifestyle change and self management techniques, and “growing



Participle, *Social Health*, 2011. (Photo Participle Ltd.)

11 Hilary Cotton, www.participle.net/projects/view/10/201/.
12 *Ibid.*

resources” by “marrying professional expertise with peer support, mixing the formal and informal, making use of non medical resources, drawing on the untapped expertise and resources found in family and social networks.”¹²

Participle’s approach offers solutions that are government-friendly and designed for implementation. Their aesthetic intervention, if it might still be termed such, is at the level of structural reinvention at delivery level.

The Political Form of Art’s Public Care

□ In *Leaving Art*, a collection of writing from the long career of Suzanne Lacy, the author speculates on the many attempts she and her collaborators have made to work closely with communities in the US to develop relations of change based on long-term residencies structured around a deep care for, and belief in, the transformational properties of artistic community practice. Concerned that “[p]ublic art has become a highly competitive alternative gallery system in which artists are thrust into contact with a broad and diversified audience,”¹³ she recognizes nevertheless the paradox faced by those who do enter into longer-term and deeper relations with the groups with whom they work:

□ Visual and theater artists working in communities struggle with a continuing quest to make their work effective and relevant. What they cannot often deliver is ongoing public policy and institutional change.¹⁴

Lacy quotes the theater maker Augusto Boal who recognized the use of artistic forms to generate our “capacity to observe ourselves in action” and thus to relearn or unlearn our conditions of caring.¹⁵ Michael Foucault, in his writing on “care of the self” understood subjective care as a form of self-discipline and a by turns exploitative and benevolent form of governmentality. Art’s gestures, arguably all those viable alternate mechanisms for the capacitation of “seeing ourselves

13 Suzanne Lacy, *Leaving Art: Writings on Performance, Politics, and Publics 1974-2007* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 172.

14 *Ibid.*, 282.

15 *Ibid.*

in action” listed above in the examples of artistic practice, are also structured around certain forms of caring for the self, forms structured through what can be said and what is suppressed, and what can be made visible and what remains invisible. Any analysis of the methodology of these strategies—from Elmgreen & Dragset to Participle—suggests a variety of relations to and reliances upon such visibility—and the different forms of visibility. This orthodoxy runs deep. Leaving art, while a choice Lacy reports that many artists make as they understand their powerlessness in the face of the pressure of political and aesthetic representation, means rejecting representation as an exclusive artistic tool. But it also means identifying art with a different kind of public work in which the role of the worker is not to suggest differences and paradoxes but to try to repair and heal broken social situations.

As organizations such as SKOR begin to reexamine their practice in the realization of the politics of their gestures, particularly in the context of globalization and the emergence of very different and less privileged forms of spatial occupation across the world, the magnitude of the task in hand becomes apparent. Interestingly, SKOR—and its fellow organizations throughout Europe and North America—begin this just at the time when the very model of government that has produced such distinctions and definitions—of publics, their spaces, and their sanctioned enactments—is reorganizing its ideological framework. What emerges is a new—and confused—landscape in which the languages of politically motivated arts and curatorial practice bears an uncanny resemblance to the language of neo-liberalism: everyone wants to co-produce, collaborate, network, spread social power, and dissipate the megaliths of the social welfare state, at least rhetorically.

The paradox inherent to this situation is often fetishized as the limit condition—and thus critical function—of artistic production: that art can *only*, in Boal’s words, generate the “capacity to observe ourselves in action” or, conversely, that this is the precise mechanism of art’s political contribution. Eighty years ago, Walter Benjamin, motivated by Russian Productivism, posited a choice. In his essay “The Author as Producer” (1934) he asked whether writers (and by extension artists, curators, composers, etc.) should make works that are merely “tendentious”—that is, works that offered advice for the revolution and described, imagined or aestheticized revolutionary activity

from the comfortable position of their professional artistic role—or should they join the revolution and put their creative skills to use as part of a new process of assemblage, working alongside other people (doctors, farmers, architects, mechanics, etc.) in the new spaces forged by such activity. A century later, such an unimpeded vision of what revolutionary activity might be is more difficult, and Benjamin’s clarion call seems simplistic in the light of the virtualization and singularization rendered apparently unimpeachable by capitalism. Other more contemporary philosophical positions argue that art’s politics—and thus power to reinvent or redistribute public space—lies precisely in its ability to formally refigure such relations rather than become the workers that render them complete.

According to Paolo Virno, art has the methodological potential to “locate a new public sphere” but it does this through the formatting of its content. In other words, through what he calls “formal work,” art—and by extension its organizers and institutions—can invent “new standards for the appraisal of our cognitive and affective experience.” He says:

————— The form of [a] poem is like the form of a new public sphere, like the structure of a new idea. Looking for forms in the arts is like looking for new standards of what we may regard as society, power and so on.¹⁶

Jacques Rancière explicitly rejects the forms of art that he terms “ethical” in their identification of the role of the artist as a tool of social “consensus.” Instead he suggests that:

————— Art is not in the first instance political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society’s structures or social groups, their conflicts or identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these

16 Paolo Virno in Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen, “The Dismasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo Virno,” in *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain*, no. 17 (Rotterdam/Amsterdam: NAI/SKOR, 2009), 75.

17 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 23.

functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space.¹⁷

But Rancière also understands that artists, curators, and commissioners cannot take too lightly the legitimacy of their privilege in the invention of new “space and time”:

[I]t seems as if the time of consensus, with its shrinking public space and effacing of political inventiveness, has given to artists and their mini-demonstrations, their collections of objects and traces, their *dispositifs* of interaction, their *in situ* or other provocations, a substitutive political function. Knowing whether these “substitutions” can reshape political spaces or whether they must be content with parodying them is without doubt an important question of our present.¹⁸

Reconfiguring assumptions about actors, agents, and attendants (artists, curators, and audiences) means reconfiguring both what is done in public and what is public. As public art slips away in standard description to be replaced by diverse forms of participatory, networked, collaborative, and/or discursive practice, and as institutions recognize this, viewers as well as artists encounter a paradox of self-definition which is variously claimed as fundamentally and positively egalitarian or entirely destructive of artistic infrastructure. Perhaps it is both. This should be taken as an opportunity for reinvention—reasseblage—rather than be perceived as a fearful shadow on the conception of art’s public value. How might art be differently public—or how might the work of an artist be counted differently?

When Bruno Latour says, “the question is to decide whether an actor is ‘in’ a system, or if the system is made up ‘of’ interacting actors,” he is demanding that we rethink our part in what he calls the “assemblage” of the social.¹⁹ He is asking us to reconceptualize the relation between things (everyday objects, artworks, hospital buildings) and humans (artists, audiences,

18 *Ibid.*, 60.

19 Bruno Latour, *op. cit.*, 169.

patients, curators), thus offering up the opportunity to re-organize the structures that have become so settled in what we think make up our socialities. The social is not “always already there,” Latour reminds us, it is malleable, mutable, and reconstructable: it is made up of “us,” “them,” and “it”; we do the assembling ourselves, but the process is contradictory, motivated and mechanized by power and the assumption of authority.²⁰

This means we must ask structural questions about the commissioning process and about relations between commissioner, curator, artist, and invigilator, just as between government, doctor, and patient. This might mean learning not to care, or learning to care in a very different way. If the concept of caring has been so liberalized as to make it a rhetorical tool for its very antithesis, then art’s current public role must be understood also to play its part in that formation; to have been too careful in its adherence to the regulation of public roles. If art does have the capacity to reinvent the spaces and times that constitute what is public—or made public—then artists, curators, and commissioners should take this opportunity seriously rather than play around its edges.

20 *Ibid.*, 162.