

Social Studies: Chloë Bass and Gregory Sholette Discuss Social Practice Queens

Queens College, City University of New York (CUNY)

By Chloë Bass and Gregory Sholette

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Peace Table Event programmed in conjunction with Social Practice Queens during Mierle Laderman Ukeles; Maintenance Art at the Queens Museum, 2016.



Alejandro Meitin of the Argentinian collective Ala Plástica presenting the group's work in a seminar led by Chloë Bass at the CUNY Graduate Center, 2016

Amid sustained calls for artists and institutions to consider art's role beyond the museum's walls, social practice art has emerged as a burgeoning field of inquiry for considering community, context, and art's ability to affect real change. Begun in 2010 as a collaboration between the Queens Museum and Queens College, City University of New York, Social Practice Queens combines the dynamics of art practice with the rigors of an education in the social sciences. At its core, the program offers instruction in a medium that adopts progressive justice and collectivity not just as principles but as outcomes. Here, Social Practice Queens professors Chloë Bass and Gregory Sholette discuss the ethics of higher art education in New York's most diverse borough and abroad, teaching optimism, and the circumstances that precipitated the social turn.

Gregory Sholette: Why social practice now? About four or five years ago, I was struck by the contradictions revealed by the growing interest in political art and socially engaged and community-based art among younger artists and some mainstream art and academic institutions. This focus on art at the societal level seemed to be evidence of a “social turn”¹ or a new “collectivism”² that had taken hold during the preceding decade. In a 2015 essay for the first issue of the journal *FIELD*, I pointed out that all of this ferment regarding social art was also occurring at a moment “when basic human rights are considered a state security risk, when sweeping economic restructuring converts the global majority into a precarious surplus, and when a widespread hostility to the very notion of society has become commonplace rhetoric within mainstream politics.” I went on to add:

In truth, the public sphere, as both concept and reality, lies in tatters. It is as much a casualty of unchecked economic privatization, as it is of anti-government sentiments and failed states. Counter-intuitively, the rise in the number of Non-Governmental Agencies (NGO) does not reveal a healthy social sphere, but more of a desperate attempt at triage aimed at resolving such complex issues as global labor exploitation, environmental pollution, and political misconduct all of which no longer seem manageable within the framework of democratically elected state governance.³

Since then, the situation has become even more paradoxical, as evidenced by the anti-government-oriented Brexit and US presidential votes in 2016. And not surprisingly, interest in what is now typically called social practice art has grown exponentially with major museums including the Guggenheim, the Tate, and the Museum of Modern Art fostering related programs and more than a dozen academic programs dedicated to teaching this field not only within the US, but also Canada, UK, Ireland, and elsewhere. One answer to the question “why social practice art now?” is, therefore, that this historical moment is itself a reaction to the disappearance of social institutions and “the social,” in a general sense. That may seem like a weakly theorized assessment given the ubiquity of digital social networking, but, as social scientists routinely point out, so-called “networked culture” reinforces some of the most antisocial beliefs and forms of behavior echoing imaginable.

I am not suggesting social practice art is simply an antidote, or a counterpart, to these symptoms. Like immunoglobulin spreading through a pathogenic social body, we should be heedful of antibodies that can also cause illness, or, in certain circumstances, result in an ultimately lethal cure for the patient. For me at least, a better analogy can be located in Walter Benjamin's urgent call to "take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger." Of course, he was concerned with the representation of history, not current social circumstances. But I would suggest that society is becoming a historical concept today, and artists who engage in social practice and political and community activism are exploring more than just another new aesthetic field: they are engaging in acts of reclamation, reuse, and historical representation.

Chloë Bass: For me, there is also a real question in my classroom, and throughout my own artistic work and writing as well, about how, where, and by whom history is made. I've spent a lot of time investigating everyday materials not as the most meaningful in an optimistic, labor-centered way, but as most meaningful because they are, in fact, the most prevalent. Yet, as we know, the everyday is rarely what "makes history," neither in terms of specific events nor in the larger emotional context of what it is like to be in the world at this time. We still somehow expect history to be monumental or spectacular. A primary purpose of a socially engaged art education, as I wrote in my introduction to our book *Art As Social Action*, is to give us back to ourselves as people:

What I really want to know is whether teaching socially engaged art provides some ability to think critically about the interpersonal environments we find ourselves in. How can teaching differently, both in terms of subject matter and style, help us to live better outside the realm of art school? [Our] students at Queens College are already fundamentally and inescapably in the world. To give them better tools for navigating that world, rather than simply the tools for succeeding at the business of school, feels essential. [. . .] In the same way that sculpture departments historically became the first place within art schools to explore interdisciplinary, time-based, or nontraditional creative fields, it is my hope that socially engaged programs can be the space where art impacts our actual lives: the exploding out of the university into the streets.⁴

This practice, which I've called "intimate education," feels directly tied to the Benjamin quote you referenced. The imperative is not just how to take control of a memory, but to determine what the site of memory is in the first place. Intimate education actively asks the question, "How do we make a memory?" The answer is that we make memories *together*, through experiences, but, of course, these memories are held *alone*. It's a continual paradox not just for socially engaged artists or students studying or hoping to become socially engaged artists, but for the larger idea of group engagement at a tenuous time.

Greg, you point out above that major museums, including the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Tate in Britain, have taken on social practice as a useful form (by which I mean useful to audiences, and by extension, useful to the institution). This happens at the exact moment that these same museums are caught up in what I hope we can look back on as self-reflection or restructuring, rather than what seems like an absurdist crisis: the continuing ethical dilemma of not only accepting, but courting and relying upon, massive amounts of money from bad people.

GS: Yes, at first glance it appears that the recent and ongoing wave of art world worker boycotts, interventions, protests, unionization drives, and letters of condemnation aimed at major cultural institutions is essentially a return to the art activism of the late 1960s and 1970s. Here in New York, groups such as Art Workers' Coalition, Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, and Artists Meeting for Cultural Change pressured museums to reinvent their relationship to the art community, communities of color, woman artists, and so forth. Still, despite similarities there is at least one outstanding difference. The call today for these institutions to "decolonize" their collections coupled with demands for certain board members to step down and for the elimination of ethically tainted sources of funding including money from Abu Dhabi, British Petroleum, the Koch and Sackler families, to name only some, truly goes beyond reform in order to rattle the very foundations of high culture in the West. Take the Louvre in Paris, or the Metropolitan in New York. If all of the fabulous treasures housed in these spaces were to be repatriated to whom they were taken from (often by force or deception), these museums would largely vanish.

Similarly, if the global art world was to extricate itself from all sources of tainted money, it would no longer be recognizable to us. After all, art is now one of the largest unregulated markets in the world, allowing it to be used as a space for laundering dirty money, of course, but also simply business as usual: capital generated through real estate developments, financial speculation, arms manufacturing, and in the case of Abu Dhabi where the Guggenheim is planning a new museum, a kingdom dependent on a vast army of poorly treated immigrant laborers from India, Pakistan, Northern Africa, and the Philippines. Notably, and not coincidentally, New York University also has a branch in Abu Dhabi.

From what I hear, instructors at this school, including those teaching art, must regularly self-censor themselves to avoid discussing anything that might be perceived as critical of the sheik or the sheikhdom's repressive conditions of labor and basic human rights.⁵ How might art be taught under such circumstances? Likewise, how does the New York City Guggenheim's relatively new social practice fellowship program avoid such contradictions? I personally know of at least one artist who was asked to propose a project for them, and was later politely refused when this person proposed working on the theme of immigration!

Chloë, how have you handled these sort of ethical dilemmas in our still fairly new social practice seminar on project management? Do students find their own way of managing the paradox of "massive amounts of money from bad people" and making art?

CB: Honestly, the connection between most students and institutional opportunities is already so tenuous that it really has not come up very frequently. This isn't to say that I don't want to talk about it, or find ways of teaching through, around, or beyond this issues—it affects us all, even if only as audiences who show up to support art. We should know what else we're tacitly okaying in the process. However, there's really a much larger separation between MFA students, especially students at public universities (even if those public universities are in New York City!), and the types of opportunities that we've been discussing above. I do think it's essential to teach lessons about finding out where money is coming from, where it might be going in addition to (or well above and beyond) a specific artist and their project, and what one's own ethical lines might be. I can't teach that my personal limitations are the right limitations for everyone. I don't actually believe that representation solves problems. And unfortunately, although I've directly benefited from (as an artist) and supported (as an audience member) recent institutional commitments to younger artists, artists of color, and female artists (I'm still all three, although the first is slipping away rapidly), it is in no way a coincidence that these commitments are suddenly not just possible, or even essential for reasons of equity, but *celebrated* at a time when what drives art at this level is being revealed to be, perhaps, not worth being involved with. I can't point to these moves as corrective, even when they are optimistic in nature and/or allow for wonderful work that deserves to reach wider audiences. This is not to say that backtracking on diversity commitments or issues of representation solves the problem either. But really, an entire restructuring is needed. It's hard, perhaps even impossible, for me to say that alternative pedagogical or curatorial models are the solution within systems as they currently stand.

Bringing this back to the practical, a central question for me, as a person, as an artist, and as an educator (because we all know systems of higher education are not outside of this crisis in any way, even if they're public, as ours is, or if Elizabeth Warren really does cancel student debt), is "what can I tolerate?" Though perhaps a more optimistic view of how to begin this work is "what am I curious about?" Students at Social Practice Queens (SPQ) have conducted a variety of projects that seem to answer either or both of these questions from their own perspectives. Just to mention two current projects, both situated in Flushing, Queens: Naomi Kuo's work speaks to issues of belonging even when one is contained by a defined cultural group (in her case, Asian Americans), which she grapples with not through personal recollection, but through more guided participatory elements of sharing place, language, or culture and expressing true curiosity about how places come to the way they are. On the theme of what we can tolerate, Cody Ann Herrmann's work with Flushing Bay and Creek seeks to make visible the toxicity of the water around us, questioning not only whether we can tolerate this environment degradation, but also the secrecy of access to communal outdoor spaces that we deserve as both present and clean.

What seems ethical to me under current circumstances (within, of course, the continuing need to grapple with larger questions of access, tone, curriculum, etc.) is to teach toward pragmatism and critical thinking while working with students to build tools of optimism and strength. Are there ways in which you feel you teach toward optimism?

GS: I think making art and teaching art as a serious and engaging life practice is itself an expression of optimism, especially under current circumstances that we've both described. By way of contrast, I know of people who in the 1970s gave up making art altogether, turning their talents and energy toward political organizing, or, in some instances, seeking out factory jobs in the Deep South to unionize low-income workers. Interviewing these individuals in the late 1990s for my own research projects, I often sensed these former artists had real regrets stemming from the "Sophie's Choice" they felt compelled to make. No doubt similar examples can be drawn from other historical moments such as Europe in the 1930s, Africa in the post-World War Two years, and Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s. In each instance, wars and deep disenchantment with political and cultural circumstances led some to renounce personal goals involving either education or art making, in exchange for joining a larger struggle for a better future, or simply to work against an oppressive present. I like to believe that through our teaching in SPQ we offer an alternative to total self-sacrifice, without sugar-coating the harsh realities of contemporary art in the political present.⁶

And, like you, when I see our students and graduates in action, optimism pushes the dark clouds away, at least a bit. Think of Barrie Cline's collaborative project *Workers Art Coalition* (the group name is a loaded anagram rearranging "Art Workers' Coalition"), which brings together union pipefitters, welders, sheet metal fabricators and other tradespeople to collectively create installations and public art focused on issues of labor, environmental justice, and feminism. Or SPQ graduate Sol Aramendi's wage theft app that directly benefits undocumented immigrant workers at a time of intense xenophobia and racism, and Setare Arashloo's graphic novel that focuses on the so-called Girls of Enghelab Street in her native Iran, young women who dared to removed their mandatory white head scarves, attached them to sticks and, before being arrested, waved these oppressive regalia about like flags in Tehran's crowded Revolution Street. Then there is SPQ grad Julian Louis Phillips who combines welded steel sculpture with performance art to originate a hybrid social practice investigating race, nationality, and conflict, almost as if nothing less than this admixture of materiality and ephemerality would be sufficient to get to the root of his concerns. Another positive phenomenon that we have both observed within SPQ is the frequent collaboration between social practice students and students in other MFA concentrations. Which is to say that breaking apart, rather than establishing rigid boundaries, is a sign of hope at a time when notions of identity and historic privilege seek to divide us into smaller and smaller fractions of tribes, clans, and consumers.

CB: It's true also that in an increasingly challenging and morally compromised world, we have had some great funders and partners, including the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, the Vilcek Foundation, and the Queens Museum, all of whom are in line with our goals of lessened boundaries and increased rigor. I can't stress enough how much support is required even to make incremental change possible, even if we just seek to reinvent ourselves. I fear we don't have the time left to move slowly, or that perhaps there are too many (and too intertwined) problems to unpack and solve, but what we can offer is the tools to send more, and better, collaborative problem-solvers out into the world—people who might already remember that another (art) world is possible.

—Chloë Bass and Gregory Sholette

Notes

1. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum*, February 2006 →.
2. *Collectivism After Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, eds. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
3. Gregory Sholette, "Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn," *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, no. 1 (2015) →.
4. Chloë Bass, "Where Who We Are Matters: Through Art to Our More Social Selves," in *Art As Social Action*, eds. Chloë Bass, Gregory Sholette, and Social Practice Queens (Allworth Press, 2018).
5. See →.
6. Gregory Sholette, "Optimism of the Will: 2018 FIELD Reports on the Global Resistance to Neoreactionary Nationalism," *FIELD*, no. 12–13 (2018) →.

Category

Education, Urbanism, Race & Ethnicity

Subject

Socially Engaged Art, Ethics, Money & Finance, Art Activism, Protests & Demonstrations, Public Space, Academia, Science, Crisis, Law & Justice, Institutional Critique, Representation

Chloë Bass is a multiform conceptual artist working in performance, situation, conversation, publication, and installation. Her work uses daily life as a site of deep research to address scales of intimacy: where patterns hold and break as group sizes expand. Her projects have appeared nationally and internationally, including the Knockdown Center, the Kitchen, the Brooklyn Museum, CUE Art Foundation, and Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Project Space. She is an Assistant Professor of Art at Queens College, CUNY, where she co-runs Social Practice Queens with Gregory Sholette.

Gregory Sholette is a New York-based artist, writer, and activist whose latest book, *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art*, is published by Lund Humphries (2022). Together with Chloë Bass he codirects the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-funded Social Practice initiative "SPCUNY" at CUNY Graduate Center. He blogs at *Welcome to Our Bare Art World*.