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## REVIEW OF ART AS SOCIAL ACTION: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF TEACHING SOCIAL PRACTICE ART

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**Abstract:** In this contribution, the author reviews the book, *Art as Social Action: An Introduction to the Principles and Practices of Teaching Social Practice Art*. Acknowledging the timely nature of this anthology of essays, interviews, and lesson plans, the reviewer strongly recommends the book for teachers of contemporary art. In the review, the author opens with personal context for the review, a brief overview of contents and a description of the editors' professional backgrounds. Interested in the usefulness of lesson plans for teachers, the reviewer analyzes the over 43 lesson plans and identifies three themes around which to provide a summary. Salient information is also extracted from essays and interviews. The author concludes by commenting more broadly on contributions and challenges associated with this anthology, troubling the use of the term "lesson plan" to describe social practice and calling for widening the conversation to include art educators

and qualitative/post-qualitative researchers whose work focuses on social justice pedagogies.

**Key words:** socially engaged art; pedagogy; social justice; contemporary art

When tapped to write a review of Gregory Sholette, Chloë Bass, and the Social Practice Queen's (SPQ) edited book, *Art as Social Action: An Introduction to Principles and Practices of Teaching Social Practice Art* (2018), I was intrigued. The book was already in my library and I was anxious to make time for it. Having read the texts of authors often associated with social practice (Bishop, 2006a, 2006b, 2012; Finkpearl, 2013; Helguera 2011, 2017; Kester, 2011, 2004; Thompson, 2013) and having conducted large-scale community and school-based art projects within the context of teacher preparation, and more recently social practice (Sanders-Bustle, 2019), I was excited to learn how pedagogical principles and practices of social practice might be described and to gain a greater understanding about how to teach social practice.

Published in 2018, at a time when social practice was becoming increasingly popular in the US and abroad, Sholette and Bass's book is a welcomed addition to a body of existing literature that, for the most part, has focused on historical roots, aesthetic theories, ethical implications, and criteria for the assessment. While some literature (Allen, 2011; Springgay, 2013; Thorne, 2017) directly addresses pedagogical applications of social practice, few works delve deeply into the ways that social practice might be taught, and given the increasing number of universities with social practice programs, it makes sense to do so.

Editors Dr. Gregory Sholette and Chloë Bass, both of whom teach for SPQ at Queens College, City University of New York, and SPQ contributors bring unique perspectives to the book. A writer, artist and activist, Sholette has written books such as *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and Capitalism* (2017) and *Dark matter: Art and Politics in an Age of Enterprise Culture* (2011) and is co-founder of SPQ, which offers an MFA concentration and advanced certification in Social Practice. Chloë Bass is a multiform conceptual artist and public practitioner whose research focuses on interpersonal intimacy and daily life. Recent work includes, *The Book of Everyday Instruction* (2018b).

*Art as Social Action: An Introduction to the Principles and Practices of Teaching Social Practice Art* (2018) features five essays, two transcripts of interviews, and 43 lesson plans contributed by artists/designers, educators, writers, performers, scholars and activists at both the high school and college levels. Given the vast amount of content and the sheer number of contributors featured in this book, for this review I highlight themes found in lessons, summarize essays and interviews and conclude by commenting more broadly on contributions and challenges associate with this anthology.

## Lesson Plans

Written specifically for teachers of contemporary art, the lesson plans are organized around five main topics: Art as Social Research/Listening/Self-Care, Teaching and Performing Direct

Action, Art and Social Injustice, Collective Learning and Urban Imaginaries, and Social Queens Alumni. Information shared in lessons differs, but for the most part, includes some derivation of the following: objectives, steps taken to achieve the assignment, outcomes, assessments, and suggested readings. Some authors describe lessons that are activist or interventionist in nature and, are for the most part, artist driven and involve participants to lesser degrees. Others read more like descriptions of social practice projects without explicit reference to pedagogical strategies. Given the aim of the book, I was more interested in those lessons that highlighted concrete methods for helping teachers/students/participants understand, design, and implement social practice. With this in mind, I identified three themes among the lessons based on their purposes, which include: 1) helping students better understand social practice 2) developing social practice skills and 3) implementing social practice.

## **Understanding Social Practice**

Two lessons stand out as intentional efforts by teachers to help students understand characteristics of and qualities associated with social practice. In “Socratic Mapping,” Daniel Tucker (2018) implements Pascal Gielen’s strategies for mapping community art to help students “think critically about the intentions and outcomes of the projects... and to recognize the porosity of the genre of social practice” (p. 101). Using Gielen’s concepts, auto/allo relational and digestive/subversive, students collaborated to analyze and map social practice projects. Mapping provided students with a process for critiquing social practice and identifying and reflecting upon individual research interests. In “What Will Your Work Organize?” Ashley Hunt (2018) encourages students to distinguish between social practice and other more individualized forms of artmaking by involving students in a series of site-specific activities such as picnicking, walking, and poetry reading aimed at helping students identify topics of interest, refine ideas, and reflect on collectivity as a key element of social practice design and implementation.

## **Developing Social Practice Skills (Deskilling)**

Overall, I found that lessons which focused on specific methods utilized by social practice artists to be particularly informative. As Helguera (2011) points out social practice requires a deskilling or moving away from traditional art skills to interdisciplinary situated principles of practice that in many ways mirrors the work of educators, sociologists, and ethnographers. In “The Listening Workshop,” Fiona Whelan (2018) demonstrates how listening is nurtured through deliberative and improvisational processes designed to encourage risk and promote trust, self-reflexivity, and an awareness of group dynamics. Related, Sean Taylor (2018), describes a series of acouscenic listening workshops through which participants document and track the evolution of projects through walking, sound

mapping, and performance. Similarly, Laurie Palmer, Sarah Ross, and Lindsey French (2018) describe how balloon mapping can be used as a research tool for gathering information from difficult to reach or dangerous sites. Finally, Bo Zheng (2018) in “Sensing Social Space,” describes a series of warm-up exercises he uses with students to help them better understand how social spaces are used. Activities include visiting a social space, observing how spaces are organized and how people behave, and performing an activity that deviates from normal behavior.

## **Social Practice Implementation**

Finally, in some lessons, authors adopt Dewey’s “learn by doing” mantra by engaging students actively in the implementation of social practice projects, from start to finish. One example is Matthew Friday and Iain Kerr’s (2018) “SPURSE Lesson Plan” which involved students in a university project aimed at codeveloping new ways to “sense, understand, and interact with urban ecosystems” (p. 170). In this case, students participated in all phases including mapping existing systems, co-designing proposals, collaborating with communities and implementing projects such as a Multi-Species Negotiation Center and a Materials Propagation Site. In their lesson, Dipti Desai and Avram Finkelstein’s (2018) describe how students formed the NYU Flash Collective and carried out a public intervention aimed at addressing issues of immigration and displacement. In doing so, students learned about guidelines for communication strategies and collective cultural production and mapped out questions associated with immigration and implemented and reflected on the project.

## **Interviews**

The book also features two interviews conducted by MFA students Jeff Kasper and Alix Camacho (2018). In the first, Pablo Helguera highlights similarities between social practice and performance art, discusses elements of pedagogical practice and pushes back against the idea that conversations about ethics are particularly fruitful. In one of the most useful quotes from the interview, Helguera provides teachers of social practice with a concise explanation of how social practice differs from traditional art. He states, “the break therefore with conventional art thinking is that, we are not making a piece about politics, we are instead doing politics within the piece itself” (p. 140). In the second interview, Alix Camacho (2018) interviews Steve Lambert and Steve Duncombe, co-founders of the Center for Art and Activism. As expected, their humor served as a spirited backdrop for a robust discussion on the importance of establishing goals, reflecting deeply on practice, and taking risks. Like Helguera, they make a distinction between art that is about raising awareness and goals for social practice which include “affecting power and thinking in terms of real outcomes” (p. 142). Duncombe and Lambert also consider conversations about ethics to be

a problematic distraction and encourage artists to be comfortable with unpredictability, failure and risk.

## Essays

The book features a total of five essays, among which are two introductory essays by Chloë Bass (2018a) and Mary Jane Jacob (2018) as well as a concluding essay by Gregory Sholette (2018). In her essay, Bass astutely questions the relevance of a social practice class in the lives of over-obligated students and poses a series of questions about what the arts can do in our lives. Jacob uses the book's title, *Art as Social Action* as a springboard for a discussion that locates similarities between many of the theories espoused by John Dewey and the intentions of social practice. Both, according to Jacob are social, transformative, integral to everyday existence and vital to education and democracy. In "Why Socially Engaged Art Can't Be Taught," Jen Delos Reyes (2018) provides an overview of tropes often implemented as part of social practice and critiques the value of such practices. In their essay, the Pedagogy Group (2018) describe pedagogical principles that guide their work, offer steps for reflecting on practice, and pose thought-provoking questions which are answered by various members. Finally, in a closing essay, Sholette provides a brief but comprehensive overview of historical antecedents to social practice and a shortlist of five pedagogical operations for socially engaged art education (SEAE) and establishes important links between social practice and the scholarship of prominent theorists such as Paulo Freire and John Dewey.

## Reflections

After careful review, I find *Art as Social Action* to be a workhorse of a book that is filled with a vast array of social practice projects, teaching strategies, and resources. In addition, its reasonable price makes it economically viable and will certainly be among required reading for a social practice course I will be teaching in 2020. In sum, this book opens up a much-needed conversation about issues that arise when teaching something that is, for the most part, always under development, in conflict with traditional ways of making art, and requires some serious shifts in thinking about the potential for art/pedagogy in contemporary contexts. With this in mind, I imagine the authors in this book wrestled with how one goes about writing a "lesson plan" for work that is meant to emerge through collective action, is fluid, and performative. Claire Bishop (2012) touches on this dilemma offering that "art is given to be seen by others, while education has no image" (p. 241). This raises important questions about how to document, represent and plan for social practice. With this in mind, one might question whether "lesson plan" best describes a process that pushes against the conventional trappings of education as an institution. Perhaps these plans or proposals might be thought of as social sketches (Sanders-Bustle, 2019), or drafts, meant to be fluid and are inherently unpredictable and complicated by the collective goals of social practice. Like Duncombe, who, in his interview (Camacho, 2018) recognizes the value

of unpredictability in art and the role of risk and failure in social practice, I found myself wanting to know more about the missteps, the flops, and the failures; those necessary nagging moments of uncertainty that are often disappointing and call for critical reflection. I imagine such conversations to be especially fruitful given the unique challenges associated with social practice and welcome focused dialogue that invites participation from art educators and post/qualitative researchers who have valuable knowledge related to social justice pedagogy and participatory methodologies.

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