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ART AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

Technologies for Change



SECTION V

Reimagination

Introduction by Karen Moss

Mary Beth Heffernan, Rebekah Modrak, Elizabeth Gregory, and Cara Levine tackle social issues such as patient alienation and intimidation during pandemics, immigration and cultural displacement, corporate media manipulation, as well as gun and police violence. Their projects have historical roots in the 1990s—forms of DIY and participatory art, Relational Aesthetics projects, and collaborative discursive projects that Suzanne Lacy called "new genre public art."[1] Employing research-based practices, tactical media, pedagogical platforms, and twenty-first-century digital technologies, they share an interest not just in *reimagining* social practice, but also engaging in strategies of reanimating, recontextualizing, replacing, and remaking to elucidate issues, inform their publics, and transform social inequities.

Mary Beth Heffernan recalls seeing images of health workers during the Ebola pandemic in 2014, long before the public became acquainted with the now-ubiquitous term "personal protective equipment." Donning impersonal, intimidating hazmat gear—Tyvek body suits with hoods, goggles, boots, and masks—she wondered: "*Would patients feel less isolated and more connected to health care workers if they could see the visage of those caring for them?*"[2] In early 2015 Heffernan initiated her *PPE Portrait Project* in Ebola Treatment Units—taking portraits of doctors, nurses, and other caregivers and making photo stickers for them to affix onto their alienating garb. A resounding success, their smiling faces simultaneously humanized them and alleviated the anxiety, fear, and isolation of their patients. Since the COVID-19 virus emerged in 2020, Heffernan has engaged with communities in assisted living facilities, schools and hospitals, refining the *PPE Portraits* that not only reveal human expressions and features usually obscured by a mask, but also *reanimates* face-to-face contact absent during the pandemic.[3]

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Heffernan's project, which she refers to as both "social practice and social medicine," has affinities with other socially engaged works that utilize garments to facilitate social/human interaction. For example, Irish artist Rhona Byrne's *Huddlewear* (2015) are fabric sculptures worn simultaneously by several individuals to activate social exchanges. Critical design projects seen in exhibitions such as the Stedelijk's *Design for Survival* (2017) or the Cooper Hewitt's *Access + Ability* (2017–18) adapt clothing to improve communication and restore the humanity of refugees and disabled persons.

Rebekah Modrak makes tactical media interventions into e-commerce to critique unethical claims, dubious representations, and flagrant stereotypes. She discusses her projects critiquing two businesses, Best Made Co. and Shinola, brick and mortar stores that became better known as online "brand communities" that purport to provide information, support, and well-being to their customers. She astutely asks: "*If companies attempt to build community through brand messaging and social media, can artistic interventionist practices into those communities be understood as a form of social engagement?*"[4]

In her 2013 project Modrak immersed herself in Best Made Co.'s brand video, website, and social media to understand their language for marketing objects such as their overpriced $350 artisanal American Felling Axe. She then designed an identical version of the Best Made site called *Re-Made Co.* in which she replaced the axe with the "American Master Plunger." When a viewer attempted to place the bespoke toilet plunger in their shopping cart they'd see a lecture about the perils of cultivating value through consumable goods.[5] Her internet-based work, RETHINK SHINOLA, reveals the company's past and present racist ideologies that instantiate white supremacy and Black subservience. Modrak also cites influences of institutional critique in artists such as Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson, but rather than focusing on the art world, she provides biting parodies of businesses to call out and *replace* their rhetoric.

Modrak cites her indebtedness to the Situationists, particularly their idea of *detournement*—"rerouting" the tropes of capitalist media culture to critique it. Her work also recalls tactical media in the nascent days of the internet by the artist collective RTMark, whose projects included a faked website for George Bush and participation in etoy.com, a domain bought to compete with and forge a buyout from the online company etoys.com. Another precedent is the culture jamming of the Yes Men, whose fake websites and "identity corrections" impersonate various public figures and target corporations, politicians, and media outlets.

Eliza Gregory photographs and interviews people about cultural identity and migration to forge social relations, encourage discourse, and foster human generosity. She asks the critical question: "*What are the limitations of photographic representation to create social understanding and social change, and once we acknowledge those limits then what can a photographic project accomplish?*"[6] Gregory yearned for more collaboration with her human subjects and wanted to devise a "social structure" for her projects—an audience with whom she could communicate and build

relationships. For *Testimony* (2015–18) at the Asian Art Museum, Gregory invited ten immigration professionals to answer questions from the audience. Each sat at a different table as the audience rotated every ten minutes, allowing them to ask their questions and construct their own narratives. In a later exhibition at the museum, Gregory interviewed immigrants from ten countries asking them about family history, their migration, and transition to a new culture. She then took a portrait photograph and installed this with objects significant to them such as scrapbooks and family albums. Keenly aware of the power dynamics of portrait photography, Gregory attempts to counteract these limitations as she *recontextualizes* her photographic practice into discursive, participatory contexts within the museum.

This recalls Jim Goldberg's *Raised by Wolves* (1985–1995), documenting a decade of work with homeless youth that integrated his photographs with the teen's own handwritten notes, drawings, found objects, and ephemera in an exhibition considered to be a prescient example of photographic social practice. Gregory's process of bringing people to the museum to share objects and histories recalls Lee Mingwei's residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the *Living Room*, a furnished gallery where special guests and visitors shared personal narratives and collections in a process of exchange and hospitality.

Cara Levine cultivates awareness around the current US crisis of racial and police violence through her *This is Not a Gun* workshops (2016–present) that promote sensory and embodied engagement. After reading an article in *Harper's Magazine* that listed objects mistaken for guns in recent shootings of innocent civilians, Levine engaged in deep research to try to better understand these incidents and how everyday objects are tragically misread as tools of violence. She then started carving these "mistaken objects" in wood noting that: "*When we hold something in our hands, we are also holding its story. As artists and craftspeople we create conduits for communication.*"[7] Her project proposes using creativity and the sense of touch to *remake* these objects into art as antidote to the violence.

In Levine's *This is Not a Gun* workshops each participant receives information about a particular shooting and makes a sculpture of one of the mistaken objects in clay, as the group converses about what they are making and why. She explains how the process of touching clay engages the haptic sense and frees the mind to elicit an embodied practice rather than an intellectual analysis, allowing participants to process the trauma and grief associated with gun violence. Levine's sensorial, art-making workshops aim to *remake* the object as a creative act aimed at ameliorating these tragic misperceptions of violence.

Levine's project has an affinity to Pedro Reyes's *Palas por Pistolas* (*Pistols into Spades*) in which he collected 1,527 guns in Mexico which were steamrolled and melted. Those who relinquished their guns received a coupon to buy electronics and appliances, and Reyes then repurposed the materials from the weapons to create shovels that were then used for planting trees.

In the introduction to *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, Pablo Helguera emphasizes how socially engaged artists appropriate educational methods such as audience engagement, inquiry and research, collaborative dialogues, hands-on activities and conceptual practices.[8] These four artists reimagine social practice by accessing these pedagogical tools and drawing upon their different strategies using photography to alleviate alienation; internet interventions to critique consumer culture; portraiture as a discursive method for community engagement; as well as creativity and touch as tools for healing.

Notes

1. Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).
2. Mary Beth Heffernan, p. 282, this volume.
3. It is interesting to note how during COVID-19, the concept of Heffernan's original *PPE Portrait Project* has been appropriated, ranging from mass-produced photographic masks to handmade, artisanal "selfie face masks" available on Etsy.
4. Rebecca Modrak, p. 291, this volume.
5. An excerpt from Thorstein Veblen, an American economist who was a harsh critic of capitalism in his best-known book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899) available on Project Gutenberg, https://gutenberg.org/ebooks/833. Accessed 1 September 2021.
6. Eliza Gregory, p. 312, this volume.
7. Cara Levine, p. 319, this volume.
8. Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art a Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Pinto Books, 2013), x–xi.

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