

SOCIAL ART AS A MEANS OF CIVIC ACTIVITY

Centre of Lucim following
the harvest festival
co-organized by
Grupa Działania
(Action Group), 1980



The concept of social art is not exactly new, dating back to at least the 1970s. Its current revival, however, creates an opportunity to reconsider the social and civic potential of artistic practices.



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Social art belongs to the repertoire of civic action in democratic societies; alternatively, it may serve as a form of protest against the violation of civil rights by authoritarian regimes. It involves citizens – not necessarily professional artists – reaching for artistic tools in pursuit of the common good and a positive social change. The activity can be individual or collective. It may concern the society as a whole or a smaller local community. Yet, by definition, it is always a public activity. The development of social art is inseparable from the more general changes of social ties and artistic institutions in modern societies. At its very core, there is the belief that every human being is capable of not only art reception, but also art creation, and that the role of the artist is to take action *within* the society rather than *beyond* or *outside* it.

Action Group

“One can imagine such an ‘artwork-action’ which by its impact on a given local community will inspire their own, individual and collective, symbolic and instrumental, activity.” This statement comes from the manifesto *Social Art as an Idea*, published in 1980 by *Grupa Działania* (Action Group). The collective was formed by the visual artists Wiesław Smużny, brothers Bogdan and Witold Chmielewski (later *Grupa III* – Group III), Stanisław Wasilewski, and Andrzej Maziec. They have been best known for their long-term involvement with the community of the village of Lucim near Bydgoszcz, which continued from the late 1970s through the 1990s, and in the case of Smużny and B. Chmielewski to the present day. Their work was, on the one hand, focused on the local context and recognition of the community’s resources. On the other hand, it was aimed at inspiring the community to engage in new activities that would merge visual arts and traditional folk culture. Hence, alongside the term “social art,” the group members – when explaining their practices, which was a part of their engagement with the community – also used such notions as “new folk art” and “the third way” (between tradition and modernity). In contrast to many a contemporary example of the so-called social practice in art, they did not regard their audiences as material for their artistic work, but rather saw them as equal partners in cooperative actions. They assumed that it is the artist who bears the responsibility for the work of art to be understood by the audience,

and that the latter are also perfectly capable of their own artistic creation. Both those effects were supposed to emerge from the direct contact and dialogue between professional and non-professional artists, prolonged in time, and organically tied to the locality. The practices of the Action Group, who for the most part worked during the communist period, stood out from both the state-organized, and oppositional arts circulation of that time in Poland. They were bottom-up and independent (from both the state, and the church), inclusive, community-based, as well as non-political.

Joseph Beuys

A different meaning was conferred on the concept of social art by the German visual artist, performer and activist Joseph Beuys (1921–1986). He divided his time between art exhibitions and galleries, academic teaching, including for the Free International University (co-founded with Heinrich Böll), and political engagement promoting democratic and environmental values. He believed that “every human being is an artist” and, as such, is able to introduce changes in their environment, especially on the level of social relations. He understood art in broad terms, as a tool of such changes, which can be used by both professional, and non-professional artists.

In that context, he spoke of “social sculpture” and an “expanded concept of art.”

As much as his individual works would frequently stir controversy and could be seen as difficult, to his social projects – such as “7000 Oaks,” joined by volunteers planting trees in the city of Kassel together with the artist – he invited anyone willing to help. He was a radical, perhaps even a utopian, democrat, who saw artistic creation, scientific knowledge, and political activity as the fields of direct and creative engagement of every human-citizen.

Suzanne Lacy

In the United States, the concept of social art spread largely due to the feminist circles and women in performance art. Between 1978 and 1980, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz led the project “Ariadne: A Social Art Network,” bringing together artists, activists, journalists, and politicians to address the problem of violence against women. In later years, Lacy formulated her own concept of “new genre public art.” In her 1995 essay *Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys*, she explained that it is “an art whose public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language.” The new public art was to be based on civic participation, so as to be able to “communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about

An example of social art today: a participatory theatre performance *Bieżeńki*, based on familial memories of refugeedom from today's Podlasie region during the First World War. Staged at the University Cultural Centre in Białystok, 2018



issues directly relevant to their lives.” Artists would use their usual artistic media and forms but complete the creative process with “a sensibility about audience, social strategy, and effectiveness.” Lacy stressed the importance of the social responsibility of the artists and their cooperation with non-artists in the process of creating the meaning of artworks and actions in the public space. In her view, art is not just a specific performance, but also everything that happens around it and is connected with it in the social and political sense: organizational work, community engagement, media coverage, collaboration with activists and politicians, educational outcomes, social memory of the event, cultural context, and much more.

The social turn

Today, the conceptual foundations of social art resonate in new theoretical categories, such as: participatory art (Claire Bishop), conversational art (Grant H. Kester), and cooperative art (Tom Finkelpearl). These are connected to the so-called social turn in art, dated to the beginning of the 21st century. According to the glossary of Tate Modern, it was marked by artists stepping outside the arts institutions (museums and galleries), working with non-artists (participants), pursuing positive social change, and creating art that was non-elitist and non-commercial. None of the above characteristics demonstrates “newness” of the contemporary social practices in art; what they reveal is, in fact, a renewal of social and, in the broad sense, political engagement on the part of the art world. In practice, the social turn involves broadening of the artistic repertoire, so that it includes social structures, interactions, and situations as artistic forms or media. Thus, the new concepts listed above can be considered sociological: what they have in common is that rather than on traditionally defined aesthetics, they all focus on social relations and actions, as initiated, moderated, and facilitated by the artist.

Democratization of art

Sociologists are traditionally interested in art as “a center of some social relations,” which form around an artwork, especially the relation between the artist and arts audience. This is how the social function of art was defined by Stanisław Ossowski (1897–1963) in the early 1930s. It is not only about creating artworks, but also about creating social relations. Since Ossowski’s day, modern society has undergone major structural changes, though. One of the key effects of those changes is the democratization of various social structures, from social movements, to local governments. Daniel Bell (1919–2011) named that process the “participation revolution.” Democratization entailed the flattening of social hierarchies and a wider access



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to power in its broad sense, which also applied to social relations within art. In Western societies, the process resulted in the proliferation of such arts practices as social sculpture, or new genre public art, already in the 1970s. What those practices had in common was not so much the engagement of the artists with social issues (which occurred earlier in history as well), as the egalitarianization of the relation between the artists and audiences, and the emergence of more symmetrical and partnership-based interactions between them. On the part of the audience, that resulted in greater freedom of arts interpretation (even if based only on emotions, as noted by Bell), and as the democratization progressed, of their direct creative engagement.

Conflicts in the field of art

In sociological theory, the category of social art first appeared in the 1990s with *The Rules of Art* by Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). According to the French scholar, the “artistic field” is divided into two segments: elitist art and mass art. The former further divides into avant-garde and consecrated (or canonical) art, the latter into popular (simply commercial) and social (politically-engaged) art. Each of the divisions implies conflict and competition for the monopoly on the legitimacy of art as practiced, that is the power to

In public spaces, social art may take on the form of a mural.

Shown here: *The Legend of Giants* – a site-specific mural by Natalia Rak in Białystok, invoking both folk culture, and environmental values, 2014

decide who gets to call themselves an artist and what qualifies an action or a piece of work as art. The struggle over the definition of art and the artist's position in the field of art is never-ending, and the boundaries, rules, and roles within the field are historical and changeable. It is also constantly influenced by external economic and political forces.

According to Bourdieu, social art disrupts the mechanism of reproduction of cultural snobbism, as reflected in the concept of "art for art's sake" – an object of disinterested contemplation by an audience of distinguished taste. Under the conditions of capitalism, it also offers a counterweight to defining art – and, more broadly, culture – in market-oriented categories, and to looking at creativity as a source of profit and economic growth. Finally, it can also express hope for a better – that is more civic, democratic, and participatory – social, cultural, and political order.

Civic enclave

In my own research and theoretical work, which I combine with social and artistic practice at the Social Art Workshop, I include the social art category with other grassroots activities in the social and pub-

Categorizing a specific project as social art requires careful consideration of its civic quality.

lic sphere. Hence, for reference points I resort mostly to the theories of civil society. In other words, I see social art as an enclave (niche) of civil society, whose defining and distinctive feature is the combination of artistic and civic intentions (motivations). Thus defined, it can be described following five interlinked criteria:

1. **Goals and effects of the activity** – expressed in categories of public benefit or social change, such as: shaping civic attitudes, intercultural integration, social inclusion, expanding the public sphere, or reorganizing urban spaces;
2. **Participants in the activity** – defined in an open and inclusive way, as groups or communities (e.g. a rural community, city residents, immigrants, young people, women), regardless of formal education, cultural capital, and other class-related barriers;
3. **The way of engaging the participants in the activity** – as creators, co-creators, or simply audiences of art – by combining participation *in art*

with civic participation *through art*, as well as in an active, creative, empowering, and frequently community-based manner;

4. **The social space of the activity** – its placing in the public, non-governmental, or non-institutional sphere, within the middle-level social structures, outside or on the margins of the art world and public cultural institutions, such as museums, galleries, or theatres;
5. **The quality of the activity** – its civic character, as reflected not only in the grassroots (private) initiative, self-organization, spontaneity, and responsiveness to a variety of social needs and interests, but also in the orientation towards civic and democratic values.

Thus defined, the enclave of social art is complementary to the other modes of civic engagement, whether in social organizations and movements, or in public debate (the so-called "verbal civic activity"). It can be an alternative to the institutionalized forms of public participation, such as consultations or petitions, especially when they are perceived as superficial or ineffective. In this respect, it provides a civic activity with greater creativity, spontaneity, and sense of agency. It also serves many other civic functions, including: expression of social protest, articulation of collective identity, counteracting exclusion and discrimination, mobilization of human, social, and symbolic resources (such as: creativity, social ties, and collective memory), or creating conditions for social communication (dialogue and understanding), especially between conflicted groups. It is usually set in the context of a public space, a local community, or a minority group.

Civiness as a "measure" of quality

The contemporary renaissance of social art brings about an increased interest of artists and arts curators in sociological theories and research. Incorporating the social dimension into the artistic repertoire encourages practitioners to "measure" such art's quality according to sociological factors rather than aesthetic criteria. This way of thinking about art was already present in the practices of the Action Group. The artists called for "the recognition of the social verification of the artistic proposals as a basis for further actions," and conducted opinion polls among the residents of Lucim. In social art, civic engagement (participation) and social utility (effectiveness) may take different forms. The enormous diversity of contemporary artistic practices provides it with a very vast aesthetic and social repertoire. Thus, categorizing a specific project as social art, in each case, requires careful consideration of its civic quality. ■

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